

# HUMAN LONGING AND FULFILMENT: ARISTOTLE'S AND AQUINAS' APPROACH

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## *Introduction*

Is there an ultimate and highest aim people long for? Modern western philosophers answer: no! What people strive for differs from person to person, from age to age. It depends on personal decisions, on culture and on the context of the longing. Against the background of Western philosophy in the Aristotelian tradition, on the other hand, there must be an ultimate or first aim people long for. They might see it and account for it in different ways but it is the same for all: Happiness (*ευδαιμονία*, *beatitudo*) is the ultimate goal people long for. All humans want to be happy, even though they have very different views on what happiness consists in.

According to Aristotle happiness is the realisation or actualisation of the highest potencies humans have as humans. However, only few people can achieve it. According to Aquinas, on the other hand, nature cannot deceive. Thus, the deeply rooted human longing, that is, the naturally given longing for happiness must reach fulfilment— if not in this life, in the life to come. Happiness consists in the highest form of human perfection, in the joyful vision of God.

I would like to stress that this Christian Thomist adaptation of the pagan Aristotelian view on human longing and fulfilment is — contrary to what many people think — compatible with the modern Western view that happiness consists in *self-realisation*.

## *Modern Western background*

Let us ask: Is there a highest goal or an ultimate aim humans strive for? And if there is one, is it the same for all people? Could it be that all people long for the same thing without knowing it? Let us ask, in other words, if it does make sense to look for something that could fulfil the ultimate human desires.

In the West nowadays many philosophers stick to the thesis that similar questions do not make sense or — at least — that there are no common generally valid answers to them. And if people give answers, these are relative to their culture, to their education and basically to their needs as they themselves experience them. Evidence compels these philosophers to stick to a *relativistic* view — so they claim: Against the modern background there is no common aim all people strive for and, thus, it does not make sense to speculate about it.

The issue is like that of the *meaning of life*. The mainstream modern Western view is that there is no objective meaning of life which could be discovered. If it makes sense to speak of the meaning of life at all, so only against a *conventionalistic* background. It is up to each person to *decide* what the meaning of life should be. Each person is going to experience that meaning she states on the basis of conventional decisions.

For Aquinas and even for Aristotle, on the other hand, issues concerning the human good (*bonum*) have an objective answer. Not everything that is taken to be good is really good for us humans. The fact that people strive for certain goods, being convinced that they are good for them, does not imply that they are good. They can do a lot of harm to them. Thus, according to Aquinas questions concerning human longing and fulfilment have *valid* answers.

Aristotle explicitly holds the thesis that there is an ultimate aim in life, a goal all people strive for, and this he calls “*εὐδαιμονία* — *eudaimonia*”, that is happiness. All people — so the claim — want to be happy, they cannot but desire happiness. And what does happiness consist in? It is identical with the realization of those potencies or faculties that are typical for human beings. To better understand the background of this doctrine it is helpful to take a closer look at Aristotle’s analysis of human longing and human striving for goals.

### *The Aristotelian ranking of goals*

Our striving for goals can be ordered: *by* longing for X we long for Y, and *by* longing for Y we long for Z. Nowadays we speak of the so called “*by-relation*” connecting different intentions: *by* intending X we intend Y, and *by* intending Y we intend Z. By ordering our intentions on the basis of the “*by-relation*” we can form a ranking: there are higher and lower goals we strive for. By taking an exam e. g. we want to get a certificate, *by* getting a certificate we want to qualify for a job, *by* qualifying for a job we want to get better living conditions. In this case striving for the exam is the lower goal, having better living con-

ditions the higher. In between these extremes there are the other mentioned goals.

Once we have a goal we *strive for*, we can either ask *why* we strive for it or *how* we strive for it. *How* do you want to get the certificate? By taking the exam. *Why* do you want to get the certificate? Because I want to qualify for a job. By answering the how-questions we descend, by answering the why-questions we ascend the ranking of goals. Once we have a ranking we can prolong it by further asking how and why we *intend* something. We could e. g. further descend by asking how do we want to take the exam and further ascend by asking why do we want to get better living conditions.

By speaking of the *architectonic* of human goals (τα των αρχιτεκτονικων) Aristotle means these rankings of intentions. (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics I, 1094a 14f) Various activities and projects get their purpose and meaning from higher ordered purposes, and theses from further higher ordered purposes and so on. Aristotle takes examples from the military domain: The various activities of a complex army are ordered by goals and depend on the higher purpose of the victory. Striving for victory is the presupposition for the other aims of the activities of an army in the war. (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics I, 1094a-b)

The main difference between modern accounts of the rankings based on the "by-relation" and Aristotle's view of the architectonic of purposes of human actions consists in the answer to the question whether there is a highest, ultimate goal all humans strive for. The modern answer is, no, there is no ultimate goal in life. One is allowed to go on as long as one wants to in stating higher goals: Why should we have to stop somewhere by claiming, this is our ultimate goal?

Aristotle, on the other hand, stresses and defends the thesis that there is a highest, ultimate goal (το αγαθον/αριστον). According to him it is not possible to go on "ad infinitum" (εις απειρον). (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics I, 1094a 20-25) The ranking is accounted for in such a way that the higher goals are the presupposition for the lower ones. Thus, if you did not have a highest goal you would not strive for anything at all.

According to Aristotle each person has an ultimate goal he is longing for, and this ultimate goal is — on the objective level — *the same* for all people. What people long for is to be happy. Everybody strives for happiness (ευδαιμονια) as her ultimate goal. People have different views about happiness, but according to Aristotle happiness consists — again on the objective level — in the actualisation of the highest and typical human potencies.

Against the background of the pagan Greek world it is evident that not everybody can achieve this last goal. Very few people can really be happy in the above mentioned sense. Happiness presupposes many other things, e. g. health, a certain amount of money, friends, freedom and even good birth. If

any of these conditions is not given, it is impossible to be happy. Slaves e. g. lack freedom, the poor money, the sick strength and a healthy body. All these things are necessary to lead a good life and thus actualise the highest human potencies.

The pagan classical view on longing is, one the on hand, based on the persuasion, that there must be an ultimate aim and that this is the same for all people, and, on the other hand, on the evidence, that only few people reach it. Human longing is fulfilled only in a few cases. Aquinas accepts the classical view that humans long for some ultimate goal and that this is the same for all people but adapts it in various respects.

### *The ultimate aim according to Aquinas*

Against the background of medieval philosophy everything strives for a goal. Since the whole nature is subject to striving it makes sense even to ask what inanimate objects strive for. But Aquinas stresses the difference between the way of striving typical for human beings and the rest of nature. Humans differ from nature by being able to *consciously* and *willingly* aim at goals. (Summa Theologica I. II., q1, a1, c) In that capacity they are similar to God. Being free they can consciously choose between different goals. How does this doctrine fit into the mentioned view that all people have an ultimate, highest aim they strive for? Doesn't this doctrine exclude freedom?

Here we have to distinguish according to Aquinas between the aim as object or "res" and the way people account for it and consequently the various ways people think they might reach it. The whole nature, all animals, humans included, long for their ultimate goal. But inorganic things and the plants and animals devoid of reason do it by nature and unconsciously. Humans however do it only partly by nature, partly consciously. In the latter case they do it in different ways depending on their account of the ultimate goal. On the level of the "res" all humans long for the same, but on the level of searching to reach it they differ (quantum ad consecutionem finis). (Summa Theologica I. II., q1, a8, c) Thus, Aquinas tries to convince the reader that even if people give different answers to the question what they long for, they ultimately long for the same.

At the moment of acting people often are not conscious of their intentions and thus hesitate to give a clear answer to the question *why* they do it. But even if they are not aware of their intentions, that does not imply that they act without intention. Moreover, it is impossible to be aware at one and the same moment of all the aims one is striving for. Very often people seem to be aware only of the lower intentions in their rankings. They are in other words aware of the "*fines proximi*" but not of the "*fines remoti*". That too does not

imply that they do not have higher intentions. Thus, the evidence that generally people are not conscious of their longing for some highest, ultimate goal is for Aquinas no valid objection to the Aristotelian thesis that they long for the *same ultimate* goal. (Summa Theologica I. II., q. 1, a6, ad 3)

Thomas argues for the Aristotelian thesis that the various goals we long for presuppose a first or ultimate goal. If there were no "primum movens" in the order of the intentions there were no intentions at all. The order of the intentions is the opposite of the order of the execution, but both orders have a first element. If there were no beginning there were no executing at all; if there were no highest intention there were no intention at all. Thus, if there were no first or ultimate goal in the lives of people they would not even act. The ordering of the intentions is not an accidental, but a "per se" one, that means that it needs a first element grounding all the others. (Summa Theologica I. II., q1, a4, c)

But let us see now what — on the objective level — the ultimate goal is which, according to Aquinas, everybody longs for. For Aquinas people agree on the ultimate aim insofar as they all try to achieve their own *perfection*. (Summa Theologica I. II., q1, a5 and a7) They strive for those goods (*bona*) that allow them to develop and complete themselves. Even if they differ in their accounts they all long for their own *development*, their own *completion* and thus for what Aristotle calls "εὐδαιμονία".

Happiness cannot consist in the achievement of external goods, neither natural goods nor artefacts nor goods of the body. It certainly cannot consist in getting *wealthy*: money is only a presupposition for other goods. Besides, the more money you have, the more you realize that it does not fulfil your deeper longing. Happiness — as highest goal in life — must be such that, the more you have of it, the more you feel satisfied. (Summa Theologica I. II., q2, a1, ad3) Goods like *fame*, *glory* or *power* are on the other hand only *consequences* of other qualities. And goods like *health* are only among the *presuppositions* for being happy. As such, all these goods cannot be identical with happiness.

But why is it not *pleasure*? Everybody desires and longs for pleasure. Moreover, everybody strives for it not as a means for something else, but as an end in itself. Is this not typical for an aim like happiness? Aquinas stresses that, on the one hand, pleasure and joy are connected to happiness, but that, on the other, they do not belong to the essence of it. Pleasures and joy are only a consequence of it, they are — in scholastic terminology — an "accidens proprium". Once you have reached happiness you feel pleasure and joy, but they are not identical. Thus, if you desire and strive for pleasure, it could be that you do not reach happiness.

Happiness cannot be but a good of the human soul (*est aliquid animae*) (Summa Theologica I. II., q2, a7, c), the soul being the first reality, the "actus

primus", of the human organism or the living body. The perfection of the body has as its aim its living activity, its soul. Therefore, happiness must consist in the perfection of the human soul. This consists in the actualisation of its highest potencies, i. e. in acts of *knowing* and *loving*. These potencies distinguish humans from all other animals.

Against the background of medieval philosophy the ranking of human acts depends on their intentional objects or on the objects they are connected to. The act of seeing e. g. is to be ranked according to the object seen. The higher the object the more distinguished the act. The same applies to the act of knowing and loving. Loving a person is more than loving a cat, and knowing and loving God more than anything else. Thus, it is by knowing and loving God that men reach happiness; they thereby achieve the highest development and perfection of their faculties, the perfection of their soul.

We have seen that for Aristotle many lack the presuppositions to reach "ευδαιμονία". Very few can reach what humans long for. Aquinas sees things in a similar way for this life but not for the life to come. Medieval philosophy is permeated by the principle that longing, which is deeply rooted in nature, cannot deceive: "desiderium naturale non est inane", it must be fulfilled — at least in general or in normal conditions. As a Christian, Aquinas believes in the life to come, in the *eschaton*. On the basis of this belief he sees the fulfilment of human longing as promised in the next life. It is true for Thomas that many people cannot reach happiness in this life, but that does not imply that they won't reach it at all. It is impossible that nature systematically deceives people, being God's creation.

To sum up, what human beings ultimately long for is, according to Aquinas, their *perfection*, that is the actualisation of the highest potencies of their soul. The fulfilment is promised for the life to come by knowing and loving God in the "*visio beatifica*".

### *Aquinas' Christian view and modern self-realisation*

We have seen that in modern Western philosophy questions concerning the ultimate goal cannot be answered in an objective sense. They depend on conventional posits. For some philosophers it does not even make sense to pose such questions. Nonetheless, even nowadays people — mainly non philosophers — believe that there is a valid answer to the question what the ultimate goal is people long for. They say: it is *self-realisation*. Asked why they seem to be frustrated or unhappy, people often tell it is because they cannot realise themselves. They cannot develop their faculties and their inclinations by being conditioned through external factors. They could be happy only by real-

ising what they long for, that is to really live up to that what they themselves could be.

From a Christian point of view the given answer seems to be problematic. Where are the values of altruism or of neighbourly love? Isn't that what a Christian should long for? Isn't God his ultimate goal? Thus, many think that there is a kind of *opposition* between the modern widely spread view that the ultimate aim in life is self-realisation and the Christian view that it is loving God and the neighbour. In their sermons priests very often stress the incompatibility of these views. You have to decide: either you want to be a Christian or you strive for self-realisation. In some Christian analyses of Western society various shortcomings are traced back to the view that the ultimate goal in human life is self-realisation.

Against the background of Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy the mentioned views are *not incompatible*, on the contrary, they can — if understood in the right way — *complement* each other. Thomas Aquinas accepts the pagan Aristotelian thesis on the ultimate goal and adapts it in such a way that it does not conflict with the Gospel.

According to the Christian tradition the ultimate goal in life is God. Our longing finds its fulfilment in God and in nothing else. As a matter of fact, Augustine's saying that the human heart comes to rest only in God, permeated the Christian understanding of human life. But if God is the highest goal in life, then loving, seeing and understanding God turn out to be among the highest activities of humans. If God is the ultimate goal, getting to know and to see him is the realisation of the highest potencies. Thus, accordingly, to fully realise oneself coincides with what is called "*visio beatifica*", the experience of loving and seeing God. This, at the same time, is highest and deepest happiness. If Aquinas is right, the seemingly opposite standpoints are only two sides of the same coin.

Thomas teaches that we should distinguish between the "*res*" and the "*adeptio*" of the "*res*", that is, between the object we long for, and the activity in getting or possessing the object. This distinction is relevant for the account of the ultimate goal in our lives: We can talk about the *object* and about the *activity* necessary to get the object. For the purpose of elucidation Aquinas hints at a miser striving for money. Money is the object of his desires. But money would not satisfy his desire if he did not possess it. He desires to *posses* it. (*Summa Theologica* I. II., q1, a8, c) Thus, it is possible to say that *God* is the ultimate goal in life, but also that it is the *realisation* or actualisation of our highest potencies, and therefore *self-realisation*.

Aquinas' account presupposes a philosophy often said to be outdated, that is the doctrine of "*potentia — actus*". But paradoxically enough it turns out to be helpful for an account of the modern view on self-realization compatible with Christianity. Against the background of Thomas the ultimate aim

should not be taken to be something separated from human beings. It should not be confused with a "bonum separatum". It has to be something that is good for us, something connected to us, and that cannot be but an "actus" or an "operatio", that is to say an activity or an actualisation of a potency or capacity.

As Aristotle teaches, happiness is "εὐεργεῖα", i. e. an actualisation of a potency. But as happiness, it has to be an activity that characterises humans, i. e. "θεορᾶν", a kind of understanding and comprehending, alien to all other beings. Now, for Aquinas whether an activity is higher than another depends on the object it is directed to — as we have seen. Experiencing an object of art is e. g. higher than experiencing a simple artefact. But then, nothing being higher than God, experiencing or seeing God in the "visio beatifica" is the highest activity humans can have.

Against the background of Thomist philosophy the traditional Christian belief that God is the ultimate goal is therefore not incompatible with the view that it is self-realisation. However, whether the views fit together depends on their unfolding. The main differences between the Christian understanding of life and the modern Western understanding of self-realisation are due to the *secular* version of the latter. Those who share this secular view do not believe in God nor do they believe in a life to come. They further reject the medieval principle "desiderium naturale non est inane" and the medieval ranking of acts.