A Short Primer on Beatitudo in Aquinas

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(A) The sense of 'beatitudo'.

The first job is to determine what 'beatitudo' meant simply as a matter of ordinary language, reserving till later the question of its learned definitions (rationes). There are three options: happiness, well-being, and fulfillment. To see which option is best, one needs to consider the following facts.

(1) In current English, to say that Jones is happy at the time t just means that Jones is satisfied at t with his state at t. Satisfaction implies the belief that one's state is good, but satisfaction is quite compatible, alas, with the circumstance that this belief is false. Thus 'Jones is happy' implies 'Jones believes his state is good' or 'Jones accepts his state as good'. But 'Jones is happy' does not imply 'Jones's state is in fact good' nor 'Jones is justified in thinking his state good'. Jones may be living under illusions. Thus happiness in current usage carries subjective implications but no objective ones.

(2) Quite the opposite is 'well-being' and the corresponding adjective, 'well-off'. To say that Jones is well-off at t just means that Jones's state is good at t. This is an evaluation of his state, but it is quite compatible, alas, with the circumstance that Jones does not share the evaluation. Thus 'Jones is well-off' does not imply 'Jones is happy', 'Jones believes his state is good', or anything of the kind. Jones may be wretchedly discontented in circumstances which (the rest of us can see) ought to satisfy him. Well-being justifies satisfaction, one may say, but does not impose it. Thus well-being carries objective implications but no subjective ones.1

(3) In the middle, carrying implications of both kinds, is 'fulfillment'. To say that Jones is fulfilled at t is plausibly taken to mean that Jones's state is good at t and he knows it. A fulfilled person is aware of being so, delighted in being so, etc. To be fulfilled is to be consciously well-off. Therefore, 'Jones is fulfilled' implies 'Jones's state is good' and 'Jones knows that his state is good' and hence 'Jones justifiably believes that his state is good' plus 'Jones is satisfied with his state' and hence 'Jones is happy'.

There is really no doubt that 'beatitudo' and its Aristotelian ancestor, 'eudaimonia', were meant to carry implications of both kinds.2 Therefore, one's best option in current English is to translate 'beatitudo' with 'fulfillment'.

To confirm this conclusion, one compares happiness, well-being, and fulfillment in their status as objects of pursuit. It is uncontroversial that everyone seeks happiness, because everyone does seek to be satisfied with his or her state. It is tricky to say that everyone seeks well-being, because it is false that everyone seeks what is in fact well-being, but true that everyone seeks what he thinks is well-being. It is tricky in the same way to say that everyone seeks fulfillment. For it is true that everyone seeks what he thinks is a good state in which he will be fulfilled, false that everyone seeks

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what is in fact a good state in which he will in fact be fulfilled. In 2/1 ST 5, a. 8, Aquinas says that it is tricky in just this way to say whether everyone seeks beatitudo. Therefore 'beatitudo' either means what we mean by 'well-being' or else means what we mean by 'fulfillment'. But since beatitudo carries subjective implications (apprehension of well-being, satisfaction and delight of the will), it does not mean what we mean by well-being. Therefore it means fulfillment.

People use the words just discussed to characterize their hopes and dreams, and to state in a general way what life is "all about." It is a job of philosophy to clarify what is meant by such talk, and the result will be an explanatory definition or ratio. For Aquinas there were two levels of definition in this case, the general and the more special, to which we now turn.

(B) The ratio beatitudinis on the general level.

Since everybody knows that being fulfilled includes being happy and thus being satisfied, everybody agrees that, when you are fulfilled, your desires are satisfied, you "have all you want," etc. And since everybody knows that being fulfilled includes being in a good state, everybody agrees that, when you are fulfilled, you are in a state where you have the goods you should want, i.e. the genuine goods (whatever they are), etc. Hence everybody, wise or foolish, can agree about fulfillment on a general level: it is "the state made perfect by compresence of all the goods" (Boethius' definition) or it is "having all you want and wanting nothing amiss" (one of Augustine's definitions). Aquinas considered these definitions substantially equivalent and called them the ratio communis of beatitudo. Interestingly, he called them beatitudo itself under its general ratio, because they are fulfillment itself as an object universally known and intended, hence as the conscious ideal which, in every life, motivates practical endeavor. As Cajetan pointed out, this general ideal serves in consciousness as the final cause of each human being's self-directed projects.

However, each human being associates with this ideal certain beliefs about what it means, i.e.
—certain beliefs about the sense it conveys (e.g. a belief that the list of goods spelling out 'compresence of all the goods' or 'all I want' is beauty, wealth, and fame, or that the list is talent, commissions, and integrity, or that the list is long life and good character, or ...) and
—certain beliefs about the realizable situation to which it refers (e.g. a belief that 'state made perfect etc.' refers to my landing that contract, or refers to my getting published, or refers to Joan's accepting my proposal of marriage, or refers to my learning to overcome these weaknesses, or ...).

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3 *The Consolation of Philosophy*, book III, prosa 2; *PL* 63, column 724.

4 *De Trinitate XIII*, c. 5; Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 42, column 1020.

5 2/1 ST 5, a. 8.

6 This interesting text is the second paragraph of his commentary on 2/1 ST 3, a. 2, where he is talking about the answer *ad* 2. The text of that answer appears below, in footnote 14. Here is Cajetan's comment:

Second, in the answer *ad* (2), the statement that "fulfillment is the state made complete by compresence of all the goods" is not a case of essential predication but of causal predication. The meaning is that fulfillment as a cause is that sort of state as an effect [to be achieved]. For the very essence of fulfillment is that through which such a state is [achieved], as the text says.

In other words, Boethius' definition says what fulfillment is as a cause. Well, fulfillment as a cause is fulfillment as a final cause, an end, an ideal attracting the will.
Since different people have different beliefs about these matters of sense and reference, and since what concretely motivates endeavor in a given life is the general ideal plus these beliefs, different people are pursuing different ideas of where happiness is to be found.\(^7\) Aquinas called these ideas beliefs as to wherein fulfillment lies ("in quo beatitudo consistit").\(^8\) The great problem of life, as of course, is to know whether some such beliefs are more correct than others, and if so, which ones, so that one may know which concrete ideal to pursue.

**C) Transition: the job of further rationes.**

Since human desire is complicated and confused, the pursuit of fulfillment invites a further and crucial distinction: enlightened pursuit vs. unenlightened.\(^9\) Everybody past childhood is at least dimly aware of this distinction, because everybody past childhood has some experience of the fact that pursuing fulfillment is fraught with dangers of illusion and disillusionment. Some people turn this experience to good account (and thus become, to one degree or another, enlightened pursuers of fulfillment), while others do not.

- An enlightened pursuit will be guided by (or will at least include the pursuit of) the right standards of evaluation, so that one will know what to make of the talk of "well-being," so that one will know what to seek as deserving that evaluation, so that if and when one is well-off, one will recognize that one is, duly appreciate why, take appropriate satisfaction in what is making one well-off, etc. An enlightened pursuer of fulfillment is open and ready, in short, to be satisfied by genuine goods.

- An unenlightened pursuit of fulfillment is guided by one or more incorrect standards and overlooks the need for correct ones. An unenlightened pursuer of fulfillment is not open, or at least not ready, to be satisfied by genuine goods. He is looking for satisfaction in some of the wrong places. His pursuit is thereby doomed to failure. He may attain what he always thought was a good state, only to be surprised by unhappiness.

But what is it that the enlightened know? What is the correct standard of evaluation? The matter is controversial, of course, because people tend to overrate material or sensual goods at the expense of the goods of intellect and character, or they think that the goods of social approval substitute for those of character, or they take an eccentric view of what the goods of character are, etc., etc. Thus people disagree about what counts as "a good state." The series of issues handled in 2/1 ST 2 was intended to shed light on these mistakes.

Moreover, so long as the fulfillment under discussion is the sort people can have in this life, "the right answer" is not quite unique. For there are two good standards of evaluation, one justifiable by natural reason, the other knowable by revelation alone. The first leads to a philosopher's definition of wherein fulfillment lies; the second leads to a theologian's definition and has to do with the distinctive form of life called "being in Christ." Aquinas was at great pains to make the latter an extension of the former, rather than a wholesale overturning of it.\(^10\)

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\(^7\) 1 ST 2, a. 1 \textit{ad} 1; 2/1 ST 5, a. 8.

\(^8\) See the titles to the articles in 2/1 ST 2. In Aquinas's Latin 'consistit in' meant 'lie in' or 'be found in'; it did not mean 'consist in' or 'consist of' as that expression is used in current English. For example, in 2/1 ST 52, a. 3, Aquinas said that the use of the habits \textit{consistit in} man's will. He meant that use of the habits is found in the will; it lies in the power of the will, in that each use of a habit is an act of the will.

\(^9\) 1 ST 63, a. 1 \textit{ad} 4; a. 3 \textit{corpus}; 2/1 ST 2, aa. 1-6.

\(^10\) Part of the reason for this can be explained as follows. Aquinas inherited and unified two good answers
In our present life, there is also a second reason why there cannot be just one "right" concrete ideal. I am referring to the fact that fulfillment can be found in an enormous variety of careers, vocations, states, stations, and conditions of life. In fact, this variety poses a problem as to whether there is anything further that can be defined about fulfillment. Perhaps there is nothing but variety, beyond the general ideal. Perhaps the concrete ideal that each person pursues is incomparable with anyone else's. Aquinas could not accept such an answer. He thought that the requirements of virtue and the distinctives of human nature would combine to assure that every fulfilling way of life would resemble every other one in certain core features.

If all fulfilling life-plans and all fulfilled lives have at least one feature in common, a ratio could capture what it is. The philosophical or theological task of isolating this common core, which Aquinas called the *essentia beatitudinis*, was the task of stating the *ratio specialis* of beatitudo. It captured the essential feature (but not the whole) of *id in quo beatitudo consistit*.

(D). The *rationes beatitudinis* on the special level.

(1) Under the natural standard of evaluation, he agreed with Aristotle that the essential core of fulfillment is a special case of "activity in accord with complete [intellectual and moral] virtue," namely, a life endowed with the *noblest understanding* we can have; it is a life in which the

to the question of where fulfillment is to be found: a revealed one (fulfillment lies in the Vision of God, in which one can participate now by living in grace) and a philosophical one developed by Aristotle. The Stagirite reasoned that each species is present in nature for a purpose, and its members find their fulfillment in achieving that purpose (*De Caelo* II, c. 3). To discover what the purpose is, one has to look at the highest activity distinctive of the species (the best exercise of their best capacity). Man's highest distinctive activity is understanding, and its best exercise is understanding the deepest causes and purposes, and these Aristotle called "divine things" (*Nicomachean Ethics* VIII). Of course, it is hard to devote oneself to such topics without a well-regulated private life, supported by health, friends, social order, and economic sufficiency; so a person best pursues the intellectual life in a state where all those goods are present (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII). Aquinas saw the apologetical potential in Aristotle's answer: if human fulfillment lies in contemplating "divine things" in this world's favorable conditions, how much more must it lie in seeing those things first-hand in Heaven's favorable conditions — as the Gospel promises? Hence he appropriated Aristotle's idea that man's end lies in understanding certain things. Critics have called this appeal "intellectualist," but neither Aristotle nor Aquinas said that understanding was man's only good, nor did they say that all the goods we seek were found in that act alone, apart from its environing conditions, which included moral virtues. What they said was that, in a fulfilling human life, social and economic blessings support intellectual seriousness. A life devoid of interest in the ultimate questions is a shallow and stunted life.

11 Aquinas pays little attention to the variety of fulfilling ways of life in the *Summa* (except to tout the advantages of the contemplative religious life over the active life: 2/1 ST 3, a. 2 ad 4; 2/2 ST 182), but he shows more understanding of the excellence of active careers elsewhere, especially in *De Regno* I, c. 9.

12 The distinction between *x* under its general *ratio* and *x* under the special *ratio* of wherein it *consistit* makes excellent sense wherever *x* is an object desired. Take "a party." Everybody likes a party. Sooner or later, almost everybody wants to throw a party. Everybody knows that a party is people having a good time together; that is its general *ratio*. But many a would-be host or hostess fails to know what makes a party come off; he or she is clueless about the real conditions under which people do have a good time together. The special *ratio* of wherein a party *consistit* is missing.

13 2/1 ST 3, articles 2 and 5.
highest cause of everything, the ultimate purpose of everything, the noblest being, is the object of our understanding, to the extent we can make it so.\footnote{This matter comes up in many places, but perhaps the most profitable to read is 2/1 \textit{ST} 3, a. 2. There the question is whether fulfillment is an activity (\textit{operatio}), and Aquinas is forced to choose between Boethius's definition, which made fulfillment a state (the one made perfect by compresence of all the goods), and Aristotle's definition, which made it an activity (one in accord with all the intellectual and moral virtues). Aquinas sided with Aristotle but left room for Boethius, as follows, in the answer \textit{ad} 2:

when Boethius defined fulfillment, he was thinking of its general definition. For the general account of what it takes [to be "fulfilled"] is that it takes general, all-around good. And this is what he indicated when he said it is the state made perfect by compresence of all the goods, by which he meant to convey nothing more than the fact that a fulfilled man is in a state of all-around good. Aristotle, however, was expressing the very essence of fulfillment by pointing to the factor through which a man is in such a state, since a man is in it through an activity. In \textit{Ethics I} he, too, showed that fulfillment is "all-around good."

This answer \textit{ad} 2 is a nodal point in Aquinas's treatment of \textit{beatitudo}, for it is here that he combined his inheritances. Whether one translates \textit{'beatitudo'} as happiness, as well-being, or as fulfillment, Boethius' definition rings true. Happiness/well-being/fulfillment is a state, rendered ideal by the fact that it contains all that has attracted one's desire as to-be-had or attained as "good." Aquinas himself made room for this definition, conceding that it captures \textit{in general terms} the makeup of fulfillment. But he thought that Aristotle's definition got more informatively to the heart of the matter, and so he insisted on making room for it, too. Aristotle thought of being happy as "flourishing," and it does make sense to think of flourishing as doing something, as being engaged in fulfilling activity, and in doing it all-around well ("in accord with complete \textit{virtus}"). But why should one insert the definition of flourishing into one's account of the state which is fulfillment? Why did Aquinas combine ideas that could simply have been distinguished? One answer is: to accommodate Augustinian theology, in which \textit{beatitudo} had to be an \textit{operatio} because it had to be seeing God. A better answer, I suggest, is that if one does not put a doing into the state of fulfillment, one's account will foster the illusion that fulfillment is a state into which one can be \textit{put passively} — as though happiness were a bowl of cherries into which one could be dropped. Many people have that idea, and it is a source of wretchedness and resentment. "Fulfillment" really is a state which a person has to \textit{find actively}, \textit{in doing} (with whatever help it takes) the \textit{right things}. And the more I come to think of my true goods as interior ones, the more I will think of the right doing as the essential core of my fulfillment, not a mere preliminary to it.

From there, it is not hard to see that the right doing must be one in which understanding is alert and successful. But to the further selection of a particular exercise of understanding, targeted on a particular topic, as essential to any fulfilled life — that is a very long step. For Aquinas, the reasons to make it come not only from the defining role of intellect in human nature (which is the first reason he relies upon in 2/1 \textit{ST} 3, a. 5 and elsewhere) but also from his account of wisdom. If human fulfillment must be reached in self-directed activity, and self-directed activity cannot be fulfilling unless it is wise, but being wise is a matter of taking into account \textit{first} causes and \textit{ultimate} purposes (3 \textit{CG} cc. 37, 44; 1 \textit{ST} 1, a. 6), then a grasp of those things must be the very key to fulfillment and the heart of it.}

\footnote{2/1 \textit{ST} 3, a.3, a. 8, and many other places.}

(2) Under the revealed standard of evaluation, he agreed with Augustine that the essential core of fulfillment is union with uncreated Good, which is persevering in faith in the state of grace in this life, and which is the glorious Vision of God in the next life.\footnote{Needless to say, these \textit{rationes} are not universally known or accepted; they define not what everyone seeks but wherein what everyone seeks is really to be found.}

Needless to say, these \textit{rationes} are not universally known or accepted; they define not what everyone seeks but wherein what everyone seeks is really to be found.
The word that best expresses what is common to these two *rationes speciales* is 'wisdom'. An activity of understanding which is both intellectually and morally rewarding is an exercise of wisdom. It orders one's life (sets one's priorities) by looking at first causes and ultimate purposes. A philosopher who turns his knowledge of these things to good moral account is a wise man by the natural standard. A Christian who turns his revealed knowledge of the first cause and last end to the good account called "living the faith" is a wise man by the revealed standard. Under either standard, a wisely lived life is an enlightened pursuit of fulfillment. They differ in whether the light that makes them enlightened is human or divine, a thing of this world (this world at its best) or a thing of Eternity.

(E) This life and the next.

In 2/1 *ST* 3, aa. 6-8, Aquinas contrasted the fulfillment one can have in this life with the fulfillment one can have hereafter, calling the former incomplete (*imperfecta*) and the latter complete or "last" (*perfecta, ultima*). These fell under the general and special definitions as follows. Fulfillment in the next life properly satisfied the general definition ("complete good"), while fulfillment in this life fell short of it, capturing only a resemblance to it. As for special definitions, the incomplete and the complete fulfillments fell under different ones. Incomplete fulfillment got either the naturally-known special definition (Aristotle's) or the revealed one (conjunction to Uncreated Good through grace). Complete fulfillment had no special definition but the revealed one (the Beatific Vision). As a theologian, Aquinas's interest was overwhelmingly focused on this last.

(F) Concrete ideal vs. what one settles for.

Cutting across the distinction between this life and the next is another distinction which one must draw, between the concretized fulfillment one seeks and the concretized fulfillment one settles for. Jones seeks, perhaps, to be a great medical doctor, amply rewarded and widely consulted. In the end, he will settle for being a country practitioner. Smith seeks to be a priest and a great missionary. In the end, he will settle for being a dutiful Catholic husband and father. Precisely because all humans do seek what is nowadays called happiness, everyone seeks to be satisfied with his state; and when factors beyond his control set limits to the state he can achieve, so that it falls short of being the state he had desired, he seeks to be satisfied with it as is.

If one poses this issue as I have just done, as a practical matter in particular lives, it is fair to say that Aquinas did not deal with it, and his failure to do so is hardly surprising. Whether this "settling for less" is a good thing in a given life cannot be answered without seeing what is going on in that life. One man settles for less in a pattern of compromise. Another man opens his eyes to the mediocrity of his gifts and settles for less in a pattern of humility. To discern which is which is the work of a guidance counsellor, not a theologian. But if one poses this issue in its broadest general features, one will see that Aquinas did deal with it. He dealt with it both as a moral problem and as a theoretical one.

(1) Morally, the problem of whether to settle for less is the same as the problem of what is really important, and it is solved by isolating the *essentia beatitudinis*. Settling for less can be praiseworthy, provided that the state one is settling for includes the *essentia beatitudinis*. Aristotle saw this even under the natural standard of evaluation: a man hammered by cruel misfortunes can still

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16 2/1 *ST* 3, a. 6, at the beginning of the corpus. Notice that 'beatitudo' was used analogously, then, as between the two. The definition of 'beatitudo' as applied to the next life's fulfillment really was "complete good," while the definition of 'beatitudo' as applied to this life's fulfillment was "resembles complete good." The situation where the same word was used with different *rationes*, but the one *ratio* expressed a relation to what was mentioned in the other, was said to characterize analogous use in 1 *ST* 13, a. 6.
act according to complete virtue and, if he does, should still be called "fulfilled." 17 A fortiori the hammered man will be fulfilled if his life retains the essentia beatitudinis under the supernatural standard; for then when he has nothing left but the integrity of his soul, he still has the indwelling Trinity, which is Uncreated Good not as a distant Other but as an available Friend, and a man can settle for that gladly, not just stoically. For one who judges by the supernatural standard can see that he has the unum necessarium, remaining conjoined to God through grace, even when stripped and tortured.

(2) As a theoretical matter, the question of whether to settle for less brings to the surface a further and critical difference between the two standards of evaluation, natural and revealed. A man not reached by revelation has the natural standard and no other. As Aristotle pursued that one standard, it led not just to an answer about whom to call happy but also to a sigh of resignation. Even if the virtuously acting man's circumstances are fortunate, he said, they are not invulnerably so, and his virtue itself is not irrefragable. These are not worries incidental to this or that career but structural shortcomings of human life itself. The core of fulfillment, as rationally isolated by Aristotle, therefore pointed to an incomplete and fragile thing; yet poor as it was, it was the only thing visible to him under that standard. Those who have that thing, he said, are what we call happy "as human beings." 18 In other words, settling for less than one can think of to desire was inevitable under the naturally knowable standard, as Aristotle used it, because the fulfillment discoverable under that standard was inherently incomplete in his opinion. One should not miscontrue this result as purely a conclusion about this life. For even if Aristotle thought he could prove by reason that the soul was immortal (as he did not, though Aquinas read him otherwise), so that there would be a next life, where the separated soul would enjoy certain cognitive advantages, there was still no way to prove by reason that the next life would be so much better as to deliver all the good that man can desire. If "complete fulfillment" meant satisfaction of all desire, actual and potential, then reason provided to Aristotle neither proof nor even solid ground of conjecture that complete fulfillment was available to man in any life (cf. 3 CG c. 48).

Needless to say, matters look different when one judges by the revealed standard, as any Christian thinker is in a position to do. By that standard, one knows that complete fulfillment is available in the next life; what is more, one knows how it is to be reached, so that one can intend such fulfillment and not just dream about it or "hope" to tumble into it. By the revealed standard, in short, resignation to incomplete fulfillment is not only unnecessary; it is a deadly mistake.

But the point that requires notice here is a different one. When one adopts the revealed standard by faith, one does not lose one's reason. One has both standards under which to judge of fulfillment, and therefore one has a theological problem. How are the two standards to be compared? More precisely, were Aristotle's conclusions mistaken? Did he use his human reason well or ill? Many Christian thinkers would say that he erred, that he overlooked signs discernible even to reason that man is fitted to higher things than human virtue and human understanding, that some even of the pagans, such as Plotinus, saw further than Aristotle. But Aquinas was not of their number. He never accused Aristotle of mistake. He would cite the Stagirite's conclusions as belonging to a limited perspective, but he never said that Aristotle reasoned mistakenly within that perspective. For Aquinas, Aristotle was the standard of natural reason; and so he held that settling for incomplete happiness was inevitable and correct apart from the faith. The proof of this last is in front of one's eyes in De Veritate q. 27, a. 2, where Aquinas himself, Christian though he was, said that man's

17 Nicomachean Ethics I, c. 10; 1100b10-32.

18 Ibid., 1101a20.
natural end was such contemplation as Aristotle stipulated. This point carries in turn a note-worthy corollary, namely, that Aquinas could distinguish the following two propositions:

(a) apart from revelation, man is ultimately unknown to man
and
(b) apart from revelation, man's nature is unknown to man.

Every Christian thinker will affirm (a); some will affirm (b), and many will fail to distinguish (a) from (b). But Aquinas was in the camp that affirms (a) and denies (b). For him man's nature is known apart from revelation, having been known already to Aristotle. According to Aquinas, then, if man be considered according to his nature alone, he must settle for an incomplete fulfillment because there is nothing better for him.

In a movement comically known as "the Enlightenment," the leaders of Western Europe returned to the natural consideration of man but not to Aristotle's wisdom about how incomplete a fulfillment to settle for. They believed that a gloriously complete one could be attained in this world by revolutionary changes in who held political power, how wealth was distributed, or (latterly) how the sexes behaved. They have dirtied three centuries with the pursuit of their illusions.