

From Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, Book 3, Prose 2 (translated by Watts)¹

‘In all the care with which they toil at countless enterprises, mortal men travel by different paths, though all are striving to reach one and the same goal, namely, happiness, beatitude, which is a good which once obtained leaves nothing more to be desired. It is the perfection of all good things and contains in itself all that is good; and if anything were missing from it, it couldn’t be perfect, because something would remain outside it, which could still be wished for. It is clear, therefore, that happiness is a state made perfect by the presence of everything that is good, a state, which, as we said, all mortal men are striving to reach though by different paths. For the desire for true good is planted by nature in the minds of men, only error leads them astray towards false good.

‘Some men believe that perfect good consists in having no wants, and so they toil in order to end up rolling in wealth. Some think that the true good is that which is most worthy of respect, and so struggle for position in order to be held in respect by their fellow citizens. Some decide that it lies in the highest power, and either want to be rulers themselves, or try to attach themselves to those in power. Others think that the best thing is fame and busy themselves to make a name in the arts of war or peace. But most people measure the possession of the good by the amount of enjoyment and delight it brings, convinced that being abandoned to pleasure is the highest form of happiness. Others again confuse ends and means with regard to these things, such as people who desire riches for the sake of power and pleasure, or those who want power for the sake of money or fame. So it is in these and other such objectives that the aim of human activity and desire is to be found, in fame and popularity which appear to confer a kind of renown, or in a wife and children which men desire for the sake of the pleasure they give. And as for friendship, the purest kind is counted as a mark not of good fortune, but of moral worth, but all other friendship is cultivated for the sake of power or pleasure.

‘Now, it is clear that physical endowments are aspects of higher blessings: for clearly bodily strength and size give a man might; beauty and speed give him renown; and health gives him pleasure. And through all of this it is clear that the only thing men desire is happiness. Each man considers whatever he desires above all else to be the supreme good. We have already defined the supreme good as happiness; so that the state which each man desires above all others is judged by him to be one of happiness. So you have before you the general pattern of human happiness—wealth, position, power, fame, pleasure.

...

‘...these roads to happiness are side-tracks and cannot bring us to the destination they promise. The evils with which they are beset are great, as I will briefly show you. If you try to hoard money, you will have to take it by force. If you want to be resplendent in the dignities of

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high office, you will have to grovel before the man who bestows it: in your desire to outdo others in high honour you will have to cheapen and humiliate yourself by begging. If you want power, you will have to expose yourself to the plots of your subjects and run dangerous risks. If fame is what you seek, you will find yourself on a hard road, drawn this way and that until you are worn with care. Decide to lead a life of pleasure, and there will be no one who will not reject you with scorn as the slave of that most worthless and brittle master, the human body.

...

I think we now have to show where this perfect happiness is to be found...As to where it is to be found, you should think as follows. It is the universal understanding of the human mind that God, the author of all things, is good. Since nothing can be conceived better than God, everyone agrees that that which has no superior is good. Reason shows that God is so good that we are convinced that His goodness is perfect. Otherwise He couldn't be the author of creation. There would have to be something else possessing perfect goodness over and above God, which would seem to be superior to Him and of greater antiquity. For all perfect things are obviously superior to those that are imperfect. Therefore, to avoid an unending argument, it must be admitted that the supreme God is to the highest degree filled with supreme and perfect goodness. But we have agreed that perfect good is true happiness; so that it follows that true happiness is to be found in the supreme God.'

'I accept that. There is nothing in any way open to contradiction.'

'But,' she said, 'I must ask you to make sure that your approval of our statement that the supreme God is to the highest degree filled with supreme good is unqualified and final.'

'How do you mean?' I asked.

'By avoiding the assumption that this Father of creation has received this supreme good with which He is said to be filled from outside Himself, or that He possesses it by nature but in such a way as would lead you to suppose that the substance of God the possessor was a separate thing from the substance of the happiness He possesses. If you thought that He received it from outside Himself, you would be able to count the giver superior to the receiver. But we are in agreement that it is right to consider God the most excellent of things.

'On the other hand, if goodness is a natural property of God, but something logically distinct from Him, whenever we speak of God as the author of creation, an able mind might be able to imagine the existence of power responsible for bringing together the two that were separate.

'Finally, if one thing is distinct from another, it cannot be the thing from which it is perceived to be distinct. So that which by its own nature is something distinct from supreme good, cannot be supreme good; but this is something we may not hold about Him to whom we agree there is nothing superior. It is impossible for anything to be by nature better than that from which it is derived. I would therefore conclude with perfect logic that that which is the origin of all things is in its own substance supreme good.'

'Perfectly right.'

'But we have agreed that supreme good is the same as happiness.'

‘Yes.’

‘So that we have to agree that God is the essence of happiness.’

‘Your premises are incontestable and I see that this inference follows upon them.’

‘Then consider whether this, too, can be firmly accepted: that it is impossible for two supreme goods to exist separate from one another. For it is clear that if the two goods are separate, the one cannot be the other, so that neither could be perfect when each is lacking to the other. But that which is not perfect is obviously not supreme. It is therefore impossible for there to be two separate supreme goods. However, we deduced that both happiness and God are supreme goodness, so that it follows that supreme happiness is identical with supreme divinity.’

‘There could scarcely be a conclusion more true to reality, or more sure in its reasoning, or more worthy of God.’

‘I will add something to it. Just as in geometry some additional inference may be drawn from a theorem that has been proved, called in technical language, in Greek a *porisma* and in Latin a corollary, I too will give you a kind of corollary. Since it is through the possession of happiness that people become happy, and since happiness is in fact divinity, it is clear that it is through the possession of divinity that they become happy. But by the same logic as men become just through the possession of justice, or wise through the possession of wisdom, so those who possess divinity necessarily become divine. Each happy individual is therefore divine. While only God is so by nature, as many as you like may become so by participation.’