

AN EARLY VERSION OF A PAPER THAT IS FORTHCOMING IN THE *ROUTLEDGE*  
*HANDBOOK OF PHILOSOPHY OF WELL-BEING*, EDITED BY GUY FLETCHER

## Well-Being in the Christian Tradition

I will spend the first three sections of this article discussing well-being in the thought of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, respectively. Then, in the rest of the article, I will focus on some more recent discussions of well-being in the Christian tradition.

### Well-Being in the Thought of Augustine

We know from Book VII of the *Confessions* that Augustine's conversion to Christianity was largely spurred by his reading of some books of the Platonists, probably books written by Plotinus and Porphyry, respectively.<sup>1</sup> With regard to these Platonist books (or, as we would now say, Neo-Platonist books), Augustine says:

There I read, not of course in these words, but with entirely the same sense and supported by numerous and varied reasons, 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...All things were made by him...What was made is life in him; and the life was the light of men. And the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.' Moreover, the soul of man, although it bears witness of the light, is 'not that light', but God the Word is himself 'the true light which illuminates every man coming into the world' (Augustine 1991: 121).

Thus Augustine saw in these Platonist books a restatement of some of the opening lines of the Gospel of John. Speaking more generally, Augustine saw in these Platonist books a good deal of Christian thought.<sup>2</sup> In providing his account of well-being, Augustine merged Platonic thought and Christian thought in a number of ways. Here consider three sets of points.

One: In both Platonic thought and Augustine's thought there is a strong emphasis on the ascent of the soul, with the bottom levels of the ascent involving the soul's contact with what is physical-sensible, and with the upper levels of the ascent involving the soul's contact with what is immaterial-intelligible. The idea here, of course, is that the soul advances in well-being by rising upward: the higher one ascends, the better off one is. Plato discusses ascents of the soul in the *Symposium* and in the Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic*.<sup>3</sup> And Augustine discusses ascents of his own soul in Books VII and IX of the *Confessions*.<sup>4</sup> In Book VII Augustine describes the ascent of his own soul as follows:

And so step by step I ascended from bodies to the soul which perceives through the body, and from there to its inward force, to which bodily senses report external sensations, this being as high as the beasts go. From there again I ascended to the power of reasoning to which is to be attributed the power of judging the deliverances of the bodily senses. This power, which in myself I found to be mutable, raised itself to the level of its own intelligence...It withdrew itself from the contradictory swarms of imaginative fantasies, so as to discover the light by which it was flooded. At that point it had no hesitation in declaring that the unchangeable is preferable to the changeable, and that on this ground it can know the unchangeable, since, unless it could somehow know this, there would be no certainty in preferring it to the mutable. So in the flash of a trembling glance it attained to that which is. At that moment I saw your 'invisible nature understood through the things which are made' (Rom. I:20). But I did not possess the strength to keep my vision fixed. My weakness reasserted itself, and I returned to my customary condition (Augustine 1991: 127).

Augustine's soul here moved from outward to inward to upward.<sup>5</sup> It first had contact with bodies external to itself; then, through a reflexive turn, it had contact with its own hierarchically-ordered faculties, that is, with its own faculty of sense-perception and, moving up a level, with its own faculty of reason; and, lastly, it moved upward and had close contact with God. From the end of this quote, we can see that Augustine's peak moment of attaining close contact with God, though joyous, was ephemeral; indeed, he quickly fell back down to the physical-sensible realm.

Two: In both Platonic thought and Augustine's thought there is one thing that stands at the peak of the immaterial-intelligible realm, where this one thing is eternal, immutable, the most real thing there is, and the best thing there is. On Plato's view, this one thing is the Form of the Good; and, on Augustine's view, this one thing is God. Obviously, the Form of the Good is very different from God in that the Form of the Good is impersonal and so cannot love anything, whereas God, according to Augustine, is personal and loves what he creates. And this difference has important implications for well-being, since God, on Augustine's view, loves humans so much that he became a human, died for humans, and showed humans how to live so as to reach heaven, where they can fare as well as possible. Still, the fact remains that the Form of the Good and God, respectively, do (in many ways) play similar roles in thought of Plato and Augustine, respectively. As a further point here, it is worth noting that in both Plato and Augustine there is a strong sense of yearning or longing for the one thing that stands at the peak of the immaterial-intelligible realm. We see this brought out by Plato in the *Symposium*, and, with respect to Augustine, we see this not only in his famous claim that our hearts are restless until they rest in God, but also in his own life-story, that is, in his having wandered restlessly for many years until he finally found the Christian God.<sup>6</sup>

Three: In both Platonic thought and Augustine's thought there is a worry that is present for as long as we are living our earthly lives, namely, the worry that we cannot remain in contact with the best things – that is, the immaterial-intelligible things – in anything like a permanent way. We see this worry expressed by Plato in the *Phaedo*, where Plato says that it is only once we die and thus are rid of our bodies that our souls will be able, in an undistracted and enduring way, to focus on the truth and, more generally, on immaterial-intelligible things.<sup>7</sup> And we see this worry expressed by Augustine at the end of the ascent-of-the-soul quotation from above, where Augustine expresses disappointment at the fact that he was unable to remain at the peak of his ascent (i.e., unable to remain in close contact with God), as, indeed, he quickly fell back down to the physical-sensible realm. Like Plato, Augustine maintains that it is only after we die our earthly-bodily deaths that we can attain an enduring union with immaterial-intelligible things and, most importantly, with God.<sup>8</sup> Here, then, we have Augustine's distinction between the complete and stable sort of well-being that is open to us in heaven and the incomplete and unstable sort of well-being that it is open to us while we are living our earthly lives.

Augustine discusses this distinction at length in Book XIX of *The City of God*. There he mentions a number of goods that we might attain for ourselves during our earthly-mortal lives: bodily health, bodily beauty, a well-functioning intellect, knowledge, the moral virtues (e.g., temperance and courage), friendship, and so on. Augustine is quick to point out that, for as long as we are living here on earth, we cannot possess these goods in anything like a wholly satisfying way. For instance, we are always faced with the possibility that physical-health problems might rob us of bodily goods, and we are always faced with the possibility that a mental impairment such as insanity might rob us of a well-functioning intellect and of knowledge (Augustine 1950: 676-677). With regard to the moral virtues, Augustine asserts that they are in a perpetual war

with lust and the other vices that are in us; thus, although the moral virtues are indeed good things, our possession of them is not nearly as satisfying as it would be if we were purged of all vices, as we will be in heaven (Augustine 1950: 677-678).<sup>9</sup> And, in relation to friendship, Augustine notes that we cannot help but always worry that something bad might happen to our friends – that, for example, they might suffer due to famine, or war, or disease, or captivity, or slavery (Augustine 1950: 684). The upshot of these remarks is that, on Augustine’s view, there is no way to attain a complete and stable state of well-being while we are living here on earth; the only way to attain a complete and stable state of well-being is in heaven, where we will be united with God in an unmediated and permanent manner, and where our enjoyment of God and other goods will be, as Augustine puts it, “complete and unassailable” (Augustine 1950: 685). It is worth stressing that Augustine’s privileging of heavenly well-being over earthly well-being is very strong. He claims that those who hope for heaven “may well be called even now blessed, though not in reality so much as in hope” (Augustine 1950: 698). His view, then, is that earthly well-being has significance or status only inasmuch as it is grounded in the hope for heavenly well-being. With regard to those who lack the hope for heaven, Augustine says that they cannot have anything but a “false” well-being during their earthly lives (Augustine 1950: 698).

Now for a point about translation: Most translators do not use “well-being” when they are translating Augustine from Latin to English; rather, most translators use “blessedness”, or “the chief good”, or “happiness”. Further, it is not entirely clear that Augustine’s concept of *felicitas* or *beatitudo* can be mapped onto our present-day concept of well-being in a perfectly smooth manner. I am mentioning this translation problem not because I am going to resolve it (I will not), but rather simply so that readers are aware of it. (A similar sort of translation problem

arises with respect to both Aquinas and Calvin, and in discussing them I will do what I have been doing in discussing Augustine – that is, I will simply use “well-being”.)

One last question here: Should we consider Augustine’s view of well-being to be an objectivist view, or a desire-based view, or a hedonistic view, or a hybrid view, or what? In Book XIX of *The City of God*, Augustine references various goods (e.g., unmediated union with God, knowledge, bodily health, and friendship), and he seems to be thinking of many of these goods as being non-instrumentally good for humans. So he does not seem to be a hedonist. Is he a desire theorist? I do not think so, for in his book *The Happy Life* he registers agreement with Cicero on the point that desiring what is “not fitting” is “the worst of wretchedness” (Augustine 1939: 67).<sup>10</sup> Could Augustine be a hybrid theorist? In *The Happy Life* Augustine does at one point say to the others (the book is written in the form of a dialogue, one where Augustine is discussing the nature of well-being with loved ones): “Do we all now agree that nobody can be happy without possessing what he desires, and that not everyone who has what he wants is happy?’ They all expressed their approval” (Augustine 1939: 69). Thus Augustine seems to be claiming that one cannot gain in well-being without having a desire fulfilled; and, if this is in fact Augustine’s view, then it does seem best to say that he is a hybrid theorist, one who thinks that well-being is a desire-dependent sort of value. However, this is one comment, and it was written relatively early in Augustine’s life, before his views were fully developed; and I am wary of concluding, simply on the basis of this comment, that Augustine is a hybrid theorist.<sup>11</sup> It seems best, overall, to say this: Augustine is either a hybrid theorist or an objectivist about well-being, though it is hard to know exactly which of the two he is.

## Well-Being in the Thought of Aquinas

Like Augustine, Aquinas holds that “perfect” well-being can only be had in heaven and that the best we can do here on earth is to attain an “imperfect” sort of well-being.<sup>12</sup> However, Aquinas seems to take a somewhat more favorable view of earthly well-being than Augustine does. In short, Aquinas seems to hold that earthly well-being, though far from being perfect, nonetheless has some sort of significance or status, taken just in itself. It seems fairly clear, for instance, that Aquinas would reject Augustine’s claim that those who lack the hope for heaven cannot have anything but a “false” well-being here on earth. Here consider Aristotle: Though Aristotle did not believe in any form of personal immortality and so did not hope for heavenly well-being of any sort, it is hard to believe that Aquinas would have denied that Aristotle could have attained some measure of genuine (i.e., non-false) earthly well-being for himself.<sup>13</sup>

How, according to Aquinas, can one attain well-being for oneself here on earth? In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle claims, at least initially, that one’s faring well consists primarily in one’s having and exercising the moral virtues (e.g., courage and honesty), and secondarily in one’s having bodily and external goods (e.g., physical health and friends). I have added the qualifier “at least initially” to the previous sentence because, near the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that the exercise of the moral virtues is actually only a second-best sort of contributor to well-being; one is best off, Aristotle says, when one is engaged in a god-like sort of intellectual contemplation.<sup>14</sup> Aquinas is convinced that the view of well-being that Aristotle advances in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is, as far as it goes, a correct account of the imperfect sort of well-being that one can attain here on earth.<sup>15</sup> I have added “as far as it goes” here because, whereas Aquinas’s view of earthly well-being incorporates an emphasis on



religious belief and practice and also on God's grace, the same cannot be said of the view of well-being that Aristotle advances in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. With respect to Aquinas's view of how grace can impact earthly well-being, two points are in order. First, Aquinas thinks that the natural functioning of every human is to some extent impaired due to original sin and that, with the help of grace, a restorative boost in the functioning of one's natural constitution can occur, where this restorative boost can help one to fare better here on earth than one otherwise would.<sup>16</sup> Second, Aquinas thinks that, as one is living one's earthly life, God can infuse one's soul with supernatural virtues (e.g., faith, hope, and love), thereby significantly enhancing one's earthly well-being.<sup>17</sup>

One more point about the influence of Aristotle on Aquinas: As I have said, Aristotle claims that we are best off when we are engaged in a god-like sort of intellectual contemplation; and, in a way that echoes this claim from Aristotle, Aquinas thinks that in heaven we will be contemplating God's essence directly, and that our doing so will primarily be an intellectual affair.<sup>18</sup> The point here is not that Aquinas leaves all other goods (i.e., all goods besides the good of the unobstructed, intellectual contemplation of God's essence) out of his account of heavenly well-being, for, indeed, Aquinas accepts that other goods will enter into our heavenly well-being (e.g., Aquinas accepts that bodily goods and friendship with other humans will enter into our heavenly well-being).<sup>19</sup> The point here, rather, is simply about what is primary: On Aquinas's view, heavenly well-being is primarily an intellectual-contemplative affair.

Is Aquinas's view of well-being objectivist, or desire-based, or hedonistic, or hybrid, or what? Aquinas is probably most naturally construed as being an objectivist who holds that a human's well-being and the perfection of his or her own human nature are one and the same

thing. That said, Aquinas puts much more of an emphasis on desire – or, at any rate, on *natural* desire – than contemporary objectivists about well-being typically do. In particular, Aquinas holds that each of us by nature desires those general objective goods that are perfective of his or her own human nature (i.e., goods such as knowledge and friendship).<sup>20</sup> And, in view of this, it is difficult to rule out the possibility that, if Aquinas were here today (and thus were to have a chance to enter into our contemporary debates about the nature of well-being), then he would be open to the idea of adopting a hybrid theory that entails that well-being is a function of both perfectionist value and natural desire (for more on this point, see Lauinger 2012: 169-171).

### **Well-Being in the Thought of Calvin**

As with Augustine and Aquinas, Calvin thinks that heavenly well-being is far superior to earthly well-being. For instance, in Book III, Chapter IX of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin speaks of enjoying the presence of God in heaven “as the summit of happiness” (Calvin 1977: 716), and, with respect to our earthly lives, Calvin says that they are “troubled, turbulent, unhappy in countless ways, and in no respect clearly happy” (Calvin 1977: 713). Moreover, in a way that sounds a great deal like Augustine, Calvin speaks of “how unstable and fleeting are all the goods that are subject to mortality” (Calvin 1977: 713), and he notes that in heaven “a firm condition will be ours which nowhere appears on earth (Calvin 1977: 717).

Though Calvin claims that we should “accustom ourselves to contempt for the present life” so that we can “be aroused thereby to meditate upon the future life” (Calvin 1977: 712), he soon makes it clear that he does not entirely discount earthly well-being. He says:

But let believers accustom themselves to a contempt of the present life that engenders no hatred of it or ingratitude against God. Indeed, this life, however crammed with infinite miseries it may be, is still rightly to be counted among those blessings of God which are not to be spurned...[B]efore he shows up openly the inheritance of eternal glory, God wills by lesser proofs to show himself to be our Father. These are the benefits that are daily conferred on us by him (Calvin 1977: 714-715).

It is worth stressing that Calvin does not seem to view the benefits that are daily conferred on us here on earth as being merely instrumental – say, as being benefits that are valuable for us only in the sense that, through them, we are led to God. As Guenther Haas puts this point, “God has given humans these gifts [i.e., creational goods] not merely for their good, but also for their delight, enjoyment, and comfort. This takes Calvin’s understanding of these gifts beyond the bare notion of necessary use, to the sense of loveliness, beauty, and goodness” (Haas 2004: 96).<sup>21</sup>

In view of the foregoing, it seems clear that Calvin holds that Christian believers can attain some measure of earthly well-being for themselves, that is, by attaining various goods that are non-instrumentally beneficial. But what would Calvin say about non-Christians? Can they attain any sort of well-being here on earth? We saw above that, whereas Augustine holds that those who lack the hope for heavenly well-being cannot have anything but a false well-being here on earth, Aquinas holds that some measure of genuine (i.e., non-false) earthly well-being can be attained by those who lack the hope for heaven. Calvin’s view of this matter seems to be closer to Augustine than to Aquinas.

Much of the reason for this has to do with the effects of original sin. With reference to the corruption of human nature that is brought about by original sin, Aquinas says: “In the state

of corrupt nature he [i.e., man] falls short of what nature makes possible, so that he cannot by his own power fulfill the whole good that pertains to his nature. Human nature is not so entirely corrupted by sin, however, as to be deprived of natural good altogether” (Aquinas 1954: 140-141).<sup>22</sup> And, in another place, Aquinas asserts that, although the damage done by original sin is considerable, it does not reach to the very root of human nature (Aquinas 1954: 127-129).<sup>23</sup> The upshot of Aquinas’s view of original sin is that its damaging effects, though considerable, are not so severe as to make it impossible for humans to attain some measure of earthly well-being for themselves without the help of God’s grace.<sup>24</sup> On Calvin’s view, by contrast, the damaging effects of original sin do reach the very root of the human being, corrupting him or her in an all-pervasive way. As Calvin puts the point, “[T]he whole man is overwhelmed – as by a deluge – from head to foot, so that no part is immune from sin and all that proceeds from him is to be imputed to sin” (Calvin 1977: 253).<sup>25</sup> Thus, on Calvin’s view, there is no way for a human being to do anything good or worthwhile at all unless he or she is aided by God’s grace.

With respect to earthly well-being, then, I think that Calvin would say that non-Christians who are unaided by God’s grace can at best attain only a very shallow sort of earthly well-being (e.g., one where, although they may gain bodily pleasures that are non-instrumentally beneficial, they cannot gain much, if anything, besides that).<sup>26</sup> One point worth noting here, though, is that Calvin holds that some non-Christians receive a restraining grace from God as they are living out their earthly lives. The non-Christians who receive this restraining grace remain corrupt at their very root (i.e., they are not purged from within of original sin in the way that Christian believers are), but this restraining grace bridles them in a way that allows them to act honorably as they are living out their earthly lives (Calvin 1977: 292-293).<sup>27</sup> Perhaps, then, the non-Christians who receive this restraining grace (and who in turn live honorably) can attain more than merely a very

shallow sort of earthly well-being. In short, by my reading of Calvin, this possibility should not be ruled out.

Is Calvin's view of well-being objectivist, or desire-based, or hedonistic, or hybrid, or what? Because Calvin references multiple goods, and because he seems to think of many of these goods as being non-instrumentally good for humans, he does not seem to be a hedonist. Moreover, because Calvin holds that original sin so severely damages every faculty that humans have, I cannot see him allowing any human faculty (e.g., the faculty of desire) to play a role in grounding human well-being. Thus I do not think that Calvin is a desire theorist or a hybrid theorist. He seems, in short, to be an objectivist who holds that a human gains in genuine well-being by, and only by, conforming himself or herself to God's wisdom and will.<sup>28</sup>

### **Earthly Intimations of Heavenly Well-Being**

Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin all assume, as Christians standardly do, that humans are best off in heaven. But what would (or will) heaven be like? This is, to say the least, a difficult question to answer. Nevertheless, many Christians (and also many non-Christians) believe that, during their lives here on earth, they have certain intimations of what heavenly well-being would (or will) be like. Sometimes these intimations arise through the experience of beauty. Jacques Maritain quotes a passage from Baudelaire that expresses this point well:

‘...it is this immortal instinct for the beautiful which makes us consider the earth and its various spectacles as a sketch of, as a *correspondence* with, heaven. The insatiable thirst for all that is beyond, and which life reveals, is the most living proof of our immortality.

It is at once through poetry and *across* poetry, through and *across* music, that the soul glimpses the splendors situated beyond the grave...’ (Maritain 1954: 85-86).

I think that many Christians (and also many non-Christians) have had (or at least think that they have had) intimations of heaven through the experience of beauty. One witnesses, say, the beauty of the mountains (or the ocean, or the poem, or the music), and one is amazed, stunned, and enthralled. There is a non-instrumental benefit that is present here. But this experience also points beyond itself to another experience, one that will be even more amazing, more stunning, and more enthralling – and that will be so in an unceasing or enduring way. No doubt the pointing beyond that occurs here is obscure; one’s experience here is hard to put into words, since it is “affective and nostalgic” rather than “rational and conceptual” (Maritain 1954: 86). Still, this pointing beyond provides one with (or at least seems to provide one with) an intimation of what heavenly well-being would (or will) be like.

C. S. Lewis suggests that intimations of heavenly well-being can be triggered by one’s experiencing a certain sort of disappointment with the wonderful things that are attainable on earth. With reference to heaven, Lewis says:

Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would ordinarily be called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am

speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality...The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job: but something has evaded us (Lewis 1952: 135).

The idea here is that we (a) experience disappointment at finding out that this wonderful thing (e.g., this marriage, or this trip, or this subject) cannot quite give us all that we want (though perhaps for a time we thought that it could) and then (b) come to the realization that we must want a sort of well-being that does not fall short in the way that the wonderful things that are attainable in this earthly life fall short. This, then, is (or is believed to be) an intimation of what heavenly well-being would (or will) be like: It would (or will) be like this wonderful marriage, or this trip, or this subject, *except that it would (or will) not fall short*.

I should also say something about Christian contemplative practices here. As I noted earlier, Augustine describes two different ascents of his own soul to God in the *Confessions*, one in Book VII and another in Book IX. In Book IX Augustine indicates that he and his mother, Monica, shared a contemplative ascent together and that, through this ascent, they gained some insight, however small, into what eternal life in heaven will be like (Augustine 1991: 171-172). Here, in particular, Augustine says that “to exist in the past or in the future is no property of the eternal”, and he laments his and Monica’s return, after their ascent ended, “to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending” (Augustine 1991: 171). Thus Augustine points us toward the claim that in heaven we will live in a pleasant and peaceful eternal present that somehow transcends all temporal flux and successiveness. Though most Christians who practice contemplation probably do not have the successes that Augustine seems

to have had, the fact remains that, for many Christians throughout history and right up to the present, contemplation has been the main way in which they have gained (or have tried to gain) some insight into the nature of life in heaven.<sup>29</sup>

Before leaving this section, I should stress that everything said here can reasonably be questioned by non-theists. For instance, in response to a Christian who claims to have an intimation of heaven through his or her experience of something beautiful (e.g., a mountain), a non-theist might say: “Your experience of the mountain, wonderful though it may be, does *not* point beyond itself to heaven. Yes, you *believe* that it does. But that is because you are already a theist. If you were working with different background assumptions (e.g., atheistic ones), then you would *not* form the belief that your experience of the mountain points beyond itself to heaven.” Or again, in response to the common Christian view (shared by Maritain, Lewis, and Augustine) that life in heaven would (or will) always be pleasant, peaceful, and desirable, a non-theist might (following Bernard Williams) say: “I can see life in heaven being pleasant, peaceful, and desirable for a fairly long stretch of time (say, for hundreds of years). But I cannot see it being pleasant, peaceful, and desirable *forever*. Indeed, at some point along the way, it would surely become intolerably boring or depressing.”<sup>30</sup> Though Christians disagree with non-theistic views such as these, nothing said in this section shows that these non-theistic views are mistaken.

### **Does Religion Have Objective Priority over all Other Welfare-Goods?**

In the last section I focused on heaven, and in this section I want to focus on earth. In particular, I want, if only briefly, to focus on a certain debate that, for the last few decades, has



been taking place among Catholic natural law theorists in the Thomistic tradition – though, to be clear, the debate should be of interest to all Christians and, for that matter, to all theists. The debate concerns the role of religion (i.e., religious belief and practice) during one’s earthly life. The main participants in the debate are objectivists about well-being, and they all agree that religion is a good that directly contributes to well-being. But, while some parties to the debate think that religion is on a par with other welfare-goods such as friendship, knowledge, and aesthetic experience, other parties to the debate think that religion is a superordinate good, which is to say that it has objective priority over all other welfare-goods.<sup>31</sup> Here objective priority contrasts with subjective priority. Through one’s own subjective choice about how to order welfare-goods in one’s own life, one might give the good of religion priority over friendship, knowledge, and all other welfare-goods. But the question here is about objective priority: It is about whether religion has priority over all other welfare-goods in a way that is independent of anyone’s subjective choices.

John Finnis is one of the main proponents of the view that religion is on a par with other welfare-goods such as friendship, knowledge, and aesthetic experience (Finnis 1980: 81-133 and 403-410). Finnis refers to welfare-goods such as religion, friendship, knowledge, and aesthetic experience as “the basic goods”, and he holds that all of the basic goods are equally fundamental, which is to say that there is no objective hierarchy or ordering among them. Each one of us is, Finnis says, under a requirement of practical reason to find some way of ordering the basic goods in his or her own life, taking into account his or her own preferences, talents, and circumstances (e.g., a scholar might reasonably choose to give priority to knowledge over the other basic goods in his or her own life). But, says Finnis, this ordering of the basic goods in one’s own life is subjectively generated, and the fact remains that the basic goods are all objectively equal (Finnis

1980: 103-106). With regard to religion, Finnis says that, if someone claims that religion has objective priority over the other basic goods, then “we must reply by asking whether the glory of God may not be manifested in *any* of the many aspects of human flourishing” (Finnis 1980: 113). Finnis’s point here, I think, is that all of the basic goods (not just the basic good of religion) are ultimately grounded in God, and that God’s glory is just as much manifested when one engages in friendship, or knowledge, or aesthetic experience, etc., as it is when one engages in religion. Finnis also indicates that “the love of God” can be expressed in many different sorts of “life-plans” (Finnis 1980: 113), with the point being that different lives, ones that exhibit different prioritizations of the basic goods, might all equally express the love of God.

Though Finnis is a Thomistic natural law theorist, his claim that there is no objective hierarchy or ordering among the basic goods seems to cut against Aquinas’s view. I say this because Aquinas seems to have accepted something like the following objective ordering of welfare-goods: (a) unmediated union with God in heaven is best; (b) close union with God here on earth, which is primarily attained through religious practice (i.e., prayer, worship, and so on), is second best; (c) intellectual contemplation (e.g., of theoretical truths) is third best; (d) the exercise of the moral virtues is fourth best; and (e) bodily and external goods (e.g., physical health and friends) are fifth best.<sup>32</sup> Or, put more simply, Aquinas seems to have accepted that religion is ranked first, knowledge is ranked second, moral virtue is ranked third, and so on. Of course, Aquinas’s view could be mistaken, and Finnis’s view could be correct. One worry, in particular, about Aquinas’s view is that it might be thought to have the implausible implication that, in order to be as well off as possible, each of us should spend all of his or her time praying, worshipping God, and so on. Daniel McInerny, who is among those who defend the view that religion has objective priority over all other welfare-goods, addresses this worry. He says:

But what then of the related, “domination” objection? If contemplation and religious observance are the best goods, why shouldn’t I spend all my time with them? To answer this we need to underscore again that higher goods in a hierarchy do not undermine the intrinsic goodness of the goods subordinate to them. My obligation to honor my parents, for instance, binds me to the goods of family life in a way that is constitutive of my happiness. My other obligation to honor God in the practice of the virtue of religion is not a rival to this obligation, even while it remains the more important obligation. The natural law in no way requires that I pursue religious acts to the exclusion of all other obligations. The natural law only demands that the religious obligation is given foremost respect in the tailoring of the hierarchy to my individual circumstances (McInerny 2006: 129).

An example might help here. Suppose that someone feels called by God to be an artist, and suppose that this person spends more time on artistic pursuits than on anything else, including prayer, worship, and so on. Presumably it would not necessarily follow that this person has put aesthetic experience above religion in his or her own life. After all, it could be that, for this person, religion (and, more generally, his or her relationship with God) is always there in the background, regulating everything (or almost everything) that he or she does; and thus it could be that, for this person, religion does have priority over everything else, including aesthetic experience, even though, as stipulated, this person spends more time on artistic pursuits than on religion. I take it that, if and insofar as this person is indeed allowing religion to regulate all (or almost all) that he or she does, then McInerny would say that this person is properly ordering welfare-goods in his or her own life – that is, McInerny would say that this person is living in a way that corresponds to the objective hierarchy that obtains among welfare-goods.

There are, I assume, responses that Finnis and those who agree with him might offer at this point. But, instead of continuing on with this debate, I will now proceed to the final section of this article.

### **Contemporary Christian Philosophers and the Nature of Well-Being**

There is no consensus among contemporary Christian philosophers about the nature of well-being. Though it is true that many contemporary Christian philosophers are objectivists about well-being (e.g., see Finnis 1980: 59-99; Murphy 2001: 6-138; and Oderberg 2004: 127-144), it is also true that many are not. For instance, Stewart Goetz is on record as defending welfare hedonism, and in partially explaining his view he says:

It is, then, the pleasure that either accompanies or is produced by instrumental goods such as friendship and knowledge that makes them attractive and the pursuit of them worthwhile, and the fact that pleasure enhances the status of these supposed intrinsic goods in this way undermines their candidacy for being intrinsic goods. Conversely, the status of pleasure as an intrinsic good is not enhanced by the friendship, love, knowledge, beauty, etc. that accompanies or is productive of it (Goetz 2012: 93).<sup>33</sup>

Like Goetz, Thomas Carson rejects objectivism about well-being, but, unlike Goetz, Carson defends a desire-based theory of well-being. Interestingly, Carson holds that, assuming God exists, we should accept a desire-based theory of well-being that appeals to God's desires rather than to humans' desires, and Carson defends his divine desire theory of well-being against objections similar to those that divine command theories of morality face (Carson 2000: 219-

267).<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Robert Adams has proposed that one's well-being consists at least primarily in one's enjoyment of the excellent, where enjoyment is a pro-attitude, and where the excellent is a non-relational, Platonic sort of objective value (Adams 1999: 93-101). Thus Adams accepts (or at least inclines toward) a hybrid view of well-being. Finally, I have defended a hybrid theory that entails that well-being is a function of desire and perfectionist value (Lauinger 2012: 3-120).

Is it surprising that there is no consensus among contemporary Christian philosophers about the nature of well-being? I do not think so. Christianity is a diverse religion, full of many different strands, and full of much internal disagreement. Moreover, the claim that we should accept such-and-such a view of the nature of well-being (i.e., an objectivist view, or a hedonistic view, or a divine desire-based view, etc.) is not one of the fundamental claims that all or virtually all Christians accept. Here I have in mind claims such as the claim that God is Triune, the claim that Jesus' death and resurrection is crucial to the salvation of humans, the claim that the Bible is divinely inspired and should be taken very seriously, and the claim that evil and suffering will be overcome, if not here on earth, then at least in heaven. Of course, to this list of fundamental claims we can add the claim that heaven exists and that humans are best off in heaven. And no doubt this claim is accepted by all or virtually all contemporary Christian philosophers. So, if only with respect to this one important claim concerning well-being, there is a consensus among contemporary Christian philosophers.

## References

- Adams, R. (1999) *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Aquinas (1954) *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. A. Fairweather, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- (1998) *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, trans. R. McInerny, New York: Penguin Books.
- Aristotle (1987) *A New Aristotle Reader*, edited by J. Ackrill, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Augustine (1950) *The City of God*, trans. M. Dods, New York: The Modern Library.
- (1991) *Confessions*, trans. H. Chadwick, New York: Oxford University Press.
- (1939) *The Happy Life*, trans. L. Schopp, St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co.
- Calvin, J. (1977) *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by J. McNeill, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Carson, T. (2000) *Value and the Good Life*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Chadwick, H. (1991) "Introduction," in Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. H Chadwick, New York:

Oxford University Press, pp. ix-xxviii.

Finnis, J. (1980) *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Gilson, E. (1941) *God and Philosophy*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Goetz, S. (2012) *The Purpose of Life: A Theistic Perspective*, New York: Continuum.

Guthrie, W. (1975) *The Greek Philosophers*, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.

Haas, G. (2004) "Calvin's Ethics," in D. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 93-105.

Hittinger, R. (1987) *A Critique of the New Natural Law Theory*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

King, U. (2001) *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages*, Mahwah, New Jersey: Hidden Spring.

Laird, M. (2006) *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Lauinger, W. (2012) *Well-Being and Theism: Linking Ethics to God*, New York: Continuum.

----- (forthcoming) "Eternity, Boredom, and One's Part-Whole-Reality Conception," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*.

Lewis, C. (1952) *Mere Christianity*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Maritain, J. (1954) *Approaches to God*, trans. P. O'Reilly, New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers.

McInerny, D. (2006) *The Difficult Good: A Thomistic Approach to Moral Conflict and Human Happiness*, New York: Fordham University Press.

Murphy, M. (2001) *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Oderberg, D. (2004) "The Structure and Content of the Good," in D. Oderberg and T. Chappell (eds.), *Human Values: New Essays on Ethics and Natural Law*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 127-165.

Plato (1961) *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ribeiro, B. (2011) "The Problem of Heaven," *Ratio* 24, pp. 46-64.

Schopp, L. (1939) "Introduction," in Augustine, *The Happy Life*, trans. L. Schopp, St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., pp. 3-37.

Williams, B. (1973) "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in B. Williams, *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 82-100.



---

<sup>1</sup> Augustine does not say which Platonic books he read; he simply says that he read “some books of the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin” (Augustine 1991: 121). In commenting on this matter, Henry Chadwick says: “Scholars have disputed whether they [i.e., these Platonic books] were all tracts by Plotinus or all works by his pupil Porphyry. The probability is that Augustine read some by each of them” (Chadwick 1991: xix, n. 2).

<sup>2</sup> That said, Augustine does stress that there are large differences between what he read in these Platonic books and what Christianity entails (Augustine 1991: 122). Also, for a discussion of some of the perplexities surrounding Augustine’s merging of Platonic thought and Christian thought, see Gilson 1941: 44-62.

<sup>3</sup> See 202a-212b in the *Symposium* (Plato 1989: 554-563) and 514a-520e in the *Republic* (Plato 1989: 747-753).

<sup>4</sup> The ascent in Book IX is the famous vision at Ostia ascent, which Augustine shares with his mother, Monica (Augustine 1991: 170-172).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of how Augustine drew on Plotinus in order to learn how to make these ascents, see Chadwick 1991: xxi-xxii. One thing that is essential to the success of the ascent is the inward turn. As Chadwick says, “The method is that of introspection: ‘Go into yourself’” (Chadwick 1991: xxi).

<sup>6</sup> See 202a-212b in the *Symposium* (Plato 1989: 554-563). For Augustine’s claim that our hearts are restless until they rest in God, see the first paragraph of the *Confessions* (Augustine 1991: 3). And, for Augustine’s life-story, see Books I-IX of the *Confessions* (Augustine 1991: 3-178).

---

<sup>7</sup> See 65a-68b in the *Phaedo* (Plato 1989: 47-51).

<sup>8</sup> I should note, though, that the denigration of the body in Augustine is not as strong as it is in the *Phaedo*. This comes out fairly clearly in Augustine's discussion of original sin in Book XIV of *The City of God* (Augustine 1950: 441-477). In particular, see Augustine's comments about why it is wrong to think that all the evils of the soul proceed from the body (Augustine 1950: 443-447).

<sup>9</sup> Augustine thinks that, during our earthly lives, there is no hope of our entirely being rid of vice. He says: "For we must not fancy that there is no vice in us, when, as the apostle says, 'The flesh lusteth against the spirit'" (Augustine 1950: 677). In heaven, however, we will be purged of original sin and, in general, all vices. As Augustine says, "There [i.e., in heaven] the virtues shall no longer be struggling against any vice or evil, but shall enjoy the reward of victory, the eternal peace which no adversary shall disturb" (Augustine 1950: 685-686).

<sup>10</sup> Augustine makes it clear that it is Cicero's *Hortensius* that he (i.e., Augustine) is invoking (Augustine 1939: 67). We know from Book III of the *Confessions* that Cicero's *Hortensius* had an enormous influence on Augustine (Augustine 1991: 38-40). (This work from Cicero is lost.)

<sup>11</sup> *The Happy Life* was written between the time of Augustine's conversion to Christianity in July of 386 and Augustine's Easter baptism in 387 (for discussion of this point, see Schopp 1939: 28-31). The *Confessions* was written between 397 and 400, and *The City of God* was written between 413 and 426. Needless to say, then, *The Happy Life* was indeed one of Augustine's early works. It is also a work that is light in tone; it is not as sobering as some of Augustine's later works, especially *The City of God* (for discussion of this point, see Schopp 1939: 30-31).

---

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas's distinction between perfect and imperfect happiness (i.e., perfect and imperfect well-being) can be found in various places in *Summa Theologica* I-II, Questions 1-5. For instance, see Question 3, article 2, reply to the fourth objection (Aquinas 1998: 512-513) and Question 3, article 3 (Aquinas 1998: 514).

<sup>13</sup> In Book III, Chapter 5 of *On the Soul*, Aristotle says (or at least seems to say) that the agent-intellect is immortal, with the idea presumably being that, when a human dies his or her bodily death, his or her agent-intellect can live on and be absorbed into the divine, eternal mind (Aristotle 1987: 197). But Aristotle makes it clear that this agent-intellect that is (or at least can be) immortal has no memory, and, more generally, the idea seems to be that it has no individual personality at all. Thus it seems that Aristotle does not believe in any personal form of immortality. For a helpful discussion of this matter, see Guthrie 1975: 145-146.

<sup>14</sup> For Aristotle's claims regarding the superiority of intellectual contemplation to the exercise of the moral virtues, see Book X, Chapters 7-8 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1987: 469-473).

<sup>15</sup> See *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 3, article 5, where Aquinas says: "But imperfect happiness, of the kind that can be had here, consists first and principally in contemplation, but secondarily in the activity of the practical intellect ordering human actions and passions, as is said in *Ethics* 10.7 [i.e., Book X, Chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*]" (Aquinas 1998: 518). Also see *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 4, articles 6, 7, and 8, where Aquinas makes it clear that bodily and external goods (e.g., physical health and friends) contribute to the imperfect sort of well-being that one can attain in this life (Aquinas 1998: 532-536).

---

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 109, article 2, where Aquinas speaks of a type of grace that heals the corrupted or impaired natural functioning of humans (Aquinas 1954: 141).

<sup>17</sup> For Aquinas on faith, see *Summa Theologica* II-II, Questions 1-7 (Aquinas 1954: 219-292); for Aquinas on hope, see *Summa Theologica* II-II, Questions 17-21 (Aquinas 1954: 293-341); and, for Aquinas on love (i.e., charity), see *Summa Theologica* II-II, Questions 23 and 27 (Aquinas 1954: 342-368).

<sup>18</sup> See *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 3, articles 4-8 (Aquinas 1998: 515-523).

<sup>19</sup> With regard to bodily goods entering into our heavenly well-being, see *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 4, article 6 (Aquinas 1998: 532-534). And, with regard to friendship with other humans entering into our heavenly well-being, see *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 4, article 8 (Aquinas 1998: 535-536).

<sup>20</sup> On this point, see *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 3, article 6 (Aquinas 1998: 519-520), particularly where Aquinas says (in the reply to the second objection) that “not only perfect happiness is naturally desired, but also any likeness or participation of it whatsoever”, with the implication being that humans by nature desire knowledge and all other general objective goods that are perfective of their own respective human natures.

<sup>21</sup> Also see Book III, Chapter X of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, where Calvin speaks of God’s rendering many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use (Calvin 1977: 721).

---

<sup>22</sup> This quotation is from *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 109, article 2.

<sup>23</sup> See *Summa Theologica* I-II, Question 85, article 2. What Aquinas seems to be thinking here is this: Like all things in the natural order, humans were created by God as good, and they remain good at their very root even after having been corrupted to some extent by the fall.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth stressing that “without the help of God’s grace” does not here mean “without the help of God”. Given that God created the natural order and all things in it, and given that God sustains the natural order and all things in it at every moment, it is not true to say that a human who does something without God’s grace does something without the help of God. In short, what God does in providing a human with grace differs from (i.e., goes above and beyond) what God does in creating and (at every moment) sustaining the natural order and all things in it, including humans.

<sup>25</sup> This quotation is from Book II, Chapter I of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

<sup>26</sup> In Book III, Chapter IX of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin refers to “wicked men flourishing in wealth and honors” and “enjoying deep peace, taking pride in the splendor and luxury of all their possessions, abounding with every delight” (Calvin 1977: 718). But of course, on Calvin’s view, this sort of earthly-materialistic flourishing has no substance (i.e., it makes no significant contribution to genuine well-being). In fact, in Book III, Chapter VII of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin goes so far as to say that impious humans who amass great honors and riches “taste not even the least particle of happiness” (Calvin 1977: 699).

<sup>27</sup> Calvin’s discussion of the restraining grace that is given to some non-Christians can be found in Book II, Chapter III of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

---

<sup>28</sup> As Calvin says in Book III, Chapter VII of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds... We are God’s: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions ” (Calvin 1977: 690).

<sup>29</sup> For a history of Christian mysticism, see King 2001; and, for an informative present-day book about why Christian contemplation is important, and also about how to do it (e.g., how to work on one’s posture, breathing, and mental focus, so as to be able to bring one’s mind to stillness), see Laird 2006.

<sup>30</sup> For Williams’s argument against the desirability of living forever in heaven, see Williams 1973: 82-100; and, for a more recent argument against the desirability of living forever in heaven, see Ribeiro 2011: 46-64. (For a response to Williams and Ribeiro, see my article entitled “Eternity, Boredom, and One’s Part-Whole-Reality Conception.”)

<sup>31</sup> This debate involves many participants and has been written about in many places. For instance, see Finnis 1980: 81-133 and 403-410; Hittinger 1987: 93-154; Murphy 2001: 190-198; Oderberg 2004: 147-158; and McInerny 2006: 109-132.

<sup>32</sup> See *Summa Theologica* I-II, Questions 1-5 (Aquinas 1998: 482-550).

<sup>33</sup> Though Goetz is a hedonist about well-being, he is not a hedonist about value in general. In particular, he explicitly says that he accepts that justice is an intrinsic good (Goetz 2012: 78).

<sup>34</sup> To be clear, Carson thinks that, on the assumption that God exists, we should go with a divine desire theory of well-being, and Carson thinks that, on the assumption that God does not exist, we should go with a version of the informed-desire theory of well-being that appeals to humans’

---

desires (Carson 2000: 219-267). Also, though I am speaking of well-being, Carson's book (*Value and the Good Life*) focuses mostly on value in general rather than well-being in particular. Moreover, Carson does at one point express some uncertainty about the defensibility of desire theories of well-being (Carson 2000: 88-92). That said, I think that anyone who reads Carson's book will come to the conclusion that Carson is a desire theorist about well-being.