

## QUESTION 34

### The Goodness and Badness of Pleasures

Next we have to consider the goodness and badness of pleasures. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Is every pleasure bad? (2) Given that not every pleasure is bad, is every pleasure good? (3) Is there some pleasure that is the best thing? (4) Is pleasure a measure or rule according to which goodness or badness is judged in morals?

#### Article 1

##### Is every pleasure bad?

It seems that every pleasure is bad:

**Objection 1:** Anything that corrupts prudence and impedes the use of reason seems to be bad in its own right (*secundum se*), since, as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, a man's good is "to exist in accord with reason." But pleasure corrupts prudence and impedes reason, and the greater the pleasure, the more it does this. Hence, as *Ethics 7* says, "in the midst of sexual pleasures," which are the greatest pleasures, "it is impossible to have an intellectual understanding of anything." And in *Super Matthaenum* Jerome says, "The presence of the Holy Spirit will not be granted at the time that conjugal acts are being performed, even if they involve an apparent prophet who is fulfilling the duty of generating." Therefore, pleasure is bad in its own right. Therefore, every pleasure is bad.

**Objection 2:** If there is anything that a virtuous man avoids and that a man deficient in virtue pursues, then that thing seems to be bad in its own right. For as *Ethics 10* says, "The virtuous man is, as it were, the measure and standard (*mensura et regula*) of human acts." And in 1 Corinthians 2:15 the Apostle says, "The spiritual man is the judge of all things." But children and beasts, in whom there is no virtue, pursue pleasures, whereas the temperate man avoids them. Therefore, pleasures are bad in their own right and should be avoided.

**Objection 3:** As *Ethics 2* says, virtue and craft (*virtus et ars*) are directed toward what is both difficult and good. But no craft is ordered toward pleasure. Therefore, pleasure is not something good.

**But contrary to this:** Psalm 36:4 says, "Take pleasure in the Lord." Therefore, since a divine authority does not induce us toward anything bad, it seems that not every pleasure is bad.

**I respond:** As *Ethics 10* explains, some have claimed that all pleasures are bad. The reason seems to have been that they were directing their attention only to sentient and corporeal pleasures, which are the most obvious ones; for in other matters as well, as the *De Anima* reports, the ancient philosophers did not distinguish intelligible things from sensible things, or the intellect from the sensory power. Now they thought that corporeal pleasures should all be called bad in order that in this way men, who are prone toward immoderate pleasures, might arrive at the mean of virtue by withdrawing themselves from pleasures.

But this way of thinking was not plausible (*non conveniens*). For since no one can live without any sentient and corporeal pleasure, if those who teach that all pleasures are bad are discovered submitting to some pleasures, then men will be more inclined toward pleasures by the example of their deeds, whereas the teaching of their words will be ignored. For in the case of human actions and passions, in which experience holds sway for the most part, example is more effective than words (*magis movent exempla quam verba*).

Thus, one should reply that some pleasures are good and some are bad. For (a) pleasure is the appetitive power's coming to rest in a good that is loved, and (b) it follows upon some operation. Hence, there are two possible explanations [for the goodness or badness of a pleasure]:

One is on the side of *the good* in which the one who comes to rest takes pleasure. For as was explained above (q. 18, a. 5) in moral matters, 'good' and 'bad' are predicated in accord with what agrees

or disagrees with reason, in the same way that among natural things something is called ‘natural’ because it agrees with nature and ‘unnatural’ because it disagrees with nature. Therefore, just as among natural things there is both (a) ‘natural rest’, viz., a coming to rest in what agrees with nature, e.g., when something heavy comes to rest down below, and also (b) ‘unnatural rest’, viz., a coming to rest in what is opposed to nature, as when a heavy body comes to rest up above, so too in moral matters there is (a) good pleasure, insofar as a higher or lower appetite comes to rest in what agrees with reason, and (b) bad pleasure, insofar as an appetite comes to rest in what disagrees with reason and with the law of God.

The other possible explanation is taken from the side of *the operations*, some of which are good and some bad. Now the pleasures that are joined to the operations have more affinity to those operations than do the sentient desires (*concupiscentiae*) that precede them in time. Hence, since the desires for good operations are themselves good and the desires for bad operations are themselves bad, *a fortiori* the pleasures that belong to the good operations are good, and the pleasures that belong to the bad operations are bad.

**Reply to objection 1:** As was explained above (q. 33, a. 3), it is not the pleasures derived from an act of reason that impede reason and corrupt prudence; instead, it is extraneous pleasures such as corporeal pleasures. And, as was explained above (*ibid.*), these pleasures impede the use of reason either (a) because of the opposition of the appetite, which comes to rest in what is opposed to reason and because of which the pleasure is bad, or (b) because of the shackling of reason, as in the case of conjugal intercourse which, even though it agrees with reason, nonetheless impedes the use of reason because of the corporeal change that accompanies it.

However, conjugal intercourse does not for this reason acquire moral badness, just as sleep does not acquire moral badness if it is undertaken in accord with reason; for even reason itself dictates that the use of reason should sometimes be interrupted (*et ipsa ratio hoc habet ut quandoque rationis usus intercipiatur*). Still, we claim that even if this sort of shackling of reason by the pleasure of sexual intercourse is not morally bad—for it is neither a mortal sin nor a venial sin—it nonetheless stems from an instance of moral badness, viz., from the sin of the first parent. For as is clear from what was said in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 98, a. 2), this shackling of reason did not occur in the state of innocence.

**Reply to objection 2:** A temperate man does not avoid all pleasures, but avoids immoderate pleasures and those that do not agree with reason.

Now the fact that children and beasts pursue pleasures does not show that pleasures are always bad. For the natural appetite that exists in children and beasts comes from God, and this appetite is moved toward what is appropriate for them.

**Reply to objection 3:** As will be explained below (q. 57, a. 3), a craft is aimed not at every sort of good, but at exterior things that are able to be made. By contrast, it is prudence and virtue, rather than craft, that has to do with actions and passions. Still, as *Ethics* 7 points out, some crafts, viz., “the arts of the cook and the perfumer,” do indeed produce pleasure.

## Article 2

### Is every pleasure good?

It seems that every pleasure is good:

**Objection 1:** As was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 5, a. 6), the good is divided into three: the upright, the useful, and the pleasant. But everything upright is good, and the same holds for everything useful. Therefore, every pleasure is likewise good.

**Objection 2:** As *Ethics* 1 says, what is good *per se* is such that it is not sought for the sake of anything else. But pleasure is not sought for the sake of anything else; for it seems ridiculous to ask

someone why he wants to have pleasure (*quare vult delectari*). Therefore, pleasure is good *per se*. But what is predicated *per se* of something is predicated of it universally. Therefore, every pleasure is good.

**Objection 3:** What is desired by all seems to be good *per se*; for as *Ethics* 1 says, “The good is what all things desire.” But all, even children and beasts, desire some sort of pleasure. Therefore, pleasure is good in its own right (*secundum se*). Therefore, every pleasure is good.

**But contrary to this:** Proverbs 2:14 says, “They are glad when they have done evil, and they rejoice in the most wicked things.”

**I respond:** Just as some Stoics claimed that all pleasures are bad, so the Epicureans claimed that pleasure is good in its own right (*secundum se*) and that, consequently, all pleasures are good. They seem to have been misled because they did not draw a distinction between what is good absolutely speaking (*bonum simpliciter*) and what is good as far as *this* individual is concerned (*bonum quoad hunc*). To be sure, what is good absolutely speaking is good in its own right. However, there are two ways in which it happens that what is not good in its own right is good for *this* individual:

In one way, because it is appropriate for him, given the condition in which he now finds himself (*secundum dispositionem in qua nunc est*), where this condition is not a natural one. For instance, it is sometimes good for a leper to eat certain poisonous things that are not agreeable to a human constitution absolutely speaking.

In a second way, because what is not appropriate is thought to be appropriate.

Since pleasure is the appetite’s coming to rest in a good, if what the appetite rests in is good absolutely speaking, then there will be pleasure absolutely speaking and that pleasure will be good absolutely speaking. By contrast, if what the appetite rests in is good as far as *this* individual is concerned but not good absolutely speaking, then there is pleasure with respect to this individual but not pleasure absolutely speaking (*nec delectatio est simpliciter sed huic*), and the pleasure will not be good absolutely speaking, but will instead be good in a certain respect or an apparent good (*nec simpliciter est bona sed bona secundum quid vel apparens bona*).

**Reply to objection 1:** The upright and the useful accord with reason, and so there is nothing upright or useful that is not good. By contrast, the pleasant accords with appetite, which sometimes tends toward what does not accord with reason. And so not everything pleasant is good in the sense of having moral goodness, which involves reason.

**Reply to objection 2:** The reason that pleasure is not sought for the sake of anything else is that it is a coming to rest in the end. But it is possible for ends to be good or bad, even though nothing is an end except insofar as it is good as far as some individual is concerned. And the same thing holds for pleasure as well.

**Reply to objection 3:** All have a desire for pleasure in the same way that all have a desire for the good, since pleasure is the appetite’s coming to rest in the good. But just as it happens that not every good that is desired is *per se* and genuinely good, so, too, not every pleasure is *per se* and genuinely good.

### Article 3

#### Is any pleasure the best thing?

It seems that no pleasure is the best thing:

**Objection 1:** No instance of generation is the best thing, since generation cannot be an ultimate end. But pleasure follows upon an instance of generation, since, as was explained above (q. 31, a. 1), something takes pleasure from the fact that it is established into its own nature. Therefore, no pleasure can be the best thing.

**Objection 2:** The best thing is such that it cannot be made better by anything that is added to it. But pleasure is made better by something added to it; for pleasure is better when accompanied by virtue than when not accompanied by virtue (*est melior delectatio cum virtute quam sine virtute*). Therefore, pleasure is not the best thing.

**Objection 3:** The best thing is such that it is good in all respects (*universaliter bonum*), in the same way that it is good *per se*; for what is such-and-such *per se* is prior to and more important than what is such-and-such *per accidens*. But as has been explained (a. 2), pleasure is not good in every respect. Therefore, pleasure is not the best thing.

**But contrary to this:** Beatitude is the best thing, since it is the goal of human life. But beatitude does not exist without pleasure; for Psalm 15:11 says, “With Your countenance You will fill me with gladness; at Your right hand are pleasures even to the end.”

**I respond:** Plato did not, like the Stoics, claim that all pleasures are bad; nor did he, like the Epicureans, claim that all pleasures are good. Instead, he claimed that some pleasures are good and that some are bad, but in such a way that no pleasure is the highest good or the best thing (*nulla sit summum bonum vel optimum*).

However, as far as one can tell from his arguments, he is mistaken on two points:

First, since he saw that sensible and corporeal pleasures consist in a certain movement and generation, as is clear in the case of filling up with food and other such pleasures, he thought that *all* pleasures follow upon generation and movement. Hence, since generation and movement are incomplete acts (*actus imperfecti*), it would follow that pleasure does not have the character of an ultimate perfection.

However, this seems obviously false in the case of intellectual pleasures. For as was explained above (q. 31, a. 8), one takes pleasure not only in generating scientific knowledge, e.g., while he is learning or wondering, but also in contemplating in accord with the knowledge that has already been acquired.

Second, he claimed that the best thing is that which is the highest good absolutely speaking and, more specifically, that which is, as it were, the abstract and unparticipated Good itself, in the sense that God Himself is the highest good.

However, we are now talking about the best of *human* things. And in the case of each thing, the best is its ultimate end. But as was explained above (q. 1, a. 8 and q. 2, a. 7), there are two senses of ‘end’, viz., (a) the thing itself and (b) possessing that thing; for instance, the avaricious man’s end is either (a) money or (b) possessing money. Accordingly, a man’s ultimate end can be said to be either (a) God Himself, who is the highest good absolutely speaking or (b) the act of enjoying God, which involves taking a certain sort of pleasure in the ultimate end. And in this sense there is a pleasure belonging to a man that can be called the best thing among human goods.

**Reply to objection 1:** Not every pleasure follows upon an instance of generation; instead, as has been explained, some pleasures follow upon completed operations (*consequuntur operationes perfectas*). And so nothing prevents some particular pleasure from being the best thing, even if not every pleasure is the best thing.

**Reply to objection 2:** This argument goes through in the case of the thing which is the best absolutely speaking and through participation in which all things are good. Hence, this thing is such that it is not made better by any addition.

However, among other goods it is true in general that every good is made better by the addition of something else—although one could claim that, as *Ethics* 6 says, pleasure is not something extraneous to the operation of a virtue.

**Reply to objection 3:** Pleasure has its status as the best thing not from the fact that it is pleasure, but from the fact that it is a perfect coming to rest in the best thing. Hence, it need not be the case that every pleasure is the best or even that every pleasure is good. In the same way, some instance of

scientific knowledge, but not every instance of scientific knowledge, is the best (*sicut aliqua scientia est optima, non tamen omnis*).

#### Article 4

##### Is pleasure the measure or rule of moral goodness and badness?

It seems that pleasure is not the measure or rule of moral goodness and badness:

**Objection 1:** As *Metaphysics* 10 says, “All things are measured by what is first in their genus.” But pleasure is not the first thing in the genus of morals, but is instead preceded by love and desire. Therefore, pleasure is not the measure of goodness and badness in morals.

**Objection 2:** The measure and rule has to be uniform, and so, as *Metaphysics* 10 says, it is the movement that is maximally uniform that is the measure and rule of all movements. But pleasure varies and takes on many forms (*delectatio est varia et multiformis*), since some pleasures are good and some are bad. Therefore, pleasure is not the measure and rule of morals.

**Objection 3:** One makes a more certain judgment about an effect on the basis of its cause, than vice versa. But the goodness and badness of actions is a cause of the goodness and badness of pleasures, since, as *Ethics* 10 says, “Good pleasures are those that follow upon good actions, whereas bad pleasures are those that follow upon bad actions.” Therefore, pleasures are not the rule and measure of goodness and badness in morals.

**But contrary to this:** In commenting on Psalm 7:10 (“God is the searcher of hearts and minds”), Augustine says, “The end of care and of deliberation (*finis curae et cogitationis*) is the pleasure that each one tries to reach.” And in *Ethics* 7 the Philosopher says, “Pleasure is the architectonic end”—read: the principal end—“which we look to when we say of each thing that this one is bad absolutely speaking, whereas that one is good absolutely speaking.”

**I respond:** As was explained above (q. 20, a. 1), moral goodness or badness lies principally in the will. Now whether an act of will is good or bad is known mainly from the end, and what is taken to be the end is what the will comes to rest in. But it is pleasure that is the will’s—or any appetite’s—resting in the good. And so a man is judged to be good or bad mainly according to the sort of pleasure that belongs to the human will; for a good and virtuous man is one who rejoices in the works of virtue, whereas a bad man is one who rejoices in bad works.

However, the pleasures of the sentient appetite are not a measure of moral goodness or badness; for instance, food is generally pleasurable to both good and bad men in accord with the sentient appetite. But the will of good men takes pleasure in such things according to their agreement with reason—something that the will of bad men does not care about.

**Reply to objection 1:** Love and desire are prior to pleasure in the order of generation (*in via generationis*). But pleasure is prior in relation to the notion of the end (*prior secundum rationem finis*). And in the case of actions the end has the character of a principle which is such that it is especially on the basis of it, as a rule or measure, that the judgment [regarding goodness or badness] is made.

**Reply to objection 2:** Every pleasure is uniform in the sense that it is a resting in some good, and it is on this score that it can be a rule or measure. For someone is good whose will rests in a genuine good, whereas someone is bad whose will rests in something bad.

**Reply to objection 3:** Since, as was explained above (q. 33, a. 4), pleasure perfects an action in the manner of an end, there cannot be a perfectly good action unless pleasure is also present in the good. For the goodness of a thing depends on its end, and so the goodness of the pleasure is in some sense a cause of the goodness in the action.