VOETIUS ON THE SUBJECT AND FORMAL ACT
OF HAPPINESS—A SCHOLASTIC EXERCISE

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Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) is surely one of the theologians who was of particular importance for both church and school in early modern Protestantism. When he became professor of theology at the new Illustrious School of Utrecht in 1634, he had already served as a pastor for 23 years, and he continued to combine church ministry with four decades of professorship, including even a rectorate. He not only trained generations of students in academic theology, but was also the major theological leader of the Dutch Nadere Reformatie.¹

Voetius was also famous for his disputations over which he presided on Saturdays in the aula of the University of Utrecht, many of which can be found in the five volumes of his Selectae Disputationes. The second volume includes two “exercises” on articles of Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologiae.² In the present essay I want to honor the groundbreaking work of Richard A. Muller on Reformed orthodoxy and scholasticism by looking at the exercise on the article about the “subject and formal act of happiness” (as Voetius called it).³ This scholastic exercise deals with the debate between the Thomistic and Scotistic schools on the question whether beatitude or happiness (beatitudo) is situated in the intellect (as Aquinas held), or the will (as Scotus argued), or in both faculties.⁴

AQUINAS ON THE FORMAL ACT OF HAPPINESS

The articulus under consideration is part of Aquinas’ tract on happiness or beatitude at the beginning of the prima secundae of his Summa Theologiae (qq. 1–5). In this tract, Aquinas first discusses man’s last end or ultimate purpose of life, which is God, whereas happiness means the acquisition of the ultimate goal (q. 1). Next he explains that happiness does not consist in earthly things or created good, but in God alone (q. 2). The other three questions deal with the nature of happiness (q. 4), its conditions (q. 5) and how it is attained (q. 6). Each question includes eight articles, making up a total of forty articles.6

Aquinas starts his discussion of the nature of happiness in the third question by arguing that happiness is non-creaturely (a. 1). After that, he spells out that it is an activity or operation (a. 2), but only of our intellectual part, not of our sensitive part (a. 3). The fourth article is the one which Voetius discusses in his “exercise”; it argues that happiness is an activity of the intellect rather than of the will. The next article specifies that it is an activity of the speculative and not the practical intellect (a. 5). This activity, in turn, consists in dwelling on the theoretical sciences (a. 6), but not in the consideration of angels (a. 7). Instead, human happiness consists in the vision of God’s essence (a. 8).

Aquinas’ conception of happiness or beatitude has clearly intellectualist traits by which he departs from the Augustinian tradition. This is partly due to Aristotelian influences, although it should be noted that Aquinas by no means follows Aristotle in all respects, but surely speaks as a Christian theologian.7 The intellectualist setting of happiness in Aquinas’ theology becomes especially clear in the article that is discussed by Voetius.

In his discussion, Voetius follows the structure of this article. But first, he renders its question: “If happiness be an activity of the intellectual part, is it an activity of the intellect or of the will?” Voetius rightly observes, that,

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5 ST, IaIIae.3.4. I use in this article the New Blackfriars edition: Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, vol. 16: Purpose and Happiness (IaIIae.1–5), ed. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), along with the more literal translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.
