Can we ever be satisfied?

The Rolling Stones sang 'I can't get no satisfaction' thirty years ago. Since then more people have more goods and more pleasures and even less satisfaction. Margaret Atkins, a columnist for the Independent and lecturer in theology at Trinity and All Saints College, Leeds, explains why for moderns happiness is so elusive, and why '... we have lost so many of the joys and enjoyments we used to take for granted'.

Margaret Atkins

A party of visitors was being shown over a coal mine. It was an old coal mine, where conditions were very bad; the passage down which they went grew lower and lower; it was hot and wet and most uncomfortable. They approached a coal face where a miner was obliged to work all day in a crouched position, unable to sit upright. The visitors were full of indignation at the intolerable conditions of such work.

As they approached down the long dark passage, they could hear the man's voice, singing at his work:

'Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all!'

and the visitors were silenced (Rosalind Murray, The Good Pagan's Failure, p.152).

We have forgotten how to sing. I mean it literally: the whispering rattle of Walkmans poisons the peace of a railway-carriage, or even a library; but the faces of their young owners are expressionless. The music to which they submit does not make them sing. The cause of this, I want to argue, is that we have also forgotten a virtue. Worse even than this, we have almost lost the language for talking about the neglected virtue. If I can do no more than persuade you to rediscover a nourishing vocabulary, I shall be content.

English is not a good language for talking about virtue. A friend once put it succinctly: the Italian virtù means something that you do; the English 'virtue' means something you don't do. If you talk about virtue, it seems as if you are out to spoil someone's fun. That is particularly true for the virtues I am interested in here. Their Latin ancestors were rich and attractive words: temperantia, abstinentia, continentia; in English they have been reduced. 'Temperance' 'abstinence' and 'continence': we are left with images of teetotallers, of Friday fish, and ... well, I think I have made my point. The new words we substituted have fared little better. 'Self-control' 'self-restraint' imply a painful struggle to repress the real person and his or her wishes. So I shall borrow a word from Herbert McCabe, 'temperateness'.

St Thomas Aquinas defined temperantia as the virtue concerned with desires for the greatest pleasures, those natural pleasures which delight us most powerfully precisely because they are connected with our natural needs. Temperateness is concerned, then, with the pleasures of touch, that arise especially from food, drink and sex (a lazier theologian than Thomas would surely have included sleep in the list!). Does that mean that virtue is simply self-denial: the more one restrains or suppresses natural desires, the more virtuous one is? Far from it: virtues are not for killing joy, but for letting it flourish. Aquinas actually thinks it a vice to refuse natural pleasures without good reason.

The point is not to suppress desires, but to satisfy them appropriately. Pleasurable things have an end, a purpose: we should use them to satisfy a genuine human need. Temperateness enables us to use and enjoy pleasurable things the right amount, that is,
as they contribute to the needs of human life. Thomas is not advocating that we all return to subsistence farming, and never use more resources than we need just to stay alive. He recognises that there is a difference between survival and decent human living; he also recognises that different professions and different social roles make different material demands. But the key point is this: temperantia measures pleasurable things not simply by whether we enjoy more or less of them, but by whether we enjoy the appropriate amount. Are we able to live healthily, decently, virtuously? If so, we can be well satisfied.

St Thomas argues that natural desires in themselves do not lead us to intemperateness. The problem comes when human curiosity discovers new ways of inciting desires, such as fancy recipes or fashionable make-up (Summa theologiae 2a2ae.142.2). The analysis is devastating in its simplicity: every successful advertising agent recognises its truth, while every victim of commercial propaganda fails to see it.

Advertising

In the thirteenth century advertising had not yet acquired limitless power to increase our natural

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desires, and so when St Thomas wants to deal with infinite desires, he turns to money: 'the man who has made wealth an end has a desire for wealth without limit; whereas one who desires wealth as a necessary means to supporting life desires only limited wealth' (ST 1.2.30.4). Avarice arises from precisely this confusion: the avaricious person forgets that money is a means and treats it as an end. Therefore avarice (unlike gluttony, for example) has no limit, because one can always want to pile up more money (as one cannot always want more chocolate cake). The avaricious person, by definition, can never be satisfied: for they will never have enough (Latin: satiis). To be 'content', the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is to have 'one's desires bounded (Latin: contenus) by what one has'. Or as Aquinas put it: 'Restlessness issues from avarice in that this engenders anxiety and undue worry in a person: a covetous man shall not be satisfied with money (Ecclesiastes 5.9)' (ST 2a2ae.118.8).

St Thomas understood the psychology of addictive greed, but in the thirteenth century its object was rarely anything other than money. In our society the machinery for promoting desires, for fancy recipes, fashionable make-up and innumerable other incitements to intemperateness (as Thomas would have termed them) is vast, sophisticated and untrammeled to a degree that he could never have dreamed. It is no wonder that we have become a society of addicts. I do not refer only to those of us who are 'on drugs'.

The debate about drugs is interminable, and largely fruitless. Sometimes, I find it hard to see what the fuss is about. Our public language tells us that nothing matters except having and using more: or to put it more sophisticatedly (and less clearly) that a successful society is one whose 'economy is growing' and whose 'standard of living' is rising. In other words, we must never be satisfied; happiness comes from living in a perpetual cycle of desire, consumption, and renewed desire. If our young people swallow this much, and then see little difference between the desire for money and the desire for Ecstasy, can we blame them? Indeed, it is more immediately obvious to me why someone should want Ecstasy than why they should want a larger number on their bank statement.

The point is not that a small number of us are addicted to chemical substances. The point is that
almost all of us are addicted to a host of instant and trivial gratifications that we have been persuaded, are inseparable from a decent modern life. We are addicted to cruel and salacious gossip; even the Independent, after a month or so of penitential chastity after the death of the Princess of Wales, plunged into the unsavoury details of her brother’s divorce-suit. We are addicted to instant and artificial excitement; therefore we cannot wait even until Lent for chocolate Easter eggs. We are addicted to convenience, and to minor physical comforts; hence the impossibility of getting cars off the roads. We are addicted to exotic and varied foods; and so environmental catastrophes are caused (elsewhere, of course) by our insistence on rare and unseasonable vegetables. We are addicted to speed and noise and status and fashion, and to the cheap admiration of our peers.

More pleasure less joy

Sadly, our frantic pursuit of pleasure has been self-defeating. It is not just that we are never satisfied; worse still, we have lost so many of the joys and enjoyments we used to take for granted. ‘A modern boy travels a hundred miles with less sense of liberation and pilgrimage and adventure than his grandfather got from travelling ten,’ as C.S. Lewis wrote, discussing the motor-car (Surprised by Joy, p.150). ‘Christmas Day was spent playing with our new toys ... and munching the apples that had been carefully picked out to save for this day’ (Marie T. Litchfield, Countryside and Cloister, p.55 writing of rural England between the wars). How many of us now are capable of savouring different species of apple? Many of the pleasures once available to the poorest beggar — birdsong, clean air, a star-filled sky — are available now only to the affluent on holiday. Just as depressingly, we are bullied into believing that everyday duties cannot be enjoyed: ‘labour-saving’ has become an unquestionable goal. But I happen to like peeling sprouts, and washing dishes and walking to work; and it seems natural to like such things: for it is easy to do them while humming a tune.

Why have we ceased to value the virtues of limit? Why do we no longer believe that there is an appropriate measure of the use of material goods? The answer is that we have abandoned an older understanding of happiness. For Aristotle, happiness was an activity: i.e., the activity of living well, living virtuously. Christianity infused his account with grace, but the essential point remained: we were happy when we were living well, living responsibly to God. Happiness depended on who you were, or, more precisely, how you were. It did not depend on what you had. Your possessions could contribute to your happiness, but only if they were enabling you to live well. The purpose of using goods was the Christian life.

For a couple of centuries at least, that account has been under siege. Utilitarianism measured happiness by pleasure: what mattered was not how you acted, but what you experienced. We begin to believe that happiness could be quantified: if we added up our pleasures and pains, and pleasures won, we were, on balance, happy. And the more pleasures we had, the happier we were.

There was a limit to the damage that utilitarianism alone could do: after all, as St Thomas had pointed out, our natural desires for pleasure are satisfied easily enough. Indeed, in a society which was marred by harsh physical suffering, utilitarianism helped to drive valuable reforms. If you increase the pleasures of an exhausted and hungry chimney-sweep’s assistant, you will be helping him to live a more fully human life.

Use or consumption

The serious trouble began when utilitarianism was allied with commercialism. The problem for utilitarianism was that it is not clear how to balance pleasures against one another. As long as people are still hungry, the pleasure of food will be their priority. But once society is, broadly speaking, fed and watered and warm, how do you measure utilitarian happiness? How do you balance the joys of listening to a symphony against those of a walk in the country? How do we know whether people are happier or not? At this point, Mammon stepped in to usurp the role of pleasure. It was easy to tell who had more money. So all you needed to do was to redefine the utilitarian calculus: more pleasures means more happiness; money can buy you pleasure; therefore more money means more happiness. Blessed are the rich indeed! And thus we take it for granted that a wealthier society is a happier one.

There is one crucial difference between the modern and ancient accounts of happiness. St Thomas thought that one should use external goods for a purpose, and that the purpose set a measure for
their use. The new story has abandoned the notion of appropriate measure. The more we have, the more we use, the better. In other words, we have abandoned the notion of use, which is naturally limited by its end, and embraced that of consumption, which has no limits. In the process, we have made the virtue of temperateness unintelligible. No wonder we live in a society of addicts.

This explains a curious fact about our culture. We appear to be simultaneously more earnest and more frivolous than ever before. Our working lives are driven by competitiveness, conformity, and an obsessive search for quantifiable 'improvements'. Our leisure is spent in an equally restless search for ephemeral stimulation. Correspondingly, our youngsters are both more anxious, more industrious and more obedient in their work, and more passive, more materialistic and more escapist at their play. The new puritanism and the new hedonism are two sides of a single coin: the idolatry of quantity, or the belief that more must be better. We used to rest in order to be fresh for work (which included the most valuable work, that of caring for the home). This was because work was intrinsically purposeful. Now we work to maximise the income to pay for our (potentially unlimited) pleasures. That, incidentally, is why dance-rhythms have driven out song: we used to sing while we worked, but now we dance as an escape from everyday life.

St Thomas limited the province of temperantia to the pleasures of touch. Today we need a more inclusive virtue. Because we succumb to the advertisers' imaginations, our desires are stimulated in an innumerable variety of ways. Because we treat all pleasures as if they had a cash value, we have infected intemperateness with the disadvantages of avarice: all our desires appear potentially limitless. Today a temperate person needs to desire food, drink, sex, clothing, houses, music, entertainment, status, sport, travel and an innumerable variety of possessions in the appropriate way, at the appropriate time and to the appropriate degree.

A second point: Aquinas thought that temperateness was basically a private virtue. The intemperate harmed only themselves. He recognised clearly, however, that avarice damaged the common good; for it hampered its opposite virtue, liberality or generosity, and the generous used their excess goods to assist the poor or benefit the community. The special discovery of our century is the degree of interconnectedness of the world. We are in a far better position than St Thomas to see that no virtue can be simply private. For the excess goods that we consume come from the common stock, and the environmental goods that we damage through consumption are of their nature shared. Intemperateness and avarice have become inseparable: our luxuries deprive others of their necessities (remember that the Catechism includes concern for the integrity of creation under the discussion of 'Thou shalt not steal'). To put the point more biblically, in our age 'temperateness and generosity have embraced'.

I cannot leave the virtue of temperateness without sketching its connections with two central Christian doctrines: creation and original sin. For the more one reflects upon Christian understanding, the more one realises its extraordinary coherence: everything is interconnected. C.S. Lewis observed this as he moved nearer and nearer to accepting Christian faith: 'Considerations arising from quite different parts of my experience were beginning to come together with a click' (Surprised by Joy, p.209).

It is hard to live temperately, and Christianity has always provided a twofold aid: gratitude and penance. Gratitude is, at bottom, the response to the doctrine of creation: in recognising the created world, and our own existence, as a gift, we are able to embrace it with joy. Therefore, we are able to
Shop till you drop — Shopping habits in Britain

Retail sales in 1996: £143,990 million

Number of rural shops that close in a year: 200

20 companies enjoy 52% of the retail share

17% of all money spent on clothes in the UK is spent on trainers

Number of trainers sold in 1996: 46 million pairs

Number of people who suffer from shopaholism (est): 700,000

Enjoy our pleasures temperately: 'We should thank God for beer and Burgundy by not drinking too much of them' (G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p.64).

Penance is the response to the recognition that our own natures are flawed: we are not straightforwardly able to act sensibly, to do what really benefits us. We are constantly tempted to believe that our naturally limited desires are in fact unlimited. Christians have always believed that our desires need retraining at a deep level. At times, Christian penance has erred on the side of excess, as if we had to defeat rather than harness our desires. But if human beings are not naturally restrained and sensible enough to live temperately, then we cannot be happy if we abandon the penitential tradition altogether.

Essential faith

Why have we forgotten how to sing? The Christian must at least ask: 'Can temperateness be practised without faith? Can we ever live contentedly without a deep-seated gratitude for the fact of creation, and without the restorative discipline of penance?' The pagan Aristotle thought that we could; and he seems to be right in the case of a few gifted and fortunate individuals. But for a society, in practice if not in theory, it doesn't appear to work. We cannot be temperate without faith, for we have no defences, of will or of intellect, against the powerful fantasies of greed generated by politics, by business, by the media. And we cannot be happy without temperateness; which is why we no longer sing.

I have been reading G.K. Chesterton while writing this. As usual, I discover that everything important that I want to say has already been said better by him. Why did sailors and harvesters sing at their trades, he asked, while bankers and auditors did not? Being Chesterton, he wrote some verses for his banking friends to sing at work:

Up my lads, and lift the ledgers, sleep and ease are o'er
Hear the Stars of Morning shouting: 'Two and Two are Four'.

Sadly, his financial pals declined to use them. Chesterton concluded there is something spiritually suffocating about our life... Bank clerks are without songs not because they are poor, but because they are sad... As I passed homewards I passed a little tin building of some religious sort, which was shaken with shouting as a trumpet is torn with its own tongue. They were singing anyhow; and I had for an instant a fancy I had often had before: that with us the super-human is the only place where you can find the human ('The little birds who won't sing', from Selected Essays).

Tony Blair wants to put a computer in every classroom. Will that make us happy? I doubt it. Instead, let's put a piano in every classroom, and give our children back their songs. Along with a hymn-book, that is, because no one ever really sang a song in honour of Mammon.