

**Steven J. Brust**

Eastern New Mexico University  
USA

**BOOK REVIEW:**  
**Heather M. Erb, *The Path of Spiritual Happiness***  
**(St. Louis, MO: En Route Books and Media, 2016)**

One of the most famous political documents, *The Declaration of Independence*, claims that our Creator has created everyone with the right to the pursuit of happiness. When asked about what they think the happiness actually is that one has a right to pursue, many students respond in a relativist manner, claiming that it is different for everyone, or rather, it is what each determines it to be. It can be difficult to get students to entertain the possibility that there might be an objective understanding of happiness that everyone is called to achieve. That is why I am glad Professor Heather Erb has written this excellent book. In the introduction we discover that her motivation for this book is the unfortunate state of affairs where there appears to be an emphasis on the pursuit of ephemeral desires and too little desire for truth and wonderment about reality. One is reminded of the infamous Rolling Stones, who tell us we can't get our satisfaction no matter how hard we try. The author makes the case that only in the two sources of reason and revelation, as transmitted by Christian philosophy and theology, is a reflective and authentic spiritual happiness to be found.

This harmonic relationship of reason and faith (nature and grace) unfolds in three sections titled: "Aristotle's Theory of Happiness," "St. Thomas Aquinas's Ethics of Beatitude," and "Pieper on Wisdom and

Contemplation.” In each section, the author presents a clear and concise distillation of each philosopher’s thought and its relation to each of the others. They are also augmented with the thought of St. John Paul II as found in his encyclicals, *Fides et Ratio* and *Veritatis Splendor*, and Pope Benedict XVI, as found in *Deus Caritas Est*. For Erb, the importance of Aristotle can’t be understated because he affirmed human nature with a *telos*—the end of happiness—for which humans strive. As Fr. Kevin O’Reilly, O.P., states in his magisterial foreword to her book, a most essential point is the “simple yet crucial lesson: if the human quest for happiness is to be realized in any way at all in this life then it must respect the structure of reality in general and of human nature in particular.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this may be the most important lesson that this book teaches—that there is a reality, including a human reality, that human persons can and must come to know and live in accordance with, as opposed to assuming that human persons can themselves construct both reality and human nature based on their fluctuating, subjective desires.

Erb refers to John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*, where he makes not only a defense of faith, but a “defense of reason against unreason.”<sup>2</sup> This is a problem today, when reason is rejected for pleasure, feeling, and will, but in the name of reason and rationality. Basic truths about the purposes of human capacities and functions as given to us are denied from the perspective of some of the human and natural sciences and in the name of political and legal ideologies.

However much a defense of reason is needed, Erb also argues for the importance and necessity of the Christian faith which assists one’s reason and corrects and completes Aristotle’s conception of human nature and happiness. She does this by calling to our attention how Aquinas, John Paul II, and Pieper build upon the natural knowledge in

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin O’Reilly, O.P., “Foreword,” in Heather M. Erb, *The Path of Spiritual Happiness* (St. Louis, MO: En Route Books and Media, 2016), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Heather M. Erb, *The Path of Spiritual Happiness*, 50.

light of what God has revealed. This allows the Christian philosopher to have a more profound understanding of human dignity, the moral life, and to acquire the recognition that it is by God's own initiative that one *participates* in His Divine life. By grace, one grows more fully in the virtues since one's happiness is ultimately grounded in Christ, the object of one's happiness. In Him, the very loving *beatitudo* of eternal life, the person both fulfills and transcends the limits of Greek *eudaimonism*.

What is somewhat novel in a philosophical book about happiness is the wise inclusion of the Thomist Josef Pieper's book *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Pieper offers a wonderful vision of life's purpose, in stark contrast to the dull utilitarian spirit of the contemporary world. As Erb notes, Pieper

links the notions of *culture, leisure, philosophy, and worship: leisure, the basis of culture, is guaranteed only by the authentic practice of transcendent activities such as philosophy, which in turn are grounded in divine worship. Any reflective person can see the ways in which an aberrant notion of leisure, taken from the view that reduces humans to mere work units, ruins culture.*<sup>3</sup>

This contrast with contemporary culture is one example of what is helpful about this book—the contrast of the Aristotelian and Christian views of the world and human nature with the errant notions based on bad modern philosophies and actions including eclecticism, historicism, scientism, pragmatism, relativism, nihilism, and the “will to power.”

The author helpfully includes the suggested readings of the texts of the authors under consideration, as well as a separate glossary of terms for each of the three sections. Not only is this a great little book of substance, but it is written in a very eloquent style combining rigorous logical and coherent reasoning with charming language, for in-

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

stance: “It is only by being struck with wonder at the depth of being that our reason learns to bow its crest before the wilderness of contemplation, and find there the mountain of divine truth and power whose streams alone can renew and refresh a weary civilization.”<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that some of the questions provided at the end of each chapter presuppose that one has some familiarity with the original texts, and some of the questions presuppose a Christian understanding of some topics. I found myself desiring further elaboration on some points, but this could be achieved easily by the teacher or professor in the fruitful exercise of having students engage more fully with the primary sources.

Since the enterprise of “critical thinking” is a ubiquitous goal of the modern university, it is refreshing to discover a book that helps to restore the true purpose of critical thinking—an alert, honest search for the nature of reality that is born of the love of wisdom. Erb argues that in the absence of Thomist realism and the goods it affords, the vague search for happiness can no longer sustain our spiritual and intellectual commitments. On the contrary, without it, both individuals and societies will languish and are imperiled.

There is a cliché that attributes an honor to someone who has “written the book on happiness.” Yet it is to Erb’s credit that by faithfully observing the intersection of metaphysics, ethics, and faith, she keeps to the path trodden by the best of Christian philosophers and reminds us of the goodness of the created intellect. In so doing, she follows St. Thomas in affirming the possibility of the fulfillment of our deepest aspiration for happiness.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.