



If there is some end of the things we do...will not knowledge of it, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what we should? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is. **—Aristotle**

THE IDEA OF HAPPINESS

V. J. McGill

(Part 1 of 4)

For this year's assessment of the current status of a great idea, the editors have asked Professor V. J. McGill to review and report on recent literature dealing with the subject of happiness. Dr. McGill has just completed a detailed analysis of the controversy about happiness from the time of the ancient Greeks down to the present. The editors have asked him to report the most recent developments in that controversy.

Dr. McGill received his B.A. degree from the University of Washington and his Ph.D. from Harvard University. He taught philosophy at both universities, at St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland, at Barnard College, and, from 1929 to 1954, at Hunter College. He is an editor of the quarterly, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research. At present, Dr. McGill is Professor of Phi-

osophy at San Francisco State College. His most recent book, The Idea of Happiness, was published in 1967 by Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., of New York. This book is one of the Concepts in Western Thought Series, under the direction and editing by Mortimer Adler at the Institute for Philosophical Research.

Introduction by the Editors of *The Great Ideas Today*

According to Professor McGill's report, the contemporary controversy concerning happiness is primarily a continuation of the dispute between Aristotle and Kant. The basic issue concerns whether happiness can and should provide the fundamental moral norm of human action. Aristotle is the classic exponent of the position that happiness does provide such a norm. Kant is the principal upholder of the opposing view with his claim that "the principle of private happiness is the direct opposite of the principle of morality."

In the current dispute, as Dr. McGill indicates, Aristotle's doctrine does not come directly under attack. For English and American philosophers at least, the main proponents of the happiness principle are the utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill, and their followers. The main critics of the principle are the so-called formalists, who readily acknowledge their indebtedness to Kant. Thus the first three parts of Dr. McGill's report are devoted to an analysis of the recent literature dealing with the utilitarian version of the happiness principle and the formalist attack upon it. Aristotle's own theory does not explicitly enter the contemporary discussion until we reach the theory of self-realization advanced by certain psychologists and psychotherapists. This is described in the fourth part.

Aristotle's theory remains central, however, to the discussion of happiness. Mill's utilitarian theory is best viewed as a version or variant of the Aristotelian doctrine. In fact, in his book Dr. McGill shows how the entire history of the discussion of happiness is seen most clearly when it is considered in terms of the Aristotelian analysis. Aquinas, for example, provides a variant in which Aristotle's teaching is integrated with Christian supernaturalism. Spinoza's theory merges the position of Aristotle with that of the Stoics. Both the Stoics themselves and Kant can be understood as an attempt to refute Aristotle and to provide a substitute. It is not too much to claim, then, that without an understanding of Aristotle's theory, it is scarcely possible to make good sense of the subject of

happiness and the controversy about it.

Aristotle uses only a small number of terms for his analysis of happiness. Of these terms, “happiness” and “good” are the most important; the others are “pleasure,” “virtue,” “wealth,” “honor,” and the notion of an order of goods in which some goods serve as means to other goods as ends.

A quick overall view of Aristotle’s account of happiness can be gained by considering certain paradoxes about it to which he calls attention. He notes that happiness is something that all men desire, and yet they disagree strongly and widely about what it consists in. Again, happiness involves pleasure, yet it is not identical with pleasure. So too, happiness cannot be attributed with certitude to any man while he still lives, even though it is only through the active life that men can become happy. By overcoming and resolving these apparently conflicting statements, one can grasp what Aristotle understands by happiness.

The first of these paradoxes arises from the special and even peculiar relation in which happiness stands to the good. If by “good” we understand anything that is desirable (that is, an object capable of being desired and of satisfying a desire), then it is clear at once that happiness is unique among goods. Of any good except happiness, it makes perfectly good sense to ask why one wants it. It is easy to imagine situations in which a person might ask himself, or be asked by another, why he wants a certain job, or why he wants an education, or wealth, position, fame, or even virtue or knowledge. But it makes no sense to ask this question of happiness, at least as Aristotle understands it. One cannot conceive of making a sentence of the form “I want happiness because. . . .”

This unique character of happiness as a good is described by Aristotle in terms of its being a last or final end. Happiness is *that for the sake of which* all other good things are desired as means. But to talk of happiness in this way is misleading if it leads one to think of happiness as only one good among other goods, even if it is regarded as the last or highest of goods. “We think it most desirable of all things,” Aristotle claims, “without being counted as one good thing among others; if it were so counted it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; since the addition would result in a larger amount of good, and of goods the greater is always more desirable” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b17). But nothing can be added to happiness to make it a greater good, since of itself it “makes life desirable and lacking in nothing” (*ibid.*, 1097b16).

As lacking in nothing, happiness is not one good among others; it is the whole of goods. One “assigns all good things to the happy man,” Aristotle says (*ibid.*, 1169b9). Happiness, then, is *the* good for man, conceived as the aggregate of all good things. In short, happiness for Aristotle is the good human life. It justifies all particular goods as constituting that life or contributing to its attainment. Men may differ and disagree about what constitutes it, but there is no doubt that all men do want a good life.

So far, there is nothing normative about the conception of happiness; it is not yet a moral norm. It does not become a norm until its constituents are identified and their relation to one another is specified. These are the questions, of course, that generate disagreement. “Verbally there is very general agreement,” Aristotle remarks, “for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement ... identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honor; they differ, however, from one another—and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor.” (*Ibid.*, 1095a16.)

Such differences reveal the need for a normative conception of happiness. The aggregate of all good things does not by itself suffice to define happiness. Particular goods may conflict with one another: pleasures of food and drink, for example, may have to be subordinated to health. Some measure of wealth is necessary, for, although man may not live by bread alone, he still needs food; yet wealth *by itself* does not constitute happiness. Then, too, there are many different kinds of good. If happiness is to provide a moral norm that will apply to all men, these goods must be exhaustively enumerated and established in an ordered relation to one another, so that one may know which is to be preferred to another when conflict arises.

According to Aristotle, this task is not impossible of accomplishment. Given the kind of being that man is, with his needs and capacities, one can specify the goods that are necessary for their fulfillment. There is no question of enumerating all individually good things; we need know only the general kinds of goods that are necessary for a completely good human life. Collecting together all the particular kinds of goods, we obtain the following enumeration of the goods that Aristotle holds are necessary for happiness: wealth, health, pleasure, friends, good society, honor, virtue,

knowledge. Under wealth would be included all the external and economic goods needed for life and the good life; all the remaining goods divide into the goods of the body and goods of the soul. Among the latter, virtue and knowledge provide the means of subordinating the inferior to the superior goods and of enabling one to make the proper choice in case of conflict.

Happiness, so conceived, constitutes a moral norm; it establishes a standard by which men ought to measure and control their actions. Men naturally desire a good human life. But they ought also to do what is necessary to attain it, and Aristotle claims that happiness, as he has analyzed it, lays down what ought to be done. Happiness is thus both natural and moral—natural as being the end that men do in fact desire, and moral as being so constituted that it is violable, so that men may not only misconceive it but fail to do what they ought. Two features, in particular, give it a moral and violable character. One is the fact that it is constituted by a multiplicity of different kinds of goods, all based on the capacities of man as man. The other derives from there being one right order among these many goods. Aristotle's doctrine of virtue is meant to explain how this order can be established and maintained in the individual human life. One may go wrong with respect to either the enumeration or the order of the goods necessary for happiness. But by aiming at, and achieving, virtue, one may be sure that he has done all that is within man's power for attaining happiness.

One other note still remains to be considered in order to complete our understanding of the Aristotelian definition. This is contained in the observation—often taken as the most paradoxical contention of all—that a man can never be said *to be* happy. As long as he lives, he can only be in the process of *becoming* happy. Yet this conclusion is implicit in the position that happiness consists in the aggregate of all goods properly ordered. Obviously, the totality of goods cannot be possessed by a man simultaneously at any one time in this earthly life; if possible at all, this is possible only in heaven through union with God. Man's temporal life is successive, and the goods constituting happiness can only be acquired in a successive order and not all at once; in fact, the possession of some goods interferes with having others, as intense sensual pleasures prevent rational contemplation. Further, happiness depends, as we have seen, upon certain external goods, and these are notoriously subject to the vicissitudes of fortune. Hence, Aristotle claims, happiness requires a whole life, just as it consists in a whole aggregate of goods: "One swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy" (*ibid.*, 1098a18).

Collecting the various notes, we can define happiness, as conceived by Aristotle, as activity in accordance with complete virtue in a complete life attended by a sufficiency of the goods of fortune (cf. 1098a17; 1101a15; 1102a5).

We have resolved two of the three paradoxes with which we began. The third one—the paradox about pleasure—still remains. With the distinctions so far made, that is readily resolved.

The argument used to show that happiness cannot be one good among many also serves to disprove the identification of happiness with pleasure. For if “the pleasant life is more desirable with wisdom than without, and if the mixture is better, pleasure is not the good; for the good cannot become more desirable by the addition of anything to it” (*ibid.*, 1172b28). This argument, Aristotle says, shows that pleasure is “one of the goods and no more a good than any other.” In this sense, pleasure is to be identified with sensual goods, such as the pleasure of food and drink, and it is one kind of good along with other kinds, such as health, wealth, knowledge, and virtue. Pleasure, as only one object of desire among many, is obviously not all or everything that a man can desire. He may frequently turn his back on sensual pleasures, such as food and drink, for the sake of health, wealth, or any one of many other objects that are judged to be more important.

There is another use of “pleasure,” however, in which it names not just one object of desire but the satisfaction that is experienced when the object of any desire is attained. It is not in itself a particular object of desire; it is satisfaction of any desire. Thus, when food and drink are objects of desire, we may experience the sensual pleasures of taste in eating and drinking and also have the nonsensual pleasure that is identical with having satisfied our hunger and thirst. The pleasure of satisfaction is entirely distinct from the pleasure that is the object of desire. In fact, satisfaction by itself cannot ever be an object of desire. It cannot be one object, since it is achieved by fulfilling any desire indiscriminately. Furthermore, if it could be desired as an object distinct from all others, the desire for satisfaction would be condemned paradoxically to endless dissatisfaction. A desire for a drink is readily satisfied by obtaining a drink. But what could satisfy a desire for nothing but satisfaction removed from any other object? Pleasure as satisfaction, Aristotle says, accompanies and completes an activity, it is not an activity in itself; he compares it to the bloom of youth on those in the flower of their age (*ibid.*, 1174b32).

The failure to keep these two senses of pleasure distinct—that is, pleasure-as-an-object-of-desire and pleasure-as-satisfaction-of-desire—makes nonsense of Aristotle’s conception of happiness. No doubt, we sometimes use the word “happiness” and its cognates in one or the other of these two senses of pleasure. We speak of “feeling happy” and mean only that we are enjoying a pleasant condition of the body or that we have achieved some satisfaction. No one can ever “feel happy” in Aristotle’s sense, since happiness consists in a whole life made perfect by the possession of all good things. The miser and the playboy, as well as the good man, can “*feel* happy,” but only the good man can *be* happy. But he is happy only after a lifetime spent in desiring and enjoying all good things in due measure and proper order.

THE IDEA OF HAPPINESS

If man’s greatest good is happiness, and happiness is attainable, it seems clear that we should do everything in our power to bring it about. Its claims will have priority over all others, and, for this reason, it must be the foundation of morality. A good man is one who works efficiently to attain or further happiness, using his talents and opportunities fully to this main purpose, and if he pursues other goods they must be instrumental or in harmony with the supreme good. Men are bad or wicked, similarly, insofar as they produce suffering when they might have produced happiness. Punishment of wrongdoers must itself aim at happiness, or at a reduction of unhappiness. The ideal of happiness thus provides a remarkable unification of the whole world of desire, purpose, and morality, of education, positive law, and institutional life. Faced with controversial actions, policies, and institutions, and conflicting rules of conduct, we can put them all to the test. They are justified if, and only if, their tendency is to further happiness, or to prevent the opposite.

The main tradition of Western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle has insisted that man’s supreme good is happiness and that happiness is attainable.¹ Kant, however, denied both and insisted that the supreme good can only be doing one’s duty for duty’s sake, i.e., obedience to the moral law out of pure respect for the law alone. This austere doctrine, which belittled human happiness and hopes

¹ For a full analysis, see my book *The Idea of Happiness* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1967).

for happiness, was supported by arguments of great power and appeal. Even when unmistakable logical flaws were exposed in the pattern of Kant's argument, the underlying idea could make its appeal to human conscience all over again, like the giant Antaeus who, when thrown down, drew strength from the earth. The liveliest contemporary opponents of the happiness principle are fundamentally Kantians, and are called "formalists," or "deontologists."

The contemporary formalists contend that rights and obligations cannot be explained in terms of pleasure or happiness, or even "good." What we *ought* to do cannot be reduced to "contribute as much as we can to the greatest good of the greatest number," which is what the utilitarians propose. Nor is it always our duty to produce the most happiness possible, or the least unhappiness, in the Aristotelian sense of "happiness," or in any other sense. It is not even our duty always to produce the most good that we can. For considerations of fairness or justice and solemn commitment have priority. Sometimes it is our duty *not* to produce the greatest happiness or good, in order that justice may prevail.

In the present controversy, the formalists are pitted against all "teleologists," and all teleological ethics, i.e., ethics that explain what is right and obligatory as "producing the most happiness or good, or the least unhappiness or evil," but their chief adversaries are the utilitarians. The utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number is the very opposite of what the formalists believe. The utilitarians are also criticized by other philosophers who offer a variety of objections, viz., utilitarianism cannot even be stated in a clear intelligible fashion; people are not always seeking pleasure and should not; pleasures cannot really be added up or calculated; and so on, as we shall see. There are also disagreements between rival conceptions of happiness that will be touched on as we proceed.

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Tammy Georgallides

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.