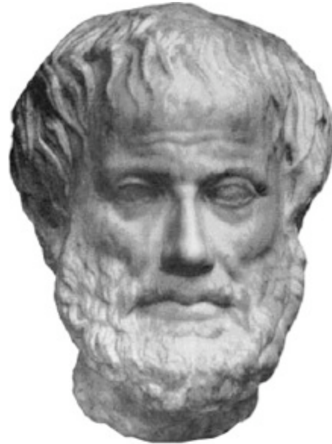
THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Jun '09 Nº 527



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 2 of 4)

RECENT ATTACKS ON UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism, the theory that the supreme good is the greatest happiness of the greatest number, is at present under sharp attack, but it has many defenders, too. Some of the criticism denies the very significance of the conception. Thus Marcus George Singer argues that expressions like "the sum of pleasure" or "the greatest amount of happiness" are only apparently meaningful. They result from:

> … reifying the pleasure or "good," and thinking of it as if it were like money, which can be thought of in abstraction from the people whose money it is, and thus can be said to have an

> independent existence. It would make sense to speak of the amount of money in the universe … because there is a method of calculating it. But it makes no sense to speak of the amount or sum of good (or pleasure). …[1]

The argument is not very convincing, because it assumes that the pleasure of a thousand employees at the announcement of a raise in pay is no greater, not more, not greater in amount, than the pleasure of one of them; and that if you cannot add pleasures as you do money, you cannot add them at all.

Henry Hazlitt also objects to the calculation of the *amount* of pleasure that an act will produce, when *amount* is understood quantitatively. He echoes a timeworn criticism of the utilitarian calculus of pleasures when he says:

> We may say … that we prefer to go to the symphony tonight to playing bridge. … But we cannot meaningfully say that we prefer going to the symphony tonight 3.72 times as much as playing bridge (or that it would give us 3.72 times as much pleasure).[2]

The reason is that pleasure is not quantifiable, as cheese is, and this has to be admitted. But Hazlitt gives another reason, namely, that pleasures are qualitatively different, as Aristotle held, so that you cannot say that the pleasure of swimming is *more* than the pleasure of writing poetry. More *what?* There is no common denominator for these two pleasures. But whether or not pleasures are qualitatively different is itself a debatable question.

If these criticisms are correct, the utilitarians' "hedonic calculus" would appear to be impossible. How can we calculate the amounts of pleasure that will result from alternative acts open to us at a given time and choose the act that will produce the greatest amount? How can we so act as to contribute to the greatest sum of pleasure, which according to Jeremy Bentham and other utilitarians is what we ought to do? And how, then, can the greatest pleasure of the greatest number be man's happiness or highest goal?

The argument is convincing to many. Utilitarians reject it. Since we calculate pleasures every day, it cannot be impossible. Actions

---

[1] *Generalization in Ethics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1961), pp. 182-83.

[2] *The Foundations of Morality* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1964), p. 27.

can be chosen because they promise more pleasure than any others open to us, even though pleasure is not quantitative. The utilitarian also has another escape hatch. Instead of talking about amounts of pleasure, he can deal with observable degrees of preference, while still maintaining in theory that it is greater pleasure that determines preference. The shift has long since taken place in economics, and the measurement of preferences has an important place in the social sciences. Recently the formal logic of preference has been developed for the first time by Georg Henrik von Wright, in his *The Logic of Preference*.[3] The advantage of treating value judgments, such as judgments about degrees of pleasure, in terms of relative preference is now clearer than ever.

R. M. Hare complains that the happiness of the utilitarians is so indeterminate that we are unable to identify the happy man. To do so, we must begin by imagining ourselves in his shoes, with all his likes and dislikes, and in *his* circumstances. But this is difficult. If I decide a certain mental defective could not be happy, that he misses too much, it may be simply that my imagination has failed. On the other hand, if I decide that a man whose likes and dislikes are exactly opposite to mine is "satisfied," in the sense that he has what he wanted, I will not be willing to say he is *"happy."*

Happiness, Hare says, is a more complicated matter. We cannot conclude from his external state of life, however glorious, that a person is happy, for suppose "he himself hates every minute of his existence."[4] Nor can we trust reports of states of mind; they can likewise mean many things. "This explains," Hare says, "why the utilitarians had so little success in their attempts to found an empiricist ethical theory upon the concept of happiness."[5]

Yet the difficulty of spotting the happy man has certainly been exaggerated. We can at least come to know that some people are *happier* than others, from their personal reports, their corroborating behavior, and the advantages of their circumstances. We must not look, of course, for some quality that shines from the happy person. The Finnish philosopher Wright argues that a man's being happy is a relationship in which he stands to the circumstances of his life, not to this or that detail but to "the whole thing," so that we could say, "He likes his life as it is."[6] Of this he is the final

---

[3] Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963.

[4] *Freedom and Reason* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 128.

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 129.

[6] *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1963), p.

judge; no one is in a position to contradict him. He may be insincere in saying “I am happy,” but of this, too, he is the final judge. This does not prevent him from being badly mistaken about what future things will make him happy, Wright points out, and here others may instruct him.

If a person is the final judge of how happy he is, then the statistical studies of the variation of happiness with environmental factors, to be reviewed later, are right in starting off with the testimony of the individuals themselves. And if, as Hare emphasizes, reports of happiness, or relative happiness, can mean quite different things, then these studies have done well to check such reports with other testimony and facts about the subject’s life. For the present, let us turn to other objections to the ideal of happiness and the ethics that goes with it.

Another author, P. H. Nowell-Smith, objects to morality’s being based on any single end.

> Teleologists, in their desire to construct a single all-embracing system of morality, have tried to represent all moral rules as dependent for their validity on their tendency to promote a single end which they call Pleasure, Happiness, The Good Life or, since it is obvious that virtue is not always rewarded in this world, Eternal Bliss. But in so doing, they have distorted the logic of moral words and their conclusions either turn out to be disguised logical truisms or to be false or at least questionable.[7]

We can paint the most beautiful picture of happiness or the eternal life we please, Nowell-Smith says; it does not in the least follow that we *ought* to bring it about. It always “makes sense to ask ‘Ought I to try achieve this state?’ “Yet if the utilitarian *defines* “what we ought to do” as “what conduces to the greatest pleasure of the greatest number,” then the one expression could always be substituted for the other in a sentence without changing the meaning of this sentence, and it would not make sense to ask “Ought I to do what conduces to the greatest pleasure of the greatest number?” It would be like asking “Ought I to do what I ought to do?” But the question of whether I ought to promote the greatest pleasure does make sense, Nowell-Smith insists, and he thus concludes that utilitarianism fails, from the beginning, to state its position.

The utilitarian can avoid this criticism in two ways. He need not

---

98.

[7] *Ethics* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 220.

define "ought" in this way, or in any way; or he can retain his definition, not in the sense that permits substitution, but in the sense that a definition is a clarification of the term defined.

Nowell-Smith also complains, as other recent authors have, that reducing morality to the pursuit of a single end, such as pleasure or happiness, leads to conclusions that are plainly false or to empty truisms. No one would claim that a judge in rendering a decision should try to promote the greatest sum of pleasure or happiness: his duty is to render a just decision in the case. Kurt Baier states the objection in general terms:

> We do not have a duty to do good to others or to ourselves, or to others or/and ourselves in a judicious mixture such that it produces the greatest amount of good in the world. We are morally required to do good only to those who are actually in need of our assistance. The view that we always ought to do the optimific act, or whenever we have no more stringent duty to perform, would have the absurd result that we are doing wrong whenever we are relaxing, since on those occasions there will always be opportunities to produce greater good than we can by relaxing.[8]

It would have been wrong, according to Baier, for the Good Samaritan to have refrained from giving help when it was requested, but it does not follow from this that it would be wrong for him, or for us, to refrain from promoting the greatest amount of good.

J. S. Mill, long ago, tried to parry this stroke. There are relatively few occasions, he held, on which we have any chance of promoting the happiness of the wider community; there is time enough for leisure, which is also useful. But if we *know* that we can help a lot, of people on a given occasion, would it not be wrong to relax?

Utilitarianism is also said to generate truisms in disguise. Alasdair MacIntyre contends that although hedonists start out with pleasure as a specific goal, they eventually so dilute it, in replying to puritanical objections, that pleasure becomes no different than any other goal.[9] "Concepts like 'pleasure' and 'happiness' are stretched and extended in all directions until they are used simply to name whatever men aim at."[10] Thus the claim that all men aim at pleas-

---

[8] *The Moral Point* of *View* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1965), p. 109.

[9] *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966).

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 236.

ure comes to mean only "They aim at what they aim at." Unfortunately, pleasure reduced to "what we desire" affords us no standard for choosing whether to cultivate new desires and dispositions, or which to cultivate, and how to compare them with those we now have.

> The injunction "Pursue happiness!" when *happiness* has been given the broad, undifferentiated sense which Bentham and Mill give to it is merely the injunction "Try to achieve what you desire." But as to any question about rival objects of desire, or about alternative and competing desires, this injunction is silent and empty.[11]

Robert B. Braithwaite, the Cambridge philosopher, also complains of the emptiness of any single, final standard for moral conduct. In "Moral Principles and Inductive Policies," he contends that both Mill's happiness and Aristotle's eudaemonia (happiness) are "inscrutable" concepts.[12] "The reason would seem to be," he says, "that, in order to justify all lesser goods, they have to be so comprehensive as to lose all cognitive content. An ascending series of ends each of which is a necessary condition for its *predecessors* in the series soon fades into ineluctable obscurity."[13]

In an ascending series of scientific hypotheses—as when, in explaining the motion of a planet, we go, for example, from Kepler's law of planetary motion to Newton's law of gravitation and then Einstein's general theory of relativity—"the propositions become stronger and stronger so that we are saying more and more. … " It is quite different if, in attempting to justify a certain action, we do so in terms of a proximate end, and then try to justify this end by a higher end, and so on. "In ascending the hierarchy of ends the propositions become weaker and weaker and weaker, so that we are saying less and less."[14]Another difference is that in the hierarchy of scientific hypotheses a final hypothesis, a final explanation, would be unthinkable. An empiricist, Braithwaite says, will also avoid finality in the series of ends. Instead of being bullied by a Socrates into giving a final justification of his various particular ends, the empiricist can justify them "by reference to their invari-

---

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Studies in Philosophy,* ed. J. N. Findlay (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 112.

[13] *Ibid.,* pp. 112-13.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

ance as means towards any further end."

> And the empiricist, if he wishes, may perfectly well use traditional teleological language, and speak of pursuing eudaemonia or of pursuing happiness, using these abstract nouns not to denote unique but nebulous concepts but, in a way in which both Aristotle and Mill seem frequently to have used them, as collective names for the Kingdom of all final Ends.[15]

All the actual goods in order of their preference could remain. The empiricist would only insist that the questions whether given behavior subserves an end, and given ends subserve a broader end, be settled by scientific methods that have proved their worth, that is, by empirical methods. Advantages of teleological ethics, both utilitarianism and Aristotle's eudaemonism, could thus be preserved without assuming that happiness is a unitary concept which "justifies all lesser goods."

THE DEFENSE OF UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism—the view that the final good is the greatest pleasure of the greatest number, and that we *ought* to do everything in our power to bring it about—is an ethical view. It is typically accompanied by the theory that every man does, as a matter of fact, pursue his own pleasure. Thus Bentham combined the two doctrines, when he said at the beginning of his *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation:*

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. … On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think. …

Critics have often claimed that there is a conflict between these two doctrines, but they are mistaken. John Hospers points out that though Bentham held that men *do* seek their personal satisfaction or pleasure in what they do, he also insisted that they *ought* to find their personal satisfaction in contributing to the happiness of others, as well as of themselves. What Bentham had in mind was that people "'can be trained and educated in such a way that they will derive their maximum personal satisfaction out of doing things for others.'"[16] Conscience can be developed in children which makes

---

[15] *Ibid.,* pp. 113-14.

[16] Hospers, *Human Conduct* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.,

the thought of theft or murder distinctly unpleasant. And where conscience fails, public opinion and the law come into operation, making crime and selfish conduct personally unattractive, and social conduct personally satisfying. The main problem, as Bentham saw it, was to improve the laws so that they would serve this end more effectively than they did in his time.

Psychological hedonism, according to Hospers, does not mean that men are always selfish. Bentham claimed only that people, whether they are just or vicious, generous or selfish, seek their own personal satisfaction or pleasure. "Why should one refute a view which is so unobjectionable?"[17] If a man gave all he had to the poor, we can scarcely call him selfish because he derived personal satisfaction from the giving.

When, on the other hand, psychological hedonism is taken to mean that people desire only their own pleasure, it is, clearly false. When we want to see a certain production of *Hamlet* or to spend a day in the country with friends, these specific things are what we want, Hospers reminds us, and we seldom actually think of the pleasure they will bring. This is obvious. But it is obvious to the utilitarians, too. They do not claim that people are always calculating future pleasure; their claim is rather something like this: Men seek all sorts of things, from alcohol to mathematical knowledge, but when they sit down in a cool moment to assess the comparative value of such goods, they *tend* to use pleasure and pain as *the* yardstick, and they *should* do this consistently.

Another favorite criticism of utilitarianism misfires for the same reason. It is called "the paradox of hedonism," and is the argument that the more we aim at pleasure and make it our main concern, the less pleasure we get. If we are continually thinking of the pleasure we expect or are getting from the party, the concert, the game of tennis, instead of attending to these things themselves, we shall miss most of the pleasure they afford. This again is pretty obvious, but it fails as a criticism of utilitarianism. For though utilitarians hold that only pleasure is good in itself, they are far from saying that people are always (or should always be) thinking of pleasure. Indeed, when thinking of pleasure interferes with the enjoyment of pleasure, the utilitarian would be the first to insist that we *stop* thinking of it.

1961), p. 145.

[17] *Ibid.*

One might as well claim that there is a paradox of happiness if it is conceived as a life of virtue. A sure way of missing a life of virtue, it has been maintained, is to be continually thinking of one's virtue instead of the objects that virtue intends, such as helping the poor or defending innocents. Would not such a man be a prig? It is the way we all become Philistines, Max Scheler contended. Virtue is to be "worn" like a garment, not sought. But did Aristotle and the Stoics hold that, because virtue is good in itself, we should always be thinking of it and aiming at it? Aristotle, at least, shows in many passages that courage, temperance, and so on have by their very nature certain specific results in view, and that they are shams if they do not. Although some recent authors have complained that Aristotle's good man shows a self-centered concern for his own virtue, the criticism does not seem to be justified. The germ of wisdom it contains is that the best way to get goods such as pleasure, virtue, or excellence is not to aim at them but at other things that turn out to be the means to them.

Critics never cease to attack the central thesis of utilitarianism, that pleasure alone is intrinsically good, i.e., the only thing that is good in itself. Even some leading utilitarians have felt obliged to renounce this sweeping claim. The first great renegade, Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), after a long struggle, concluded that other things besides pleasure could be good in themselves. G. E. Moore (1873-1958) insisted that if you add knowledge, beauty, or moral qualities to a world already pleasurable, you would have a world that is certainly better, though it contained no more pleasure. This view that other things besides pleasure are intrinsically valuable is called "ideal utilitarianism," or better, "pluralistic utilitarianism," and is very widely held today. Another defection from utilitarianism came in the nineteenth century, when Mill maintained that pleasures are not qualitatively alike, i.e., differing only in intensity, duration, and number, as utilitarians had held. In announcing that he would rather be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, he was saying in effect that even a little refined human pleasure was more valuable than a lot of coarse pig pleasure. Mill did not think of this as a betrayal of utilitarianism, but it was: it meant that something besides the greatest amount of pleasure should be our final goal.

In his doughty defense of utilitarianism, J. J. C. Smart does not give an inch to the enemy. Bentham, he says, might also have preferred being Socrates dissatisfied to being a pig satisfied or a contented fool, but he would have done so for an *extrinsic* reason, not an *intrinsic* one. In itself, or intrinsically, the quantitatively greater pleasure of the pig or the fool is preferable, but extrinsically—in view of the consequences—the smaller (or even null) pleasure of

Socrates is preferable. We often sacrifice the pleasure of the day, or even undergo torment, for the sake of the future, and this is the choice that the utilitarian can consistently make in this case. For the pleasures of the pig and the fool are not productive of future pleasure, whereas "the discontented philosopher is a useful catalyst in society and … the existence of Socrates is responsible for an improvement in the lot of humanity generally."[18]

Smart takes the same hard line in dealing with Bentham's provocative statement that "pushpin is as good as poetry" so long as it is just as pleasurable. Considered by itself, this is true, he says, but we must not forget that poetry is "fecund" of future pleasure, whereas pushpin is not. Poetry is "permanently pleasurable in revival," it is said, increases the awareness of human possibilities, and can spread happiness; pushpin and sunbathing have no such culmination.

A really alarming problem for utilitarianism is presented by the recent discovery, by James Olds and Peter Milner, of centers for pleasure in the brain of the rat. It was demonstrated that when electrodes were attached to these areas of the rats' brains, and so wired that the rats could maintain the current themselves by pressing a bar, they would continue to press it indefinitely, showing no interest in water, food, or sleep, until they were completely exhausted. Now, since pleasure centers have also been discovered in the human brain, the question arises: What could the utilitarian lose by spending his days, or at least his evenings after work, operating the electrodes? How could he lose if he gained a whole world of pleasure, without effort? Smart can answer that these pleasures would not be fecund, and that he would be neglecting his duty to contribute to the happiness of others. But now suppose the situation changed so that these objections would not be valid. Would we then say that the electrode operator was really happy? No, Smart seems to say, for none of us would be willing to change places with him; all of us non-electrode operators would prefer to find our pleasure in real activities in the world.

The argument thus seems to end with an unintentional plug for Aristotle's eudaemonism, which holds, in effect, that each man enjoys the pleasure of satisfaction which accompanies the activities he values, and that the two are inseparable. Right or wrong, this explains in part the revulsion against the increasing use of psychedelic drugs. It is felt that the joy of workmanship and creation can-

---

[18] *An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1961), p. 8.

not be detached from successful achievement, and that, if it could be, it would be a fool's paradise which, as Smart would say, none of us would knowingly exchange for the real thing, however contented we might become.

Pertinent and illuminating here is Wright's distinction between three main forms of pleasure: passive pleasure, active pleasure, and the pleasure of satisfaction or contentedness. The tendency since Plato to equate all pleasure with passive pleasure, with "sensuous pleasure," as it is called, has muddled philosophical discussion, Wright says.[19] Instances of sensuous pleasure have regularly been used to condemn all pleasure, and the Epicureans have been denounced as licentious although they in fact cared most for friends and conversation.

The tendency to narrow down pleasure to passive, sensuous pleasure had another unfortunate consequence, according to Wright. It led to the bad mistake of taking pleasure to be an object of the mind, like a sensation of pain or an emotion of delight. Here Wright agrees with Gilbert Ryle, who insists that pleasure is not any sort of sensation or emotion, or a process either, but rather a liking or enjoying something.[20] Aristotle had already shown that pleasure cannot be a process, for a process goes slowly or quickly and completes itself toward some end, whereas pleasure is not for the sake of something else, and does not complete itself since it is complete at every moment. "It is not possible to move otherwise than in time," Aristotle adds, "but it is possible to be pleased; for that which takes place in a moment is a whole."[21] Ryle's way of putting it is that pleasures are not "clockable." You cannot say exactly where your being *pleased with* begins or ends.

In contrast to "passive pleasure," we have "active pleasure," which comes from doing things one "is *keen on doing, enjoys* doing, or *likes* to do."[22] Wright remarks that though active pleasure seems to be as important for ethics as the pleasure of the senses is, practically no philosopher except Aristotle has given any attention to it. As for the third form of pleasure, the pleasure of satisfaction or contentedness, Wright says it comes from "getting that which we desire or need or want—irrespective of whether the desired thing

---

[19]*The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1963), p. 64.

[20] "Pleasure," *Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954).

[21] *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1174a13—b8; *GBWW,* Vol. 9, p. 428b-d.

[22] Wright, *op. cit.,* p. 64.

by itself gives us pleasure."[23]

Corresponding to these "three *forms* of pleasure" are "three types of *ideals of happiness* or of the happy life." Passive pleasure yields what Wright calls "*Epicurean ideals,*" according to which true happiness "derives above all from *having* things which please."[24] The pleasures here are not only sensuous but include the enjoying of friendship, conversation, and beautiful things. But would passive pleasure be enough for happiness? If what a man wants most of all is "a favourable balance of passive pleasure over passive 'unpleasure,' i.e. of states he enjoys over states he dislikes, and if he were successful in this pursuit of his, then the Epicurean recipe of living would, by definition, make him happy. … " However, a consideration of human nature suggests "that very few men are such pleasure-lovers that the supreme thing they want for themselves in life is a maximum of passive pleasure."[25] Yet this gives us no ground for denying that if there *are* men who love passive pleasure so much and manage to fill their lives with it, they cannot be genuinely happy. Indeed, "to deny this would be to misunderstand the notions of happiness and the good of man and would be symptomatic, I think, of some 'moralistic perversion.'[26] Passive pleasure is, after all, indisputably good, and if it is what a man supremely wants and can get, that is the end of the matter.

The pleasure of satisfaction or contentedness corresponds, Wright thinks, to the utilitarian ideal of happiness. "The utilitarians thought of happiness, not so much in terms of passive pleasure, as in terms of satisfaction of desire."[27] Happiness for them was a good ratio between wants and needs and their satisfaction, which we might express by the fraction

$$\frac{\textit{satisfaction of desires}}{\text{desires}}$$

Wright points out that one way of gaining happiness is to restrict the number of our desires, thereby eliminating many unsatisfied desires which make for unhappiness, and he calls this "*the ascetic ideal* of life." This "crippled ideal," he says, involves the logical

---

[23] *Ibid.,* p. 65.

[24] *Ibid.,* p. 92.

[25] *Ibid.,* p. 93.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Ibid.*

mistake of assuming that happiness is the *contradictory,* whereas it is really the *contrary,* of unhappiness. If unhappiness were the *contradictory* of happiness, then a man could be happy simply by avoiding unhappiness; but since happiness is in fact the *contrary* of unhappiness, a man could stay clear of unhappiness and yet not be happy. He could be neither happy nor unhappy, like a stone. "The man of *no* wants, if there existed such a creature, would not be unhappy. But it does not follow that he would be happy."[28]

Wright leaves the impression that this ascetic recipe is the utilitarian ideal of happiness, which is odd, especially in view of Bentham's diatribe against asceticism. One would have thought that utilitarian happiness was to be attained as much, or more, by increasing the number of satisfied desires as by restricting desires; as much by increasing the numerator of the above fraction as by decreasing the denominator. On the other hand, Stoicism seems to fit the ascetic formula exactly. Epictetus, for example, continually advised us that the path to happiness is the elimination of all desires the satisfaction of which is not completely in our power. This meant that happiness was attainable only by the suppression of practically all of our desires, wants, and needs.

It must be admitted, however, that those modern eudaemonists, the self-realization philosophers, have complained of the poverty of the happiness with which the utilitarians were contented. They themselves held that happiness is the complete fulfillment of the individual's potentialities and is therefore a maximal attainment, rather than a prudent surplus of pleasure over pain. Calculation of units of pleasure and pain, even if it was for the happiness of the greatest number, showed a petty shopkeeper's outlook. The insignia of happiness for John Dewey was not at all a good ratio of satisfied to unsatisfied desires, but rather growth and the capacity for growth, an ability to form new desires and interests and to avoid fixation on modes of response no longer appropriate. Satisfaction of a desire was anything but final; if it did not turn into a desire for something further, it turned stale. From Spinoza on, self-realization philosophers have beckoned to an endless climb and quest. They represent the most expansive conception of happiness, the Stoics the most contracted view, while utilitarianism appears to be intermediate.

Wright's third ideal of happiness is based on active pleasure. It

> … seeks happiness neither in passive pleasure nor in the satisfaction of desire, but in that which we have called active pleas-

---

[28] *Ibid*., p. 94.

> ure, *i.e.* the pleasure of doing that on which we are keen, which for its sake we like *doing.* In the activities we are keen on doing, we aim at technical goodness or perfection. … the more talented we are by nature for an art, the more can the development of our skill in it contribute to our happiness [29]

The fact that we seek out, cultivate, and exercise the arts which yield active pleasure gives this ideal of happiness an advantage over that based on "passive" pleasure. It is less hazardous to let our happiness result from what we *do* and *become* than to let it depend on what we *are* or *get,* which should not suggest, Wright warns, that this life is sure or easy.

Happiness, according to Wright, is not the whole of man's ultimate good. "Welfare" is the "broader and more basic notion." It has to do with what is beneficial or good *for* the person, and harmful or bad *for* him.[30] Following Plato, Wright suggests that the wider welfare of the person is to be understood as analogous to health, which has both a positive and negative aspect, the latter being "more basic." The latter "consists [of] bodily pain and of pain-like states, which are consequent upon the frustration of needs and wants of a normal life," whereas the former "consists in the presence of feelings of fitness and strength and in similar pleasant (agreeable, joyful) states. In the enjoyment of those states the healthy body and mind can be said to flourish. … Of the being, who enjoys this aspect of its welfare, we say that it is happy. Happiness could also be called the flower of welfare."[31]

It is apparent that welfare and happiness, as Wright understands them, are very intimately related, and that welfare is regarded as more fundamental because happiness and life itself depend on the "health" of the organism and person. While Wright separates these two aspects of man's ultimate good, Aristotle combines them in a single pattern of eudaemonia, comprising excellent activities, pleasures appropriate to them, and a variety of instrumental conditions.

---

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.,* p. 88.

[31] *Ibid.,* pp. 61-62.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Mark Stevens

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.