

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 4 of 4)

SOME CONTEMPORARY VERSIONS OF ARISTOTELIANISM

The influence of Aristotle continues strong in English-speaking countries, but his theory of happiness (eudaemonia), taken as a whole, is not much debated. In brief, this theory states that happiness is a full life of self-fulfillment of natural powers in accordance with virtue or excellence, accompanied by pleasure, and provided with sufficient external goods, leisure, and reasonably good fortune. The virtues, both moral and intellectual, are discussed in detail, as are other basic features of the ideal. It is still the most elaborate account of happiness available, and probably the most influential. The theory of self-realization which had its beginning

with Spinoza, as we have mentioned, owed a great deal of its substance and inspiration to Aristotle. Two decades ago, when the philosophy of John Dewey was uppermost, self-realization was still the living creed of many philosophers, educators, lawyers, and social scientists. Now, though it lives on in education and other fields, it is no longer a focus of philosophical interest. It is still, however, an important conception. It states that the supreme good or happiness is the full realization of human excellence and of the potentialities of the individual, and that right and obligation are counsels to achievement that entail achievement.

In the meantime, these two ideals of happiness and the good life are enjoying wide recognition in the more practical provinces of psychotherapy and psychology of personality. The theory of positive mental health or happiness, put forward by influential psychotherapists and psychologists, whether it is called “self-actualization,” “productiveness,” “happiness,” or something else, is in the tradition of eudaemonism and self-realization, which it resembles in basic respects.

It is not often that contemporary psychologists in the clinical field hail the supporting views of philosophers, but at least two self-actualization authors do. Erich Fromm and A. H. Maslow both cite the similarity of their views to the eudaemonism of Aristotle and the original self-realization theory of Spinoza. Fromm compares the “productiveness” that is for him the measure of man’s happiness with the achievement that plays such an important role in Aristotle’s ethics. In Aristotle’s view, Fromm says, “one can determine virtue ... by ascertaining the function of man. Just as in the case of a flute player, a sculptor, or any artist, the good is thought to reside in the specific function which distinguishes these men from others and makes them what they are, the good of man also resides in the specific function which distinguishes him from other species and makes him what he is.”¹ Fromm goes on to quote a passage from Aristotle in which he observes how important it is to recognize that happiness is excellence of activity, rather than a virtuous *state*. If happiness were merely the latter, a happy man could spend his life asleep, or “without producing any good result.” We must agree with Aristotle that the happy man is one “who by his activity, under the guidance of his reason, brings to life the potentialities specific of man.”² Fromm also finds his ideal of productiveness anticipated in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, where virtue consists in

¹ *Man for Himself* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1947), p. 91.

² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

the realization of the natural powers of man and is expansive rather than ascetic.

Fromm also agrees with Plato, Aristotle, and Spinoza on the relation of pleasure to happiness: Pleasure is an accompaniment of natural activities that perfects them and is most valuable when it belongs to our highest nature, i.e., theoretic reason; pleasure is of different kinds and is not to be identified with happiness. In Spinoza's system, Fromm calls attention particularly to the definition of joy, as "a passage from a less to a greater perfection" (or power); the famous last Proposition of the *Ethics*, "Blessedness (or happiness) is not the reward of virtue but virtue itself. . . ."; and the implied doctrine that productive activity is the end of life.

Maslow also finds his key concept of self-actualization anticipated in part by Aristotle and Spinoza. "We may agree with Aristotle," he remarks, "that the good life consisted in living in accordance with the true nature of man"³ He insists, with Aristotle and self-realization authors, that cognitive and other higher needs be given due place in psychological explanation, and he decries the neglect of "beauty, art, fun, play, wonder, love, happiness, and other 'useless' reactions," in present-day psychology. "Expressive behavior," which has to do with the arts and enjoyments, is as important as "coping behavior," which is instrumental and adaptive. The organism does more than merely restore equilibria that have been disturbed. Recent developments have shown that it possesses "some sort of positive growth or self-actualization tendency, which is different from its conserving, equilibrating, or homeostatic tendency," and also from coping responses. This self-actualizing tendency has been recognized by Aristotle and many other philosophers. And "among psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and psychologists it has been found necessary by Goldstein, Rank, Jung, Horney, May, and Rogers."⁴

Among the authors who endorse self-actualization as the natural tendency and ideal norm of personality development or as the furthestmost goal of psychotherapy, there are many differences. Kurt Goldstein holds that the *only* drive "is to actualize the individual capacities as fully as possible."⁵ In sheer contrast with the holism of Goldstein is the integrative view of G. W. Allport, according to

³ *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 341.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁵ *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), p. 141.

which personality is formed by the integration of simple units, such as reflexes, into ever larger, more complex formations, and there exist many, diverse drives. Yet Goldstein and Allport agree that the hallmark of normality is the growth or actualization of the individual's capacities, and that integration is never and should not be complete, for it is better to be embroiled in conflict than to settle for integration on a lower level.

This last point is particularly emphasized by Nevitt Sanford, who believes that the concern of psychologists—for example, in counseling university students—should not be to see that they avoid conflicts and problems but to see that their natural growth potential toward “expansion and increasing complexity” is not thwarted.⁶

The capacity for continuous “growth,” for continuous development of human powers and personal talents, is certainly the crux of self-actualization. Some authors, however, prefer to express the ideal as a tireless urge and readiness to learn—a freedom from learning blocks, from rigidity, oversimplicity, and stereotypes which characterize the “authoritarian personality.” Lawrence S. Kubie takes mental health to be a high resistance to stress and “freedom and flexibility to learn through experience, to change and to adapt to changing circumstance,”⁷ and Robert W. White likewise ties growth to learning when he says: “It is now generally recognized that emotional disorders can be traced to blocks in the learning process. ... These blocks are produced by defenses against anxiety,” which prevent further learning. “It is implicit in this account that normal growth signifies unblocked learning, a process of *continuous change*.”⁸ For John Dewey, likewise, uninterrupted “growth,” which is the human ideal and moral condition, is defined as the unceasing readiness to learn, the willingness to put our favorite ideas to new tests, no matter how successful or comforting they have been in the past. This untrammelled readiness to learn is, it is generally agreed, nowhere more productive than in the sphere of the emotions and affections. That successful psychoanalysis is primarily a reeducation of the emotions has been emphasized by Franz Alexander, T. M. French, Karen Horney, Fromm, and many others.

The list of doctrines that the self-realization authors agree upon,

⁶ “Normative Conceptions in Psychology,” *Writers on Ethics*, eds. Joseph Katz *et al.* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1962.)

⁷ *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 28 (1954), 172.

⁸ *Lives in Progress* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1952), p. 328.

though with great differences of accent, is fairly long, and they belong also to the tradition of eudaemonism and self-realization. But without going further it is easy to see that self-realization theory is opposed to both utilitarianism and ethical formalism. It rejects hedonism in general, holding that pleasure is the *accompaniment* of self-fulfilling activity, not its goal or *raison d'être*. Nor would it accept general rules as a guide *merely* because of their formal structure, or reject moral rights and duties because they cannot be extended to everyone. Its main concern is the divergent development of individuals in different situations.

Self-actualization authors, indeed, say little about moral rules or obligations. But this does not mean that they are amoral or value-neutral. They take it for granted, as John Dewey often did, that following well-tried moral rules is generally necessary, though not sufficient for growth, achievement, aesthetic enrichment, and other things which make up happiness, individual and social.

One objection to the ideal of self-realization, and to the tradition from which it springs, is always brought up—by philosophers and by some psychologists, too. Thus Marie Jahoda, in her influential *Current Concepts of Positive Mental Health*, complains that “the Growth, Development, Self-Actualization Concept” of positive mental health does not make clear whether the self-actualizing process is supposed to be going on in all organisms or only in healthy ones. She thinks that the ambiguity may be owing to “Aristotelian teleology,” and especially to “the notion of realizing one’s potentialities”⁹

The need for making the distinction in a discussion of mental health becomes urgent if one realizes that not only the development of civilization but also self-destruction and crime ... are among the unique potentialities of the human species.¹⁰

We have seen Fromm replying to this objection by a quotation from Aristotle. The virtues or excellences of man are determined once we know the functions which distinguish his species from others, and the same is true of human potentialities. The well-functioning flute player is not one who murders the music, nor is a well-functioning man one who destroys himself or makes a career of crime.

⁹ New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1958, p. 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

SOME OPINION SURVEYS

The opinion survey provides another approach to gaining an understanding of happiness. Interviews with several thousand people are conducted in which they are asked whether they would describe themselves as “very happy,” “pretty happy,” or “not too happy.” In order to supplement and evaluate the answers they give, they are also asked how much they worry, what they worry about, and to what they attribute their happiness or unhappiness. The answers obtained are then collated and correlated to show the most important sources of happiness, of unhappiness, and of worry in the “very happy” group in comparison with the groups which give themselves a lower happiness rating. The three groups have been compared in many other respects, such as age, economic status, job satisfaction, extent of education, health, self-referral for psychotherapeutic aid, and reaction to international crisis. The interrelations of numerous variables lead to a reassessment of answers and techniques and to a growing understanding of what happiness means in typical American small-town communities.

In a recent study, Gerald Gurin, Joseph Veroff, and Sheila Feld explain how interrelations of numerous answers can furnish corrections or substantiation. The gist of the method is sketched as follows:

At the simplest level one can ask the respondent[s] to tell you ... directly what things they are happy about. ... The other approach is more indirect and analytic. We can get some idea [in an interview] of what it means for persons to say they are “very happy” as contrasted to “not too happy” by relating these responses to their responses to other questions and seeing some of the ways that people in these two extremes differ. Using both approaches, for example, we can indicate that happiness means economic well-being not only by the fact that people tell us that they are happy for such reasons but also by our demonstration that people of higher income express greater happiness. Or, we can indicate that happiness is tied to a happy marital relationship not only because people very often mention marriage as a source of happiness but also because people spontaneously mentioning greater satisfaction from their marriages express greater happiness generally.¹¹

Reports on Happiness: A Pilot Study of Behavior Related to Men-

¹¹ *Americans View Their Mental Health: A Nationwide Interview Survey* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1960) p. 23.

tal Health, by Norman M. Bradburn and David Caplovitz, also follows a complex procedure in evaluating and checking the answers: “very happy,” “pretty happy,” and “not too happy.”¹² These answers were correlated with sex, age, education, income, socioeconomic status, health, etc., and with the expression of particular worries, anxieties, cheerful or gloomy outlook, and so on. The economic angle could be examined from a single vantage point, since the four communities studied in Illinois were of comparable size, two suffering from depression and two economically in good shape. The study of psychological correlates of happiness, of positive and negative feelings, of reported illness and symptoms, of marital troubles and the like were considered important. It was easy to see that “happiness is not a simple phenomenon that can be understood in terms of a single dimension, but rather a complex resultant of the satisfactions and dissatisfactions, the gratifying and frustrating emotional experiences that occur in a person’s life situation”¹³

The authors of these two volumes are aware of ambiguities and pitfalls that face studies of this kind, and their procedure is tentative and self-correcting. There is reason enough for caution. It might be maintained, for example, that the authors are not dealing with people’s happiness, but only with individuals’ self-assessment of their happiness. In reporting that they are *very* or *not too* happy they might well be mistaken. In judging how happy they are, men may use a different base line or make a different estimate of the average happiness. But this need not be fatal. Psychologists have studied shifts of base line (adaptation level) and can often control or allow for it. And besides, people’s assessments of their happiness are correlated with their more concrete feelings, attitudes, and facts of their lives, and this provides a check and allows for corrections. But in the end, after we have sifted a man’s meaning and sincerity in saying he is very happy, it would be absurd, as Wright points out, to question his judgment. Even if we believe he is insincere or mistaken, we can scarcely do without his confirmation. Asking people questions is thus indispensable to a study of their happiness, and though the problems involved are many and serious, they do not seem to be hopeless.

A few results have a bearing on our previous discussion of happiness. The two surveys agree that education and income are both positively strongly correlated with happiness, whereas the correla-

¹² Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1965, p. 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*

tion with age is *negative*; higher education and income are apparently favorable to happiness, increasing age unfavorable to it. These results are in line with expectations, and high positive correlation of income and education with happiness is assumed by the self-actualization theory discussed in this chapter, and by the tradition to which it belongs.

It was found that, in a group of some 2,500 people interviewed, 46 percent gave children and marriage as the main source of their happiness, 29 percent gave an economic and material source, while all the other sources of happiness mentioned—such as the health of the respondent and family, job, other interpersonal sources (beyond the family), and independence—made up the remaining 35 percent.¹⁴ As sources of unhappiness, on the other hand, only 12 percent mentioned children and family; the largest sources of unhappiness are economic, personal characteristics (and problems), and community, national, and world problems. Very instructive is the authors' comment which follows:

The answers to these questions give, in a sense, the respondents' explicit definition of happiness and unhappiness. They were combined into categories according to the area of life viewed as the source of happiness or unhappiness—economic and material things, the marriage relationship, the job, one's health or the health of others close to one, and so on.¹⁵

The measure of happiness here is not the quantity of pleasure, and indeed neither survey talks in terms of pleasure. It is the *kind* of activity preferred which determines the happiness, and this varies within the group. But the 46 percent for whom happiness is mainly activity centering around children and the family also find some happiness in other things and can of course understand that other people should have different preferences.

Of all the results reported in these two surveys, those which relate to the positive and negative components of happiness seem most pertinent to our theme. It is shown in general that happy people worry less and unhappy people more. In fact, 65 percent of the "very happy" claim they never worry, or not much. Yet being worried and being unhappy, though they both spring from frustrating experiences, differ from each other profoundly. Unhappiness reflects "an absence of positive satisfactions in life ... a lack of posi-

¹⁴ Gurin, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

tive resources” to cope with reverses, and is associated with a pessimistic outlook; whereas worrying often goes along with positive satisfactions, personal resources, and optimism. A happy man can thus be a frequent worrier.¹⁶

Another study examined the balance of positive and negative feelings in the composition of happiness. People were asked how often, during the previous week, they had had positive feelings (such as, for example, being “pleased about having accomplished something”) and negative feelings (being “very lonely or remote from other people,” for example). It was found, as had been expected, that the positive feelings correlated positively with happiness, and the negative feelings correlated negatively with happiness. What was surprising was that the positive and negative feelings do not correlate with each other, one way or the other. In other words, it appeared that more negative feelings (or rather, experiences with negative affect) do not imply fewer positive feelings, nor vice versa. The data of this and other studies show that:

... forces contributing toward increased negative feelings, such as anxiety, marital tension, and job dissatisfaction, do not produce any concomitant decrease in positive feelings, and those forces which contribute toward the development of positive feelings, such as social interaction and active participation in the environment, do not in any way lessen negative feelings. Thus it is possible for a person who has many negative feelings to be happy, if he also has compensatory positive feelings.¹⁷


It is not the avoidance of negative feelings that makes for happiness; it is rather the gaining of experiences having positive affect through active participation. “It is the lack of joy in Mudville rather than the presence of sorrow that makes the difference,” Bradburn wrote in 1963.

F. Hertzberg and R. M. Hamlin recently reached a somewhat similar conclusion, Bradburn reports. There are people who “find their source of satisfaction in a sense of personal growth, or the satisfaction of self-actualization needs,” and there are others who seek theirs in the avoidance of unpleasant experiences. The former are on the “mental health dimension,” and with luck can “achieve positive mental health and self-actualization”; the latter live on the “mental illness dimension,” and with luck can achieve transitory

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

¹⁷ Bradburn, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

satisfactions, but are “truly mentally ill.”¹⁸

These findings and interpretations give their support, for all it is worth, to the self-realization theory we have discussed, and to the tradition of Aristotelian eudaemonism from which it derives. This is the expansionist strand in the long quest of the best feasible view of happiness. It is in the spirit of Goethe’s Faust of whom the angels said: “He who ever strives cannot be lost,” and of Emerson’s Everyman, of whom he said: “Each is uneasy until he has produced his private ray into the concave sphere, and beheld his talent also in its last nobility and exaltation.” At the opposite extreme is that Stoicism which would sacrifice man’s birthright of abundance and adventure for security and tranquility. This has lost its appeal. The great productive capacity of a few countries has enlightened the rest, and no one any longer dares extol to rising populations the virtues of submission and contentment. On the other hand, the appeal of the eternal supernatural happiness, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, remains unabated, though perhaps with considerable variation in “psychic distance.” It is no longer controversial, however, and it is as if the subject had been completed. The conflict between the utilitarians and formalists could go on indefinitely with modest progress in subtlety and precision, though as positions on both sides are more cautiously stated there is a tendency to convergence. The Aristotelian philosophy of happiness could gain by any clarifications reached; it by no means answers all questions about duty versus happiness and has potential to grow. 

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¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

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NOTE TO THE READER

The essential documents for understanding the background of the controversy about happiness are included in *Great Books of the Western World*. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is in Vol. 9, Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* is in Vol. 42, and Mill's essay *Utilitarianism*, in Vol. 43.

Chapter 33 of the *Syntopicon* is devoted to the idea of HAPPINESS, and the reader will find in the *Introduction* and the references a guide to the wealth of material on the subject contained in *Great Books*. Chapter 19 on DUTY and Chapter 97 on VIRTUE and VICE should also be consulted for their bearing on the general discussion of happiness.

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