

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Happy is the man who, in the course of a complete life, attains everything he desires, provided he desire nothing amiss.

—St. Augustine

THE GREAT CONVERSATION

A SYMPOSIUM ON THE GREAT IDEA OF HAPPINESS

As told to Max Weismann by Mortimer Adler, *the moderator of the dialogue*.

Persons of the Dialogue: Aristotle; St. Augustine; St. Thomas Aquinas; Immanuel Kant; John Locke; John Stuart Mill; Blaise Pascal and Plotinus.

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ADLER: The great questions about happiness are concerned with its definition and its attain-ability. In what does it consist? Is it the same for all men, or do different men seek different things in the name of happiness? Can happiness be achieved on earth, or only hereafter? And if the pursuit of happiness is not a futile quest, by what means or steps should it be undertaken?

On all these questions, you, the authors of the great books set forth the fundamental inquires and speculations, as well as the controversies to which they have given rise, in the tradition of Western thought. There seems to be no question that men want happiness...

PASCAL: [*Interrupting*] Man wishes to be happy, and only wishes to be happy, and cannot wish not to be so.

LOCKE: [*Jumping in*] And I say, the only possible answer to what moves desire is happiness, and that alone.

ADLER: Yes gentlemen, but even if this fact goes undisputed, it does not settle the issue whether men are right in governing their lives with a view to being or becoming happy. There is there-fore

one further question. Should men make happiness their goal and direct their acts accordingly?

KANT: [*Authoritatively*] As I see it the principle of *private* happiness is the direct opposite of the principle of morality. Happiness consists in the satisfaction of all our desires: *extensive*, in regard to their multiplicity; *intensive*, in regard to their degree; *protensive*, in regard to their duration. I call this the “pragmatic” rule of life, which aims at happiness and tells us what we have to do, if we wish to become possessed of happiness.

Unlike the moral law, it is a hypothetical, not a categorical, imperative. Furthermore, I would like to point out that such a pragmatic or utilitarian ethics (which for me is the same as an *ethics of happiness*) cannot help being empirical, for it is only by experience, that I can learn either what inclinations exist which desire satisfaction, or what are the natural means of satisfying them. This empirical knowledge is available to each individual in his own way. Hence there can be no universal solution in terms of desire of the problem of how to be happy. So I say, to reduce moral philosophy to *a theory of happiness* must result in giving up the search for ethical principles which are both universal and *a priori*.

ADLER: Then if I understand you correctly, you are in sharp opposition to the pragmatic rule, when you set the *moral or ethical law*, the motive of which is not simply to be happy, but rather to be *worthy* of happiness.

KANT: That is correct, and in addition to being a categorical imperative which imposes an absolute obligation upon us, this law takes no account of our desires or the means of satisfying them. Rather it dictates how we ought act in order to deserve happiness. It is drawn from pure reason, not from experience, and therefore has the universality of an *a priori* principle, without which, in my opinion, a genuine science of ethics—or metaphysics of morals—is impossible.

ADLER: Then with the idea of moral worth—that which alone deserves happiness—taken away, happiness alone is, according to you, far from being the complete good. Reason does not approve of it however much inclination may desire it, except as united with desert.

KANT: Yes and morality alone, and, with it, mere *desert*, is likewise far from being the complete good. These two things must be united to constitute the true *summum bonum* which to me means both the *supreme* and the *complete* good. In other words, the man

who conducts himself in a manner not unworthy of happiness, must be able to hope for the possession of happiness.

ADLER: But even if happiness combined with moral worth does constitute the supreme good, you still refuse to admit that happiness, as a practical objective, can function as a moral principle. Though a man can hope to be happy only if under the moral law he does his duty, he should not do his duty with the hope of thereby becoming happy.

KANT: That is precisely what I am saying. Let me say it this way, a disposition which should require the prospect of happiness as its necessary condition, would not be moral, and hence also would not be worthy of complete happiness. The moral law commands the performance of duty *unconditionally*. Happiness should be a consequence, but it cannot be a condition, of moral action.

ADLER: In other words, happiness fails for you to impose any moral obligation or to provide a standard of right and wrong in human conduct. No more than pleasure can happiness be used as a first principle in ethics, if morality must avoid all calculations of utility or expediency whereby things are done or left undone for the sake of happiness, or any other end to be enjoyed.

This issue between an ethics of duty and an ethics of happiness, as well as the conflict it involves between law and desire as sources of morality, will be considered, from other points of view, in future discussions on DESIRE and DUTY, and again in GOOD AND EVIL where the problem of the *summum bonum* is raised. In this discussion, we shall be concerned with happiness as an ethical principle, and therefore with the problems to be faced by those who, in one way or another, accept happiness as the supreme good and the end of life. They may see no reason to reject moral principles which work through desire rather than duty. They may find nothing repugnant in appealing to happiness as the ultimate end which justifies the means and determines the order of all other goods. But they cannot make happiness the first principle of ethics without having to face many questions concerning the nature of happiness and its relation to virtue.

KANT: I not only hold that a definite conception of happiness cannot be formulated, I think that happiness fails even as a pragmatic principle of conduct. The notion of happiness is so indefinite, although every man wishes to attain it, yet he never can say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes. He cannot determine with certainty what would make him truly happy; because to do so he would need to be omniscient. If this is true of the

individual, how various must be the notions of happiness which prevail among men in general.

LOCKE: I agree with this last point that everyone does not place his happiness in the same thing, or choose the same way to it. Yet in matters of happiness and misery, men come often to prefer the worse to the better; and to choose that which, by their own confession, has made them miserable. The same thing is not good to every man alike and it is possible to account for the misery men often bring upon themselves by explaining how the individual may make errors in judgment—how things come to be represented to our desires under deceitful appearances, by the judgment pronouncing wrongly concerning them.

ADLER: But this applies to the individual only. Don't you think it is possible to show that when two men differ in their notions of happiness, one is right and the other wrong?

LOCKE: No. Though all men's desires tend to happiness, yet they are not all moved by the same object. Men may choose different things, and yet all choose right.

ADLER: Do you quarrel then with the theologians who, on the basis of divine revelation, describe the eternal happiness in the life hereafter which is to be enjoyed *alike* by all who are saved?

LOCKE: [*getting up to leave for a previous engagement, says*] Revelation is one thing, and reason another. With respect to temporal happiness on earth, reason cannot achieve a definition of the end that has the certainty of faith concerning salvation. Hence, I quarrel with the philosophers of old [*motioning towards Aristotle who had just sat down*] who, in my opinion, vainly sought to define the *summum bonum* or happiness in such a way that all men would agree on what happiness is; or, if they failed to, some would be in error and misled in their pursuit of happiness.

ADLER: One wonders what Locke meant when in a previous discussion he said that there is a science of what man ought to do "as a rational and voluntary agent for the attainment of happiness." He described ethics as the science of the "rules and measures of human actions, which lead to happiness" and he placed "morality amongst the sciences capable of demonstration, wherein from self evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestable as those in mathematics, the measures of right and wrong might be made out, to anyone that will apply himself with the same indifference and attention to the one, as he does to the other of those sciences."

ARISTOTLE: The ancient philosophers that Locke was referring to are primarily Aquinas and myself. Since Aquinas has been detained in getting here, and he and I generally agree on these matters, I will speak for him until he arrives.

We insist that a science of ethics depends on a first principle which is self-evident in the same way to all men. Happiness is not that principle if the content of happiness is what each man thinks it to be; for if no universally applicable definition of happiness can be given—if when men differ in their conception of what constitutes happiness, one man may be as right as another—then the fact that all men agree upon giving the name “happiness” to what they ultimately want amounts to no more than a nominal agreement. Such nominal agreement does not suffice to establish a science of ethics, with rules for the pursuit of happiness which shall apply universally to all men.

Our view is that which is truly human happiness must be the same for all men. The reason to quote Aquinas, is that “all men agree in their specific nature.” It is in terms of their specific or common nature that happiness can be objectively defined. Happiness so conceived is a common end for all, “since nature tends to one thing only.”

ADLER: It may be granted that there are in fact many different opinions about what constitutes happiness, but it cannot be admitted that all are equally sound without admitting a complete relativism in moral matters. Erasmus, in *Praise of Folly*, has Folly argue for such relativism: “What difference is there, do you think, between those in Plato’s cave who can only marvel at the shadows and images of various objects, provided they are content and don’t know what they miss, and the philosopher who has emerged from the cave and sees the real things? If Mycillus in Lucian had been allowed to go on dreaming that golden dream of riches for evermore, he’d have had no reason to desire any other state of happiness.” It is clear from this passage that Erasmus is using the word “happiness” in its psychological sense, in which it means contentment, not in its ethical sense, in which it means a whole life well lived.

ARISTOTLE: In our view, that men do *in fact* seek different things under the name of happiness does not alter the truth that the happiness they *should* seek must be something appropriate to the humanity which is common to them all, rather than something determined by their individually differing needs or temperaments. If it were the latter, then we would admit that questions about what men should do to achieve happiness would be answerable only by

individual opinion or personal preference, not by scientific analysis or demonstration.

ADLER: With the exception of you, Locke and perhaps to a less extent Mill, those who think that a science of ethics can be founded on happiness as the first principle tend to maintain that there can only one right conception of human happiness. That right conception consists in the cumulative possession of *all* real goods in the course of a lifetime, leaving nothing more to be desired. That is why happiness, thus conceived, should be called the *totum bonum*, not the *summum bonum*. Other notions are misconceptions that may appear to be, but are not really, the *totum bonum*. The various definitions of happiness which some of you have given thus present the problem of the real and the apparent good which will be considered in a future symposium on GOOD AND EVIL.

In the everyday discourse of men there seems to be a core of agreement about the meaning of the words “happy” and “happiness.” This common understanding has been used by philosophers like you Aristotle and Mill, to test the adequacy of any definition of happiness.

When a man says “I feel happy” he is saying that he feels pleased or satisfied—that he has what he wants. When men contrast tragedy and happiness, they have in mind the quality a life takes from its end. A tragedy on the stage, in fiction, or in life is popularly characterized as “a story without a happy ending.” This expresses the general sense that happiness is the quality of a life which comes out well on the whole despite difficulties and vicissitudes along the way. Only ultimate defeat or frustration is tragic.

There appears to be some conflict here between *feeling* happy at a given moment and *being* happy for a lifetime, that is, living happily. It may be necessary to choose between having a good time and leading a good life. Nevertheless less, in both uses of the word “happy” there is the connotation of satisfaction. When men say that what they want is happiness, they imply that, having it, they would ask for nothing more. If they are asked why they want to be happy, they find it difficult to give any reason except “for its own sake.” They can think of nothing beyond happiness for which happiness serves as a means or a preparation. This aspect of ultimacy or finality appears without qualification in the sense of happiness as belonging to a whole life. There is quiescence, too, in the momentary feeling of happiness, but precisely because it does not last, it leaves another and another such moment to be desired.

ARISTOTLE: I take the word “happiness” from popular discourse and give it the technical significance of ultimate good, last end, or *summum bonum*. The chief good is evidently something final... Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final

than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing. Therefore, we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. Such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else.

ADLER: But this applies to the individual only.

LOCKE: I do not think it is possible to show that when two men differ in their notions of happiness, one is right and the other wrong. Though all men's desires tend to happiness, yet they are not moved by the same object. Men may choose different things, and yet all choose right. I do not quarrel with the theologians who, on the basis of divine revelation, describe the eternal happiness in the life hereafter which is to be enjoyed *alike* by all who are saved.

ADLER: But revelation is one thing, and reason another. With respect to temporal happiness on earth, reason cannot achieve a definition of the end that has the certainty of faith concerning salvation.

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ADLER: I wonder, therefore, what you mean by saying that there is a science of what man ought to do as a rational and voluntary agent for the attainment of ...happiness. You describe ethics as the science of the rules and measures of human actions, which lead to happiness and you place morality amongst the sciences capable of demonstration, wherein...from self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestable as those in mathematics, the measures of right and wrong might be made out, to any one that will apply himself with the same indifferency and attention to the one, as he does to the other of these sciences.

The ancient philosophers with whom Locke disagrees insist that a science of ethics depends on a first principle which is self-evident in the same way to all men. Happiness is not that principle if the content of happiness is what each man thinks it to be; for if no universally applicable definition of happiness can be given—if when men differ in their conception of what constitutes happiness, one man may be as right as another—then the fact that all men

agree upon giving the name “happiness” to what they ultimately want amounts to no more than a nominal agreement. Such nominal agreement, in the opinion of our colleagues Aristotle and Aquinas, does not suffice to establish a science of ethics, with rules for the pursuit of happiness which shall apply universally to all men.

ARISTOTLE: That is correct, in our view, what is truly human happiness must be the same for all men. The reason, in the words of Aquinas, is that “all men agree in their specific nature.” It is in terms of their specific or common nature that happiness can be objectively defined. Happiness so conceived is a common end for all, since nature tends to one thing only. That men do *in fact* seek different things under the name of happiness does not, according to us, alter the truth that the happiness they *should* seek must be something appropriate to the humanity which is common to them all, rather than some thing determined by their individually differing needs or temperaments. If it were the latter, then we would admit that questions about what men should do to achieve happiness would be answerable only by individual opinion or personal preference, not by scientific analysis or demonstration.

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The ultimacy of happiness can also be expressed in terms of its completeness or sufficiency. It would not be true that happiness is desired for its own sake and everything else for the sake of happiness, if the happy man wanted something more.

ARISTOTLE: The most obvious mark of the happy man, is that he wants for nothing. The happy life leaves nothing to be desired.

ADLER: It is this insight which Boethius later expresses in an oft repeated characterization of happiness as “a life made perfect by the possession in aggregate of all good things.” So conceived, happiness is not a particular good itself, but the sum of goods.

ARISTOTLE: If happiness were to be counted as one good among others, it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods. But then there would be something left for the happy man to desire, and happiness would not be something final and self-sufficient and the end of action.

MILL: I agree with Aristotle, and appeal to the common sense of mankind for the ultimacy of happiness. The utilitarian doctrine is that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable as an end; all other things being only desirable as means. No reason can or need be given why this is so, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This is enough to prove that happiness is a good. To show that it is *the* good, it is necessary to show, not only that people desire happiness, but that they never desire anything else.

Again like Aristotle, I presuppose the rightness of the prevailing sense that when a man is happy, he has everything he desires. Many things, may be desired for their own sake, but if the possession of any one of these leaves something else to be desired, then it is desired only as a part of happiness. Happiness is a concrete

whole, and these are some of its parts... Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so.

ADLER: There are other conceptions of happiness. It is not always approached in terms of means and ends, utility and enjoyment or satisfaction. Our friend Plato, who is not here today, for example identifies happiness with spiritual well-being—a harmony in the soul, an inner peace which results from the proper order of all the soul's parts.

Early in his book *The Republic*, Socrates is challenged to show that the just man will be happier than the unjust man, even if in all externals he seems to be at a disadvantage. He cannot answer this question until he prepares Glaucon for the insight that justice is “concerned not with the outward man, but with the inward.” He can then explain that “the just man does not permit the several elements within him to interfere with one another... He sets in order his own inner life, and is his own master and his own law, and is at peace with himself.”

PLOTINUS: Being of the same spirit, I say think of two wise men, one of them possessing all that is supposed to be naturally welcome, while the other meets only with the very reverse. Now tell me whether we would assert that they have an equal happiness? My own answer is that we should, if they are equally wise... even though the one be favored in body and in all else that does not help towards wisdom. We are likely to misconceive happiness, I think, if we consider the happy man in terms of our own feebleness. We count alarming and grave what his felicity takes lightly; he would be neither wise nor in the state of happiness if he had not quitted all trifling with such things.

I say that Plato rightly taught that he who is to be wise and to possess happiness draws his good from the Supreme, fixing his gaze on That, becoming like to That, living by That... All else he will attend to only as he might change his residence, not in expectation of any increase in his settled felicity, but simply in a reasonable attention to the differing conditions surrounding him as he lives here or there. If he meets some turn of fortune that he would not have chosen, there is not the slightest lessening of his happiness for that. So like Plato, I hold that nothing external can separate a virtuous man from happiness—that no one can injure a man except himself.

ADLER: Yes but the opposite view is more frequently held. In his argument with Callicles in the *Gorgias*, Plato's Socrates meets with the proposition that it is better to injure others than to be in-

jured by them. This can be refuted, he thinks, only if Callicles can be made to understand that the unjust or vicious man is miserable in himself, regardless of his external gains. The fundamental principle, he says, is that “the happy are made happy by the possession of justice and temperance and the miserable miserable by the possession of vice.” Happiness is one with justice because justice or virtue in general is “the health and beauty and well-being of the soul.”

This association of happiness with health—the one a harmony in the soul as the other is a harmony in the body—appears also in Freud’s consideration of human well-being. For Freud, the ideal of health, not merely bodily health but the health of the whole man, seems to identify happiness with peace of mind. “Any one who is born with a specially unfavorable instinctual constitution,” he writes, “and whose libido-components do not go through the transformation and modification necessary for successful achievement in later life, will find it hard to obtain happiness.” The opposite of happiness is not tragedy but neurosis. In contrast to the neurotic, the happy man has found a way to master his inner conflicts and to become well-adjusted to his environment.

The theory of happiness as mental health or spiritual peace may be another way of seeing the self-sufficiency of happiness, in which all striving comes to rest because all desires are fulfilled or quieted. The suggestion of this point is found in the fact that the theologians conceive beatitude, or supernatural happiness, in both ways. For them it is both an ultimate end which satisfies all desires and also a state of peace or heavenly rest.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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