

# 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

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## THE GREAT CONVERSATION

### A SYMPOSIUM ON THE GREAT IDEA OF HAPPINESS

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

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

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**AUGUSTINE:** [*finally arriving*] The ultimate good, is that for the sake of which other things are to be desired, while it is to be desired for its own sake; and, it is that by which the good is finished, so that it becomes complete—all-satisfying. But what is this final blessedness, the ultimate consummation, the unending end? It is peace. Indeed, I say, we are said to be blessed when we have such peace as can be enjoyed in this life; but such blessedness is mere misery compared to that final felicity, which can be described as either peace in eternal life, or eternal life in peace.

**ADLER:** Yes, but there may be differences of another kind among those who regard happiness as their ultimate end. Some men identify happiness with the possession of one particular type of good—wealth or health, pleasure or power, knowledge or virtue, honor or friendship—or, if they do not make one or another of these things the only component of happiness, they make it supreme. The question of which is chief among the various goods that constitute the happy life is the problem of the order of goods, to which we shall return presently. But the identification of happiness with some one good, to the exclusion or neglect of the others, seems to violate the

meaning of happiness on which there is such general agreement. Happiness cannot be that which leaves nothing to be desired if any good—anything which is in any way desirable—is overlooked.

But it may be said that the miser desires nothing but gold, and considers himself happy when he possesses a hoard. That he may consider himself happy cannot be denied. Yet this does not prevent the moralist from considering him deluded and in reality among the unhappiest of men. The difference between such illusory happiness and the reality seems to depend on the distinction between conscious and natural desire. According to that distinction, the miser may have all that he consciously desires, but lack many of the things toward which his nature tends and which are therefore objects of natural desire. He may be the unhappiest of men if, with all the wealth in the world, yet self-deprived of friends or knowledge, virtue or even health, his exclusive interest in one type of good leads to the frustration of many other desires. He may not consciously recognize these, but they nevertheless represent needs of his nature demanding fulfillment.

As we will discuss in our symposium on DESIRE, the relation of natural law to natural desire may provide the beginning, at least, of an answer to Kant's objection to the ethics of happiness on the ground that its principles lack universality or the element of obligation. The natural moral law may command obedience at the same time that it directs men to happiness as the satisfaction of all desires which represent the innate tendencies of man's nature. The theory of natural desire thus also has a bearing on the issue whether the content of happiness must really be the same for all men, regardless of how it may appear to them.

Even if men do not identify happiness with one type of good, but see it as the possession of every sort of good, can there be a reasonable difference of opinion concerning the types of good which must be included or the order in which these several goods should be sought? A negative answer seems to be required by the view that real as opposed to apparent goods are the objects of natural desire.

**AQUINAS:** [*entering*] I say *happy is the man who has all he desires, or whose every wish is fulfilled*, is a good and adequate definition *only* if it be understood in a certain way. It is an inadequate definition if understood in another. For if we understand it simply of all that man desires by his natural appetite, then it is true that he who has all that he desires is happy; since nothing satisfies man's natural desire, except the perfect good which is Happiness. But if we understand it of those things that man desires according to the apprehension of reason, then it does not belong to Happiness to have certain things that man desires; rather does it belong to unhappi-

ness, in so far as the possession of such things hinders a man from having all that he desires naturally. For this reason, I would point out, when our friend Augustine approved the statement that “happy is he who has all he desires,” he added the words “provided he desires nothing amiss.”

**ADLER:** So then, as men have the same complex nature, so they have the same set of natural desires. As they have the same natural desires, so the real goods which can fulfill their needs comprise the same variety for all. As different natural desires represent different parts of human nature—lower and higher—so the several kinds of good are not equally good.

**AQUINAS:** Yes, if the natural object of the human will is the universal good, it follows that naught can satisfy man’s will save the universal good. This, he holds, “is to be found, not in any created thing, but in God alone.”

**ADLER:** We shall return later to the theologian’s conception of perfect happiness as consisting in the vision of God in the life hereafter. The happiness of this earthly life (which the philosopher considers) may be imperfect by comparison, but such temporal felicity as men can attain is no less determined by natural desire. If a man’s undue craving for one type of good can interfere with his possession of another sort of good, then the various goods must be ordered according to their worth; and this order, since it reflects natural desire, must be the same for all men.

**ARISTOTLE:** In such terms, I think it possible to argue that the reality of happiness can be defined by reference to human nature and that the rules for achieving happiness can have a certain universality—despite the fact that the rules must be applied by individuals differently to the circumstances of their own lives. No particular good should be sought excessively or out of proportion to others, for the penalty of having too much of one good thing is deprivation or disorder with respect to other goods.

**ADLER:** The relation of happiness to particular goods raises a whole series of questions, each peculiar to the type of good under consideration. Of these, the most insistent problems concern pleasure, knowledge, virtue, and the goods of fortune.

With regard to pleasure, the difficulty seems to arise from two meanings of the term. In one of these meanings pleasure is an object of desire, and in the other it is the feeling of satisfaction which accompanies the possession of objects desired. It is in the latter meaning that pleasure can be identified with happiness or, at least,

be regarded as its correlate, for if happiness consists in the possession of all good things it is also the sum total of attainable satisfactions or pleasures. Where pleasure means satisfaction, pain means frustration, not the sensed pain of injured flesh. As Locke says “Happiness is the utmost pleasure we are capable of.”

**MILL:** I define it as an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments.

**ARISTOTLE:** I do not object to saying that the happy life is also in itself pleasant. But unlike Locke and Mill, I raise the question whether all pleasures are good, and all pains evil. Sensuous pleasure as an object often conflicts with other objects of desire. And if “pleasure” means satisfaction, there can be conflict among pleasures, for the satisfaction of one desire may lead to the frustration of another. Here I find it necessary to introduce the principle of virtue. The virtuous man is one who finds pleasure in the things that are by nature pleasant. The virtuous man takes pleasure only in the right things, and is willing to suffer pain for the right end. If pleasures, or desires and their satisfaction, can be better or worse, there must be a choice among them for the sake of happiness. Mill makes this choice depend on a discrimination between lower and higher pleasures, not on virtue. He regards virtue merely as one of the parts of happiness, in no way different from the others. But I think that virtue is the principal means to happiness because it regulates the choices which must be rightly made in order to obtain all good things; hence my definition of happiness as *activity in accordance with virtue*.

**ADLER:** This definition raises difficulties of still another order.

**ARISTOTLE:** That is correct, because there are two kinds of virtue, moral and intellectual, the one concerned with desire and social conduct, the other with thought and knowledge. There are also two modes of life, sometimes called the active and the contemplative, differing as a life devoted to political activity or practical tasks differs from a life occupied largely with theoretical problems in the pursuit of truth or in the consideration of what is known.

**ADLER:** Are there two kinds of happiness then, belonging respectively to the political and the speculative life? Is one a better kind of happiness than another? Does the practical sort of happiness require intellectual as well as moral virtue? Does the speculative sort require both also?

**ARISTOTLE:** Let me try to answer these questions, and generally shape my definition of happiness, I consider the role of the goods of fortune, such things as health, wealth, auspicious birth, native endowments of body or mind, and length of life. These gifts condition virtuous activity or may present problems which virtue is needed to solve. But to the extent that having or not having them is a matter of fortune, they are not within a man's control—to get, keep, or give up. If they are indispensable, happiness is precarious, or even unattainable by those who are unfortunate. In addition, as I have expounded is that if the goods of fortune are indispensable, the definition of happiness must itself be qualified. More is required for happiness than activity in accordance with virtue.

Should we not say, that he is happy who is active in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life? Or must we add and who is destined to live thus and die as befits his life?...If so, we shall call happy those among living men in whom these conditions are, and are to be, fulfilled—but happy *men*.

**ADLER:** This consideration of the goods of fortune has led to diverse views about the attainability of happiness in this life. For one thing, they may act as an obstacle to happiness. Pierre Bezúkhov in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* learned, during his period of captivity, that “man is created for happiness; that happiness lies in himself, in the satisfaction of his natural human cravings; that all unhappiness arises not from privation but from superfluity.”

The vicissitudes of fortune seem to be what Solon has in mind when, as reported by our friend Herodotus, he tells Croesus, the king of Lydia, that he will not call him happy “until I hear that thou has closed thy life happily...for oftentimes God gives men a gleam of happiness, and then plunges them into ruin.” For this reason, in judging of happiness, as “in every matter, it behooves us to mark well the end.”

Even if it is possible to call a man happy while he is alive—on the ground that virtue, which is within his power, may be able to withstand anything but the most outrageous fortune—it is still necessary to define happiness by reference to a complete life.

**ARISTOTLE:** I agree, for example, children cannot be called happy, because their characters have not yet matured and their lives are still too far from completion. To call them happy, or to call happy men of any age who still may suffer great misfortune, is merely to voice the hopes we have for them. The most prosperous, may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan

cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly no one calls happy.

**ADLER:** Then it seems that among the goods of fortune which seem to have a bearing on the attainment of happiness, those which constitute the *individual* nature of a human being at birth—physical traits, temperament, degree of intelligence—may be un-alterable in the course of life. If certain inherited conditions either limit the capacity for happiness or make it completely unattainable, then happiness, which is defined as the end of man, is not the *summum bonum* for all, or not for all in the same way.

**ARISTOTLE:** I say women cannot be happy to the same degree or in the same manner as men; and natural slaves, like beasts, have no capacity for happiness at all, though they may participate in the happiness of the masters they serve. The theory is that through serving him, the slave gives the master the leisure necessary for the political or speculative life open to those of auspicious birth. Even as the man who is a slave belongs wholly to another man, so the highest good of his life lies in his contribution to the happiness of that other.

**ADLER:** The question whether happiness can be achieved by all normal human beings or only by those gifted with very special talents, depends for its answer in part on the conception of happiness itself.

Like you Aristotle, our friend Spinoza places happiness in intellectual activity of so high an order that the happy man is almost godlike; and, at the very end of his *Ethics*, he finds it necessary to say that the way to happiness “must indeed be difficult since it is so seldom discovered. As he points out, “true peace of soul can be found by the rare individual. All noble things are as difficult as they are rare.” In contrast, a statement like Tawney’s—that “if a man has important work to do, and enough leisure and income to enable him to do it properly, he is in possession of as much happiness as is good for any of the children of Adam”—seems to make happiness available to more than the gifted few.

Whether happiness is attainable by all men, even on Tawney’s definition, may also depend on the economic system and the political constitution, to the extent that they determine whether all men will be granted the opportunity and the leisure to use whatever talents they have for leading a decent human life. There seems to be a profound connection between conceiving happiness in such a way that all normal men are capable of it and insisting that all normal men deserve political status and economic liberty. For example, you, Mill differ from Aristotle on both scores.

Differing from the position of both you Aristotle and Mill is the view that happiness is an illusory goal—that the besetting ills of human life as well as the frailty of men lead inevitably to tragedy. The great tragic poems and the great tragedies of history may, of course, be read as if they dealt with the exceptional case, but another interpretation is possible. Here writ large in the life of the hero, the great or famous man, is the tragic pattern of human life which is the lot of all men.

Sophocles seems to be saying this, when he writes in *Oedipus at Colonus*: “Not to be born surpasses thought and speech. / The second best is to have seen the light / And then to go back quickly whence we came. / The feathery follies of his youth once over, / What trouble is beyond the range of man? / What heavy burden will he not endure? / Jealousy, faction, quarreling, and battle— / The bloodiness of war, the grief of war. / And in the end he comes to strengthless age, / Abhorred by all men, without company, / Unfriended in that uttermost twilight / Where he must live with every bitter thing.”

Death is sometimes regarded as the symbol of tragic frustration. Sometimes it is not death, but the fear of death which overshadows life, so that for Montaigne, learning how to face death well seems indispensable to living well. The happiness of life, he writes, “which depends on the tranquility and contentment of a well-born spirit and the resolution and assurance of a well-ordered soul, should never be attributed to a man until he has been seen to play the last act of his comedy, and beyond doubt the hardest. In everything else there may be sham...But in the last scene, between death and ourselves, there is no more pretending; we must talk plain...we must show what there is that is good and clean at the bottom of the pot.” So, too, for our friend Lucretius has said, what happiness men can have depends on their being rid of the fear of death through knowing the causes of things. But neither death nor the fear of death may be the crucial flaw. It may be the temporal character of life itself.

It is said that happiness consists in the possession of all good things. It is said that happiness is the quality of a whole life, not the feeling of satisfaction for a moment. If this is so, then Solon’s remark to Croesus can be given another meaning, namely, that happiness is not something actually enjoyed by a man at any moment of his life. Man can come to possess all good things only in the succession of his days, not simultaneously; and so happiness is never actually achieved but is always in the process of being achieved. When that process is completed, the man is dead, his life is done.

It may still be true that to live well or virtuously—with the help of fortune—is to live happily, but so long as life goes on, happi-

ness is pursued rather than enjoyed. On earth and in time, man does not seem able to come to rest in any final satisfaction, with all his desires quieted at once and forever by that vision of perfection which would deserve Faust's cry: "Remain, so fair thou art, remain!"

As already intimated, the problem of human happiness takes on another dimension when it is treated by the Christian theologians. What say you Augustine?

**AUGUSTINE:** My view is that any happiness which men can have on earth and in time is, rather the solace of our misery than the positive enjoyment of felicity.

Our very righteousness, though true in so far as it has respect to the true good, is yet in this life of such a kind that it consists rather in the remission of sins than in the perfecting of... For as reason, though subjected to God, is yet pressed down by the corruptible body, so long as it is in this mortal condition, it has not perfect authority over vice... For though it exercises authority, the vices do not submit without a struggle. For however well one maintains the conflict, and however thoroughly he has subdued these enemies, there steals in some evil thing, which, if it do not find ready expression in act, slips out by the lips, or insinuates itself into the thought; and therefore his peace is not full so long as he is at war with his vices.

**ADLER:** Accepting the definition of happiness as the possession of all good things and the satisfaction of all desires, you theologians compare the successive accumulation of finite goods with the unchanging enjoyment of an infinite good. An endless prolongation of the days of our mortal life would not increase the chances of becoming perfectly happy, because time and change permit no rest, no finality. Earthly happiness is therefore intrinsically imperfect.

Perfect happiness belongs to the eternal life of the immortal soul, completely at rest in the beatific vision, for in the vision of God the soul is united to the infinite good by knowledge and love. In the divine presence and glory all the natural desires of the human spirit are simultaneously satisfied—the intellect's search for truth and the will's yearning for the good.

**AUGUSTINE:** That final peace to which all our righteousness has reference, and for the sake of which it is maintained, is the felicity of a life which is done with bondage—to vice or conflict, to time and change. In contrast, the best human life on earth is miserable with frustrations and an ennui that human nature cannot escape.



**ADLER:** Then the doctrine of immortality is obviously presupposed in the theological consideration of happiness.

**KANT:** As I see it, immortality is a necessary condition of the soul's infinite progress toward the moral perfection, the holiness, which alone deserves perfect happiness.

**ADLER:** But if I understand you correctly, theologians like you Augustine and Aquinas, assert that neither change nor progress play any part in immortal life. On the contrary, the immortal soul finds its salvation in eternal rest. The difference between motion and rest, between time and eternity, belongs to the very essence of the theologian's distinction between imperfect happiness on earth and perfect happiness hereafter.

These matters, of relevance to the theory of happiness, will be discussed in our future symposiums on ETERNITY, IMMORTALITY, and SIN where we find another religious dogma, that of original sin, which has an obvious bearing on earthly happiness as well as on eternal salvation. Fallen human nature, according to Christian teaching, is incompetent to achieve even the natural end of imperfect temporal happiness without God's help. You may remember that Milton expounds this doctrine of indispensable grace in *Paradise Lost*, in words which God the Father addresses to His Son:


Man shall not quite be lost, but sav'd who will,  
 Yet not of will in him, but grace in me  
 Freely voutsaft; once more I will renew  
 His lapsed powers, though forfeit and enthrall'd  
 By sin to foul exorbitant desires;  
 Upheld by me, yet once more he shall stand  
 On even ground against his mortal foe  
 By me upheld, that he may know how frail  
 His fall'n condition is, and to me owe  
 All his deliv'rance, and to none but me.

God's grace is needed for men to lead a good life on earth as well as for eternal blessedness. On earth, man's efforts to be virtuous require the reinforcement of supernatural gifts—faith, hope, and charity, and the infused moral virtues. The beatific vision in heaven totally exceeds the natural powers of the soul and comes with the gift of added supernatural light. It seems, in short, that there is no purely natural happiness according to the strict tenets of Christian doctrine.

**AQUINAS:** I employ the conception of eternal beatitude not only to measure the imperfection of earthly life, but also to insist that temporal happiness is happiness at all only to the extent that it is a remote participation of true and perfect happiness. It cannot be said of temporal happiness that it excludes every evil and fulfills every desire. In this life every evil cannot be excluded. For this present life is subject to many unavoidable evils: to ignorance on the part of the intellect; to inordinate affection on the part of the appetite; and to many penalties on the part of the body... Likewise, neither can the desire for good be satiated in this life. For man naturally desires the good which he has to be abiding. Now the goods of the present life pass away, since life itself passes away... Wherefore it is impossible to have true happiness in this life.

**ADLER:** If as you say, perfect happiness consists in the vision of the Divine Essence, which men cannot obtain in this life, then, only the earthly life which somehow partakes of God has a measure of happiness in it.

**AQUINAS:** That is correct, earthly happiness, imperfect because of its temporal and bodily conditions, consists in a life devoted to God—a kind of inchoate participation here and now of the beatific vision here after. On earth there can be only a beginning in respect of that operation whereby man is united to God... In the present life, in as far as we fall short of the unity and continuity of that operation, so do we fall short of perfect happiness. Nevertheless it is a participation of happiness; and so much the greater, as the operation can be more continuous and more one. Consequently the active life which is busy with many things, has less of happiness than the contemplative life, which is busied with one thing, i.e., the contemplation of truth.

**ADLER:** When the theologians consider the modes of life on earth in terms of the fundamental distinction between the secular and the religious, or the active and the contemplative, they seem to admit the possibility of imperfect happiness in either mode. In either, a devout Christian dedicates every act to the glory of God, and through such dedication embraces the divine in the passing moments of his earthly pilgrimage. 

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

**CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS**

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