



HAPPINESS AND CONTENTMENT

Mortimer Adler

(Part 1 of 2)

1

People generally espouse the mistake made by most modern philosophers—that happiness is a psychological rather than an ethical state, i.e., the quality of a morally good life.

No one can legislate how the word “happiness” should be used. Unless it is used in its ethical rather than its psychological meaning, it has no significance as the ultimate end toward which we are morally obliged to strive.

Everyone, whether they make the aforementioned mistake or not, concurs in acknowledging that happiness is always an end, never a mere means. More than that, it is an ultimate or final end, sought for the sake of nothing else.

For any other good, or object of desire, we can always say that we desire it for the sake of something else. We want wealth, health, freedom, and knowledge because they are means to some good beyond themselves. But it is impossible to complete the sentence be-

ginning with the words “We want to be happy or want happiness *because ...*”

Any other good that we can name is something that, obtained, leaves other goods to be sought. Each is one good among others, but happiness is not one good among others. It is the complete good, the sum of all goods, leaving nothing more to be desired. Thus conceived, happiness is not the highest good, but the total good.

What has just been said about happiness holds, though in different ways, for happiness understood as a psychological and as an ethical state. But it is much better understood when the word “happiness” is given an ethical rather than a psychological meaning. Fortunately, there is another word that aptly designates the psychological state, thus making it unnecessary to use the word “happiness” in two distinct senses.

That other word is “contentment.” It cannot signify anything other than the psychological state that exists when the desires of the moment are satisfied. The more they are satisfied at a given moment, the more we regard that moment as approaching supreme contentment.

2

The distinctions presented in the preceding chapter (between natural and acquired desires, or needs and wants, and between real and merely apparent goods) enable us here to deal briefly with the philosophical mistake of identifying happiness with the psychological state of contentment.

If all our desires were wants, differing from individual to individual, and if all the goods that human beings desired merely appeared good to this individual or that because these individuals happened to want them, it would be impossible to avoid the conclusion that, for any individual, happiness consists in getting what he or she wanted and, getting it, enjoying contentment at that moment.

For any one individual, happiness would then be a transient and shifting thing. He may be contented one day because he succeeded in getting the apparent goods he then wanted, but the next day might bring the frustration of his wants and with it painful discontent. Individual happiness would shift from day to day, seldom enduring for any protracted span of time. It would also differ in character from individual to individual, according to differences in

their individual wants. What brings happiness to one individual might not bring happiness to another.

There are still further reasons for arguing against the identification of happiness with contentment. No one, I think, would question the moral depravity of a miser, the pathological individual who wants only to dwell in the presence of the pile of gold he has accumulated and is willing to sacrifice his health, friendships, and other real goods to do so.

If happiness is nothing but the contentment that results from satisfied wants, then the miser who has what he wants must be called happy, though by moral standards he should be regarded as a miserable creature, lacking most of the real goods that human beings need. Happiness as contentment is equally achievable by individuals who are morally good and morally bad.

Individuals come into conflict with one another in their attempts to get what they want. One individual's wanting too much wealth may result in frustrating another individual's getting the wealth he needs and also wants. An individual who wants power over others in order to dominate and control them may interfere with the liberty that other individuals need and also want.

If a just government should do whatever it can to aid and abet the pursuit of happiness on the part of its people, that mandate cannot be carried out when happiness is identified with the contentment that results from individuals getting what they want. Confronted with conflicting wants, or with wants on the part of some that, satisfied, frustrate the satisfaction of the wants of others, no government can secure for all its citizens the conditions requisite for a successful pursuit of happiness.

With happiness conceived as contentment, its transient and shifting character, changing from day to day with changes in an individual's wants and shifting from wants that are satisfied to wants that are frustrated, makes happiness so variable and impermanent a goal that no government could possibly aid and abet the pursuit of happiness for all its people. Nor could it pledge to promote the pursuit of happiness for everyone on these terms, since the conflicting wants of different individuals would make it impossible to enable all to satisfy their wants.

All these things call for the separation of happiness from contentment. Such separation is quite possible and easy to explain once

we employ the distinction between needs and wants and the distinction between real and apparent goods.

Happiness can then be defined as a whole life enriched by the cumulative possession of all the real goods that every human being needs and by the satisfaction of those individual wants that result in obtaining apparent goods that are innocuous.

The pursuit of happiness, thus conceived, consists in the effort to discharge our moral obligation to seek whatever is really good for us and nothing else unless it is something, such as an innocuous apparent good, that does not interfere with our obtaining all the real goods we need.

A just government can then aid and abet the pursuit of happiness on the part of its people by securing their natural rights to the real goods they need—life, liberty, and whatever else an individual needs, such as the protection of health, a sufficient measure of wealth, and other real goods that individuals cannot obtain solely by their own efforts.

3

In spite of everything so far said, the widely prevalent error of conceiving happiness as a psychological and momentary state of contentment may still persist unless other difficulties are overcome.

For one thing, not only philosophers but also people in general find it difficult to accept a notion of happiness that makes it intrinsically unenjoyable. Conceived as the moral quality of a whole human life, happiness is strictly unenjoyable. Enjoyment occurs from moment to moment. Contentment, when it occurs, is enjoyable there and then. But at no moment in one's life can one enjoy a quality that belongs to one's life as a whole. Only when a life has been completed is it possible to say whether it has been a morally good or bad life—whether or not happiness was achieved.

Another difficulty lies in the understanding of happiness as a final end or an ultimate goal. This carries with it, both for philosophers and people in general, the notion that a final end or ultimate goal is something which, striven for, can be reached and rested in. When happiness is conceived as contentment, it is not only something we can enjoy but also something we can cease to strive for and come to rest in—at least for a time. Not so when happiness is conceived as a whole life well lived.

It may be the final end or ultimate goal of all our striving, but it is not something we can ever cease to strive for as long as we are alive, or something we can come to rest in when achieved, because then we are no longer alive.

These difficulties can, I think, be removed by still another distinction that is generally overlooked. It is the distinction between a terminal and a normative goal. Lack of awareness of this distinction led John Dewey, in his *Human Nature and Conduct*, to deny that there are any final ends in this life. Everything we seek, according to Dewey, is a means to some good beyond itself. None is, therefore, a final end or ultimate goal, not even happiness conceived as contentment. Enjoying it one day or for a short span of time leaves more to be striven for in what remains of one's life.

To make the difference between a terminal and a normative goal clear, examples of them should suffice.

You plan a trip to Vienna. You make decisions about the means of getting there, and you take the steps to put those decisions into action. You finally arrive in Vienna—the termination of your trip—and, for some period of time, you are at rest so far as your travels are concerned. In this simple instance of aiming at an end and taking the means to achieve it, Vienna is a terminal goal. Reaching it and resting in it is an enjoyable experience.

The conductor of a symphony orchestra prepares to play a certain musical composition at a concert some time ahead. He studies the piece of music. He rehearses the orchestra a number of times. Finally, the day of the concert arrives and the conductor puts all this prior work into effect by doing his best to lead the orchestra in a rendition of the composition that achieves a high degree of musical excellence.

Let us suppose the conductor succeeds. The musical excellence he has aimed at and achieved is a normative rather than a terminal goal. It does not exist at any moment during the playing of the composition. The conductor and the orchestra never reach it, in the sense of being able to rest in it, because the excellence aimed at comes into existence temporally. It has its being only in the whole span of time that it took to play the piece.

Normative goals are goals that exist only in temporal wholes, not from moment to moment or at any one moment. What is true of the normative goal that is aimed at in the rendition of a piece of music

is similarly true of the excellence aimed at in the production of a dramatic work on the stage, in the production of a ballet, in any of the performing arts, and, as well, in the playing of athletic games that run for a period of time.

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