

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

(In 3 Parts)

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; and Plotinus.

Part 1



ADLER: The great questions about happiness are concerned with its definition and its attainability. 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 therefore one further question. Should men make happiness their goal and direct their acts accordingly?

PASCAL

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.

KANT

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.

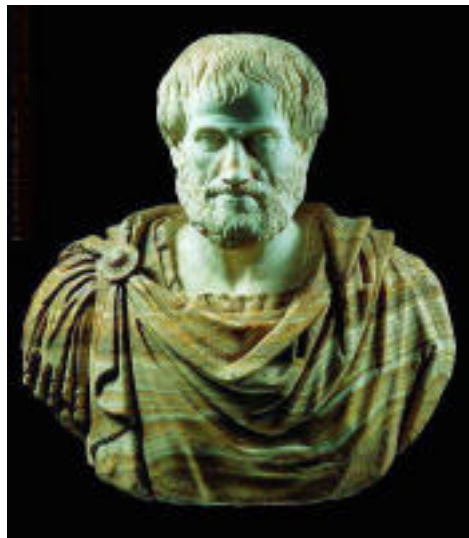
ADLER: Do you quarrel then with the theologians who, on the basis of divine revelation, describe the eternal happiness in the life hereafter which is to be enjoyed *alike* by all who are saved?

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 indifferency 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.



ARISTOTLE

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 ANDEVIL.

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.

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