

**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.**  
—Aristotle *NE*

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## 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.

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#### Part 2

**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.



**LOCKE:** I quarrel with the philosophers of old who, in my opinion, vainly seek 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:** 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 indifference and attention to the one, as he does to the other of these sciences.

**LOCKE**

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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.

**ADLER:** With the exception then 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 be 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 men have given thus present the problem of the real and the apparent good, the significance of which will be considered in our future discussion 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 you 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, 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.

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.

**MILL**

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

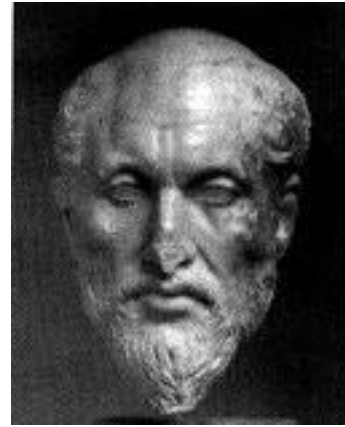
desired, then it is desired only as a part of happiness. Happiness is a concrete whole, and these are some of its parts...Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until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



PLOTINUS

**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 injured 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.

**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 unhappiness, 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."



**ST. THOMAS AQUINAS**

**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.

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## **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

Hi Max,

I very much appreciated the first of the 3-part "Great Conversation: A Symposium on The Great Idea of Happiness". I really like the question and answer (choreographed even!) conversational presentation that was used. I wanted to let you know that the Great Idea of Happiness Map is available at:

<http://www.1-900-870-6235.com/eLearning/GreatIdeas/HappinessMap.htm>

for anyone who would like to see an overview of this particular Great Idea.

Ron Wild

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Max,

I am in the process of creating The Great Ideas Reading and Discussion Group 2002-2003 Reading List schedule. It will be

conducted at the Boulder Public Library again...for the fifth year. I will e-mail you the schedule and the web-site address soon. And I hope to expand the web-site this year.

On another subject, I just read through the Boulder Camera news-paper insert on the University of Colorado's Fifty-Fourth Annual Conference On World Affairs—A New Conversation—April 8-12, 2002. Howard Higman, founder, invited Mortimer many times. Howard is gone and Jim Palmer is the director now. The only philosopher on the Monday through Friday program is Achim Koddermann, associate professor of philosophy at State University of New York. Koddermann is a specialist in applied philosophy, media ethics, human rights and theories of interpretation. His expertise has been utilized in the elaboration of codes against violence and for tolerance and strategies of integration in reunified Germany, according to the Daily Camera. Why don't you get on next years program? Your conversing on the "Great Conversation" is better than the "New Conversation". The "New Conversation" appears to be light entertainment and "We Bad" seminars.

Brian D. Hansen

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## **WELCOME NEW MEMBER**

**Matthew Sayler**

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