

PART TWO

EXISTENCE AND THE EXISTENT

F. *Ecce in Pace*

CAN 'HAPPINESS' BE SAVED?

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My title implies that happiness is in danger. The evidence of its predicament has been mounting for many years. But a serious impasse has now been reached: prophetic voices have warned us to abandon the pursuit of happiness, claiming that it trivializes and even threatens us, while at the same time the popular marketplace of ideas is swarming with pulp paperbacks and videos promoting the "Happiness Business." In our age happiness is being hawked by West Coast channelers, positive thinkers bearing their message of the mind cure, aerobic priestesses, and dietary metaphysicians. They speak of happiness in unison, promising a happy life without moral reform, a life of lasting pleasure and satisfaction resting contentedly in its own thought of itself.

Once found at its very heart, happiness no longer belongs to the discourse of humane learning but to feel-good, look-good, and buy-good hucksters. Ironically, they did not have to steal happiness, it was given to them. Philosophers have considered happiness as dead currency for some time. For example, over seventy-five years ago, Miguel de Unamuno passionately argued that we should choose love rather than happiness; the happy man, he said, was "without substance"; by choosing happiness rather than suffering love he passed through life "without any inner meaning."¹ In our own generation Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has called happiness "an idol of the market," which should never be pursued since even "a beast gnawing at its prey can be happy."² For Solzhenitsyn, as for Unamuno, happiness is the natural enemy of love.

Add to these the voices of the leading moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who calls happiness a "polymorphous" and "morally dangerous" concept,³ and the sociologist Robert Bellah who finds in the American pursuit of happiness nothing less than an excuse for national self-absorption.⁴ And one does not have to read very far among contemporary poets to realize how far we have come since Pope's *Essay on Man*: commenting upon the legacy of Epicurus, C.H. Sisson concludes gloomily, "It may be that happiness is a sign of evil",⁵ while Roy Fuller casts his complaint into a form with which we can all sympathize: "Now

that . . . all the new music is written in the twelve-tone scale, . . . anyone happy in this age and place is daft or corrupt."⁶

These represent only several among the latest warnings, grown louder since the initial alarms of Voltaire, Samuel Johnson, and Immanuel Kant, and earlier of Pascal, that the idea of happiness may be, to invert the classical tradition, fundamentally at odds with what is most praiseworthy in human life.

So happiness needs to be saved--but from whom? From the prophetic thinkers who deny its relation to love and moral purpose, or from the frivolous, self-indulgent hucksters who manipulate human eros for popularity and material gain?

Perhaps nowhere is Jacques Maritain's warning about the Cartesian substitution of technique and technology for character and virtue better illustrated than in these popular conceptions of happiness. Maritain would have known firsthand one of the well-intentioned popular writers who between the wars tilled the ground for our present crop of hucksters. The philosopher Emile Chartier, known under the pseudonym of Alain, published in 1928 ninety three of his brilliant aphoristic sketches under the title *Propos sur le bonheur*. As memorable and insightful as his writings are, the substance of his thoughts on happiness is not very far from those of the positive thinking movement which began to thrive in America during the thirties under Norman Vincent Peale. For Alain, as for Peale, happiness was a product of the will applied to the mind; happiness can be created despite all circumstances by technique--smiling, straightening one's posture, not dwelling on sad thoughts, resisting troubling passions, and delving into the work at hand. Although one cannot help but be taken in by a writer who can persuade you in four hundred words that "learning to drink a cup of tea can civilize a man,"⁷ taken as a whole Alain's treatment of happiness is hopelessly middlebrow, giving the impression of profundity while promoting entirely the cultivation of bourgeois pleasures and, most importantly (opposing Unamuno), the avoidance of all suffering. Perhaps we can see more clearly now why there exists such an impressive chorus of voices opposed to the ancient suggestion that happiness is the greatest of all human ends. Our century has witnessed something far worse than the eighteenth-century reduction of happiness to pleasure and satisfaction. At the very least, the philosophers from Locke to Rousseau who placed happiness at the heart of their ethical and political reflection never allowed it to stray too far from the acquisition of virtue. Popular writers such as Alain and Peale, as well as Bertrand Russell and the novelist John Cowper Powys, who each wrote happiness books in the thirties, convinced multitudes of readers that happiness was little more than a trick of the mind, something akin to conjuring.⁸ In *The Art of Happiness* Powys insists that we can be happy in spite of any circumstance by taking advantage of the "magic of the mind."⁹

The recourse to magic is nothing new. What is new is that an entire age seems to have succumbed to it. The protests of Solzenitsyn and Unamuno are far from eccentric when it is recognized that the pursuit of happiness has become a technique of avoidance, not only of pain but also of that part of us that is deepest, most enduring, and most praiseworthy. Maritain described work of the surrealists as a "magical preaching," words and images in obedience to only an internal rule and not the principle of non-contradiction.¹⁰ Thus, happiness has become private and inscrutable; the hustlers buy and sell a product that cannot be tested for its quality; nothing can measure it or refute it except, perhaps, the consciousness of suffering, whose arrival is quickly met with a technique of incantation and auto-suggestion. We see firmly erected in these happiness advocates what Maritain called the "shibboleth of sincerity."¹¹

Can 'happiness' be saved from all of this? Surely Maritain would advise us not to be averted from the attempt by the overwhelming odds. In his lectures on *Moral Philosophy* Maritain wrote: "We are starving for happiness, we make the *pursuit of happiness* one of our fundamental rights, we seek happiness in everything that is perishable, in the love of a woman or in the conquest of power. . . ."¹² For Maritain we seek happiness in spite of the fact that human experience constantly frustrates the attempt--"Men seek beatitude, without believing in it."¹³ If reach exceeds grasp then the response of the Christian philosopher should not be Kant's, who simply detached the motive of happiness from morality, or, as we can infer from Maritain's treatment of Sartre, the anguished cynicism of Unamuno and Solzenitzen. No, Maritain insists that "genuine Christianity does not despise the rational desire for happiness and does not reject it from the proper domain of morality but directs it to something better and more loved. . . ."¹⁴

Although Maritain's remarks about happiness are scattered and brief, they are illuminating. In fact, I would argue that Maritain is almost alone in his avoidance of a mistake common to most attempts at reviving and restoring the idea of happiness: Maritain realizes that the tradition of *eudaimonism*, even with its confident founding of happiness on the virtues, contains within itself unresolved problems, which led to its own gradual dissolution in the Renaissance. In other words, in order to save happiness Maritain knew it was not enough to revive Aristotle.

Obviously, a critique of classical *eudaimonism* cannot be completed in a short space; so I will limit myself to two important and interrelated issues, one stated explicitly by Maritain, the other vaguely hinted at. Though these do not tell the whole story, taken together they can direct our effort at restoring happiness to "something better and more loved." The first issue raises a question central to the task of the Christian philosopher who takes on the issue of happiness: whether happiness is more truthfully conceived as a final end within itself or as having some good external to itself. Interestingly, Maritain praises Kant for his insight into the inherent

weaknesses of Aristotle's eudaimonism--his subordination of the Good to the idea of happiness. Yet, Kant's rejection of all finality in ethics was too extreme, and, I may add unnecessary, if he had bothered to question the purely empirical notion of happiness he had inherited from his century.

Aristotle, and Aquinas following him, clearly distinguished happiness from the pleasure that accompanies its possession. If anything characterizes the tradition of eudaimonism, even in Epicurus, it is its insistence that contentment, joy, and pleasure must be rooted in good moral character in order to qualify as the passions of a happy man or woman. It is, I think, one of the great unexplored avenues of the history of Western ideas how these positive emotions became disengaged from a morally worthy and fortunate life to take the place of happiness for themselves. The emergence of what is termed "soft Epicureanism" as a substitute for eudaimonia has yet to be traced. There have been numerous protests against it: the best known of these is by someone who nearly sacrificed his mental health trying to provide the new Epicureanism with a philosophical grounding--"Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."¹⁵ This dead end experienced by John Stuart Mill in trying to comprehend all of life in terms of the "two sovereign masters, pleasure and pain," has been ignored by the social scientists who, operating under the rubric of "eudemics," publish their studies of "subjective well-being." What better proof is there of the damage done by "pig-utilitarianism" than the still current assumption that a happy life can be described by surveys? This residuum of utilitarianism raises the second issue: how, and how closely, must we link pleasure with happiness? This may strike one as a strange question, since nothing may seem more natural than ascribing positive physical, emotional, and mental states to the happy life. And, indeed, this is what we find in most of the classical tradition. Even those Stoic and Epicurean philosophers who thought it possible to be happy "upon the rack" rested their case not merely on the stability of virtue but further on a mental *tranquility* that could remain aloof from the pain being afflicted upon the body.

For some this issue of suffering is resolved as a question of good and bad fortune. The happy life for them, as Aristotle said, is the lucky combination of acquired virtue and external goods. In Kantian terms, if a person gains the pleasure out of life he deserves he can be called happy; if not, he can be called virtuous but not happy. This no doubt is Aristotle's position but it does not solve the entire problem of pain in happiness.

But there is an important aspect left unresolved in Aristotle and the whole tradition of eudaimonia. It has to do with the suffering involved in the acquisition and maintenance of those goods that are internal and foundational to the happy life, that is, the virtues themselves. Aristotle mentions this when he remarks that a person who is virtuous will experience both pleasure and pain at the right time and at the right place. Epicurus also remarks that we must be willing to experience pain for the sake of virtue.

And, of course, Plato in the *Gorgias* makes those forever provocative remarks about the person being punished justly as being happier than one who is not.

Taken as a whole, such isolated remarks suggest more of an answer to the question than is really there. It is only with the patristic and medieval writers that the role of suffering in the happy life moves toward the center. The reason for this, and here the two questions coalesce, is that the end of the happy life--goodness itself--has moved beyond the human to the divine. In Maritain's words, happiness has taken on a "peregrinal aspect." Happiness is now broken into earthly and heavenly, temporal and eternal, imperfect and perfect; our temporal eudamonia begins to contain a looking forward (or, to be precise, a looking-over-time) into eternity.

Once God was made the final end of happiness, Maritain comments, "by the same stroke the notion of happiness was transfigured."¹⁶ God is now to be loved more than happiness and, by implication, the level of suffering now found acceptable for a praiseworthy life has increased. Aquinas, in a crucial passage from the *Summa Theologiae*, not to be found in his treatise on happiness, was forced to differ with Aristotle and the classical tradition on the relation of happiness to suffering. In his articles on Christ's passion he quotes with approval Augustine's remark that there is "no better way to cure our misery than the passion of Christ."¹⁷ Who would have previously imagined that unhappiness could be remedied by the choice of pain? And when stating the Stoic and Aristotelian objection that the man of virtue does not suffer greatly Aquinas replies that "some sadness is praiseworthy [as] when a man is saddened over his own or another's sins."¹⁸

Aquinas does not protect Christ by invoking Stoic *tranquilitas* or Epicurean *ataraxia* but argues that His suffering extended to His entire soul, even the speculative intellect, which Aristotle had maintained suffering could not reach. But Christ's happiness remains intact because he is enjoying the perfect vision of the Father during death. Though Aristotle would argue that Christ's sadness must qualify his happiness, Aquinas answers that his bliss is perfect: the contrary emotions of pain and joy co-exist within his earthly beatitude. The suffering, once excluded from the happy life, has come to be seen as integral to it, part and parcel of the soul's commitment to its internal goods and final end.

Where Aquinas was willing to question the overly pure concept of happiness bequeathed to him by classicism, Maritain goes even further. In *Integral Humanism* we find the following passage:

If it is true that the heart of man will always suffer the *anguish of beatitude*, it is not because man would be condemned always to stagnate here below; it is because the largest and most abounding life will always be

something very small compared with the dimensions of the human heart."¹⁹

That the happy life should contain pain is no accident. For Maritain temporal happiness has the full dignity of an "infravalent" end that should not be imagined along the bourgeoisie lines as a "felicity of ease and repose."²⁰ To specify that happiness has a "peregrinal aspect" does not imply that happiness is mere resignation but rather that the heart will always be subject to a greater longing than can be satisfied by any of the world's goods, even happiness itself. In the words of Boethius, happiness is "shot through with bitterness." But if the anguish of beatitude arises from *within* the experience of happiness itself, it is not entirely visited upon it from without. Yet, insofar as our earthly happiness is inevitably visited by pain, Maritain observes within it a "law of creative conflict" that enables persons to moves to "higher forms of active peace and transfiguring integration."²¹ Boethius, while writing his *Consolation* in the dungeons of Pavia in 524, came to the same conclusion: suffering belongs to the order of providence as well as that of fate and, therefore, bears within it the possibility of blessing.

I think what Maritain is suggesting here and elsewhere may be a way of reimagining happiness that could restore the dignity of happiness as eudaimonia but without falling prey to its inner faults. Maritain, in short, understands happiness as part of the demand for sanctity. And I think he is right to do so. By following in this direction we will not need to announce a Christian monopoly of the happy life any more than we would say that only professing Christians will be in heaven. If anyone had an appreciation of differing forms of sanctity it was Jacques Maritain.

Maritain picked up the happiness debate at the moment when the philosophical and theological traditions of the Renaissance began to radically diverge. The persisting empirical conception of happiness, as an enduring state of pleasure or satisfaction, was the result. When the importance of suffering was raised once again in the nineteenth century it bore little relation to happiness, but rather to the various form of unhappiness such as despair and anxiety, which, in an ironic reversal, had gained the kind of status once belonging to eudaimonia.

As Maritain tells us in *Existence and the Existent* these romantic and existentialist precursors of Unamuno and Solzenitsyn were to make a reason-destroying idol out of anguish.²² This is not the result I recommend. Aiming at suffering destroys happiness just as much as aiming at pleasure; each belongs to happiness as an affective consequence of possessing goods. But the topic of suffering limits philosophical discourse in a special way. Philosophers, said Maritain, are rightfully "astonished" by the apparent contradiction in the behavior of the saints: on the one hand they desire suffering as one of their most precious goods, and on the other hand try so diligently to relieve others of theirs. It belongs to the "structure of the

spirit," said Maritain, that the transvaluation of suffering into a superior good remains a "closed secret, valid only for the individual subjectivity" of the saint.²³ Perhaps this is the reason that Boethius called upon Lady Philosophy to offer his panegyric to the mystery of pain and providence.

How much suffering is too much to destroy happiness? What kinds of suffering can be given reasons and purposes? What about suffering people do not choose the suffering that, in Maritain's words, "falls on them like a beast"?²⁴ These are questions that can be resolved only in the "closed secret" of each individual soul. However, the example of the saints raises a possibility of a happiness lived outside the rational mean of pleasure and pain,²⁵ requiring "a perfection," Maritain said, "consisting in loving, in going through all that is unpredictable, dangerous, dark, demanding, and insensate in love."²⁶ Far from being natural enemies, happiness and love require one another. And if questions about suffering cannot be answered in advance by some kind of calculus it does not mean that they go unanswered. I rather think that a life that is truly praiseworthy will learn one way or another to answer them. The least we can do, in advance, is not seek to rob them of the opportunity. T.S. Eliot wrote in the *Four Quartets*:

In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
(East Coker III.)

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NOTES

1. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Princeton, 1972), p. 225.
2. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, trans. Rebecca Frank (New York, 1980) p. 513.
3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A history of moral philosophy from the Homeric age to the twentieth century* (New York, 1966) pp. 167, 195, 207, and especially pp. 236-238.
4. Robert N. Bellah, with Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Stephen Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York, 1985) ch. 1.
5. C.H. Sisson, *Collected Poems, 1943-1983* (Manchester, 1984) p. 111.
6. Roy Fuller, *Collected Poems, 1936-61* (London, 1962) p. 34.
7. Alain, *Alain On Happiness*, trans. Robert D. Cottrell and Jane E. Cottrell (New York, 1973).
8. Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York, 1930). John Cowper Powys, *The Art of Happiness* (New York, 1935).
9. *The Art of Happiness*, 44.
10. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton, 1977) pp. 187-88.
11. *Ibid.*, 193.
12. Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy: An historical and critical survey of the great systems* (London, 1964) p. 76.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
15. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Oskar Piest (New York, 1957) p. 14.
16. *Moral Philosophy*, p. 75.
17. *Summa Theologiae*, III, 46, 3, sed contra.
18. *Summa Theologiae*, III, 46, 6, ad 2.
19. Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of A New Christendom*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York, 1968) p. 56.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
22. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantière and Gerald B. Phelan (New York, 1948) p. 127.
23. *Moral Philosophy*, p. 461.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Existence and the Existent*, p. 55.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.