

# SUFFICIENCY, CONVIVIALITY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

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THE PROBLEM we have with understanding what happiness is and knowing how to secure it seems to be one of the oldest that humans have cudged their brains over. More often than one would expect, intellectual traditions around the world offer less in the way of sustained argument than concentrated *bon mots* or indefinite hints. Little wonder that we go through most of our lives thinking in clichés when it comes to happiness. What I wish to propose may not be much of an improvement, but before I get to that, I would like summarily to dispel the specter of skepticism that too easily overshadows all this unclarity.

When Augustine comes to the question of what time is in his *Confessions*, he begins by throwing up his hands: “If no one asks me about it, I know what it is. But as soon as I am asked, I no longer know” (XI.14). One is tempted to say the same of happiness, but there is an important difference. Time is a concept we can think about mathematically, quite apart from our experience of it or from the way different cultures and different ages count it and pace it. Not so with happiness. There are no universally reliable “happiness clocks” or “happiness rulers.” In fact, this very indefinability and vagueness is an essential ingredient in our description of happiness. It is one of those concepts that we might call with Kant a “negative borderline concept,” an idea that we understand declaring what it is not. As such, the idea points *beyond* itself and never directly *to* itself, a

beyond that we resign ourselves to never being able to reach. Like the vanishing point in a perspective painting, it is hidden and yet without positing it there is no way for the illusion of perspective to be created. Yet even if we have to admit that we don't know how to talk about it, we are sure it is real. In one sense, our happiness discourse is very much like the language about contact with transcendent beings and other worlds that we find in myth and religion. Our experiences and memories of happiness, though, are much closer to hand. We may not be able to say for sure when it comes and goes in our lives, but we are sure that it does. Despite the uncertainty, we are comfortable at remembering patches of our lives as particularly "happy" when we compare them, in hindsight, with things that happened before or after.

Happiness is not only a *limited* concept, it is also a *mixed* concept in the sense that its descriptive face and its normative face are not the same. The descriptive question "Are you happy?" and the normative question, "What counts for happiness?" would seem to be completely consistent. After all, if I know what it is to experience X, then I can tell whether in fact I am now experiencing X or not. If I can speak this way of pain and of pleasure, then why not also of happiness? The reason is that as a descriptive concept, happiness tends to be too relative to measure, and as a normative one, too absolute to recognize in the real world. In describing happiness, we tend to think of it as related to feelings of cheerfulness, an upbeat spirit, a rosy disposition, and good humor. But these are often a matter of individual temperament and passing moods, and the face we show to others being as complex as it is, are not always what they seem to be. Meantime, attempts to provide a norm of happiness typically speak in terms so abstract as to be almost beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. There is no better instance of this than Thomas Aquinas, who says that *felicitas* consists in a complete life lived in accordance with reason and therefore in the practice of virtue. As if that were not unattainable enough, he calls this happiness incomplete and hidden to human eyes, arguing that complete happiness is identical with the perfect good and the full satisfaction of all desires (including the joy at seeing the wicked suffer an eternity of damnation, STh. III. 94.1) that can only come in the next life. Much the same view is repeated in Kant's distinction between this-worldly *Glückseligkeit*, the conscious pleasure that ideally accompanies the practice of virtue, and the *Seligkeit* that is the fulfillment of all the desires of this world and is possible only in the world to come.

These normative idealizations of happiness belong to a history in Western philosophy that goes all the way back to Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia*. Literally the term means something like "well-being" or "well-spirited," but for Aristotle this is clearly not a state or disposition. It is a distant ideal of active energy exercised in accord with the virtue of *sophia* which is aimed at knowledge of universal truths. In any case, if these are the norms, then none of us

would presume to use them in speaking of our own lives. What we *describe* as “happiness” is rather more in the nature of a feeling, which as often as not comes at unexpected moments, unconnected with anything we have done or had done to us, and serving no purpose other than its own enjoyment. This much we can agree with Aristotle on, as we can agree that such feelings do not offer a reliable norm for judging happiness or unhappiness in ourselves or others. But the gap between the descriptions and the norms in terms of which these experiences are to be evaluated remains.

Even if we grant that description is often a part of the experience being described and hence never quite “pure,” logically norms are assumed to be disconnected from whether they in fact correspond to anything in reality. The disjunction is a grave matter and quickly lands us in the skeptical conclusion that we might not be better off by avoiding this hodgepodge language altogether and refuse to talk about happiness at all. Every ounce of human intuition I have tells me that this is just plain wrong. The question we still have to ask is why, as human beings, we find it so important to preserve this kind of language as part of our ordinary, everyday discourse and use it to guide decisions and justify our actions, even though we know full well that we have little or no idea of what we are talking about. And yet, just as plainly my instincts tell me that I need to come to some kind of a practical conclusion to this dilemma and not simply get waylaid in rehearsing what the history of Western philosophy has had to say on the matter.

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Obviously, a fair description of happiness has to apply to the fullness of human consciousness and not be reduced to a lowest common denominator that lumps us together with other primates or purely vegetative states. At the same time, it will not do to establish a norm that applies only to individuals and excludes groups, or one that is patterned after mature adults to the neglect of the happiness experienced by children and adolescents. Just as obviously, happiness cannot be described in terms of fidelity to customs or laws that are epoch, culture, class, or gender specific. In other words, it cannot be purely synchronic but also must have a diachronic aspect to it. From the start, we need a healthy suspicion towards relying on any particular history of philosophy. If happiness is anything, it is polyphonic and pluriform.

Just as obviously, we must not leap over our ordinary, everyday lives to a kind of Platonic contemplation or to medieval beliefs in a heavenly bliss that awaits us in the *al di là*. The strategy here, all too often, is one we see at work in the reification of religious illusions: to negate the weakness of our human condition, only to turn around and affirm that negation by projecting it into the skies. The

wiser course is to begin by yielding to the common sense that cannot be defined primarily by the absence of unhappiness.

Turning to the history of Western philosophy, I would like to draw attention to two extreme positions, in the form in which they were articulated in the nineteenth century, and then if it is possible to extract something from both of them to sketch the contours of happiness. I begin with the pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer who thought of happiness as something not worth squandering our hopes on. His argument is a simple one. Our lives are full of frustrations, sadness, and pain simply for the reason that we expect too much of it. Illusion is to carry on pretending, seduced by expectations of a better future or heartened by momentary lapses into happiness in the midst of the “original sin of existing.” Enlightenment is to recognize the futility of this “walk on coals” and withdraw from hope. That Schopenhauer himself did not pursue the ascetic ideals he championed does not discredit his logic, but they do make us question how practical it is to follow him in his distrust in progress and education in rational thinking. Although he was one of the first in Western philosophy to take Eastern thought seriously, particularly the Upanishads and Vedas and to a lesser extent Buddhism, the appropriation was everywhere overshadowed by a deep pessimism about the human condition.

Philosophically, Schopenhauer is interesting because he corrected Kant’s unspoken belief in the consistency between appearance and reality (which Hegel made explicit) to break that connection. “The world,” he said, “is my idea of the world.” He did this by seeing that what was most basic was not the knower or the known but the impulse to grasp and reject the world—and this, as Eastern philosophy taught him, is suffering. The world, he states clearly, is like a penal colony (an inspiration for Kafka’s story of the same title). The will feeds off itself not only because of what consciousness does to desire but because of something inherent in the nature of life itself. The will is a parasite on consciousness, constantly in struggle with itself. Schopenhauer likens it to the bulldog-ant of Australia which, when cut in two, sets off a battle between the head and tail, a battle that can go on for thirty minutes or more until the two parts are dragged off by the other ants.<sup>1</sup> The pessimistic wisdom of the proverb *homo homini lupus* mirrors something rooted deep within each individual by nature. This internal tension in the will means a continued dissatisfaction that shows itself again and again in the pains and frustrations of everyday life.

Schopenhauer leaves us with two ideas: first, that the pursuit of happiness should be abandoned in favor of diminishing unhappiness; and second, that since to live is to desire, the way to do this in life is to curtail what we desire.

1. *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), §27, I: 147.

The choice to lower our expectations is sustained by the fact, he tells us, that the only time we can speak of ourselves as happy is when we are not conscious of being happy. Happiness consciously enjoyed is illusion. The only genuine things to be found in human beings work unconsciously.<sup>2</sup> We deceive ourselves if we think we can recall our joys: we only recall the abstract concept of joy. Will does not lie in memory. The people who are most unhappy are the people who do not fit in the molds of society and are conscious of it. He favors the Aristotelian “mean” only because it is a kind of anaesthesia from the unending misery of life.<sup>3</sup> In opposition to Leibniz’s view that evil is a privative in this best of all possible worlds, Schopenhauer saw evil as very real in this worst of all possible worlds. “Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim.”<sup>4</sup>

There are essays in which he offers practical advice for happiness, and oases of relief in things like the appreciation of art, but this is all eclipsed by his pessimistic metaphysic, which has earned him the reputation of an “evil genius.” Renunciation is the only honest response to the internal dividedness in the will, and the only way to make life bearable.

That is one extreme. At the other extreme, I would pick up on Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism and its goal of pursuing the greatest amount of “good” for the greatest number. The idea itself was taken from the British moral philosopher, Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), but Bentham put it to use as a measure for social reform. His concern was with locating norms that would result in a surplus of pleasure over pain and suffering, a project that increasingly removed the focus from the conscious promotion of self-interest in favor of the objective community of persons. Like John Stuart Mill and William James, nothing was as important for Bentham as happiness. Securing it requires seeing to it that all human actions arise from the hedonistic calculus. Altruism, asceticism, love, duty, a desire for freedom, obedience to the law, faith, and so forth are all reducible to individual pleasure and pain calculations, but on the stipulation that no one individual’s happiness can be calculated as of greater value than any other’s. His norms for applying the calculus to particular actions or laws included the intensity of the pleasure or pain, the duration, the certitude of the outcome and its likelihood to produce similar effects in the future, the degree to which pleasure outweighs pain, and the extent of persons affected by one’s actions. Understandably, his idea of what constitutes happiness did not take into account a plurality of cultures, let alone multicultural societies, as later critics were to

2. *The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer*, trans. By T. Bailey Saunders (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2008), 377.

3. *The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer*, 307.

4. *The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer*, 339.

accuse, but he did build in the proviso that norms are flexible and always open to revision.

In comparison with Schopenhauer, Bentham was a thoroughgoing optimist, but his was an optimism that is difficult to practice. Few moral choices in life allow for his brand of happiness calculus, which leaves us to follow laws and customs until the point at which they break down and need to be rethought. In this sense, the consciousness of the pursuit of the most happiness for the most people is far less accessible than Schopenhauer's pessimism. Furthermore, the calculus is ill-suited to the kind of renunciation of pleasure that is entailed in the higher blessings—the “beatitudes” of Jesus' sermon on the mount, for example—that come from pursuing the good at all cost. The kind of happiness associated with the beliefs in a “happily ever after” does not figure in the evaluation of pain. Even if Bentham and Schopenhauer would both reject the pious wish-fulfillment in religious experience as a relief from the sufferings of life (and even immediate torture, as the stories of the *Martyrologium Romanum* remind us), no description of happiness can exclude the body of evidence in support of the experience of “happiness in unhappiness.”

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I suggested earlier that there is something to learn from these extremes in the definition and practical pursuit of happiness. Each of them has to do with norms for living one's life in harmony with the way the world is, the one focused on the penal side of life, the other on the diffusion of the pleasant side of life. They also alert us to the fact that enlightened self-interest leads us beyond feudal loyalty to our desires towards second-order desires, that is, to the desire to choose among our desires. We need to find a wider perspective from which to accept both these insights and fill in what is missing.

We have already mentioned the importance of taking cultural diversity into account. An equally obvious condition, at least from where we stand today, is that judgments of what counts as happiness need to include the health of the natural world, both in the ancient sense of a non-anthropocentric natural order of things and in the newer sense of including the planet and its biodiversity into the moral calculus. Schopenhauer tilts in the direction of the former, partly under the influence of the “perennial philosophy” of India and China, partly by way of the wisdom of Epictetus, but he never quite makes the leap. Bentham and the classical utilitarians are of no help here at all. The question, then, is how to work a universal guiding norm for happiness into the demands of everyday life without diminishing the value of our ordinary sentiments of happiness.

To take a step in this direction—and no more than a step—I would like to turn to a graffiti on the walls of Apollo's temple at Delphi where Socrates went

to consult the oracle. On one wall, the words were inscribed γνῶθι σαυτόν, “know thyself.” As is known, Socrates took those words out of their native context, where they were an admonition for visitors to “remember their place” in the presence of the god, and understood them as a life task. Less well known is an inscription on another wall which read μὴ δὲν ἄγαν, “nothing in excess.” The first philosophical use of this well-known maxim had to wait until Aristotle and his principle of the “mean,” which served as a way to locate true virtue at the midpoint of opposite excesses. Aristotle’s use of the idea, which was not very consistent and tended to render human passions anemic, may be left aside. Instead, I would like to see it as a high point between “too much” and “too little,” namely, the point at which the fullest and liveliest level of satisfaction is reached. Rationally knowing what is excessive does not entail the pursuit of that high point, any more than that pursuit guarantees that we will be happy. At the same time, the unhappiness of knowing one has too much or too little suggests that our capacity for excess entails our capacity for renouncing excess. I will call this knowledge the “principle of sufficiency.” To explain it, I would turn to an ancient Chinese idea of “knowing how much is enough,” an idea reiterated at several points in the early Buddhist sutras.<sup>5</sup>

Adjacent to a tearoom in the main temple of Ryōan-ji in Kyoto, there is a small stone slab lying atop a water basin on which four characters have been written, all sharing the central square from which water is drawn. It reads “All I need to know is how much is enough.” Far from the drowsy tedium of a simple “middle,” sufficiency is a condition for the maximum happiness possible for the maximum of the involved parties. This is not to say that happiness is something that can be engineered. It just “happens” that, without full awareness of how or why, things “fall into place” and produce a sense of elation of being right where one should be. One has a sense of being happy, that such moments are what life is after and what one wants most. The irony is that in the pursuit of happiness we seek as much as possible, limited only by what we can afford, the result of which is only further unhappiness, the same unhappiness that Schopenhauer reminds us life is too full of, and that Yeats described in the words, “Things fall apart, the center cannot hold.” But at those unexpected moments of happiness, things seem to “come together” around a center that is almost out of time and space, like the empty space at the center of a wheel that keeps the spokes in place and sustains the structure of the whole. When this elation of happenstance is accompanied by an awareness of the sufficiency of everything and everyone involved, we can speak of a “maximum happiness” for the “maximum number.”

5. I have drawn here on an earlier essay on “Sufficiency and Satisfaction” from *Dialogues at One Inch above the Ground* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 5–29.

Experience bears this out. Although it is impossible to recreate the actual happiness of past events, reflective memory instructs us that the happiest times of our lives are not associated with excesses but with “just enough.” Such happiness may not meet the strict ideal of durability and certainty in Bentham’s model, since it is often fleeting and its repetition uncontrollable. But it does conform to what we ordinarily think of as happiness, both the “little” happinesses and the “big” ones that are remembered as milestones in one’s life. Put the other way around, memory confirms that happiness seems to elude us most when we pursue it directly and for itself.

The oldest reference I have been able to find in ancient literature regarding the blessings of knowing how much is enough comes from the *Laozi*, probably from the fourth century BCE. There we read “To know how much is enough is to be rich” (33) and later its negative restatement, “If you know how much is enough, you will not be disgraced” (44). The first reference I know of in the Buddhist sutras appears in the *Dhammapada*, dating some eight centuries later, where we read, “The greatest wealth is to know how much is enough” (204),<sup>6</sup> the Chinese translation of which is almost the same as the passage from the *Laozi*.

The “wealth” spoken of here says nothing directly about feeling happy. Indeed, it is often accompanied by a sense of the personal sacrifice involved in finding just the right amount for full satisfaction. As we read in the fifth-century Chinese translation of the life of the Buddha, the *Buddhacarita*, “Make your desires few and stop when satisfied” (XII.47). This appeal to second-level desires—the desire to control one’s desires—does not fall into pessimism or pure asceticism. On the contrary, it brings a satisfaction that indulgence cannot. The *Sutra of the Eight Great Awakenings*, a short text composed in Chinese around the second century, informs us that “the mind never wearies of having enough.” The mind converted to sufficiency is clear, transparent—and enjoyable. This may be the ideal, but the frustration and repression of desires remains unenjoyable. We read in the *Sutra of the Final Instruction of the Buddha*, an early fifth-century Chinese translation for which no Tibetan or Sanskrit original has survived, that renunciation brings its own consolation, as a reward. The Buddha is addressing his monks:

Knowing how much is enough offers a comfortable, secluded spot...  
For one who can never have enough, wealth is still poverty; for one who knows what it is to have enough, there is wealth even in poverty. One who does not know how much is enough is forever pulled this way and that by the desires of the senses; one who knows finds consolation. (T.12.389, 1111c)

6. See also the *Sutra of Departure from the Everyday*, T.4.732a.



As much sense as this makes for the ascetic who has left home for homelessness, one cannot escape the sense of a certain self-centeredness to the satisfactions and consolations that come from living according to a principle of sufficiency. What we spoke of as maximizing the harmony of sufficiencies seems to be missing from these texts. For the fact is, even when the consequences of sufficiency do not produce a state of *happiness* in the individual, is it not possible to reach a sense of *consolation* that one's actions have not minimized the potential for sustainability necessary for happiness in others? In the *Sutra of the Former Lives of the Buddha*, I discovered a single line that draws such a connection between sufficiency and the interests of the wider community encapsulated in the phrase "Knowing how much is enough, this is conviviality" (T.4.108a). The Chinese is clearly referring to the *human* world, but this is a standpoint we can no longer afford to stop at. Knowing how much is enough needs to be complemented by knowing an interdependence that extends beyond human community. If the health of our planet is a condition for the possibility of personal and communal happiness, then the natural world must also figure into the calculus. This leads me to suggest that we redefine the pursuit of happiness as the pursuit of *convivial sufficiency*. The immediate pursuit of personal states of happiness can only land us back in Schopenhauer's world-weary pessimism, and the creation of laws to protect the self-interests of as many individuals as possible is far too non-utilitarian to function.

As a pursuit, happiness it is not a simple passive expectation of *eudaimonia* frustrated by nature or legalized by society. It entails an active *eutaxia*, the cultivation of "good arrangement" of thinking and acting that assesses needs not defined by the force of first-order desires but alert to what is enough for all concerned. As a guiding ideal for adjusting desire to practical decisions, convivial sufficiency aims at harmonizing the four aspects referred to above. First, it aims at an increase of knowledge about just how much is enough. Second, it cultivates the good sense to know when one has stepped over sufficiency into excess that adversely affects self, others, and the natural world. Third, it recognizes that what is enough can entail renouncing enjoyments for the sake of maximizing a harmony which is broader than the environment centered on personal desire. And finally, it accepts moral responsibility for corrigible insufficiencies, whether or not they are the direct result of the pursuit of one's own self-interests. The kinds of awareness achieved at each of these levels, it seems to me, offer a solid ground for understanding what it means to speak of the fullness of happiness in human life.