

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF HAPPINESS

On perhaps no other concept has there been so little fruitful thinking in our time as on the concept of happiness. Traditionally it is bondage or suffering, and not happiness, that poses a problem. Job did not ask "why?" until misfortune struck him. That unhappiness can range from petty irritation to a kind of cosmic *Weltschmerz* was realized by *Sāṅkhya* no less than by the ancient Greeks. Both the latter and the ancients of this land, familiar as they were with the delights of so-called good living, were aware also of their transience. If the Greeks (with some exceptions) ignored the problem of suffering in their philosophical literature, their dramatists portrayed the whole range of human suffering, and this against the background of Fate indeed human drama played on a stage which was nothing less than a cosmic trap. The inexorability which drove the planets in their courses, which drove Apollo or Surya along their appointed paths across the heavens, was paralleled by an inexorability which governed the destinies of men.

The Greek man of excellence, *kalos kathagos*, was in a micro-cosmic way, like the sun, effulgent in a manner recognised by the community. Such a man was a good citizen rather than one whose eyes were set on other worlds. To become such a one was a matter of discipline, of *paideia*. Such a man would be the fruit of the good society, and also the type to bring it about. The circularity of this latter point did not trouble the Greek mind. Berdyaev writes that "The ethics of the ancients... considered man a being who seeks happiness, good and harmony and who is capable of achieving this goal."

The Scholastic view presupposed the Jewish. In between came the entire world of Hebrew consciousness, its profound awareness that the good can still suffer and the wicked prosper. Greek *eudaimonia* may be possible for the aristocrat who lives a life of cultivated leisure. But the Scholastic conception of beatitude is that of a state of being won through suffering, and the man who is so 'blessed' is such in virtue of his sharing in the Divine Passion. The Renaissance brought a reaction against the Stoic (Cf. the Buddhist) advocacy of the conquest of desire. The goal was discovery, that is knowledge, and at a lower level

the enjoyment of worldly goods. But there were also those who found in these times an occasion for self-searching. The discovery of new worlds was matched by the discovery of the new-found-land of the inner man. This was nurtured either in the secrecy of the confessional or, as in men like Donne, Montaigne, Pascal and Maine de Biran, expressed through the craft of letters. The Renaissance mentality (of which much of the enlightenment spirit was a continuation), however, had a certain robustness which enabled it to weather the storms of inner brooding. This robustness had a certain come-back years later, in of all places, Victorian England--although no doubt it was a robustness of a different quality.

Things on the Continent were otherwise. When Hegel wrote of the "unhappy consciousness" as one phase of the human spirit he was writing of a continent and of times which he knew well. For him it was one moment in the caravan of Reason, one stop in the deserts of the human heart, something on the whole incidental to the main route of the *Zeitgeist*. But to the romantic, melancholy, "le mal du siècle", was in principle incurable. The life of reason has its polarities but these are not the stuff of feeling. The pendulum of feeling is not to be confused with the pendulum of concepts, and, moreover, feeling has no moment of synthesis.

To turn to the utilitarians across the Channel is to breathe a different air. For them to write of pleasure as a numerable quantity as they did, was not a mark of heartlessness. There is nothing to connect them with the raptures and the melancholy of the romantics. On the other hand their public concerns inside and outside Parliament showed a keen awareness of the connection of private well-being with the health of the body politic and a sense that the state, without at all idealising it, can be an instrument for the promotion of public welfare, a vehicle of therapy for the ills which beset society. This was a development of the belief of David Hume and Adam Smith that peace, order and prosperity were the chief ingredients of happiness. The state, then was not merely the focus of power, but a means of bringing about the happiness of its subjects. This on the whole was a more beneficial insight than the one which saw a mysterious correspondence between the real will of the individual and the state's injunctions.

That suffering was ultimately incapable of conquest became the watchword of thinkers with illiberal governments. Dostoyevsky, for example, wrote "Why, suffering is the sole origin of consciousness". (*White nights and other stories*, p. 76). Outside theist circles, the Marxists alone remained optimistic. Happiness, if absent now, will at least be within our reach after the withering away of the state. Transatlantic thinkers (or rather, some of them), proclaimed that states of desire are not necessarily states of unhappiness. Pursuit and risk (even though analysed as states of 'lack' by others) are pleasureable experiences. But the very calculation which the utilitarians saw to be the main-spring of social engineering has brought about a certain joylessness, a monotone, and this is in contrast to the chiaroscuro of earlier times. The fair pursuit of happiness of which constitution-makers spoke is dogged by what John Stuart Mill called the paradox of hedonism. The existentialists, as Maslow has pointed out, stress the "through" experiences and to read their writings is to run the risk of forgetting that man is also capable of elation, joy and exaltation.

Those who are heir to the utilitarian spirit cannot help realizing that there must be something radically wrong with the way men manage their affairs if conflicts still break out in the form of warfare. The problem of war has occupied philosophers as diverse as the Stoics, Kant, Russell and Einstein. It may not be a problem which necessarily drives one to the conviction of human wickedness, but it is surely one where not only the quality of human life is at stake but its very survival. The acquisition of material goods, which earlier seemed to provide an open sesame to happiness in the sense of prosperity (a word which is still, and I think, significantly, used in New Year greetings) is found not only to have a satiation point, but to promote conflict especially in the inter-group, and specifically, the international sphere. This leads some to the solitary quest for personal happiness, often with the aid of drugs and other chemical agencies. Human desire here too encounters the principal of diminishing marginal utility and the search for an extension of the senses may terminate in an inability to respond.

The transcendentalist will no doubt consider that all that has been considered so far falls far short of what he calls *ānand*. I have little doubt that the word *ānanda* is different in connotation from the word 'happiness' although the ordinary language usage makes it indistinguishable from 'happiness' (I am thinking of things like joy expressed at the receipt of a letter and so on). About *ānanda* it seems to me that there may first of all be a question mark set against its attainability and one also against its desirability. Discontent is the spur of endeavour and a state where it was altogether absent might well appear to some as an a-human existence. It is reasonable to suppose that if happiness in the common-or-garden sense is unobtainable by direct capture, the same must be the case with *ānanda*. Happiness, of whichever kind cannot be brought about by reason, by strategem, or even by a rigorous *ascesis*. It is a state of grace from which we all too soon fall. I am myself unable to feel the attraction of, let alone the felicific content of, a state of being which separates us from the kaleidoscopic world of the senses and from our fellow men. But this may be a constitutional inability on my part.

To the vast majority, to the under-privileged (and we are doing our philosophizing in India) happiness comes in the form of work, of food. Beyond this there may well be a hierarchy of satisfactions, some of which, if not attainable by direct strategy, are yet within the reach of the more fortunate. Of all these satisfactions the one which seems to me to be most sought after to-day is the sense of the meaningfulness of existence and I shall try to show in what follows that this sense has, in many ways replaced the attaining of happiness as the object of human endeavour. Notoriously it is a sense that may be leaking in the well-fed. We wish each other a happy and prosperous New Year. Nothing shows more eloquently than this that the two are not taken as equivalent. The quest for meaning finds scant fulfilment in the unearthing of one's fundamental project, for the task of working out the project in relation to the density of circumstance still remains. Still less is it likely to find fulfilment in self-identification with the march of historic forces, for who knows whither they will lead ?

The inadequacy of the philosophical treatment of happiness to which reference was made in the beginning, as also the sense

of the meaninglessness of existence, stems, to my mind, from a common root—the failure to relate the quest for perfection to the pursuit of others' happiness. The Advaitic alternative (the quest for perfection) stands at the opposite pole to that of the altruistic utilitarian position which advocates the pursuit of others' happiness. An awareness of both and an affirmation of the imperative need to juxtapose them is to be found in the corollary to Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative. To the twentieth century humanist, as indeed to the Mahayana Buddhist, to speak of individual bliss in the context of human misery, is a mockery. But merely to juxtapose is not enough. There is a need for a deeper understanding of what the religious man calls human 'fallibility'. The contemporary secular thinker, to whom the language of finitude has become alien, is yet profoundly aware of the limits of our condition—the transience of pleasure, the duration of pain, the apparent purposelessness of much of physical suffering, the institutional brakes on progress, the intransigence of personal incompatibilities. Culturally we are citizens of many worlds and this makes for a proliferation of roots horizontally rather than in depth. This gives rise to a consciousness which is not only unhappy but which is bewildered.

The psycho-analyst and the man of religion both speak in terms of a search for personal identity, a rediscovery of the centre, of light in a penumbra of darkness. This is to be won in the teeth of all our experiences, the rough experiences of agony, and the peak ones (the occasional exultation of moods of rebellion, the sudden intrusion of personal joy like the bounty of grace, the stimulus of challenge) as well as along the plateau of everyday living. I here essay a simile. Happiness can be likened to the fragrance of the flower (and it is significant for the purpose of the simile that all flowers do not have fragrance)—a means of identification and a source of joy to others. (This is to put the perspective in an unfamiliar way. It is customary to associate happiness with one's own experience rather than with its effect on others). But what of the flower? Here, to leave the simile, we seem led to the concepts of Being, meaning and love. Of these three I have suggested that it is the concept of meaning (or rather, meaningfulness) that has taken the place

that the concept of happiness had, in the consciousness of earlier generations. But it is because he divorces meaning from Being and from love (in searching for short-term satisfactions) that contemporary man so often finds himself unhappy.

It is in the interdependence of Being, meaning and love that a way can be found of penetrating the ground which underlies what appears as a mere juxtaposition—the quest for perfection and the pursuit of others' happiness. We are at this point close to another mystery, that of the New Testament 'and' in the injunction "Love God and thy neighbour as thyself". To think in such a way, however, is to move away from the treatment of happiness as such. But the variety of contemporary quests for meaning suggests that many have already moved away from hedonism in any ordinary sense, because, foursquare on the ground as he is, man is yet aware of depth and height, of the churning of primeval oceans, of shafts of light.

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