

# 1

'Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so.'

*John Stuart Mill*

You would think human beings could agree on some things. Not things like whether a Marmite sandwich is delicious or disgusting or whether bell-bottomed trousers are fashion genius or fashion crime. But things like, for example, what it is to be happy. Of course, this question needs thinking about. But after 250,000 years of existence, 2,500 years of philosophy and 25 unrivalled, rich and revolutionary years of the Internet, it would be reasonable to hope that a consensus had been reached. After all, the smile – the sign of happiness – is universal. And happiness should be a matter of agreement for it is the very reason to live.

However, the history of happiness is a sorry saga. There have always been optimists: the hedonists, who equate happiness with pleasure and seek to maximise the latter. Aristippus of Cyrene was one who made the pursuit of pleasure his life's work. And he was clever. No less a person than Socrates chastised him, pointing out that unrestrained hedonism would make him a slave to his desire and so not happy at all. Aristippus' response was simple and radical. He aimed to indulge in more pleasure than even his desires sought, thereby exerting his authority over them, not they over he.

His approach had one flaw. Excessive pleasure can lead to pain – and even death. Aristippus' admirer, Dionysius I of Syracuse, discovered this when he expired in a delightful but deadly Bacchanalian drinking bout. In response, another of Aristippus' followers, Hegesias, reversed the philosophy: he proposed that it is the avoidance of

#### 4 42: Deep Thought on Life, the Universe, and Everything

pain, not the indulgence of pleasure, that makes for happiness. Since pleasure and pain can be so close, that left only one rational course – the elimination of both: suicide. This conclusion earned Hegesias the label of the ‘orator of death’. He must have been persuasive, for his lectures at Alexandria led to a string of student suicides. Yet if the students died content, their *kamikazi* felicity came at a price: the unhappiness of their tutors, who were so distressed that they had Hegesias banned. Ever since, moral authorities have stressed that pleasure is not something that can be pursued willy-nilly. Hedonism hinders the happiness of others.

There is also the question of just what influence someone can have over their happiness. Surely it depends on many things over which one has little or no control; the availability of food and drink, the love of friends and family or the avoidance of crime and calamity. Even today, some of these necessities cannot be taken for granted by at least two-thirds of the world’s population. For the remainder, their withdrawal hovers as a possible threat. So, the Cynics said, turn inwards and become self-sufficient, though that cuts out the joy of being with others. Or go with the flow, said the Stoics – which is OK until the flow flows like city traffic.

Christianity further radicalised the problem. One day, Saint Augustine, the towering figure of the church’s early theology, passed a beggar on the streets of Milan. He remembered the incident vividly because the man was laughing and joking. A deep sadness welled up inside the saint: he was doing fine in life; that day he had been preparing a speech to be delivered to no less a person than the emperor. He was full of ambition and energy, not just for earthly success but for peace and happiness. And yet, on seeing this smiling man in abject poverty, he turned to his companions in abject misery. This beggar, with nothing, had happiness; he did not. Worse, even though he knew the beggar’s happiness was illusory – perhaps brought on by drink or madness – it suggested to him that the path he had adopted was mere contrivance and manoeuvring and could never lead to the simplicity that must be at the heart of felicity. He later realised that happiness was like the sun and thirst. It can neither be viewed unobstructed nor satisfied once and forever.

Why was this? Augustine thought it stemmed from the human desire to be divine. Captured in the story of the Fall, the original sin of Adam and Eve was manifest in the pride of every subsequent

‘Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so.’ 5

individual. The result of not relying on God is the whole history of human evil. Men and women are caught up in a vicious spiral, which flings them about, out of control, under darkening cloudy skies. So serious is the situation that Augustine concluded happiness was not obtainable in this life. Only after death and the death of the selfish self, could anyone reasonably hope for contentment and then only if they had been saved by God. Cast an eye about the world: you do not have to be a Christian to admit there is something powerful in Augustine’s pessimism.

Not all Christians agreed. By the Enlightenment, thinkers were in revolt against this theology. The basis for their renewed optimism was what they took to be human progress. Whether through better harvests, growing populations or apparent intellectual gains, ‘the sum of well-being is perpetually on the increase,’ wrote Jeremy Bentham. The greatest happiness for the greatest number was not just possible but imperative. The eighteenth century was declared the happiest, by eighteenth century optimists. The thought went out that happiness was not just nice to have but a right.

However, this perception of their lot was as flaky as the happiness of the Milanese beggar. Bentham’s present-day followers would admit, like his near contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that progress might not promote happiness but can actually undermine it, in three ways. First, progress rests on factors, such as competitiveness, which cause anxiety. Second, it feeds desires, such as acquisitiveness, which cause dissatisfaction. Third, it creates expectations, such as the desire for happiness, which cause disquiet. ‘In the midst of so much philosophy, humanity, politeness and sublime maxims we have merely a deceitful and frivolous exterior: honour without virtue, reason without wisdom and pleasure without happiness,’ Rousseau observed.

If little can positively be agreed about happiness, perhaps we should try an alternative strategy for settling the matter. Maybe some markers can be established about what *unhappiness* is. Consider the victim of a merciless disease, dying in writhing agony, denied pain relief by their doctors. Surely that would be an uncontroversial case of unhappiness? No, said Epicurus, who spoke with great authority, having spent his last days in the company of excruciating kidney stones without so much as an aspirin. However, he did not lie on his deathbed longing for the renal failure that would bring merciful

## 6 42: Deep Thought on Life, the Universe, and Everything

release. He rested cheerfully. The terrible is easy to endure, he claimed, because the things that make life happy are so pleasant that they can overwhelm any suffering, as a blanket smothers a fire; he only had to think of the joys of conversing with friends for the pain to pale in comparison. Indeed, because the memory had such power, the happiness they brought was deep and profound. He was nursed by contentment's tranquillity. So, even if Epicurus' peacefulness seems unlikely, unhappiness is out as a candidate for unequivocal agreement. And yet perhaps this in itself tells us something – in fact, three things.

First, thinking about happiness, of itself, does not make you happy. Just as learning does not necessarily make you wise, the study of happiness will not automatically put a smile on your face. Consider a smoker who wants to quit. They decide to be responsible, avoid the places where they habitually light up, fill the times when they usually feel the urge and say a final goodbye to their trusted but destructive cylindrical friends. It is an act of will. 'I just quit,' they want, thereafter, to say. But here comes the catch. The minute they ask themselves how they are going to do it, they see their resolve in perspective. How many times have they tried before? How hard is it going to be? How long life seems without cigarettes! Sartre noticed that this move, from deciding to quit to discussing quitting, is to move from the first person to the third person. In so doing, the individual is no longer just living in the moment, when stopping smoking is relatively easy since it only has to be done in that minute. Rather, they see themselves living on and wonder how on earth they are going to keep it up. This is, perhaps, why people say they can never be a non-smoker but will always be a smoker who is trying to stop. Talking about happiness has the same effect. Being happy is an unselfconscious state; drawing too much attention to it makes it far harder to achieve. Or as John Stuart Mill put it: 'Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so.'

Second, happiness is not what you might think it is. It seems a natural assumption to equate happiness with pleasure until it becomes clear that pleasures are passing and that happiness depends on things that have nothing to do with pleasure, such as dignity or commitment. Aristotle understood this. He made the point that happiness is not an experience but an activity; more like friendship than pleasure. Or, in other words, happiness is like love: in the same way that you can love

*'Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so.'* 7

your partner without having constant romantic feelings, you can be happy regardless of how you feel in any particular moment.

Happiness might also have much to do with pain. Having children is an action that most people would instinctively believe yields one of life's greatest joys but research shows that children cause as much anxiety as exhilaration. If anything, the balance is tipped against parental pleasure. This is not to say that children are not a great good but rather to realise that children are to do with a much wider understanding of happiness, which includes elements such as giving, hope and love. Again, this happiness stems from a whole way of life. Happiness as pleasure and pleasure alone has at best an occasional, indirect, relationship to these great goods. The ancient Greek philosophers understood this. They incorporated the elusiveness of happiness in their word for it: eudaimonia. 'Eu' means good and 'daimon' means god or spirit. This is not just to say that happiness is something divine but that, like the gods, is something unknown, uncertain, unclear.

These first two paradoxes about happiness add up to a third: happiness is the by-product of a life. At one level, the point is obvious. No one is happy in a vacuum. They are happy because of what they do and who they are; because they love someone or are somewhere. So, to ask, seriously, how to be happy is implicitly to ask a different question: how should I live? This should be the primary concern.

The indirectness of happiness does not stop there, for, if you live a certain way of life solely to be happy, you will not be happy. Consider some of the things self-help books suggest doing to be happy: make friends, take up religion or pursue goals. They suggest these things because the evidence is that religious people with friends and goals are some of the happiest folk alive. However, to turn that observation into a prescription is to put the cart before the horse. Believers are not religious in order to be happy but because they love God. Friends are not sociable in order to be happy but because they like each other. People do not have goals in order to be happy but because they find life meaningful and so pursue goals. Then, indirectly, they are happy.

Where does this leave us? Sextus Empiricus, the sceptic, tells a story that helps. It concerns a painter, Apelles, who was painting a picture of a horse. All was going well until it came to depicting the sweaty froth around the horse's mouth. Apelles tried this technique and that but was always unsatisfied with the result. Finally, in frustration, he

## 8 **42: Deep Thought on Life, the Universe, and Everything**

picked up the sponge with which he wiped his brushes and flung it at the image. It hit the horse's muzzle, fell off and left a perfect impression of the lather.

Happiness is discovered by chance. But the chance is made by living.