

## Happiness: “Paradise within Thee”

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Most philosophers and poets do not believe that happiness is definite enough to serve as a goal for action. In this handout we will start with a passage from the great English poet, Milton. This comes toward the end of his great epic, *Paradise Lost*, about the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise. The angel has told them about the future of humankind and its salvation by Jesus Christ. Then he tells Adam and Eve to seek moral goodness and love, not happiness. Happiness will come to them as an unsought reward:

This having learned, thou hast attained the sum  
Of wisdom; hope no higher, though all the stars  
Thou knewest by name, and all the ethereal powers,  
All secrets of the deep, all Nature's works,  
Or works of God in Heaven, air, earth, or sea,  
And all the riches of this world enjoyedest,  
And all the rule, one empire; only add  
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,  
Add Virtue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,  
By name to come call'd Charity, the soul  
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath  
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess  
Paradise within thee, happier far.

—Milton, *Paradise Lost*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spelling modernized, from the speech of Archangel Michael to Adam, before his expulsion, after Michael has foretold the salvation of the world by Jesus (12.575-87). The “paradise within” contrasts with the special hell that is in Satan, who is conscience-stricken remembering being an angel before his rebellion (4.19-23).

**Kant.** In the angel's view, you are not supposed to aim at happiness, but at being a good person. This is the view taken by the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who understood this point clearly: "In short, he ['a human being'] is not capable of determining with complete certainty, in accordance with any principle, what will make him truly happy, because omniscience would be required for that. It follows that the imperatives of prudence, to speak precisely, cannot command at all . . . they are sooner to be taken as advisings than as commands." Imperatives of prudence are what he calls hypothetical (that is, they are "if" rules) as opposed to categorical imperatives (which you must follow no matter what, like never treating a human being as merely a means for your own ends). If rules have this form: "If you want to be a welder, take welding lessons." That's clear enough. But "if you want to be happy, go to the University of Texas at Austin." That's not clear at all. There is no way that you can be sure of the outcome. I wish I could offer you a guarantee, but I can't.<sup>2</sup> Kant is very much influenced by Socrates, whose thoughts on this come to us by way of Plato's dialogues.

**Socrates.** The angel's view is also very close to that of Socrates and the philosophers who followed him, such as Aristotle and the Stoics. They believed we should aim our lives at coming closer and closer to moral goodness, virtue, and that this would reward us with at least a *part* of happiness, which I will call "Socratic happiness." Socratic happiness is independent of the physical and social goods that most of us value for our happiness. These philosophers think that you can be Socratically happy while in terrible health or grinding poverty or even while undergoing torture. Socrates thought that his sort of happiness would outweigh any sort of misery from physical or social sources, so that if you were Socratically happy you'd be happy overall no matter what.

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<sup>2</sup> See Kant's *Groundwork* Ak. 4.418 (1785/2018: 31).

Socratic happiness consists largely in the sense that you are free and in charge of the important aspects of your life. Add to this the blessings of high-order friendships and the satisfaction that comes from feeling that you are living as well as you could reasonably expect, in view of human limitations. The misery that you avoid by living this way is moral injury. People who suffer from moral injury feel that there is a kind of war inside themselves.

**Moral Injury.** The best examples of moral injury come from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. Spurred by ambition and urged on by his wife, Macbeth decides to kill a distant cousin named Duncan so that he may take over the throne of Scotland. He succeeds, and Shakespeare brings him on stage with blood literally on his hands. Later scenes bring out vividly the consequences for him. They are of two kinds. Once he gets started on a career based on murder, he finds it easier and easier, as well as more necessary, to have more people killed—including innocent children and his friend Banquo (an ancestor of the king for whom Shakespeare presented the play). That's one kind of injury. Macbeth is now a worse person than he was before. He hesitated before killing Duncan, but murder has been habit-forming for him.<sup>3</sup> Bad deeds often lead to further bad deeds, as Macbeth kills more people to protect himself and secure the succession to his family. That is the sort of injury Socrates seems to have in mind.

Shakespeare brings out a second sort of injury soon after each bad deed. Macbeth has trouble sleeping ("Macbeth does murder sleep"), and he sees his victims reproaching him.<sup>4</sup> Even while sliding further into evil, Macbeth is plagued by remorse and guilt.

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<sup>3</sup> "I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (3.4.136-38); the image is of a man crossing a river of blood.

<sup>4</sup> "Macbeth does murder sleep," *Macbeth* 2.2.35; "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself" (2.2.73); the worse your crimes, the greater incentive you have for self-ignorance. Macbeth feels he has lost his soul: "mine eternal jewel /

This sort of injury is common among veterans of war. I have experienced it myself. A young veteran I know found it therapeutic to act out the part of Macbeth in a production of the play. Acting the part enabled him to express openly, on stage, painful feelings he had from the war, feelings he did not feel he could reveal even to friends. Some veterans can't even have friends, because they don't dare tell anyone of their feelings of guilt or shame, and they can't be friends with anyone who does not know their deepest feelings. This is so even if the veterans had no better choice than to do what now causes them shame. Freedom seems to be essential to avoiding moral injury. And in other ways too it is hard to imagine happiness without freedom.

**Freedom vs. Tyranny.** The Russian writer Solzhenitsyn wrote a novel about Stalin and his prisoners, *The First Circle* (1968). There, we read about various levels of un-freedom, from the level of the prisoners, for whom life cannot get much worse, to the level of Stalin, who faces a precipice of loss every day. One chapter gives us a picture of Stalin at night just after his seventieth birthday. He is trying desperately to be happy, but he is locked in his safe rooms which only selected people can enter, and only at his command. He is ill, but he cannot trust any doctor for treatment, and no doctor would dare to treat him. He has killed too many people (doctors included) and too many people want him dead. He has no friends; his only human contact is with lackeys. The contrast with the prisoners, who do have friendships, is striking. This rings true.

Socrates discusses a tyrant rather like Stalin in his dialogue, the *Gorgias*. The tyrant Archelaus took fewer steps for his own safety than Stalin did; he was assassinated after only thirteen years in power. He had murdered his way to the throne of Macedon, and Socrates insists that he had injured himself morally to such a degree that he could not have been happy. Like Stalin, he must not have

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Given to the common enemy of man" (3.1.68-69). In 3.4, he famously sees the ghost of his former comrade Banquo at a banquet—Banquo, whom he has just had murdered.

had real friends, and he must have lived in the fear that the violence he had wreaked on others would bounce back on him. The ancient Greeks understood this syndrome well and depicted it in their tragic plays. In *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the title character is plainly terrified of losing his position, and falls too easily for conspiracy theories. When he accuses his brother-in-law Creon of plotting against him, Creon replies that he has no desire to be a tyrant. He would rather sleep at night, without fear:

Do you think anyone

Would choose to rule in constant fear

When he could sleep without trembling?

And in the ancient Greek play *Prometheus Bound* (author unknown) we learn that the god Zeus, in his role as tyrant, can have no friends:

Tyrants are subject to a kind of sickness:

They have no trust in family or friends.

Plato bases the grand argument of the *Republic* on the idea that tyrants are miserable because they are not free. He will dismiss the tragic poets in Book 10 as crowd pleasers, but in Book 9 he appeals to ideas that must have been familiar to his readers from the Athenian theater. There, as he approaches the promised conclusion that it is in our interests to be just and act justly, he argues that the most miserable of all people are the tyrants—the ones that Socrates' companions say they admire for their power, wealth, and security from punishment. “One who is a tyrant in reality,” Socrates says in the *Republic*, “is in reality a slave.”<sup>5</sup> He is a slave because part of his soul is in bondage to his lowest level desires. His soul is broken in two, and that is a miserable condition. A division in the soul represents

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<sup>5</sup> *Gorgias* 470e, 479de, 525d; *Oedipus Tyrannos* 584-86, Woodruff-Meineck Translation; *Prometheus Bound* 250-51, Roberts tr; *Republic* 9.579d, with larger context.

a moral injury, with the soul divided against itself. That is a failure of the unity and harmony that a healthy soul enjoys.<sup>6</sup>

**Positive Happiness.** Socratic happiness has a positive side. It is not merely the absence of bondage or other moral injuries. But the positive side of happiness is hard to specify. Virtue itself is impossible to define. We are supposed to be living in ways that bring us closer to virtue, without knowing precisely what it is. I call that “living toward virtue,” and I have written a book about how we can do that without having full knowledge. People who are seriously living toward virtue have a sense of wholeness and inner peace, along with the pleasure of believing that they are living in ways they have reasons to believe are good and beneficial to others. Living toward virtue they must keep testing the reasons why they believe that they are doing well. They must keep asking themselves questions.

Their happiness comes also from a sense that they are free and in charge of their moral decisions. They are not bound to repeat mistakes from their past. They expect that they will never feel compelled, as Macbeth felt compelled, to do anything they think odious. They therefore have a quietly joyous sense of freedom. And they have friends whom they love and who love them, friends whom they trust because they recognize in each other shared commitments to what I have called living toward virtue. For this they need not act virtuously all the time; no one does, after all. But they give each other love and help each other through their mistakes. They pick each other up when they fall. And, knowing how much their friends care for them and love them, they do not need to force themselves on anyone. They know that they are human, and that their happiness cannot be secure. They know they are vulnerable to disease and disaster, as are we all, and they are never perfectly safe from moral error. For this reason they do not allow themselves to be self-satisfied, and they continue the activity of self-examination, testing the reasons for which they think they are doing

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<sup>6</sup> *Gorgias* 506e-507a.

well. But they are as happy as their circumstances permit, and they could not be so happy were they not living toward virtue.

Being engaged in an activity that you have chosen and on which you set a high value—that is a great part of happiness for anyone. If you are scholar enough to read my book, you may choose an academic career with this sort of happiness in mind. A good choice, I would say, from my experience, but a risky one. I have been fortunate. No career is a safe haven. Other people can ruin it for you. Senior faculty who are threatened by new ideas can deny you tenure, censors can ban your books, and false accusations can cost you your job. In the end, death or disease can block you from completing the masterpiece which, you had hoped, would have justified your life choices. Choosing a career well does not by itself lead to happiness.

Socrates had a better idea. Living toward virtue is an activity that happy people have chosen and on which they set a high value. This activity is very different from that of an academic career. Your academic career can be taken from you. But your way of living toward virtue cannot be taken away by anyone. No one can take this source of happiness from you. It is yours so long as you live and continue to choose it. It does not depend on anyone else's judgment or approval, and it does not require a long life or a string of achievements.

Remember that your happiness is a reward that you have not aimed at. You live as you live for ethical reasons, and for the people you love, and this reward simply comes to you unsought. The Archangel Michael does not tell Adam and Eve to search for happiness in the world outside the walls of Paradise. Instead, he tells them to put virtues into practice and, above all, to love. And when they have done so, in Milton's words:

. . . then wilt thou not be loath  
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess  
Paradise within thee, happier far.

