

Happiness—The Eternal Quest?

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, November 19, 2006
By **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

When preparing Platform address, I'm always struck by how pretty much everything I read relates to it. I put that down to the synchronicity of Ethical Culture, where things are related to each other and each person connected to every other. But yesterday while writing for this morning—I know, I too wish I could get these things done sooner but that's just part of the creative process. Anyway, I took a break and picked up a novel my wife, Betty, had just finished reading.

It opened with a poem by Jane Kenyon. And when I say opened, I mean it was the first thing I saw – before the first work of the first paragraph, even before the table of contents, there was the poem, *Happiness*. I'm not making this up. It begins, "There's just no accounting for happiness." Now I don't attribute that coincidence to anything more than that, coincidence. Still, that's as good an opening line as any.

"There's just no accounting for happiness."

Good morning! For those of you who saw the sign on the side of our building and came this morning expecting to hear a talk on the eternal quest of happiness, I have to tell you that a question mark was left off the sign. It was supposed to read, *Happiness—The Eternal Quest?* A question, not a statement. That omission provides a nice segue into the difference between asking if happiness is the eternal quest and maintaining that it is.

So you know where I am coming from, and why I posed it as a question rather than a statement, the pursuit of happiness enshrined in our Declaration of Independence is certainly a seemingly eternal quest, but whether it is the eternal quest is still an open question.

So now we have two questions, and we will have more. First, is it, is happiness the quest, the *sui generis* quest, of humankind. Is it what propels us out of the past and into the future? By most all accounts, happiness—as distinct from pleasure, joy, or contentment—is a uniquely human concept. So is progress. Do the two combine to drive us forward? And, if so, as aim or ideal?

Which is to ask if the pursuit of happiness is eternal, an ideal like perfected living that provides a "North Star" guidance but is never reached. Or is it attainable? Is it something we can actually hope for ourselves or realistically hope to provide future generations?

Those are the questions, and perhaps they have been since Aristotle put forth happiness as the purpose of life some two and a half millennia ago. And those are the questions that have fascinated and frustrated us since.

Darrin McMahon published a book earlier this year entitled *Happiness: A History*. Interesting subject. Harvard historian Howard Mumford Jones published *The Pursuit of Happiness* over a half-century ago. In it he maintained, with justification I believe, that within the pursuit of happiness can be found "a history of ethical, philosophic, and religious thought." So a treatise on the history of happiness seems appropriate.

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

But that's not nearly the end of published works on happiness. McMahon himself cites several ancient and more or less contemporary ones before reciting a litany of the torrent pouring from publishing houses today.

Footnote 29 of the conclusion, McMahon is a scholar, reminds us that "All these genuine titles can be retrieved via a simple search on Amazon.com."

What a world we live in! Whether you consider happiness the eternal quest or not, there's certainly a lot being written and presumably read about it. And this morning I'll be saying a lot about it, which I hope is listened to.

Happiness was viewed differently by pre-Socratic thinkers. They placed happiness in the hands of the gods or located it in the Promised Land. This thinking was used to justify actions harmless and harmful and still is today. Look at the advantages of the few taken at the expense of the many. Look at the religiously motivated carnage born of despair. Look at the growing trend of seeking happiness in excess and of seeking pleasure for its own sake. The application applies across the board.

Socrates, Plato, and mostly Aristotle posited happiness as our ultimate and undisputed goal. That is their legacy. They reserved happiness for the god-like few, which did take it from the gods themselves and make it a human attribute, but they offered little in the way of practical advice for the masses.

Socrates laid out the question neatly in one of the early dialogs of Plato. "What being is there who does not desire happiness?" he asked. If we Ethical Humanists accept anything a priori, it is that. That everyone desires happiness is our leap of faith.

But Socrates was never one to leave well enough alone. He went on to answer his own question with another. The man had no end of bad habits. "Well then," he ask/answered, "since we all of us desire happiness, how can we be happy?—That is the next question."

"How can we be happy?" Socrates asks. Not What is happiness? Why do we want it? or even Should we want it? but Where can we find it? Well, according to McMahon, you can find it at Amazon.com.

The desire for pleasure is held up as a universal trait in all animals, including humans. But Socrates is talking about something more—something loftier than the satisfaction of the senses, something grander than mere creature comforts. Something that perhaps cannot be conceptualized until basic needs are met and creature comforts enjoyed. Those are important and perhaps essential, but Socrates has us reaching for something more, something uniquely human.

I was going to add to that earlier leap of faith—that we all want happiness—by going on to say, "and we all know what happiness is." There's more than a grain of truth to that. I believe that we do have a shared cultural sense of what happiness is. One that may vary from one individual to another, or one cultural to another, but only within relatively narrow margins. But it's equally as obvious that describing happiness may be more an exercising in describing those margins than defining what lies within them.

I'm trying my best to remain intellectually honest on the matter of definition without completely copping out. And I hope you will help me by being a bit understanding of the enormity of the task. Some of the most revered minds in philosophic history were challenged to the point of bafflement by this same considerations: What is happiness?

So I hope you'll allow me that cultural consensus and suffice it to say that whatever understanding of the state of happiness one comes to, it is as fleeting as the state itself. To embrace happiness is to embrace impermanence. The fortunate circumstances which help engender happiness are subject to reversal at any moment. It takes a certain fortitude to withstand such reversals and to cling to the aspiration of happiness in times of despair. Yet without that aspiration toward happiness, toward betterment, life itself can become a desperate state.

The vicissitudes of fate and fortune; political and religious meanderings; cultural upheavals; the uncertainties of health; the vagaries of old age; the definite prospect of death. How do we cope with them? Where do we find the courage to unflinchingly face our own certain demise? Where do we find comfort? Where do we find happiness?

After Aristotle, along came the likes of Zeno and Epicurus who set out to lower the bar a bit: "Manage your desires and you can better fulfill them" they sermonized. Want less-and-less and you can have what you want. That's pretty grim but there's been a resurgence of that grimness lately.

I have recently, and with dismay, come to understand that for many a tepid personal satisfaction born of muted expectations has replaced any anticipation of even a fleeting moment of true or full happiness. That's not just sad, it's tragic. Not only because of what it says about that person and her or his prospects of a fulfilled and fulfilling life, but for how it impacts each of us—how it drags down our own expectations and blunts our prospects of progress.

Happiness is more than the achievement of dreams but lowering expectations is like tying rocks to clouds. It may ward off ennui and disappointment, but it will never lift you above them. Low expectations will not produce happiness.

We live in an interconnected web in which each is as important as the other. If any one of us suffers we all suffer. Fortunately that approach to "happiness" [and I here put happiness in quotes] is embraced by but a few and for the rest of us it belongs to an ancient and developing past.

There's been a lot of twists and turns along the developmental path. But today we don't temper our desires so much as our expectations. Indeed, we've taken to allowing our desires full and unfettered flight and established them as ideals without expectations of fulfillment. We locate happiness in the understanding of the ideal and whatever we are able to attain of its successive approximation. Happiness for many of us lies in our—singular and plural—betterment.

That's the short, densely compacted version of the history of happiness. Put more simply, happiness is a journey, not a destination. I know that's sixty-ish and better found on a tee-shirt than in a Sunday morning address, but it's true.

Or maybe you'd prefer Bobby McFerrin's exhortation, "Don't worry, be happy!" He went on to say "When you worry your face will frown and that will bring everybody down." The Ethical Humanism of that is so obvious I won't even bother to point it out. That was, by the way, the first a cappella song to top the charts.

You learn the darndest things when you come here.

There's an element of unattainable "pure happiness" in the Adlerian ideal of perfected living. It can be argued that Aristotle's concept is exactly what Adler was envisioning though differently and more naturally stated. In fact, if you accept the

Aristotelian concept of duty as expressed in his *Ethics*,—that we amuse ourselves correctly only when we do so not for amusement’s sake alone but in order that we can do something serious—and blend with that sense of duty purpose, virtue, and truth, you have the essential ingredients of Adler’s “Right” with a capital R. As it says on the side of our building, we are “Dedicated to the ever increasing knowledge, practice, and love of the Right.” In that light you cannot help but equate the happy life with the ideal life—happiness with the ideal of perfected living.

It is, as the ancients posited, a godlike state. One we can glimpse but only fleetingly. To think that we can live in a perpetual state of happiness is hubris of the highest order. Yet not to work toward happiness is folly of the lowest sort.

Whatever the meaning or definition of happiness, one must assume the responsibility of attaining it. Others can add to your happiness. Indeed, as Ethical Culturists, it’s hard to imagine being happy without the awareness of our deep and profound connections to others. But your own happiness is your own responsibility. No one else and nothing else can provide it for you.

Since the Greeks took custody of happiness as a human attribute, all who have considered it have maintained that happiness is our own responsibility, not something that can be provided by others. Wellbeing, security, even prosperity, yes. Those can come from outside. Happiness, no. This does not render us impervious to circumstances, but it does equip us against them.

To a naturalist with a pragmatic bent, happiness is found in growth, in betterment—individually or collectively, or perhaps I should say individually and collectively. So long as we see ourselves and the world in which we live as growing, expanding in our capacity to love and care for each other, we have the prospect of happiness. When we see ourselves as stagnate or regressing, we’re concerned.

Happiness is not about where you start or where you end up; it’s about the distance in between. And, I maintain, that’s a measurement often taken. Happiness is not hedonism. Happiness is within our power, happiness is within our grasp, and happiness is within our breast—an internal state affected but not dictated by external circumstances.

To the ancients, happiness was a godlike life. Much has happened to our concept of god and to our concept of happiness in the intervening millennia. Virtues then were assigned individually to personified gods who together comprised a divine community. Over time they were seen more and more as humanely attainable, as human rather than divine attributes.

As the gods were stripped of their divinity, our image of god was ratcheted up to where what once had been distributed among many became vested in one. And thus human ingenuity gave birth to monotheism—one all-knowing, all-powerful god created in our own image.

We often dwell on the downside of that, on the radicalization of monotheistic thought, which by its very nature is rigid and lacks the flexibility of a polytheistic divine community, or a naturalistic worldview. This has given us reason for much concern over the course of history and certainly in the present when different interpretations of the one true way has led to mayhem and slaughter.

But there is an upside to the abandonment of polytheism, to the ascribing of happiness and virtue as the exclusive domain of the society of gods. A big one. It gave to humanity what had previously been beyond our reach and freed us from the vicissitudes

of fortune and the whim of the gods. It gave us influence over our lives and the course of our history. And it placed virtue and happiness within our grasp. That was a huge step.

There are elements of Ethical Culture in Aristotle, who equated happiness with virtuous behavior and went to great lengths to examine what he meant by virtue and who was capable of it. His prescription for internalization of virtue through practice—do right and you will become right—is not dissimilar to our own attitude toward the cultivation of ethical habits. Each advocates assimilating right response until it becomes reflexive, second nature.

And, Like Siddhartha's preaching of the middle way of Buddhism, each advises a balanced moderation in which desire is tempered by reason. Thus we develop key aspects of personal character. Seeing courage as a balance of cowardness and rashness; recognizing generosity by weighing stinginess against prodigality; and locating self-respect between self-deprecation and boastfulness.

While Adler brought aspects of Aristotle's concept of perfect happiness and full development down to earth, grounding them in human relationships and activities, he exhibited the same tendency to place the ideal in transcendental territory. While Adler's "supersensible" realm is nothing as supernatural as Aristotle assigning pure reason as an activity of the gods, it is nonetheless at least softly transcendental. He did not see "infinite interrelatedness" as an attribute of one or more deities, but he did place that ideal beyond the reach of our senses and thus supersensible without being supernatural.

Adler did bring the ideal closer. His followers brought it closer still within just a few years of his death, embracing the philosophic naturalism of Ethical Humanism as they did and we do. But that's the subject of another talk.

Wherever it ends, in an eternal quest or a perpetual state of bliss, happiness begins with the will to be happy—the willingness and commitment to work toward happiness. There is value and nourishment in that striving alone, in the conviction that we can be if not completely happy all the time at least happier, appreciably happier than we are now. That conviction gives our quest, our actions, our lives meaning.

Absent that conviction, despair sets in, we're gripped by desperation, and we in turn do desperate things. Things we would not do if we were confident we could make our lives better through our own actions.

Is happiness something that happens to us or something we can seek to attain? No and a qualified yes. No, it is not something that happens to us. We are an active agent in the experience of our own happiness. And yes, we can seek to attain it so long as we seek without expectation of attainment. I think the highest we can do is, through right living, to affect situations in which happiness can arise.

Happiness, I believe, is a peak experience of life, like awe and wonder. Many most often experience awe and wonder through nature. That doesn't mean that whenever they are in nature they experience awe and wonder. But it does mean that the more time they spend in nature the more likely they are to have that peak experience.

The same is true of happiness. Encourage the circumstances and you will more often experience the result. Happiness, like so many of life's positive aspects—freedom and justice among them—requires a stable and viable structure in which to be realized.

Happiness is a concept, an ideal. We see glimpses of it, experience moments of it, but it mostly resides on the horizon of our aspirations where it serves as motivation toward better living.

And like the Ethical Culture ideal of perfected living, we can move toward it, each one each day and each generation more successfully approximating the ideal.

I think all those great thinkers were right: Happiness, by whatever definition or understanding is, was, and ever shall be an ultimate and eternal human quest. If you treasure life and live it well, and share it fully with others, you will experience happiness.



A member of the American Ethical Union
and the International Humanist & Ethical Union

2 West 64th Street • New York, New York 10023
212.874.5210 • www.NYSEC.org