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Paradoxes of Happiness

There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants,
and the other is getting it. —Oscar Wilde (or Bernard Shaw)

WE ARE OFTEN TOLD THAT HAPPINESS lies in living according to nature. Yet as the depressed most lucidly see, nature is a sinister business. No other life, elsewhere, will compensate us; yet phenomenology and biology echo the theological evasion that happiness is elsewhere. The quest for the secret of happiness yields confusions, antinomies and paradoxes, both in theory and in practice. In this paper, I sample some of these and speculate about their cause. Confusions result from semantics: we learn language individually, yet assume it applies universally. Beyond semantics, paradoxes stem from systematic mistakes, some superficial, such as the cult of positional goods, some deeper, concerning the relation of desire to satisfaction. More fundamental still are three features of the brain: the disconnection of motivation, pleasure, and desire; the odd algorithm by which past pleasures and pains are computed in present memory; and the dependence of all the brain's mechanisms on chemical processes. These features of our brains are more closely tied to individual personality than to life's events. So character, it seems, is destiny, and destiny hangs on chemical grace. While these are all natural facts, the familiar injunction to *Follow Nature* is unlikely to be helpful. Happiness and depression are evolutionary side-effects of brain mechanisms designed, with no thought for our welfare, by the profoundly alien agents that are our genes. The paradoxes generated by the pursuit of happiness suggests that unhappiness might best be mitigated by chemical intervention with the mechanisms of the brain.

The Vice Grip of Theodicy

Many years ago, a Mississippi State trooper in charge of processing my car registration asked me, apparently in the line of duty, whether I believed in God. Upon hearing that I did not, he quietly said: "That sends shivers down my spine. No man can bear the burdens of this life alone." The germ of all of theology, and of my message here, was in that State trooper's *cri du coeur*.

I am a philosophical manic-depressive. As a philosopher, I want to see the world as it really is. I also believe that I see things more clearly and truly when I am depressed. To back me on this, there's some empirical evidence that depressed people are more realistic. More recent research, however, has found that even depressed people are quite unrealistic, which is depressing in itself.¹ So I may not myself be being realistic about this, but at least I'm consistent: When I'm depressed, I say: Good! Now I see things as they are! and in celebrating the new clarity of my vision I become elated. Which of course depresses me. And so on.

It follows that happiness cannot be pursued, at least by me. For insofar as I pursue the clarity of depression, I necessarily expose myself to the mist of elation. The pursuit is therefore self-defeating. I shall argue that this is no mere idiosyncrasy of the philosophical manic-depressive. There are other interesting obstacles to the pursuit of happiness.

Whatever else may be said about manic-depression, it is dynamic. To catch it on the wing and hold it, the discipline of theodicy was invented. Theodicy is frozen manic-depression: it turns the depression and the mania into the two arms of a vice grip in which the hapless believer is caught. One arm of the vice grip is expressed in the message of Hopkins' "Leaden Echo": *wisdom is early to despair*.² It requires us to be imbued with the full

¹ The empirical research I cite focuses on 'realism' in trivial judgments. See L.B. Alloy and L.Y. Abramson, "Judgment of Contingency in Depressed and Nondepressed Students: Sadder but Wiser?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 108.4 (1979): 441-85 and D. Dunning and A.L. Story, "Depression, Realism, and the Overconfidence Effect: Are the Sadder Wiser When Predicting Future Actions and Events?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 61 (1991): 521-32; see also, for a more skeptical view, E.R. Stone, C.L. Dorrill and N. Johnson, "Depressive Cognition: A Test of Depressive Realism versus Negativity Using General Knowledge Questions," *Journal of Psychology* 135.6 (2001): 583-602. For a compelling and more existential meditation on whether and how one sees more clearly in a state of true clinical depression, see Jonathan Dollimore, "Diary," *London Review of Books* 23:16 (23 Aug. 2001): 521-32.

² "And wisdom is early to despair: / Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done / To keep at bay / Age and age's evils, hoar hair, / Ruck and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death's worst, winding sheets, tombs and worms and tumbling to decay; / So be beginning, be beginning to despair" ... "Spare! There is one, yes I have one (Hush there!); Only not within seeing of the sun, / Not within the singeing of the strong sun, / Tall sun's tingeing, or treacherous the tainting

horror of life. That is best induced by meditating on history. But don't just focus on wars and revolutions and Man's Inhumanity to Man. Forget about mammalian iniquities altogether. Our time has been short. Contemplate the billions of years before that, populated by creatures bent on tearing one another limb from limb. According to Michel Cabanac, the capacity for conscious feeling arose in phylogeny somewhere between the amphibians and the reptiles. The lizards can feel. The fish and the frogs just react.³ Perhaps the dinosaurs were the original Cartesian animal-machines and took it all in stride. But either way, if you believe in God, you'd better be an all-out Young-Earth-Creationist. For what could God have been *doing* for billions of years, just watching this senseless carnage?⁴

So let the gloom settle in nicely, and whisper "wisdom is early to despair." That's when the other arm of the vice grip closes in, by slipping in the echo: "*Spare! yes there is one, yes I know one . . .*" One what? One *saving trick*. A simple disappearing trick, actually: declare the whole thing—life as we know it—void. *Real life is elsewhere*. Nature red in tooth and claw doesn't count. It will all be made up to you, and, I suppose, to every sensate trout. Happiness is elsewhere, in another world, and only that other is truly real.

Thus one is caught in the vice grip of theodicy: On one side, life is awful. But on the other, consolation is rooted in the very awfulness of life. For it is precisely because it is *too awful* to be true, that it *can't be* true. And so it isn't, as we will see once we realize that this isn't real life after all. The rest is theological details, over which believers are fond of slaughtering one another, but which needn't concern us here.

Once transmuted from theology into phenomenology and biology, this scheme holds the key to the elusive character of happiness. Many acci-

of the earth's air, Somewhere elsewhere" (Gerald Manley Hopkins, "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo," in *Poems*, 3rd ed. [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1948] 96–97).

³ "Emotion and Phylogeny," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6.6/7 (July 1991). More recent research, evincing science's disagreeable habit of changing its mind, appears to provide evidence that fish, or at least rainbow trout, do feel pain. See L.U. Sneddon, V.A. Braithwaite and M.J. Gentle, "Do Fish have Nociceptors: Evidence for the Evolution of a Vertebrate Sensory System," *Proceedings of the Royal Society* (London, 2003) 1115–21.

⁴ Don't object that I'm presuming to speculate about the mind of God: of course I am, and so does any theology, even the purest *via negativa*. If you didn't presume that, you couldn't be in business as a theologian. Witness Descartes in one breath telling us we can't second guess God's motives, and in the next doing just that: explaining that God couldn't be motivated to deceive, or that he may like to watch us make mistakes for the sake of variety (see Descartes, *Meditation IV*).

dents contribute to this elusiveness—but it is also part of the very essence of happiness, which is to be *elsewhere*, in ways I shall attempt to elucidate.

What is 'Happiness'?

Let me begin with words. Word meanings are no more determined in heaven than happiness itself. They arise pell-mell as each person's idiolect gets constructed through childhood and beyond, out of the random jostlings of utterances, situations, and interpretations. As a result, the consensus about the semantic structure of our vocabulary is only approximate. Storm, Jones and Storm looked for confirmation that 'happiness' is a superordinate word in a hierarchical family.⁵ They took sixteen words related to happiness: *Ecstasy, Bliss, Elation, Joy, Merriment, Cheerfulness, Serenity, Peacefulness, Amusement, Jubilation, Contentment, Satisfaction, Gladness, Hope, Pride, and Triumph*, and asked of each whether it was happiness or whether happiness was it. We philosophers are brought up to believe in entailment: if Paul is a bachelor, that *entails* he is not married. But for linguists and psychologists things aren't so cut-and-dried. Subjects got four choices from "Certainly No" to "Certainly Yes." The results tended to confirm that happiness is a more general term than any of the other sixteen, but for my purposes they form, to put it as technically as I can, an interesting mess. Among other things they suggest that *bliss* and *cheerfulness* each entail happiness to the same degree, though if you're happy you are much more likely to be cheerful than blissful. If you are *contented* it's quite likely that you're happy, though not vice-versa; and while you are fairly likely to be happy if *serene*, you are actually not likely to be serene if you are happy. *Joy, merriment, cheerfulness* and *gladness* seem to come closest to being synonymous with happiness, since over 80% of respondents found entailments going both ways. (See Table 1.)

Most notable, however, is the idiosyncrasy of people's conceptions of happiness that underlies these less than firm results. The variability in different people's conditions of happiness is easy to see. Some have counted themselves happy who were poor, or sick, or desperately neurotic ("I've had a wonderful life," said Wittgenstein). Religious faith is often cited as enhancing well-being. And indeed I dare say Mohammed Atta was a happy man at the last, fulfilled, going to God's bosom, like Joan of Arc, in a blaze. But so was atheist Hume a happy man, so shockingly serene even on his deathbed that his devout friend Boswell had to rush to a brothel, where

⁵ C. Storm, C. Jones and T. Storm, "Aspects of Meaning in Words Related to Happiness," *Cognition and Emotion* 10.3 (1996): 279–302.

Entailment: Mean Ratings, Standard Deviations, and Percentages of Yes Responses for Items Worded "Can . . ."

X	Does X Entail Happiness?			Does Happiness Entail X?			Order Effects
	M ^a	SD	P Yes (N = 28)	M ^a	SD	P Yes (N = 31)	
Ecstasy	3.46*	0.88	82	1.74**	0.89	16	P < 0.0001
Bliss	3.11*	1.10	75	2.13**	0.92	28	P < 0.0005
Elation	3.29*	0.85	82	2.23	1.09	32	P < 0.0001
Joy	3.43*	0.84	86	2.74	1.12	45	P < 0.01
Merriment	3.47*	0.88	82	2.77	1.00	58	P < 0.01
Cheerfulness	3.21*	1.10	79	3.03*	1.11	74	n.s.
Serenity	2.00**	0.90	32	2.13**	0.85	23	n.s.
Peacefulness	2.21	1.07	32	2.32	0.91	35	n.s.
Amusement	2.18	1.22	39	2.23	1.06	42	n.s.
Jubilation	3.61*	0.63	93	2.19	1.14	29	P < 0.0001
Contentment	2.58	1.10	50	2.97*	1.10	68	n.s.
Satisfaction	2.39	1.15	39	2.26	0.93	32	n.s.
Gladness	3.25*	0.84	86	2.87	1.18	58	n.s.
Hope	1.54**	0.79	11	2.15**	0.66	22	P < 0.005
Pride	2.68	1.09	50	1.77**	0.96	16	P < 0.002
Triumph	2.82*	1.19	64	1.87**	0.85	23	P < 0.007

^a 1 = certainly No; 4 = certainly Yes. For comparison with the "If . . ." wording, scoring was reversed. That is, a No response to the question "Can you feel X, but not Y?" was scored as a Yes response to the question "Does X entail Y?"; n.s. = not significant.

* Mean rating significantly greater than 2.5 by one-sample *t*-test.

** Mean rating significantly less than 2.5 by one-sample *t*-test.

TABLE 1

(Reproduced by permission from Storm, "Aspects of Meaning" 297.)

no doubt he asked for the Afterlife Special. Aristotle summed it up first: "Some say one thing and some another, indeed very often the same man says different things at different times: when he falls sick he thinks health is happiness, when he is poor, wealth."⁶

In that sentence Aristotle expresses two ideas that I mean to explore. The first is a version of what I've suggested already: our idea of happiness shifts according to circumstance, following, like a sort of perverse sunflower, the dark spot of whatever we currently lack. *Wherever we may be, happiness is elsewhere.* The second idea is in potential tension with the first. It is that happiness depends not on your circumstances, but on who you are. If that is true, then the same lack may be experienced differently by two different

⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.5.

individuals. Taken to its extreme, this is the Heraclitean idea that *character is fate*. It matters little what happens: your level of happiness is predestined in your genes and early learning. More on this later.

Why Most Prescriptions are More Lucrative than Effective

Whether because happiness is predestined or merely because it needs to be individually tailored, most prescriptions for happiness are more lucrative than effective. The same was true until quite recently for medical prescriptions,⁷ and it continues to be true for 'traditional' medicine. There are three main reasons both sorts of prescription still sell briskly. First, the placebo effect: advice from happiness experts, like traditional medicine, all finds favour, because just thinking you are getting help will work, up to a point and for a while.⁸ The second reason is that regardless of whether it even seems to work, in desperation people will try anything. (Desperation, curiously, seems to be the opposite of despair: in true despair people will no longer try anything.) The third reason is the systematic attribution error well known as superstition, which consists in ascribing causal efficacy to circumstantial events in preference to chance and constant factors.⁹

Here's how it works for traditional medicine. Most diseases get worse in a first phase: fever rises and rashes and pains get more and more alarming. Then in a second phase they get better. Anything you take during phase one will be credited with the improvements at phase two—unless you die, in which case you left it too late before seeking the advice of your alternative practitioner.

This promotes belief, because attention is focused on the improvement, not the whole curve. *I know first hand that it works, because I've tried it and I got better!* says the patient who took the cure somewhere in the first phase.¹⁰ Much the same holds for courses of therapy that promise happi-

⁷ L. Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* (Toronto: Bantam, 1975) 23.

⁸ R.T. Carroll, "The Placebo Effect," in *The Skeptic's Dictionary* (2003) <http://skeptdic.com/placebo.html>.

⁹ J.M. Rudski, M.I. Lischner and L.M. Albert, "Superstitious Rule Generation is Affected by Probability and Type of Outcome," *Psychological Record* 49.2 (Spring 1999): 245–60.

¹⁰ Gilbert Harman and John Doris have argued that the notion of individual character manifests the "Fundamental Attribution Error," in which people attribute to the character of an agent what is actually determined by ambient circumstances. At first sight, this error seems to be the contrary of the one just described, which ignores the constant characteristics of the situation and of the practitioner. But both can be seen in the same light, if the alternative practitioner's patient is viewed as crediting the practitioner's personal skills, as opposed to the vagaries of chance and circumstances that would have prevailed without her intervention. Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and

ness. The clients assume happiness will spring from circumstance—getting married, getting a job or a new nose, or just taking the course. But what if these things hardly mattered at all?

Before I get to that, consider three puzzles intended to illustrate, and begin to diagnose, the confusion at the heart of our notion of happiness.

Three Symptomatic Puzzles

1. Is it better to be smart or dumb?

The first puzzle is inspired by Aristotle's characterization happiness—or more modestly what is “most pleasant and valuable”—as “activity in accordance with your characteristic excellence.” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6) By elimination, on the basis of a few additional constraints, Aristotle went on to specify that happiness consisted in contemplation. But contemplation, as those who profess it know all too well, is not everyone's cup of tea. Hence the old question: is it better to be Socrates dissatisfied or a pig satisfied?

On whether intelligence is actually correlated with well-being, empirical research is equivocal.¹¹ As philosophers, we get to regiment this equivocation into an antinomy:

Thesis: *Smart people have more fun.* This is surely plausible, because smart people find more ways to amuse themselves in the absence of television, if only by finding entertainment in the contents of their own mind. But on the other hand,

Antithesis: *You have to be dumb to be happy.* Only a person devoid of elementary understanding and common sense could fail to realize how grim things really are.

Aside from the fact that Antithesis fails to allow for the Philo-Manic-Depressive, both sides of the antinomy are questionable. Thesis rests on the assumption that repetition is boring and boredom incompatible with happiness. That ties in Aristotle's view, as well as his definition of pleasure as “natural activity unimpeded” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 12.12). But it neglects the cultivation of a kind of meditative boredom which is sometimes advocated as a means to serenity—and serenity, as we saw in Table 1, is deemed to be 55% of happiness. Still, insofar as dispelling boredom makes for happiness, it is likely that what underlies the rewards afforded by Aristotelian activity is

the Fundamental Attribution Error,” *Aristotelian Society Proceedings* (1999): 315–31 and Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behaviour* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).

¹¹ E. Diener et al., “Subjective Well-being: Three Decades of Progress,” *Psychological Bulletin* 125 (1999): 276–302.

the biological role of *play*.¹² Play hones essential skills. So natural selection must have made it rewarding. And the brain, too, likes to play, and that is what explains the pleasure we get from exercising the modules that serve to construct for us coherent representations of the world. Think, for example, of the pleasure we get when an otherwise trivial design suddenly detaches itself in the third dimension from a meaningless background, in one of those stereograms now commercialized under the “Magic Eye” brand. The pleasure not from a sophisticated aesthetic sense, but merely from the play of a specialized brain module.¹³

Pleasures taken in movies that evoke horror, love or sex doubtless owe their appeal to the same sort of mechanism, though they tickle different modules. Not incidentally, all of these pleasures taken in the exercise of our faculties illustrate Aristotle’s characterization of pleasure as activity, though it occurs not at the level of conscious behaviour but of neural activity.

On the other hand, there is no reason you have to be especially smart to exercise these brain modules. Antithesis is therefore dubious as well as self-righteous. It might even seem offensive, not so much in the slur on duller wits, but in that implied against those pathologically cheerful temperaments who are unable to feel as dejected as their knowledge of the world would enjoy.¹⁴ However that may be, the crucial point is that emotions require more than opinions. Understanding no more ensures gloom than the lack of it guarantees cheerfulness.

The lesson here is this. When we look at the biological story that underlies Aristotle’s characterization, the antinomy disappears. Such a shift of focus, bringing to light the biology behind the perplexities of phenomenology, is what I am advocating in this essay.

¹² Aristotle, in the passage just cited from *NE* 10.6, explicitly denied that happiness lies in entertainment. But play, as I understand it, is not entertainment even when it is entertaining.

¹³ Stereograms of this sort can be viewed at <http://www.magiceye.com/>. They are based Bela Julesz’s 1971 discovery that the brain sorts out stereoscopic images hidden in random dot patterns without the need for contextual cues (*Foundations of Cyclopean Perception* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971]). The remarks about brain play in the present paragraph were inspired by V. Ramachandra and W. Hirstein, “The Science of Art,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6 (1999): 15–51.

¹⁴ Perhaps its plausibility rests on a confusion between stupidity and ignorance, which is, after all, reputed to be bliss (which we saw to be 97% happiness, though happiness is only 61% bliss).

2. Hot pursuit

I return now to the paradox of pursuit. Americans have a constitutional right to pursue happiness. Many exercise this right with grim determination. Yet it's a familiar cliché that the pursuit of happiness undermines itself. Why should this be? I see two quite different causes. One may seem more superficial in that it appears to stem from ideology; the other comes from the logic of the concept of happiness. But both, I shall contend, also have deeper roots.

The ideological cause is that chief among the benefits for the sake of which people vainly place their hope in wealth, are what economists call "positional goods." It's not the things you have that are valued, it's the having more of them than other people. But the pursuit of positional goods inevitably leads to a Prisoner's Dilemma:¹⁵ since what matters is not what I have, but the comparison between what I have and what you have, we're bound to expend more in their pursuit than their mere possession would warrant. This must, by the logic of the situation, leave us all much in the same relative position as we started in—hence worse off overall, when effort and aggravation are counted in.

Now if something could be given away without the giver being deprived of it, you'd expect that sort of thing to escape being hoarded for positional advantage. And indeed there is such a class of goods, namely *ideas*.¹⁶ Yet Americans' devotion to positional goods is so deeply ingrained that they have hemmed in even ideas with legal barbed wire so as to nullify their peculiar virtue. Now ideas too have become positional goods. As a result, the scholar and scientist are dispossessed of their chief jewels—joyful contemplation and discovery—by the anxieties of priority and greed. *Did I*

¹⁵ In the structure of the Prisoner's Dilemma, prisoners are expendable. It can be illustrated as follows. At a club dinner, the diners agree that each will pay an equal share of the wine bill regardless of how much they have consumed. Each diner reasons that if she drinks more than the average, she will have bought her wine more cheaply. As a result, each has reason to drink more than her fellow diners. All end up drunker and poorer, and each is worse off than she would have been, had she not been rationally self-interested. A vast number of human situations involving groups of individuals rationally pursuing their interests exhibit this structure, fostering a "race to the bottom" which leaves all worse off. For a nice discussion of the ubiquity of the problem, see J. Heath, *The Efficient Society: Why Canada is as Close to Utopia as it Gets* (Toronto: Penguin, 2002).

¹⁶ The same has been said of love, to be sure, but the economics here may be more chaotic. In the case of ideas, or more generally of anything that can be regarded as *information* in the technical sense, the economic calculus is strict and simple: my sharing an idea with you may involve a small energy cost, but the cost is uncorrelated with the importance of the idea, and not one byte of information is lost to me by the conveyance.

have this idea first? Shouldn't you pay me if you want to repeat it? Think what the proceeds from the *Sermon on the Mount*TM could have done for world poverty if Jesus had been American.

So much for the ideological reason. Perhaps we could overcome it if we were nicer; but that may be harder than it seems, for the importance of positional goods may be more primate trait than American quirk.¹⁷

Even if we could forswear positional goods, however, the logical difficulty would remain. To see why, recall the messy results obtained by Storm et al. They seem to have assumed that Merriment, Cheerfulness, Serenity, etc. are *species* or perhaps better *determinates*¹⁸ of happiness. That would justify talk of a *hierarchy* (though it would still be rather short on the *archy*, as genera don't *control* their species). But merriment, cheerfulness and so on are not species or even determinates of happiness, any more than the various objects at which I might shoot an arrow are determinates or species of the genus 'target.' The lower terms designate not species of happiness but ways of being happy. When one is happy, they constitute the actual object of enjoyment; when one aspires to happiness, the intentional objects of desire.

To see this, consider a curious symmetry between happiness and money. Happiness is the paradigm case of what is intrinsically desirable. Money is the paradigm of what is desirable only instrumentally. Yet each, in its own way, is *contentless*.

Money can be *pursued in itself*, but cannot be *desired for itself*.¹⁹

Happiness is *desired for itself*, but cannot be *pursued in itself*.

When I want money, I want it *for* something else. I may not know yet what that is, but the money will be useless until I do. Money in itself has *no desirable content*.

¹⁷ F. de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998).

¹⁸ A species instantiates a *generic* property plus another which is its *differentia*. By contrast, while a *determinate* also instantiates the property of its *determinable*, no differentia can be specified. The relation of determinable to determinate is best modeled by relations of colour: we say loosely that crimson is a *kind* of red, but it is a determinate, not a species, since no differentia can specify the different 'kinds' of reds there are.

¹⁹ The "can" here must not be understood strictly psychologically. Intrinsic desires can be acquired, by association or otherwise, and so one might form an intrinsic desire for money just as one can form a desire, however unintelligible, for a saucer of mud. See E. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957) 33. But one couldn't convey what it was about money *as such* that was intrinsically desirable without mentioning its uses. Against this, see also T. Schroeder, *Three Faces of Desire* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004) 148.

When I want happiness, there must be something else I want *for it*. I may not yet know what it is—merriment, serenity, success, adulation, or love—but I can't set out on the pursuit until I do. Happiness in itself has no *pursuable content*. Again, then, in a fresh sense, in its relation to what we pursue happiness is always elsewhere.

It follows that happiness may be among those things that can be pursued only by indirection, like sleep, or love. You can't find love intentionally any more than you can go to sleep intentionally, though you can put yourself in the way of it, as by counting sheep. (Which is reputed to put you in the way of happiness too, if you can get to Arcadia.)

In the light of this perhaps I should invert my opening paradox. It's not exactly that you can't pursue happiness, it's rather that you can't fail to do so. But in the end these come to the same: If a *target* is defined as *whatever you are aiming at*, the advice to *aim at the target* is unhelpful.

3. Leaving something to be desired

When we say, *The situation leaves something to be desired*, we mean we're not quite happy. But what if there were literally *nothing to desire*? That sounds more like a coma than like happiness. In happiness, does one not at least desire that the present state endure? So if there were *really* nothing to be desired you wouldn't be happy either.

Yet Buddhists are said to recommend the elimination of desire, on the ground that all suffering is linked to desire. And so it is, if only because suffering engenders a desire that it cease. But that is the wrong sort of link. The point isn't supposed to be that suffering creates desire, but that desire leads to suffering. And the moral of that fact is more equivocal, for many a joy is also linked to desire. Renouncing desire will also deprive us of those joys.

The trick is to find a kind of joy that is not linked to desire. Many traditions prescribe spiritual joys. But for two reasons that is no solution. First, because spiritual joys can be objects of desire. Mystics, artists and intellectuals are all well acquainted with yearning. Secondly, some bodily pleasures require no conscious desire: as even Plato noticed, we can be unexpectedly delighted by a wafting perfume as we chance to walk into a rose garden.

This second objection looks feebler on second thought. For it assumes desire exists only when conscious. But there are reasons to think the desire for sweet smells is better construed as innate, and constantly in existence even if it is only occasionally conscious.²⁰ All the more reason to

²⁰ Schroeder, *Three Faces of Desire* 97–99.

view the absence of desire as incompatible with any sort of mental life at all. If happiness is not elsewhere, nestled in some object of desire, then it is nowhere at all.

Vice, Grace and Chemistry

Let us look further into the relation of desire to happiness. The puzzles just discussed, as well as those I'll come to in the next section, can be explained by the disconnection between desire, motivation and pleasure.

That *p* should come true when you wanted *p* is no warrant of satisfaction. Your desire might have been insufficiently specific: I know I said an apple, but not that *kind*. Or it might be that kind, but it tastes different now than I remembered. You should have specified. But you can never *fully* specify what you want. The Monkey's Paw phenomenon²¹ always threatens: you wanted *p* and *p* came true, but so did all kinds of other horrible things that you didn't think of mentioning in your specifications.

Conversely, happiness can arise without antecedent desire. What mystics call *grace* is a little like Plato's rose garden. Though grace can be desired, it cannot be brought on by the machinery of intention that typically follows on desire. But there is an element of grace, not only where joy comes unbidden, but in all those satisfied desires that manage to evade Oscar Wilde's second tragedy. Being lucky enough to get what you want is only the half of it. Enjoying what you wanted when you get it is the other. And that too takes *luck*: the right neurons must fire, neurotransmitters flow, circuits light up. Only they stand between you and the proverbial dust and ashes. That is what, translating theology into biology, I shall call *chemical grace*.

The *chronic* case of dust and ashes I propose to call *vice*. A vice is *something you can no longer stop choosing to do although it no longer brings pleasure*. How can there be such a thing?

If desire is more than mere wanting—for we can want to do what we have no desire to do—is not pleasure the proper object of desire, that which it tautologically pursues? If so, then how is it possible to desire what gives no pleasure?

A smoker may desire to smoke, yet not enjoy it. To be sure, her desire might focus on relief from the pain of not smoking. In true addicts, perhaps the pain of withdrawal may seem to be the only source of the desire. But

²¹ From the W.W. Jacobs story of that name, in which the monkey's paw talisman always brings what you wish, but always in ways that may you long to undo it. You can read it online at <http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/mnkypaw.htm>.

then we're back with the Buddhists: this isn't desire causing suffering, but suffering causing desire. If that is so, vice is not quite addiction. But it surely occurs. Sometimes one seeks not relief from suffering, but just the nicotine, the caffeine, the dopamine—yet gets no pleasure when it comes.

Here is a recent triumph of science: the creation of vice in rats. K.C. Berridge and E. Valenstein manipulated rats' brains in such a way as to produce a desire and motivation to eat, but they were able to ascertain by the rats' physiological and expressive behaviour that while they *wanted* to eat, they did so without *enjoying* it.²²

The reason that vice in my sense, whether in rats or people, seems paradoxical is that we are in the grip of a certain common-sense picture of the intimate connection between desire, pleasure, and motivation. The view is roughly this:

- desire motivates us to pursue a goal,
- successful pursuit secures the object of desire
- attaining the object of our desire produces pleasure,
- pleasure rewards the pursuit,
- the reward increases the probability that the desire will recur.²³

But as Tim Schroeder has shown in some detail, this picture conflicts both with phenomenology and neuroscience. Schroeder adduces an impressive amount of evidence and argument to show that of the “three faces of desire”—motivation, pleasure and reward—only the third is linked essentially to desire.²⁴ As the facts already alluded to make clear, there can be motivation without desire, and pursuit without resulting pleasure. Because

²² K.C. Berridge and E. Valenstein, “What Psychological Process Mediates Feeding Evoked by Electrical Stimulation of the Lateral Hypothalamus?” *Behavioral Neuroscience* 105.1 (February 1991): 3–14.

²³ The picture has a compelling logic, but apart from being wrong it has not always been regarded as benign. Its cyclic structure brings it very close to Plato's “leaky jar” conception of desire, as well as to the Buddhist cycle of suffering and desire. The most compelling poetic expression of it that I know is Baudelaire's poem *Le Voyage*.

²⁴ The most counterintuitive disconnection is that of desire from motivation. Schroeder illustrates this with “akinetic mutism” a condition consequent on lesions of the motor Anterior Cingulate cortex and to Adjacent Supplementary motor area where “sufferers make no voluntary movements or vocalizations, not as a result of straightforward paralysis but because they can no longer initiate actions,” yet we have no other reason to think they do not have desires, capable of promoting other forms of learning (*Three Faces of Desire* 110). Most of what I refer to on the neurology of desire I have learned from this important book. My account is highly simplified, particularly in one crucial respect: I have ignored the fact that neurologically as well as phenomenologically pleasure and displeasure are separate systems, not poles in a single continuum.

the learning induced by the reward system modifies not just behavioural dispositions but also perceptual and associative ones, some learning can occur without affecting motivation. Consequently, on this view of desire, desire's links to motivation and pleasure are merely causal, not essential ones: they hold in standard cases, but we should expect occasional breakdowns.

Vice, then, is not a form of perversity stemming from the misuse of the divine gift of freewill, but merely a consequence of a quirk in the engineering of our brains which we share with the humble rat.

Mixing Memory and Desire

Just as the attainment of what is desired can fail to be matched with pleasure, so memory can fail to record past pleasure as happiness, and can view past pain as happy. This is not a matter of subjective experience disagreeing with some more 'objective' test. For the assessment is made on the basis of experienced feeling at both times. Many people, for example, deem that happiness is linked to satisfying work. And while working at an activity that engages us can feel enjoyable, the effort of work can also be experienced as anguish, and turn into happiness only in retrospect.

Why should this be? Part of the explanation may lie in a quirk called the "peak-end rule" discovered by David Kahneman.²⁵ In measuring the overall pleasantness of a past period consisting of a sequence of shorter episodes, we reckon in only two of the component episodes: the one with the most extreme valence, regardless of its place in the sequence, and the last, whatever its rating. As a result, a largely unpleasant period may not be viewed as such, providing it ended pleasantly. If *finishing* the work is pleasant, this may explain why we can look back on a long period of painful work as happy.

One could speculate about the evolutionary origins of the Peak-End mechanism. Maybe it was selected for the advantage it confers in certain crucial situations, and then applied to all assessments of the past. Without the notorious capacity of women to ignore the pain of childbirth in retrospect, for example, the human population explosion might never have happened. Or maybe it's just a piece of lazy design, like so many others in nature: accurate integration of past pleasures and pains was just never worth the engineering cost. Assuming then that happiness has something to do with how we feel, and indeed often with our capacity to *live in the present*, what are we to say about the prospect that present experience will

²⁵ D. Kahneman et al., "When More Pain is Preferred to Less: Adding a Better End," *Psychological Science* 4 (1993): 401-05.

get reassessed by future judgment? Conversely, why should I trust a present judgment about the past which doesn't match the assessment I made at the time? Which matters more? Is it what I experience *right now*, or is it what I will experience in retrospect, as I judge this moment in the calm contemplation of what my life was like?

I have no answer, nor any principle for generating one. What is certain is this: when you consider that in most people's lives the last moments are among the worst, the implication that in a whole life the end counts for more than half the total is dismal indeed. Chalk up an additional squeeze to the theological vice grip.

Character is Destiny

Let me return now to the Heraclitean strand I twice left dangling: the paradoxical fact that happiness sticks closer to the person than to events. I noted that when we seek happiness, happiness isn't generally the intentional object of our quest. Yet what we do pursue or avoid—"bottom-up" factors such as money, marriage, jobs, accidents that leave you quadriplegic—turn out to make surprisingly little difference to our sense of well-being.²⁶

Take money, for a start. If our conduct reflects our beliefs, the cliché that money doesn't make happiness is one most of us don't really believe. So we might expect that money at least affects our sense of subjective well-being, though it might give rise to illusions of happiness. And yet the evidence is clear enough. Lottery winners, it is said, are often more miserable than they were before. This can be attributed to the various pitfalls that attend the satisfaction of desire, not to mention the excess of new friends. But the effects either way don't seem to last. It's no different if your income steadily increases: as attested by a graph in Diener's article,²⁷ the median income of Americans increased almost uniformly from a base 100 measure in 1946 to 240 in 1989. At the same time, the index of subjective wellbeing hovered, almost unchanged, to stand at just under 100 in 1989.

More generally Diener reports that according to some studies such "bottom-up" factors could only account for 8% to 15% of the variance in reports of subjective well-being. The one factor that seems decisive is personality, some 80% of which is heritable. On the basis of this, Diener comments, "it could be said that it is as hard to change one's happiness as it is to change one's height."²⁸

²⁶ Diener et al., "Subjective Well-being: Three Decades of Progress."

²⁷ "Subjective Well-being" 288.

²⁸ "Subjective Well-being" 278–79.

Furthermore, even when bottom-up events do affect our well-being, they may themselves result from our personalities.²⁹ Insofar as that is true, Heraclitus's dictum that character is fate is true twice over. First, it pretty much dictates whether we are happy, regardless of what happens. Then, for the 8% to 15% of the rest that is caused by the vicissitudes of life, character shapes some of those too. And even if some of the latter stem from perception rather than reality, the characteristics that influence how life is perceived are themselves features of personality.

How is a philosophical manic-depressive supposed to feel about that? If happiness is something you were born with, no more changeable than your height, that's one more reason to give up on its pursuit. Note that not everyone finds that reason compelling, since the Puritans, for one, believed in predestination and yet furiously persisted in the pursuit of salvation. Surely that was irrational, but then that's for theologians to determine.

On the other hand, there is *something* you can do about even your height: elevator shoes. Those surely have their equivalent in mood-elevating drugs. Aldous Huxley's soma is not quite here yet, but it's coming, and if it does the job without too many awkward side-effects, then I'm all for it. Just as Mill advocated a judicious alternation of excitement and tranquillity, so the philosophical manic-depressive might be willing to settle for a judicious mix of clear-headed gloom and cheerful illusion, carefully controlled by direct intervention on the neurotransmitters.

Fools' Paradise, Natural and Artificial

Drugs! you say. Heaven help us! You are advocating drugs! But isn't a chemical happiness the very type of illusory happiness? Won't all the wise men and women from antiquity to the present rise up and swear in the witness-box of culture that happiness is not to be found in artificial paradises?

Against this, it's tempting to respond much as the painter did to the bishop. Shocked to see that he had painted shoes on his angels, the bishop challenged: "Have you ever seen an angel wearing shoes?" and the painter answered: "Have you ever seen an angel barefoot?" So to the challenge about artificial paradises, I say: have you ever seen a natural paradise?

Yes! they will say, Mengzi, Laozi, Aristotle, Spinoza and the other

²⁹ Dienar et al. again: "Another challenging factor is that genetic effects on SWB may not be direct. For example [Plomin et al., "Genetic Influence on Life Events During the Last Half of the Life Span," *Psychology and Aging* 5 (1990): 25-30] found that genes have an influence on life events. In other words, there are genetic factors influencing behavior that increase the probability that certain life events will be experienced" (279).

assorted Greens: Nature is the answer. It is not true that happiness is elsewhere: it is inside you, in your garden if you can afford one, providing you let Nature be your guide.

But the Follow Nature movement is squarely rooted in bad faith. For each one of us is the product of nature as surely as are eagles, antelopes, and the smallpox virus. Acting and making is what we do, just as the flowers grow. And so what we make is a product of nature too: like birds' bowers or the dams that beavers build, genetically modified foods and greenhouse gases are just products of nature at one remove. If it is not permissible to drive the Bald Eagle to extinction, why is it all right to eradicate smallpox? Because we find eagles nice and smallpox nasty. Talk of protecting nature is always a smokescreen for choices not *of* natural things but *among* them.

The counsel to follow nature worked for Aristotle because he had a neat two-stage method for implementing it: first, discover empirically what the function of human life is. Next, fulfill that function. Action was at one with being. The main problem for us lies at the first stage. We can't read off teleology from the facts: things don't always act in accordance with their natural ends even if we grant that they have them. (Besides, our natural end is death: a fact which Aristotle fudges, lacking the theological vice grip.) So we can't look to what's happening and expect to find what's meant to happen.

We can, it is true, look to the past: Millikan's Methods do yield a robust distinction between what happens and what's supposed to happen: viz., roughly, that it's supposed to happen if its happening earlier up in the lineage causally enabled its capacity to happen now.³⁰ Unlike some critics of Millikan I think it's no drawback of her theory of function that we have to look to the past to figure out what is—in that special sense—'supposed to happen' now. But a much more serious problem looms. Being a function by that criterion, unlike being a function as Aristotle thought of them, carries no warrant of value for me now. What is it to me that some trait was adaptive for my ancestors in the past? Why should that make it an end for me?

The infection of this worry spreads to those ends that I do think my own. From a biological perspective, the very fact that I value something for its own sake results from a stealthy manipulations of an agency alien to my own. Those aliens aims are best furthered by my blindly following what I

³⁰ R. Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984) and *White Queen Psychology and Other Essays for Alice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

think of as my own goals. In the theological version, we are instruments in the hands of God, whose “higher” purposes we serve even without discerning them. In that light, revolt seems no less reasonable than submission. In biological terms, the intrinsic value of happiness is just a manipulative trick by our genes, to get us to do what they metaphorically purpose. We are all puppets of our alien genes.

But not just of our genes, of course. There is evidence that intrinsic desires are not necessarily unconditioned,³¹ making way for the most insidious form of the tyranny of the social. If so, then depending on the way we have been conditioned, our intrinsic goals might clash regardless of whether they embody values incommensurable in the metaphysical space of values. They may clash simply as a result of the way we have been conditioned to want one thing, which may or may not satisfy us, as well as another incompatible thing. The case of manipulation by genes and the case of manipulation by conditioning are equally disconcerting.

It is hard to take stock of the essential contingency of our desires and of our loves. It begins at birth. The child is doomed to love its parents, like Titania under Oberon’s spell: you pop out, and “Be it ounce, or cat, or bear, / Pard, or boar with bristled hair, / In thy eye that shall appear / When thou wak’st, it is thy dear.” Don’t mistake me here: I’m not claiming that it’s not *a good thing* that babies automatically love their parents. But good things of this sort are always *general*. Like many products of natural selection, they are good things statistically, which means they may turn out bad in particular. I’m just pointing out something that is hard to see because a child’s love seems so, well, *natural*:³² namely that while it creates intrinsic desires it isn’t linked to individual interests and prior desires of the individuals concerned. Not because the infants don’t have prior desires: they do, but those desires—for security, warmth, and so on—may be mightily frustrated in the future when their chemically fated love falls on unworthy objects. Once again, individual happiness is at odds with its own biological sources.

Well, the familiar counsel goes, you might as well go along with

³¹ I. Johnsrude et al., “Conditioned Preferences in Humans: A Novel Experimental Approach,” *Learning and Motivation* 30 (1999): 250–64.

³² See J. Fodor, “The Trouble with Psychological Darwinism,” review of Pinker, *How the Mind Works* and Plotkin, *Evolution in Mind* (1999) http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n02/fodo01_.html: “A concern to propagate one’s genes would rationalize one’s acting to promote one’s children’s welfare; but so too would an interest in one’s children’s welfare. Not all of one’s motives could be instrumental, after all; there must be some things that one cares for just for their own sakes. Why, indeed, mightn’t there be quite a few such things? Why shouldn’t one’s children be among them?”

Nature because you have to. You'll feel better if you don't resist. That may be true for some; but others' nature may be such that they feel better, on the contrary, when they fight back. "Nature," said Katherine Hepburn to Humphrey Bogart in *African Queen*, "is what we were put in this world to rise above." That too, conforms to nature.

Summary and Conclusion

I have tried to re-tool in a biological mode what I called the vice-grip of theodicy, with its conviction that something outside of life must compensate for the ills of living. I sketched four ways in which that view may be seen as a dim reflection of some fundamental logical and biological facts about happiness, in its relation to desire, to pleasure, and to satisfaction:

First, I argued for what I called the contentless character of happiness, from which it follows that happiness can be desired for itself but cannot pursued in itself.

Secondly, I described how some paradoxes about desire and happiness might be explained by the disconnection, at the biological level, of pleasure and satisfaction from desire. This disconnection follows from Schroeder's view that the core nature of desire links it essentially to the reward system that results in changes in our perception, in our propensity to form new thoughts, and in our capacities and dispositions to behaviour.

Thirdly, I stressed the more general fact that the ultimate determinants of our happiness, both at the level of momentary satisfaction and of long-term well-being, are not life events but personality characteristics, which in turn are tied to the chemistry of the brain.

Fourthly, in response to the plausible idea that the secret of happiness lies in the injunction to live according to nature, I stressed the alien character of the biological determinants of what are experienced by us as intrinsic desires.

Finally, I suggested that when viewed from a biological point of view, even our intrinsic ends appear as instruments of an alien agency, and in that light I argued that we take a favourable view of technology that might allow us directly to affect the chemistry of the brain.

The approach I have favoured does not *solve* the intellectual problem of evil, for that problem is manufactured by theology in the first place. In the biological mode, there is no intellectual problem of evil. Yet my view remains a pessimistic one, because using chemical agents as they are made or discovered will never remove the essential alienness which, I have argued, marks nature's determination of our ends, as well as of our capacity to find emotional satisfaction in their achievement. As to the practical problem

of what to pursue, I do not minimize the wisdom of common sense and ancient advice: *be neither too rich nor too poor, pursue unimpeded activity in accordance with your nature, go jogging*, and so forth. But I also mean seriously the suggestion that we should welcome chemical agents to lighten our darker moments and add colour to the brighter ones.³³

³³ Thanks are due to Nina Straus for incisive comments on an earlier draft.