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### MEANING OF LIFE AND HAPPINESS: A PRELIMINARY OUTLINE\*

The common move in ethical theory is to discuss happiness and its place in the hierarchy of the good. Relatively little has been said about meaningfulness and its place in this great structure. The reason is that the tradition has been concerned chiefly with understanding the nature of the highest intrinsic good. Since meaningfulness, the having of a primitive sense of well-being, seems to be neither a higher good nor an intrinsic one, its nature and implications were seldom explored. In our own times the contrary is true. There is a tendency to avoid the issue of what constitutes the highest intrinsic good and a movement away from what strikes many as an essentially elitist intellectual activity. There is a growing interest in understanding the nature of the primary good, that is understanding what modes of experience or states of being are nearly necessary for the achievement of the higher goods. Whether or not meaningful life (or the lack of a sense of meaningfulness) is the primary sufficient good, it is becoming increasingly clear that happiness is not possible without having some degree of a meaningful life.

In this paper I propose first to outline an argument. The argument is that, since having a meaningful life is, as a rule, a necessary condition for having a happy one, the protection of happiness requires the protection of being able to have a meaningful life. I assume that if a case, albeit a rough and preliminary one, can be made, if meaningfulness and happiness can be shown to be related but at different levels of satisfaction, then the rest of the argument is relatively unproblematic. I also propose to raise and reply to two of the more salient objections: the first is the claim that happiness is unnecessary because having a meaningful life is more than a sufficient form of life satisfaction; the second is the Epimethean<sup>1</sup> charge that we have mistakenly characterized the nature of having a meaningful life.

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<sup>1</sup> Epimetheanism is a form of stoicism. It is based upon Greek mythology and the personality difference between the brothers Prometheus and Epimetheus. Prometheus is the inner flame of desire for a better world; the will to aspire, to the stature of the gods, even if that means open defiance. He questions the unquestionable. He is the bold innovator who often stands alone, often against the world, always against the immediate world. Epimetheus is the adapter to the present, and the worshipper of the power that is. He is the supporter of the will of the gods. He is the cement of the social order, always preferring harmony to innovation. An excellent psychological study of these types is provided

## I

Having a meaningful life is like breathing. Just as breathing or the ability to absorb oxygen is vital to our physical well-being, meaningful life is vital to our psychological well-being. Just as we neither take much notice of, nor tend to appreciate normal respiration, we usually neither notice nor appreciate having a meaningful life. But what does it mean to say that a human being normally has a meaningful life? And under what general conditions does life become meaningless?

It has already been suggested that to have a meaningful life is to have a primitive sense of well-being. This sense of well-being is typically characterized by the belief that it is genuinely possible to realize one's concrete ideal or dominant life goals and by the predilection to enjoy life, a predilection normally accompanied by feelings of reasonable zest.

The notion of a meaningless life is more difficult to characterize.<sup>2</sup> However, I think it is clear that meaninglessness is a matter of degree and that it has important psychological components. It is also clear that it is somehow related to the sentiment of disappointment, often the fear that one's deepest desires may not, or cannot, be achieved. Because of this we can say that an individual senses that a span of life or life itself is devoid of meaning roughly when, or to the extent to which, he believes he cannot possess goals, or when, if he can and does have goals, he believes they are trivial or impossible to achieve, and when either judgment is accompanied by a sense of dysphoria or despair. In other words, people who have studied the claims of those who hold that their life is meaningless, or who have had the experience themselves, share the following convictions: first, that meaningfulness is not a permanent state of being; second, that the circumstances of our lives and the disposition of our character mainly determine the measure of meaningfulness we enjoy; third, that the experience of meaninglessness typically occurs when an individual believes he cannot have significant goals or achieve the ends he holds to be fundamentally important; and fourth, that there is an important difference between believing and knowing X, a difference between believing one has a meaningless life and knowing that his is true.

All this indicates something about the deeper nature of man. It indicates that man is a teleological, ideal-forming, and normatively sensitive creature. Man is teleological because, like other living crea-

by William H. Sheldon, *Psychology and the Promethean Will* (New York and London: Harper, 1936). For a Promethean-like advocate of Epimetheanism, see: Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972, esp. 151-167). For one of the more robust forms of contemporary Prometheanism, see: Garret Hardin, *Promethean Ethics* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1980, esp. 3-9).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of some of the difficulties associated with the notion of having and knowing that someone is having a meaningless existence, see: Marvin Kohl, "Karen Quinlan: Human Rights and Wrongful Killing," *Connecticut Medicine* 42:9 (1978), 579-583, a paper which is reprinted in *Bioethics and Human Rights*, ed. by Bertram and Elsie Bandman, Boston: Little, Brown, 1978, 121-128; and my "Voluntary Death and Meaningless Existence," *Infanticide and the Value of Life* ed. by M. Kohl, Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1978, 210-214.

tures, he is genetically predisposed to evolve towards, or pursue, certain ends. He is ideal-forming because, unlike most other creatures, he is sometimes motivated by and, to that extent, must be understood in the light of his intentions, ends, and ideals; especially those ideals which provide for the fundamental worth of his life. He is normatively sensitive because, at times, he can be painfully aware of the schism between what is and what ought to be. When he is painfully aware of this discrepancy and considers it to be a personal defeat, he feels that life is meaningless.

We are now perhaps in a better position to understand why having a meaningful life is, as a rule, a necessary condition for having a happy one. The first argument is based upon need-reduction theory. It holds that since happiness is, in part, being reasonably successful in satisfying basic needs, since one of these needs is that of having a life built round some central purpose, it follows that to the extent this life ideal is threatened so is happiness. The second claim is that any viable theory of happiness has to hold that enjoying or appreciating life is a necessary condition for happiness. This provides one of the premises for what I shall call our psychological argument. Since a sense of meaninglessness generally threatens and often permanently defeats, an individual's natural disposition to enjoy life, and since enjoying (or at least appreciating) life is a necessary condition for happiness, it follows that if happiness is to be protected, human beings have to be protected against having a meaningless life.

There are two objections I wish to consider. Each shares the view that it is a mistake to distinguish between meaningful and happy life in the way we have done. Each would deny our contention that these represent two different and distinguishable levels of human satisfaction. The first objection, in greater detail, is as follows: The above arguments fail, not because they wrongly describe the nature of meaningless existence, but because they suggest that life satisfaction requires more than having a meaningful life. Contrary to what has been suggested, happiness is not a superior but an inferior type of life experience. Happiness is, at best, the mark of creatures on a very low and dull level. If one has a richly purposeful life, there is no need for the bland balancing which typifies the happy animal. If you have a human being or a cause that you love, if you have one thing that you really care for, life derives its meaning from that thing, and you barely need anything else.

I do not positively know that happiness is always preferable to an intense love, a devotion to another human or cause, a kind of love that fills one's soul with a sense of profound interdependence and belonging. But I cannot help thinking that it is possible to obtain both. That for most men and women a minimal satisfaction of basic needs and other correlate interests is a prerequisite. Perhaps man does not live by bread alone. Nonetheless, he needs bread to live. Perhaps the material side of life is least important. But it generally only becomes so after there are sufficient material goods to make life tolerable.

James Chewing Davies maintains that "all people have the right and may gain the opportunity to become themselves fully, but they will never be able to do so without the prior and continuing means of

satisfying the higher priority — the more basic — innate needs.”<sup>3</sup> It is, I think, a mistake to say that people have the right to become themselves *fully*. It is also an exaggeration to say that *all* people must satisfy the more basic needs before they can satisfy the social-affectional or love needs. Nonetheless, it seems to clearly be the case that, while some human beings can, even in conditions of the most dire poverty, be nurtured and be fully satisfied with love, most human beings are not, and say they are not, satisfied with their life under such conditions. Above my desk I have a news photograph of a Biafran mother, lean and starving, feeding her emaciated, almost dead baby. No thoughtful and sensitive person would deny the great value of her love for that child. But who would want to argue that, in such situations, love is enough?

The second objection is that we have wrongly characterized what it means to have a meaningful life. The real meaning of life, we are told, is always the same eternal thing, the marriage solely of one's life and aspirations with the Omnificent Power that governs all things. Nothing matters, except the willing fulfillment of this power, whether it be recognized as God or as nature. It does not matter if our most precious efforts are defeated. It does not matter if we cannot obtain the things we most desire. It is the will of Omnificent Power that we should strive, and it may not be His will that we should succeed. To the extent we can accept this, to the extent we accept the eternal purpose, we will find meaning and be content, even though we may suffer. For the suffering is of no great importance. The only thing that matters is the way we face life. What truly matters is our attitude towards life. As long as the attitude and goal is the loving acceptance of what must be, the individual will have a meaningful life.

I know of no method by which I can show, in a completely telling way, that this Epimethean life perspective is an inferior one. How far a thinker is willing to go in reflecting this perspective depends upon his possessing various convictions, of which three may be singled out as specially important. They are: (a) man often has the power to radically change the world for the better; (b) defiant living is more courageous and more fittingly human than mere compliance; (c) human action is transcendent in a pluralistic way. Of these, the meliorist conviction is the most important. People simply behave differently when they believe they actually have the power to change the world. A community organized to develop a life-saving drug behaves differently from a community whose only task is to make sure that incurable mental defectives are cared for in as economical and invisible a way as is prudently possible.

The Promethean rejects the Epimethean outlook. At best he equates subservience with inauthenticity. Like Sartre he insists that human beings are not like stones. That human beings are free to choose, and at times to be defiant. At worse, the Promethean equates compliance with a kind of death. For he feels as if the loving acceptance of what allegedly must be — is tantamount to the acceptance of an early and

<sup>3</sup> James Chewing Davies, "The Priority of Human Needs and the Stages of Political Development," *Human Nature in Politics*, ed. by J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, New York: New York University Press, 1977, 192.

pointless psychological death. He may ultimately be defeated by the gods. But if so, it is because he tried to snatch their secret from them, because he strove to become all that he could become by courageously, and at times defiantly, exercising his power.

When a man deliberately acts he acts with the hope of successfully achieving his goal. Deliberate action, like desire, contains in it the hope of obtaining its end-in-view. It is in this sense that human action is held to be transcendent. It almost always aims at a future objective beyond the moment, an objective which is viewed as being attainable and better than the present state of things. Rare occurrences of irrevocably meaningless life aside, the general sentiment is that not all action is futile and, despite defeat and personal death, there is a new and more glorious world to be born. To say that human action is transcendent in a pluralistic way is merely to add that man naturally aims at a plurality of goods, a wide diversity of kinds of goods. Largely because of genetic disposition, human nature stands in opposition to the pursuit of a reductive single goal. Hence, human nature is opposed to any theory or mode of behavior that comes down to holding that the only goal should be that of learning how to lovingly accept Omnificent Power.

Of course, human nature can be changed. A program of negative eugenics might be implemented in which human beings are altered and programmed as stoics. The advantage of such a program is that human beings would become incapable of being unhappy. The disadvantage is that it is difficult to see why this new breed would otherwise be considered superior, since (intelligence aside) they would essentially function like the social insects. But upon further reflection we see that such a proposal would not be consistent with the Epimethean stance. Except for increasing the power of the will and exercising greater self-control, the typical Epimethean wishes to leave the universe unchanged. What the Promethean charges is that, except for special individuals, most human beings lack the power, literally the will power, to defeat the diversity of instinctual drives.

For the above reasons people who do not live in consistently brutal environments generally reject the Epimethean perspective. Given the meliorist conviction, the belief that defiant living is more courageous and fitting for humans than cosmic acquiescence, and that human action is transcendent in a pluralistic way, the Epimethean ideology seems doomed to failure. It can only breed well in times of painful cultural transition or when conditions of suffering are combined with an enduring sense of powerlessness. The fact that it does, under these circumstances, indicates that prudent benevolence may require a lowering of standards in extremely bad times. But to lower standards in times of genuine adversity is not the same as admitting that the meanings of life and happiness are identical or that they should always be reduced to the grateful acceptance of life as it presently is. In a concentration camp it may or may not be psychologically prudent to adopt an Epimethean form of stoicism. But as a general stance towards life Epimetheanism fails because it too easily surrenders the vast potential richness of human existence for peace of mind.

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