**happiness/福(Fú)**

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| European Perspective | Gerald Cipriani | 31 May 2022 |

Discussing 'happiness' in the current distressing context of predicament that a European entity, Ukraine, is experiencing because of the aggressive invasion by one of its neighbours, Russia - looks like it can only be an abstract exercise. This, of course, applies to any context of predicament experienced throughout the world. But as the purpose of this exercise is to offer a European perspective on happiness together with the corresponding Chinese conception in order to hopefully overcome mutual misunderstanding, it is pertinent to be reminded that the meaningfulness of a concept vitally depends on the context from which it is abstracted.

In this light we can easily see how ill-thought Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's (1949-) infamous sayings on happiness sound: 'What makes us happy is not to get what we want. But to dream about it. Happiness is for opportunists.'; 'If you want to remain happy, just remain stupid. Authentic masters are never happy; happiness is a category of slaves.' Indeed, Why be happy when you could be interesting? Anyone experiencing right now Russian military barbarism in Ukraine – something to be unequivocally condemned by all civilised entities and individuals – will find Žižek's interpretation of happiness as 'unethical category' something of an incongruence that only the one who does not experience predicament to the bones can afford.

Of course, opinions on the ethicality of happiness all depend on what we really mean by the concept. Happiness understood as selfish pleasurable psychological satisfaction to the detriment of others, be they the earth, animals, or human fellows, can only be ethically condemnable. However, as the history of ways of understanding happiness in the Western world shows, the concept betrays levels of complexity and nuances that would from the outset place it in the paradigm of humaneness more than anything else.

As with many concepts used in the West, we must look at its alleged civilisational origin, ancient Greece, to understand how conceptions of happiness took shape in its auspicious as well as subsequently nihilistic versions.

Before Aristotle (384-322 BCE), the ancient philosopher of 'happiness' par excellence, Democritus (460-370 BCE) identified a particular condition in human beings, or more exactly what he called 'a case of mind' that did not necessarily originate from 'favourable fate' or whatever external causes. This meant that happiness (‘euthymia’ – good mood) was, probably for the first time in the West, understood as a psychological state of its own.

Plato (429-347 BCE), in the Republic, brings in another dimension by connecting happiness ('eudaimonia', lit. dispensing in a good fashion) with the idea of the just life and by extension the good city ('kallipolis'). The question he asks is whether the happy person is the one who lives in a city of justice, opening thus the door for ethical interpretations of the nature of happiness.

It is, however, Aristotle who set the tone for centuries of conception of happiness in the West. He clearly went beyond the mere psychological account of happiness by radically identifying it as a proper virtue, a theory he famously expounded in his Nicomachean Ethics.

Thus, although happiness for Aristotle is an 'ultimate purpose of human existence' that remains 'desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else', it cannot be confused with mere pleasure. Human beings are no animals; they think rationally, and if their actions are well performed according to such principle then human beings can be said to enjoy the 'good life', a virtuous life of happiness.

Happiness is therefore contingent upon virtue. Although one can take some form of pleasure in barbarity, happiness according to Aristotle's ethical conception would be inconceivable. Friendship on the other hand becomes an essential virtue at the source of happiness, just as other virtues such as benevolence, civic awareness, fairness, or resolve.

What is fundamental in Aristotle's conception of happiness is that it constitutes a life-goal that should prevail over minor and transient forms of happiness. The ethos of 'instant gratification' that characterises much of nowadays societies is therefore foreign to Aristotle's ethics of happiness.

Education is of course one important refining way human beings can learn how to lead the good life and reach happiness. One can indeed learn how to practice the virtues and become morally good in order to reach the promised land of happiness, a form of self-cultivation achieved by the one who thinks and acts accordingly in a balanced way, rationally. Clearly, Aristotle's conception of happiness as practice of virtue bears no relevance to the kind of pleasurable hedonistic satisfaction that is in the present world too often taken for happiness.

Even Epicurus (341-271 BCE), most well-known for his principle of hedonism did not, in actual fact, advocate experiencing happiness at all costs. In fact, quite the opposite. We certainly must avoid any form of pain (whether bodily or mental) through pleasure, but this does not imply indulging in un-necessary pleasures which would inexorably lead to a drive and desire for more pleasures. Only what is necessary should be desired precisely to avoid generating greater desires that would ultimately become harmful to the self, others, and the community (see Letter to Menoeceus).

Now, the concept of happiness in its long journey before reaching the twenty-first century acquired a Christian outlook throughout the Middle Ages, as we might expect. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), for example, certainly preserved the Aristotelian conception of happiness as ultimate goal of life through cultivation, rationality and the practice of virtues, determining thus what behaviour or action was morally right or wrong.

But Aquinas also believed that happiness as a goal in itself was concretely out of grasp by mortals, for happiness amounted to a sort of mystical fusion with the Divine. In other words, although humans must aim at happiness, they will never reach perfect happiness by themselves. Cultivation, rationality and the practice of virtues alone fall short of guiding humans towards happiness; humans need the help of the Divine to experience happiness in the form of 'beatitude'. (See Summa Theologica).

The high/low dualistic principle at work in Aquinas' conception of happiness is certainly something that also runs throughout the Enlightenment and modernity, but unsurprisingly in different shapes. René Descartes' (1596-1650) conception of happiness separates between the kind of pleasure felt by the mind ('bonheur') resulting from favourable material conditions or occurrences that are nonetheless necessary for welfare, and a higher form of happiness (félicité) experienced when human beings exercise their virtues and rationality to keep desires wise and balanced. Needless to say, that the fortunate can enjoy material happiness does not necessarily entail that they can experience virtuous happiness. Conversely, the less fortunate may be able to experience virtuous happiness while being deprived from the means to enjoy material happiness. (See letters to Princess Elizabeth).

This distinction between the material and the virtuous when it comes to qualify happiness is in some way also found in the empiricism of a contemporary of Descartes, John Locke (1632-1704). For Locke life is intrinsically about desiring happiness (see ‘the pursuit of happiness’ in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding), but not all desires can be equally valued. There is happiness resulting from fulfilling any desires, and there is 'true happiness' that is achieved under the guidance of some kind of 'intellectual perfection'. 'True happiness' is what human beings should achieve by ensuring that we only desire what he calls 'the true intrinsic good' of things as opposed to what is superficially or only momentarily pleasurable.

This is where virtuous rules come into the equation. As what we find pleasurable can be subjective our way of fulfilling our lives would simply amount to enjoying what we find pleasurable, here and now, wildly and regardless of rules. Society cannot function this way. So, Locke suggests that the morality of happiness must be determined by the fact that our actions are judged by the Divine after our death. It is in other words the Divine law that must determine which things at the source of 'true happiness' are intrinsically good and which are not.

This distinction between the material and moral dimensions of happiness so characteristic of Western thought on the matter also influenced utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Happiness through the lens of Utilitarianism that ascribes value to actions depending on their effects, may sound like it is only concerned with material pleasure. In fact, Bentham's idea of 'greatest happiness principle' is no less than a moral ruling that determines what action leading to happiness is acceptable (see ‘Happiness is the greatest good’ in Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation). But instead of resorting to some Divine law as with Locke, the moral value of an action depends on the extent to which the greater number can enjoy happiness.

And the question of whether happiness should depend on our actions solely or on rules to follows (or on both) was further articulated by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Moral actions depend on moral rules that are designed to make the greater number enjoy happiness. (See Utilitarianism).

In whatever case, we recover again this idea of higher form of happiness contingent on its virtuous nature, whether determined by cultivation, the Divine, or the greater number and which, understood as an ultimate goal for human life, remains within a tradition of thought that originated in Plato and Aristotle.

Perhaps Slavoj Žižek was referring to the lower form of happiness in its brutal rejection of the concept. Even so, there are contexts that make such disparaging sound irresponsible, and I would in this light rather refer to Descartes who did not reject altogether the necessity for the lower form of happiness, the bonheur, for securing the welfare of human beings, which at a time of predicament and barbarism looks like as virtuous as any of the higher forms of happiness previously mentioned.

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