

Ten Philosophical Mistakes

By Mortimer J. Adler

CHAPTER 6

Happiness and Contentment

[In these sections Adler is offering a critique of John S. Mill's *Utilitarianism*. Sections have been selected and slightly edited to make reading easier for a classroom of students.

Comments in blue are in the original text, highlighted to help focus attention. Comments in green have been added by R.A. Baker, Ph.D. to help encourage and facilitate student discussion.]

1.

...happiness is always an end, never a mere means. More than that, it is an ultimate or final end, sought for the sake of nothing else.

For any other good, or object of desire, we can always say that we desire it for the sake of something else. We want wealth, health, freedom, and knowledge because they are means to some good beyond themselves. But it is impossible to complete the sentence beginning with the words “I want to be happy or want happiness because ...”

[That is interesting. Can you complete the sentence above in a way that the overwhelming majority of your fellow students would agree with?]

Any other good that we can name is something that, when obtained, leaves other goods [to the side]. Each is one good among others, but happiness is not one good among others. It is the complete good, the sum of all goods, leaving nothing more to be desired. Thus conceived, happiness is not the highest good, but the total good.

...there is another word that aptly designates the psychological state, thus making it unnecessary to use the word “happiness” in two distinct senses.

That other word is “contentment.” It cannot signify anything other than the psychological state that exists when the desires of the moment are satisfied. The more they are satisfied at a given moment, the more we regard that moment as approaching supreme contentment.

2.

If all our desires were wants, differing from individual to individual, and if all the goods that human beings desired merely appeared good to this individual or that because these individuals happened to want them, it would be impossible to avoid the conclusion that, for any individual, happiness consists in getting what he or she wanted and, getting it, enjoying contentment at that moment.

For any one individual, happiness would then be a transient and shifting thing. He may be contented one day because he succeeded in getting the apparent goods he then wanted, but the next day might bring the frustration of his wants and with it painful discontent. Individual happiness would shift from day to day, seldom enduring for any protracted span of time. It would also differ in character from individual to individual, according to differences in their individual wants. What brings happiness to one individual might not bring happiness to another.

There are still further reasons for arguing against the identification of

happiness with contentment. No one, I think, would question the moral depravity of a miser, the pathological individual who wants only to dwell in the presence of the pile of gold he has accumulated and is willing to sacrifice his health, friendships, and other real goods to do so.

[So, perhaps gaining what we want is NOT exactly happiness OR contentment, unless we applaud ANYTHING that makes a person happy.]

If happiness is nothing but the contentment that results from satisfied wants, then the miser who has what he wants must be called happy, though by moral standards he should be regarded as a miserable creature, lacking most of the real goods that human beings need. Happiness as contentment [would then be] equally achievable by individuals who are morally good and morally bad.

Individuals come into conflict with one another in their attempts to get what they want. One individual's wanting too much wealth may result in frustrating another individual's getting the wealth he needs and also wants. An individual who wants power over others in order to dominate and control them may interfere with the liberty that other individuals need and also want.

[It seems here that Adler is bringing an ethical demand to our definition of *happiness and contentment*.]

If **a just government** should do whatever it can to aid and abet the pursuit of happiness on the part of its people, that mandate cannot be carried out when happiness is identified with the contentment that results from individuals getting what they want. Confronted with conflicting wants, or with wants on the part of some that, satisfied, frustrate the satisfaction of the wants of others, no government can

secure for all its citizens the conditions requisite for a successful pursuit of happiness.

With happiness conceived as contentment, **its transient and shifting character, changing from day to day** with changes in an individual's wants and shifting from wants that are satisfied to wants that are frustrated, makes happiness so variable and impermanent a goal that no government could possibly aid and abet the pursuit of happiness for all its people. Nor could it pledge to promote the pursuit of happiness for everyone on these terms, since the conflicting wants of different individuals would make it impossible to enable all to satisfy their wants.

[It appears to me that Adler is pushing the argument that "Happiness as our Aim" as Mill presented it is simply not correct. Thoughts?]

Adler, Mortimer J., *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (London 1985), Chapter 6, Sections 1 and 2, pp.131-134).