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**Life's Meaning and the Search for Happiness**

**No one is master of his fate : the ideology and experience of happiness**

*by Michael Hampe\**

There is an ideology of good fortune, or happiness, which is implied by the old German proverb “Jeder ist seines Glückes Schmied” (“every man forges his own good fortune” – roughly equivalent to “I am the master of my fate”). It may be seen as encouragement to make something of one’s own life, or equally as a kind of summation of the following convictions: People are fundamentally autonomous; they have the power to mold their own lives, and happiness is a result of that creative molding. This ideology involves both a collective and individual ignoring of such matters as illness and death, which are markers for the limits on our power to completely mold our own lives.

We can speak of an ideology here because these ideas mask the real power relationships (in the very broad sense of “power”) under which people live, enabling us to harbor false ideas of ourselves. As natural creatures, of course, people enjoy only relative power, especially that of survival. They are therefore always subject to suffering. They do not automatically enjoy freedom of action, but must achieve it through self-reflection and knowledge of the world – and can just as well lose it again. For that reason, the set of ideas subsumed under “I am the master of my fate” is collective self-deception, an illusion with which people try to imaginatively compensate for their factually limited power and mortality. In reality, the human power to mold one’s own life is limited not only by biological facts; the social conditions in which people’s biologically limited lives are played out put further limits on human autonomy. Of course, people can also develop the necessary courage, reflectivity and interventionary abilities to better respond to both their biological and social limitations.

**The complexity of it all**

Realizing the limits of human power does not mean denying self-determination or freedom. But the idea – repeated endlessly in countless self-help books – that all an individual has to do is pull himself together, think positively and follow a few rules in order to mold his own life and make it a happy one, is naive at best, but actually cynical when we consider the fate of people who are caught in natural calamities, famine and wars, or who are victims of chronic illness, violent crime or terrorism in totalitarian states.

Indeed, the conditions of activity and passivity, power and powerlessness, while they

are important to a happy life, are more complicated than the ideology of happiness would have us believe. In light of people's varying desires and customary actions, a first question would have to deal with how there could ever be a uniform idea of happiness. The ideology we have described assumes that people are clear about what constitutes a happy life, as if the concept of happiness were innate and universal.

But that is not at all the case. It may indeed be that everyone regards hunger and thirst, pain and mortal threats as misfortunes. But examining the opposite side of the coin, comparing feel-good situations that yield fleeting feelings of happiness, it quickly becomes evident that there are pronounced differences, both during different stages of development of one and the same individual, and between different people. Babies feel good in different situations than adults do. And while one individual may feel a sense of elation while para-gliding, someone else of the same age, sex and nationality, but with a different life history, may feel nothing but panic.

Even more than ideas about transient feel-good moments, ideas about what constitutes a gratifying life change in the course of each individual life span on the basis of past experience. The idea that someone at the age of 14 knows what will constitute a happy life for him/her, and then proceeds to "forge" his life along those lines until he reaches retirement, is simply incomprehensible. We would not call such an individual "happy," but rather say that he has not developed into adulthood. But at the same time, the idea implicit in the foregoing statement, that people *should* develop, *should* mold their own lives and live them as self-aware individuals in order for them to be happy, is difficult to explicate philosophically.

### **Diversity in unity**

Ideas about human nature in which an individual either remains repressed, which means unhappiness, or else realizes himself, which results in happiness, have long dominated thinking about human development. Part of that tradition are emancipatory ideas according to which people living in un-free conditions in which they dominate one another can neither recognize nor realize their true natures.

The German philosopher Theodor Adorno broke with that essentialism and put forward a radical individualism which regards any general statements about individuals as mistaken. Nevertheless, even in this conception, and regardless of their thinking in generalized terms, people remain caught in ideas of happiness, vague fantasies such as that of living in a place where all is harmony. Adorno speaks of the "metaphysical experience" of childhood, in which place names become signposts to possible happiness. The places of our childhood, in which happiness is not yet realized but is dimly perceived as achievable, are "indissolubly individualized" in the imagination, while the "real world," which denies people happiness, is dominated by generalities. Two paths of personal development are conceivable against that background: In one, the

individual relinquishes as an illusion the childlike perception that there is a life in which all things fit together, and adjusts to the presumed negatives which dominate reality. In the other process of development, the individual maintains a “utopian impulse” toward happiness and insists on confronting the exigencies of this world with the question: “Is that all there is?”

How one evaluates these development processes depends upon whether one regards reality as a contradictory context determined by generalities, or as “indissolubly individualized,” with all generalities seen as constructs which never reach individuals. In an indissolubly individualized reality, the differences and generalities are decisive. The latter involve simplifications at best, and at worst the control or denial of true differences.

In his reflections on “happy identity,” Adorno draws a distinction between a merely apparent union of individuals into an undifferentiated chaos, and “realized peace.” In that peace there is a “class of the differentiated without domination, in which the differentiated participate in one another.” It is not difficult to see that our present competitive society, in which everything is ranked, is the diametric opposite of such a peace. The prerequisite for different individuals to truly “participate” in one another is that they themselves become open and clear. This is much like the statement made by Walter Benjamin back in the mid-1920's that “Being happy means becoming aware of oneself without fear.”

Conditions of harmony and unification are certainly among the images of happiness, whereas those of division, alienation and war are signposts for unhappiness. Adorno's observation that it is possible to have a fusion which dissolves differences, and a society which maintains that fusion without domination, is important as a point of orientation for unsuccessful and successful striving for happiness. Consciousness and calm toward the complexity of one's own striving are conditions for a happy experience of unity; preventing it, on the other hand, are shame, guilt, repression and numbness, false ways of dealing with the suffering caused by differences. This applies not only to differences within an individual, but even more to those between different people. The American philosopher Stanley Cavell has noted that it is “a terrible and awesome truth” that the acknowledgment of the differentness of the Other, the unavoidable separation, is a condition of human happiness. Indifference, he adds, is the denial of that condition.

### **Meaning: a voice of one's own**

“Meaning” might be defined as the natural unity achieved in a person's life, with retention of the inner complexity of that life. Experiences of meaning are in themselves experiences of happiness. To the extent that they involve an entire life, they may be

regarded as experiences of happiness-in-life – as when a person in retrospect can see his own life as meaningful. But the experience of meaningfulness may also be important with regard to fleeting moments. A situation in which momentary euphoria is experienced, for example, is heightened in intensity when it is part of a chain of meaning. A case in point: A member of a soccer team who kicks a goal may be happy about it at the moment of success. But if that goal is part of a life story in which the player has been working for a long time with his team-mates to win a championship, and if that goal clinches the championship for his team, the biographical significance heightens the euphoric feeling engendered by the goal.

Meaning is not something that simply happens of itself in life. Nor is it an artifact that can be manufactured. We as individuals are the very process of our existence and we cannot produce it as something external to ourselves. So how are we to think about the realization of meaning or happiness-in-life? Meaning is something which develops out of the experienced and remembered episodes of a life. It is not the result of deliberate effort, like a work of art. Individuality and happiness-in-life are neither technical nor artistic products, as the Romantics and their successors Nietzsche and Foucault imagined. In this case, the choice between emergence and production is a false one, because here we are dealing with a process of attention. A bodily sensation, such as a headache, or a sound, such as a conversation at a neighboring table in a restaurant, may be present for some time without my perceiving it. But suddenly I grow quiet, or there is a moment of relative silence in the restaurant, and I suddenly become aware of my headache, or of the conversation at the next table. I did not produce either the headache or the nearby conversation, but neither was I passive; rather, I actively focused my attention on these events. The situation is similar with regard to the process of my existence. One life episode may follow another without my really thinking about what sort of life I am living; but alternatively, I might pay close attention to the sequence of my own actions and the events which befall me, and recognize a pattern there.

What a person recognizes when he sees meaning in his own existence is a shape or form, like the dark and light patches on an outside wall that is wet with rain. One individual may see a dog in the patches, another may perceive a rabbit. That depends, first, on one's own degree of attention, and second, on the rain and the outer surface of the wall. Which shapes gain prominence is a product of the interplay between passive acceptance of the given and active, attentive interpretation.

One's own existence is not a spatial, but rather a temporal shape. When thinking about the experiences in one's own life yields a sense of meaning, the result is a temporal pattern from which the continuation of one's life follows, just as if one continued the shape in the rain-wet wall by adding a brush-stroke. But one's own actions continue to change the temporal shape, which is the sense of meaning in one's life. And attention must also be given to those changes. It is important, in general, to focus attention on

the sequences of events in one's life, to look for a pattern, to ask oneself: "What kind of life am I really leading?" If one succeeds in discovering a pattern, that may provide a springboard from which it becomes possible to lead a life in which one's actions may be perceived as right or wrong in an eminent sense of the term, one action seen as being true to one's own life, another as alien to it.

In this context, Stanley Cavell has spoken of the search for "one's own voice." One's own voice has to do with one's reactions to that which life presents one with. A concert singer asks herself what a particular aria means to her, with other pieces of music she has sung before in her life coloring her judgment. Or, when involved in a discussion, one may ask oneself what meaning a particular remark or question has on the basis of one's experience in life so far – or not, and respond with a mere cliché. In this way all people, when they are looking for a sense of meaning, are involved in the search for how they, as a creature different from all others, should respond in their future life to what they have done and experienced in the past.

### **Basic emotional health**

This possibility of reacting "with one's own voice" is only possible when the organic continuation of life is assured. It also takes an ability to reflect, a certain degree of inner peace and courage, to be able to focus attention on the events of one's own life. We might call that "basic emotional health," which is a prerequisite in the search for happiness in life. When both are present – which is often not the case, because a person may be ill, or their organic life threatened in some other way, or they do not possess the basic emotional health to fearlessly ask themselves what sort of life they are living – if, in other words, both organic and emotional health are present, a mixture of easy receptivity and creative responsiveness may lead someone to discover a recognizable shape or pattern to his or her life which will make it clear how they are to continue living so that this quality may continue.

Let's not fool ourselves: The old philosophers were right, and those new "advisers" who pretend to have the secret of happiness for everyone are wrong. A happy life is difficult to find, and quite rare. Most people do not find much happiness in their lives, but simply struggle to survive or achieve only momentary gratification, fleeting euphoria and short-lived satisfactions. The experience of meaning or happiness-in-life is not linked to the sense of freedom to do this or that or the other thing. When the celebrated conductor Sergiu Celibidache was asked whether he was a happy man, his response was Yes, and his reason was that he knew every morning what he was getting up for: music. That is precisely what he meant. A person who discovers and creates meaning in his life, knows how he must deal with the individual exigencies of his own existence.

This does not necessarily mean that such a person is externally free, as Celibidache

was, to be able to live out that meaning. Powerful forces may prevent him from doing what is necessary for him. That is why even those who have found meaning are not necessarily the “masters of their fate.” Like all creatures with finite power, they too are subject to the vagaries of chance.

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