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NUMBER 2, 2012

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Social Sciences

VOLUME 43

NUMBER 2, 2012

Social Sciences

A Quarterly Journal of the Russian Academy of Sciences

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Anthropology of Happiness

Anthropology of Happiness: The State of Well-Being and the Way of Joy

Dmitry LEONTIEV

The problem of happiness has since the times of Antiquity attracted genuine interest both of philosophers and lay people, although that interest has waxed and waned over history. On the one hand, this state is in one way or another familiar to most people; on the other hand, it has always been loaded with philosophical, ethical and cultural-historical contents.

By the end of the 20th century the problem of happiness transcended the framework of purely philosophical, ethical and theological discussions to become a mass culture mythologeme.

Pascal Bruckner critically analyzed in his book *Perpetual Euphoria* the mass obsession with the idea of happiness. Bruckner said, among other things, that forced happiness was the ideology of the second half of the 20th century, a euphoria imposed on us that "forces us to consider everything in terms of pleasantness/unpleasantness" and "banishes or squeamishly gets rid of those who for some reason do not experience it." That ideology has direct political consequences: "By becoming part of a political doctrine happiness turned into a terrible weapon of mass destruction. No amount of sacrifice, no purges of the human herd seem to be excessive if their goal is the bright future."¹

For all the diversity of concrete views, the concept of happiness has always been identified with the highest good accessible to human being, the ultimate of the desired. Is happiness simultaneously the highest goal and motive of human actions? A superficial view would suggest an affirmative answer formulated not only in the popular poetic simile "human being is created for happiness like a bird is created for flight," but also in the preamble to such a serious document as the US Constitution. Bruckner begins his book by quoting a thesis on happiness that young Victor Mirabeau was advancing in a 1738 letter to a friend, happiness as the only goal that makes life worth living. At the same time a closer philo-

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The study was implemented in the framework of the Program of Fundamental Studies of the Higher School of Economics in 2011.

sophical reflection proceeding from recent psychological investigations puts such a straightforward approach into question.

Psychologists recently joined the discussion of that problem contributing many empirically established facts and regularities: the problem of happiness is effectively pivotal for the Positive Psychology trend that emerged at the turn of the centuries.² Over the past several decades so many empirical studies have been published in this field as to lend credence to the claim that humanity learned more about happiness during this period than in the preceding 2000 years. Most studies use for a measure of happiness "subjective well-being," an integral emotional-rational assessment of a person's life by that person. We witness psychology becoming a new type of anthropology. Positive Psychology practically does not question the principle of the pursuit of happiness. The only reservation is adopting as the basis not hedonism—life principle emphasizing direct, immediate here-and-now pleasure,—but rather eudaimonism, the principle that considers the overall balance of pleasures and the price one has to pay for them in the long term.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the main dilemmas and contradictions connected with the role of happiness in human life. Drawing on psychological data and theories we can formulate the problem more precisely and discover at least two distinct realities behind that word.

Trajectory of the Development of Philosophical Ideas about Happiness

The idea of happiness as the supreme good one can attain arose in Antiquity in the context of juxtaposition of the desire for immediate gratification (hedonism) and the desire for a more complete, rounded and sustainable well-being (eudaimonia). The content of happiness, the range of elements it contains was not specified: some linked happiness primarily with pleasure, others with moral good believing for example that a heroic death for one's country in the field of battle was supreme happiness, others again combined the two.³ Not surprisingly, back in the first century BC the Roman philosopher Varro counted 289 different views on happiness. Characteristically, the word "eudaimonia" literally meant the fate of a person protected by gods, just like the Russian word *schastye* has the same root as the word uchast (meaning "fate" or "lot").⁴ Therefore, initially happiness was associated with luck and good fortune. But luck and good fortune do not bestow their gifts at random. It is a gift of the gods, an expression of their benevolence, with the gods deciding on whom to bestow their gifts. Therefore, the view of happiness as luck and good fortune does not only contradict the concept of happiness as a deserved good, but is rather closely intertwined with it. At the same time happiness cannot be attained through direct effort, this is beyond the power of human being.

Such a concept of happiness implied a certain objective basis, an external assessment, a view from the outside, and prevailed for almost two thousand years. A kind of alternative to this concept was provided by the teachings of Plotinus and early Christian philosophers, St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who saw happiness exclusively as the merger of the soul with God and achieving

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heavenly bliss in the better world; these authors were skeptical about the possibility to achieve genuine happiness in earthly life and in mundane pursuits.

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However, in the Modern Times the objectivist concept of happiness began to gradually give way to the subjectivist view: only the person himself or herself can say whether he/she is happy and pleased with life. Given this understanding, possessing goods is important for happiness (because it is hard to be happy without possessions). But it does not guarantee happiness. Everything depends on feeling, reaction and the attitude to these benefits. A tramp living under a bridge can be much happier than a coat-tailed millionaire. The objective criterion was supplanted by the subjective one: the main thing is how happy you feel while objective circumstances, though they do play a certain role, are not decisive. Lev Tolstoy's *Confessions* begins with the author telling that he has all the conceivable good things to the utmost degree; nevertheless the meaning of life escapes him and he feels sometimes like shooting himself.

In the Russian language and in Russian mentality the concept of happiness was initially associated exclusively with luck and material well-being. Vladimir Dahl's *Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language (1853)* does not contain a definition of happiness as an inner state of the soul. It only finds its way into dictionaries in the late 20th century although even there the former interpretation is prevalent.⁵

However, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries an intensive attack was launched on the idea of happiness as the foundation and rationale of human life. The main target of the critique was the utilitarian philosophy (Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill) which again put the problem of happiness to the center of philosophical discussions while the biggest contribution to this critique was made, in addition to Friedrich Nietzsche, by Russian religious philosophy. It stated that the concept of happiness, like the concepts of utility and pleasure, has no moral character and cannot provide the basis for ethics.⁶ The principle of the quest of happiness has no meaning: it can give rise to absolutely contradictory doctrines,⁷ it does not specify what should be the object of activity,⁸ it is impossible to compare the happiness experienced by various individuals and finally, happiness means a suspension of all desires and ignorance of what is good and what is evil.⁹ For the same reason the idea of happiness cannot provide a justification of human life, and the idea of arranging one's life on earth in accordance with the principle of happiness is false. "It is unnatural and impossible to make this byproduct the goal that lies ahead; just like it is impossible and ugly for a ship to move with its bow behind the attached rudder."¹⁰

Happiness and Meaning

Vasily Rozanov, Nikolay Berdyayev, Aleksey Vvedensky and other philosophers juxtaposed to the principle of the quest of happiness the principle of the quest of meaning oriented towards something valuable in the world. What is important is that they saw the meaning of life as something transcending life itself.

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"The only logical justification of the belief in the meaning of life is our belief that our life is a journey leading us to a goal of absolute value that lies outside our life and is implemented through life."¹¹ "An evaluation in terms of meaning invariably presupposes standing above what is being evaluated."¹² That is why human being is capable of enduring suffering: suffering the meaning of which is known, differs from the suffering lacking goal and meaning.¹³ In that tradition happiness is seen as an intentional experience that is not closed in itself, but is generated by the discovery and realization of meaning through action in the world.

Essentially the same logic was presented in the existential anthropology of Viktor Frankl in which the principle of seeking for meaning was clearly opposed to the quest of pleasure and happiness, and not only in the philosophical-ethical, but also in the psychological context. "The theory based on the principle of pleasure ignores an important quality of mental activity, i.e., intentionality. And in general people desire not pleasure as such, they simply want what they want."¹⁴ Elaborating this thesis Frankl stressed that what we need is not happiness per se, but rather the reasons for it; if they are there, happiness will come by itself.¹⁵ An attempt to sidestep the need for meaning and derive a sense of happiness directly leads to alcoholic or narcotic addiction.¹⁶ Meaning provides the basis of happiness and possessing it is a prerequisite of happiness and even of the very possibility of experiencing it. Lack of meaning deprives man of the ability to experience happiness and to endure suffering.¹⁷

The idea that orientation towards meaning comes before the experience of happiness gradually makes its way into positive psychology to which the problem of happiness, identified with a sustained subjective sense of well-being, is central. Some authors have come to consider meaning as a significant factor of happiness which turns out to be "a by-product of participating in worthwhile projects and activities that do not have as their primary focus the attainment of happiness."¹⁸

Empirical studies in positive psychology that in practice take into account the factor of meaning, are comparatively few, but their results are indicative. They show that what contributes to a sense of happiness most is progress in achieving not any, but personally significant ("internal" or "motive-congruent") goals and that the most powerful positive experiences are connected with being absorbed in something that goes beyond one's *self*.¹⁹ However while meaning predicts happiness, the reverse is not true: meaning does not depend on the level of well-being, it helps not only to attain happiness, but also to do without it.²⁰

Thus an analysis of the problem of happiness cannot be complete without taking into account the role of meaning in achieving it. The role of meaning is manifested, first, in that its implementation is one of the key reasons for experiencing happiness. Second, it determines the direction of the quest and the quality of the very state of happiness, not only its intensity, but rather maturity. Finally and thirdly, meaning is a great help in coping not only with a deficit of happiness, but with still more serious adversities. Both accomplishments and discoveries, and gaps and blind alleys of positive psychology provide vivid evidence of the key role of the concept of meaning in the solution of the central problems of present-day psychology.

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Happiness As a State and Happiness As an Activity: Following Aristotle

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The opponents of the idea of happiness as the supreme goal and foundation of human life, from Nietzsche to Solovyov to Bruckner, advance three groups of arguments.

- The first argument is that the concept of "happiness" is vague and even tautological: there is not a single concrete object that everybody would describe as "happiness," everyone invests the word with one's own content and for everyone the word has a different meaning. An interesting analysis of the problem of happiness was provided in Mikhail Veller's philosophical treatise *Everything About Life*.²¹ Analyzing logically various ideas of happiness, which are very diverse whereas the psychological state that this word indicates is pretty well defined, Veller concludes with good reason: happiness is the function of distance from the current position to the passionately desired position, whatever the latter may be. It is the distance between the desired and the actual that lends dynamism to life and striving this dynamism disappears once happiness is achieved.
- This leads to the second argument against happiness, the statement that happiness viewed in the traditional way is time standing still, the end of life. The pure metaphor of supreme happiness is "now I can (or even want to) die." Indeed, a person in a state of happiness has no further motivation for life, no perspective. I am already at the highest point. From there the only way leads downward. Psychology describes the "Martin Eden syndrome" after the main character of Jack London's novel of that title. Martin Eden rose from a humble background and through hard and at times adventurous life, effort and sheer ability made it to the top. He became a famous writer, a member of high society and achieved everything he had dreamt of. At the peak of his powers he committed suicide because everything had been achieved and there was nothing left to live for. Is there a way out of this impasse? The answer is no if one considers happiness to be a purely emotional phenomenon, an experience of the state of bliss.
- The third argument is that an inner state cannot be the goal and foundation of life. Strictly speaking, it refers not to the idea of happiness as such, but the reduction of happiness to the most positive emotional state possible. One can gain a better insight into this by looking at the problem of happiness from the viewpoint of the universal structure of self-regulation of purposive activities of living systems. In that structure happiness can play the role either of a feedback mechanism or a goal criterion of a desired state. In the first case happiness, like all emotions, performs the function of giving a signal to the subject as to how well his or her life is proceeding. But if happiness or other positive emotions within that structure play the role of the criterion of what should be and what is desirable, then the subject ceases seeking for really improving life if positive emotions.

tions can be achieved by other ways, for example, through alcohol or drugs. Indeed, if emotions (including happiness) become the goal, life does not necessarily have to be good and full, an illusion that everything is fine can be obtained bypassing life.

Let us turn to Aristotle, who was invariably credited with introducing the principle of happiness in popular domain, while few people read what he has actually written. As if foreseeing this situation, the philosopher wrote: "With regard to what happiness is people differ and the majority do not give the same account as the wise." Aristotle's ideas of happiness were very far from the current ideology of "perpetual euphoria." He tried to construe relationships between such concepts as pleasure, good, virtue and happiness. The boundaries between them were and still are not easy to identify. But most importantly, Aristotle stressed that "happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue" and that "activity plainly comes into being and is not present at the start like a piece of property."

This is not an accidental formula. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle persistently repeated that happiness means activity (*energeia*). Moreover, he even distinguished between the kind of happiness that implies activity and more lowly kinds. "Any chance person, even a slave, can enjoy the bodily pleasures no less than the best man; but no one assigns to a slave a share in happiness unless he assigns to him also a share in human life for happiness does not lie in such occupations but, as we have said before, in virtuous activities."²² Thus with Aristotle we discover a connection of genuine happiness not with an emotional state, but with activity, virtue and with being engaged in life, at the same time, he distinguished his concept of happiness from more primitive views.

Thus, what leads us into an impasse is not so much the idea of happiness as such but rather the interpretation of happiness as an emotional state, a state of supreme bliss. That notion arose as a result of an unnoticed departure from Aristotle and the other "wise men" towards vulgar superficial interpretations of happiness promoted by the mass consumerist culture. These elicited the following comment from Aristotle written 2000 years ago: "Neither should the opinions of the many (for it is they who speak at random about almost everything, and especially so). For it is absurd to apply reasonably to those who need sensation rather than reason."²³ No comment is needed.

The Duality of Happiness

Empirical studies carried out during the past decade in the field of positive psychology, although still assuming happiness to be a subjective state, gradually bring to awareness that this understanding is insufficient and that it is necessary to take into account the role of activity, meaning and personality.

At the center of generally recognized regularities of the psychology of happiness and subjective well-being is the "pie model" of Sonya Lyubomirski, Ken Sheldon and David Schkade which draws on many psychological studies of the factors that influence our state of happiness. The model compares the contribu-

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tion of three groups of factors to the extent to which people feel happy, and in terms of common sense that relationship turns out to be somewhat unexpected. All that pertains to external conditions and can be described by the umbrella term "quality of life" accounts for just about 10% of the variance of the individual sense of happiness or subjective well-being, far less than is commonly believed. The stable personality structure of the individual which is considered to be hereditary to a large extent (but not entirely), accounts for up to 50% of the variance. And about 40% of the variance pertains to the factors that the authors describe in terms of "intentional activity," which echoes Aristotle and the ideas of some modern authors. These are factors that have to do with the way we organize our lives, relate to our fellows, with the goals we pursue, in short, with what is in our hands and is an object of our choice.²⁴

Some other data put in still bolder relief the fact that happiness in different people may differ not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. For example, many publications of the past decade devoted to the dependence of the experience of happiness and subjective well-being on the material welfare (per capita GDP), based on the comparison of the data of international surveys, invariably reproduce one and the same pattern.²⁵ The chart that expresses the dependence of happiness on money is divided into two parts. The lower part of the chart (when GDP values are low) reveals a direct linear dependence of the level of subjective wellbeing on material welfare. However, that dependence ends as soon as a certain level of material welfare is achieved (an average annual GDP of about \$15,000 per capita by now). If one passes from international comparisons to individual differences in one and the same country only the position of the turning point will change but the regularity will be the same. Beginning from a certain moment the curve becomes almost flat, which means that further improvement of well-being hardly correlates with happiness, and a person with a fortune of 100 million dollars is only marginally happier than a person with a fortune of 1 million. As Sholom Aleichem said, having money is not as good, as it is bad having none.

In fact this curve reflects two kinds of happiness. The first is the minimum happiness directly linked to living conditions and the satisfaction of basic needs. If the level of welfare is low it is possible to make a person happier by improving the material welfare. But there comes a moment when the basic needs that determine the quality of life are met. In fact, the concept of "the middle class" corresponds to the level of material welfare at which happiness ceases to depend on it and becomes determined by other factors. That is the maximum happiness, individual happiness connected with meaning, activity and virtue; Aristotle termed it eudaimonia. It depends on the person, his/her own life and relationships with other people. Another recently discovered empirical regularity refutes the long-standing belief among psychologists that every person has his/her own stable individual range within which his or her experience of contentment with life and psychological well-being fluctuates: particularly joyful or tragic circumstances may only temporarily change the individual level of happiness before it returns to the original level.²⁶ The data of a longitudinal study conducted in Germany over many years have shown that although this is really the case for the majority of respondents, there is a group of them (24% of the total sample) that

reveal sustained shifts (mostly positive) of the level of subjective well-being by at least one standard deviation.²⁷

Thus, the answer to the question "is there happiness?" would be: "yes, and more than one." There are at least two. One can be provided for a person by helping him/her to meet his/her basic needs, raising the standard and quality of life. Such happiness can be bestowed or ensured by another person or the state, it can be bought for money and in fact it consists in money that enables one to buy the necessities-a shelter, nutritious and healthy food, leisure and entertainment, family hearth, sex, security and confidence of tomorrow-"like all the other people." It has its upper limit that may be considered to be the psychological norm while an insufficient level is a deviation. The second kind of happiness is individual and can be achieved by tortuous ways, it cannot be given or established as a norm, it can only be found in meaningful activities. It does not have an upper limit or standards for comparison and is in general hard to quantify, whereas its qualitative-phenomenological characteristic turns out to be very significant. One can go along with the definition of eudaimonic happiness as the degree of success in fulfilling one's personal existential project.²⁸ It means that happiness depends not only on success, but on what kind of project it is, in other words, alongside the quantitative measure it has a qualitative dimension.

The theory of autotelic experiences, or the theory of "flow" put forward by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi²⁹ is the most widely recognized of the modern theories that treat happiness in terms of activity. The author interviewed initially representatives of creative professions and then of various occupational, age and ethnic groups to discover and describe the optimal experiences characterized by engagement in a certain self-motivating activity. Flow is the state of total immersion in one's action, absorption in that action, when you are oblivious of time, of yourself and when instead of fatigue you experience a surge of energy. That flow is not bestowed on us like a blessing, but is generated by our conscious efforts, it is in our hands. In it pleasure merges with effort and meaning generating a powerful sense of enjoyment that in turn generates energy. Unlike happiness, enjoyment preserves energy, preserves motivation, preserves movement and offers a perspective and meaning. Flow experience is a reward for the effort exerted in order to be able to cope with ever more complicated tasks and thus is the driving force of evolution towards growing complexity. The flow is directly linked to personality characteristics, to the level of its development and maturity.

The two above described kinds of happiness are in line with the distinction between two categories of motivational processes in one of the versions of Abraham Maslow's theory, that on deficiency-related and Being-related ones. We speak about the first type of motivation when a person lacks something specific and needs to urgently fill the gap. The Being motivation is connected not with a deficit of something special but rather with the free development of the potentialities inherent in a person. Maslow described for example deficiency motivated and Being motivated processes of cognition, love, etc.³⁰ The distinction between both types of processes corresponds well to the above mentioned facts of dual determination of individual happiness.

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Happiness and Human Nature

Thus there are a number of reasons for distinguishing two realities which we are used to describe by one and the same word, "happiness," in all languages. They correlate directly with the two regimes of human existence:

- (1) the necessity mode on the basis of fixed auto-pilot mechanisms that make it predictable and manageable, and
- (2) optional mode of existence on the basis of reflexive consciousness, autonomy and orientation towards meaningful possibilities.³¹

We described earlier the former state as a minimum happiness, or, to use Maslow's term, deficiency happiness; it can also be equated to subjective wellbeing. That is a stable characteristic that varies little, has its quantitative measure and can be applied to any person by describing that person's position on a corresponding scale. It reflects the extent to which the basic human needs are met, adjusted for the general predisposition of a particular person to positive or negative emotions, accordingly, it is determined and predicted by the chances for needs gratification and by individual traits on which account for the ability to fully enjoy the positive aspects of life.

The second state was described above as maximum happiness, or Being happiness, to use Maslow's term. It can be equated to such concepts as "eudaimonia" or "optimal experience." It expresses the degree to which the meaning of the life or personal existential project is being fulfilled, conditioned by the very existence of such meaning or project (not everyone has it) and by its individual character. Therefore it has greater specificity and is better described in qualitative than quantitative terms. It does not arise by accident or through some automatic mechanisms, but through the intentional activity and communication thanks to conscious and authentic efforts of the subject; it can be called self-determined. Although potentially that kind of happiness is also within everyone's reach, not everyone has ever encountered it in his or her life due to the widespread phenomenon of "escape from freedom," from decision-making, choices, efforts and consciousness. At the same time, although there are good reasons for considering it to be a higher level of happiness, it can be present in life even against the background of very unfavorable external conditions and a low level of subjective well-being, in particular when a person can attain joy and happiness despite low living standards through inner psychological resources and meanings. It is not so uncommon, especially in Russia, when, to use Mikhail Zhvanetsky's apt remark, it is easier to be happy than contented.

As material welfare grows and people's basic needs are met they become happier; their subjective well-being increases along with their objective welfare. Having experienced this dynamics and having implemented the minimum program people try to continue moving up that trajectory, but, although they are earning still more money happiness does not increase anymore. To succeed in further search of happiness one has to change the trajectory of that search to a more complicated maximum program not through gratification, but through activity, through goals and relationships. In these forms of activity we find enjoyment rather than satisfaction, or subjective well-being.

Thus, the dilemma as to whether happiness is generated by objective material welfare or subjective experiences that confer meaning on what we do is resolved at the deficiency level through the recognition of the interaction between both sets of factors with the subjective factors playing the key role, while at the Being level through a dialectical synthesis that leads to the understanding of happiness as an intentional experience connected with meanings in the world that impel us and with the experience of progress in their discovery and fulfillment. One can agree with Maslow's definition of happiness as "experiencing real emotions over real problems and real tasks."³²

That view corresponds also to the well-known paradox of happiness formulated by John Stuart Mill: "Not seeking happiness and being able to do without it is the most reliable way of attaining it." Since then philosophers and psychologists have repeatedly used various words to reaffirm this paradoxical but unassailable truth: the more we seek happiness the harder it is to achieve, but it comes by itself if you pursue other worthy goals in your life. This relates to the conviction, expressed by many outstanding thinkers, that happiness can be found anywhere except within oneself. "The door to happiness opens outwards," as Søren Kierkegaard put it.

Since the problem of happiness is directly linked to the solution of the problem of meaning it is inseparable from the problems of personality and personal maturity. With regard to happiness the appropriate verb is "to be" rather than "to have." The question is to what extent a person is capable of being happy. While repeating the old saying that everyone is the blacksmith of one's own happiness we tend to forget how laborious and complicated the blacksmith's trade is. As Abraham Maslow pointed out, it is at the level of advanced and mature individual and advanced and mature happiness that the failure of the hedonistic worldview is particularly apparent.³³ The common type of hedonism propagated by the consumerist culture is the life strategy of the passive majority which tends to prefer the soft option. Of course, the hedonistic principle is an inalienable part of human nature because every living organism tends to conserve resources while seeking to obtain maximum results. It would be a mistake, however, to see the human essence in that principle. There are higher guiding principles that become more noticeable as the person grows up, matures and develops. Human nature is not static: transcendence of the given is its only invariant and we develop as we move towards higher principles of organization. Happiness can easily be achieved at the lower levels of personal maturity when the images and criteria of higher good are simple. Security and wealth that ensure bodily comfort and wellbeing of one's family and friends and/or infinite sexual pleasure is all that the majority of people can imagine as a picture of complete happiness. Not surprisingly, children are as a rule happier than adults. At higher levels of maturity (personal and spiritual, rather than biological one) the distance between reality and the ideal increases and happiness acquires a different quality and becomes more complicated and difficult to achieve. At the same time it becomes more individ-

ual and no less authentic. One has to pay a higher price for it, but the rewards are much greater. "Everyone has to grow up to one's happiness."³⁴ Even a little high-quality "hand-made" happiness can outweigh large amounts of primitive "machine-made" happiness.

Thus, humans are impelled not just by seeking a certain point of bliss. A mature personality starts seeking to raise that point which can be at different levels, at different horizons. Happiness is like the horizon not only because as you walk towards it, it recedes. The taller the person the broader his or her horizon. Happiness is directly linked to the magnitude of the personality: a little person cannot have genuinely great happiness although everyone can have happiness of a suitable size. A big person has big happiness although such a person is probably less concerned with achieving it... As Maslow pointed out, it is in human nature to seek for higher and higher heavens. And different kinds of heavens, one may add.

Finally, happiness is independent of life only in a drug addict or a severely mentally ill person because there is no other way towards happiness than the way of life.

"And to the young Mirabeau I would reply: 'I love life too much to wish nothing but happiness." 35

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