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# OUTSIDE ETHICS

***Raymond Geuss***

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seems extremely implausible. Of course, no one can be prevented from refusing to call something which has all the usual psychological (and other) characteristics and trappings of virtuous action “really” virtue, on the grounds that it has consequences that are not good and we wish to reserve the word “virtue” for dispositions and character traits that have exclusively good consequences; but to argue in this way is to adopt a kind of verbal immunization strategy rather than to tell us anything of substance about “virtue.” If “virtue” is used in this sense, there may turn out to be no “virtues.” The fact—if it is a fact—that caring for the aged, the helpless, and the infirm by taking them out of the line of fire actually contributes, in *these particular circumstances*, to the success of a reprehensible political policy—assuming for the sake of argument that “ethnic cleansing” even of a peaceful kind is a reprehensible political policy—in no way implies that those providing the care were not exercising virtue. After all, the members of the international agencies in question may not have had any real choice in Bosnia other than, on the one hand, acting (in many cases heroically) as they did, or, on the other, withdrawing or effectively doing nothing, an option that would also have been unlikely to stop ethnic cleansing and would certainly have resulted concretely in much more human suffering than actually took place. This indicates, I think, the need to see “virtue” in a wider historical and political context. From the fact that there is no obvious way simply to combine one’s moral admiration for the action of many of these agencies with one’s disapproval of the actual results to which they contributed (albeit perhaps unwillingly), so as to reach an unproblematic unitary general evaluation of what happened, is, I think, no argument against this position, but merely indicates the difficulty in evaluating real situations rather than the simplified “example” favored in some of the ethics literature.

One of the most important tasks of moral philosophy as the theory of the good life is keeping open a space for social criticism, so that necessary bourgeois cooperation does not transform itself into complicity with evil. This requires appeal to as much history, psychology, and social theory as we can muster. It isn’t at all clear that a freestanding virtue-ethics can by itself discharge this task.

## 6

### Happiness and Politics

AT THE HEIGHT OF THE TERROR during the French Revolution Saint-Just announced that “Happiness is a new idea in Europe.”<sup>1</sup> Extracted from its context and interpreted very literally, this does not seem *prima facie* a terribly plausible opinion to hold. Surely many people before the eighteenth century had rather a clear idea of what they thought happiness was; many ancient philosophers, at any rate, such as Epicurus, Zeno of Kitium, and Aristotle, had views, sometimes elaborate and highly articulated views, about the nature of happiness, and about what human individuals might do to increase their chances of attaining it. What is more, Saint-Just will have known this.

Does Saint-Just, then, perhaps mean that the idea of “collective” or “public” happiness is a new thought? Does he think that ancient philosophers had views about the potential happiness of *individuals*, but none about what it would mean for a human community to be happy? “Happiness,” after all, like that other great modern ideal, “liberty,” is a term which in principle purports to refer either to individuals or to groups. I can speak of an individual human being, Alcibiades, Cavalcanti, or John Knox, as being happy (or free), but the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (article one in the version of 1793) also speaks of the “*bonheur commun*” of a community as the goal of political association, and uses the level to which this “goal” has been attained as a criterion for evaluating a given polity.<sup>2</sup> If I follow this usage, presumably, I can say that the Roman Republic was “happy” whereas the *ancien régime* in the early eighteenth century was not, or that France in 1794 was happier than in 1744.

Margaret Thatcher once notoriously claimed that society does not exist, and this strong modern bias toward individualist conceptions might give further impetus to a historical argument to the effect that “happiness” (and also,

This paper is a slightly expanded version of a talk I gave at a conference on “Democracy and Human Happiness” in April 2002 in Kyoto. I wish to thank the sponsors of this conference, the Institute for the Integrated Study of Future Generations, and its president, Prof. Tae-Chang Kim, for the kind invitation to Kyoto. I am particularly indebted to John Dunn, Zeew Emmertich, Hilary Gaskin, Lawrence Hamilton, Istvan Hont, and Michael Sonnenscher for discussions of the topic of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> “*Le bonheur est une idée neuve en Europe*,” in *Oeuvres Complètes de Saint-Just*, ed. Michel Duval (Paris: Gêvard Lebovici, 1984), 715.

<sup>2</sup> Article One, “*Le but de toute société est le bonheur commun*.” The documents show a parallel use of “*bonheur de tous*” and “*bonheur publique*.”

by the way, "liberty") was originally used only of individuals, not of groups, and ought strictly still to be taken to refer in the literal sense only to individuals. Application to groups is a seemingly unwarranted metaphorical extension. To say that a city is happy is just shorthand for saying something that can be put more correctly as a simple aggregative statement about individuals, such as that most of the individuals in the city are "happy" (in whatever sense human individuals can be happy). This is a familiar phenomenon in political philosophy, and it is important to note that the process of "extension" can go in either direction. That is, terms that originally refer to individuals can be extended to groups, but terms originally used of groups can also come to refer to individuals. Thus "deliberation" seems originally to have referred to the processes by which groups of people discuss matters and come to a decision, and then it was extended to the presumed internal dialogue in which individuals may engage when they weigh up the merits and disadvantages of some proposed course of action.<sup>3</sup> Many people find this kind of extension inherently dubious and grounds for suspicion that some kind of category mistake is being made. I am suggesting that one try to see "metaphorical extension" not as a potentially dubious afterthought, but as the very lifeblood of all thought and language use.<sup>4</sup> As long as one is clear in each case about what one means, one can see this dual usage of "happiness" as potentially an enrichment of the vocabulary we have at our disposal to think about politics and the good life.

Unfortunately, if Saint-Just meant that the ancients had no conception of "public happiness," he was completely wrong. Ancient authors assume that one can speak equally of individuals or cities as being "happy."<sup>5</sup> Aristotle even goes further than this and specifically says (*Politics* 1324a5) that when one calls a group or an individual "happy" one is using the term *in the same sense*.<sup>6</sup> The argument he uses, however, which depends on the claim that "happy" in this respect is like "wealthy," does not convince completely, but rather should be seen as warning us of certain dangers.<sup>7</sup> Even if we assume that we know

<sup>3</sup> S. Hampshire, *Justice Is Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Particularly if one takes a view of language like that which has been developed by Nietzsche and Wittgenstein and which deemphasizes the distinction between literal and metaphorical usage. This is clearest perhaps in Nietzsche's "*Über Wahrheit und Lüge in einem außermoralischen Sinne*."

<sup>5</sup> An example taken virtually at random: Pindar, *Isthmia* 7, line 1 (although the word there is μάκαρ, not εὐδαίμων).

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle does not, of course, have at his disposal the modern terminology of "meaning," so what he says is that the happiness of the city is the same as that of the individual.

<sup>7</sup> The conjunction of happiness and wealth is presumably not coincidental. The word which later gets established as the canonical one for "happy" (εὐδαίμων) does not occur in Homer, but when it does first appear it is paired with another word which seems to retain a strong connotation of "wealthy, prosperous" (ὀψιμος, in Hesiod, *Opera et dies*, 826).

what "wealthy" means in the case of an individual—originally, having many useful possessions, then having much money, and, perhaps nowadays, having large and secure entitlements and lines of credit—in applying the term to a group of people, a city, or a state, issues of distribution arise for which there are no analogues in the case of the individual. If the city is an organized political association we can assume that the resources available will be divided among various individuals who make up the city, but that there will also be a sector of things held "in common" or "publicly." Various individuals in Cambridge (including me) may also own houses, but the City of Cambridge as a public corporation itself owns school buildings, police vehicles, tracts of land, etc. By virtue of what, now, would Cambridge count as a "wealthy" city? By virtue of what we could call the "private" wealth of the individuals who live there? Does this mean the total wealth or the average wealth? Or does Cambridge count as wealthy by virtue of the value of the resources owned by the corporation which is the City of Cambridge? Or perhaps by taking the sum of all the wealth in private or public hands in the city?

This is a serious issue not simply with reference to wealth, but also with reference to the concept of "happiness." Aristotle's breezy analysis seems to be trying to divert attention from this issue, but Plato faces up to it squarely at the beginning of book 4 of the *Republic* (419a–421c6), when one of Socrates' interlocutors, Adeimantus, objects to Socrates' whole mode of proceeding in describing his ideal city. The ideal city is supposed to be an ideally happy (εὐδαίμων) city, that is, a city which instantiates and realizes what it is to be a city to the fullest, which is a fully flourishing specimen of what a city should be. Plato claims this is a city in which all the essential functions of communal human life are performed as well and efficiently as possible by distinct subgroups. Individuals are assigned to a given subgroup according to a highly developed principle of division of labor, so that each person does only that for which he or she has the greatest natural aptitude. Adeimantus, however, points out that in the city thus described, *none* of the people will be fully happy. This does not depend on surreptitiously shifting from Plato's technical sense of "happiness" (being a perfect specimen who is successfully, efficiently discharging one's task) to the common everyday sense of happiness (enjoyment or satisfaction), although we can well imagine that individuals in a Platonic city would not be terribly satisfied with their lot. Rather, although the Platonic city might instantiate fully what it is to be a city, none of the individuals would instantiate and realize humanity at its fullest, be fully flourishing instances of humanity; rather they would be locked into the exercise of particular social functions. Perfectly discharging one's task as a human being won't be the same thing as efficiently discharging one's specific role as a cobbler-in-the-ideal-city. The happiness of the city would then be quite distinct and would diverge in a significant way from the happiness of

its members taken either individually or collectively.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of the present discussion, the important point is that Plato seems to admit that happiness could, in principle, be a systemic property of the society as a whole that is not reducible to any straightforward summation of the states of happiness of the individual members. As Aristotle puts the point (*Politics* 1264b 19–20)—one he himself *rejects*—“happiness” is construed as being like “even” (as in “odd and even”). A given number, e.g., 7 + 7, are themselves even. Perhaps it is not yet completely clear in what this “happiness” of the city as a whole as distinct from that of the individuals consists, but what is clear is that these ancient philosophers at any rate had a very robust sense of “public happiness” indeed.

No matter how one turns it, then, Saint-Just seems simply to be wrong. Perhaps we can make sense of what he says by considering the political context within which his claim was made. Saint-Just was speaking in favor of the enactments that have come to be known as the Ventôse Decrees. These decrees called for the expropriation of enemies of the revolution and the use of the resources thus made available to support “poor patriots.” Measures like this, though, far from being a novelty of eighteenth-century France, have a very long history in the West. Demands for agrarian reforms that would have involved very extensive redistribution of lands to the poor were a recurrent feature of the political and social life of the Roman Republic at least from the time of the Gracchi (second century B.C.), and by the end of the Republic rival warlords were routinely using the expropriated land of opponents to reward supporters. Saint-Just’s point, then, presumably would have been that the *reasons* he and the Committee of Public Safety gave for these measures depended essentially on some reference to human happiness, but that in the past arguments for measures like these depended not on appeals to happiness but on appeals to some other grounds. So to say that the idea of happiness was a new one would mean not that no one in Europe had ever had the idea of (individual or communal) happiness before, but that for the first time a systematic attempt was being made to adopt happiness as an explicit social goal in a politically effective way. Perhaps we can become clearer about what Saint-Just might have meant by “happiness” by contrasting it with other things which he might have thought people in the past would have used to support fundamental institutions or drastic forms of action. What sorts of other grounds, then, does he think his, and our, ancestors might have given for this kind of decree?

<sup>8</sup> Plato’s response to this apparent objection is to emphasize the natural differences between individuals and to claim that although they are not happy *simpliciter*, they are as happy as they can reasonably be expected to be (given their natural endowments). This is their further developed in the myth of the metals (415)—one of the most repellent doctrines in the Platonic corpus.

One perfectly reasonable thing he might have meant was a contrast between the world of late eighteenth-century Europe and two other historical periods which preceded it and were widely considered to be completely distinct from it and each from the other: the Christian feudal era and the world of the ancient Mediterranean city-states and empires. The ancient world was one of perpetual war, and it is thus comprehensible that the most valued kinds of human properties were the active heroic ones of aggressive success, excellence, virtue, and glory. Such properties are characteristically displayed in zero-sum competitive contexts in which the success of one individual is the failure, or even death, of the other: Patroclus or Hector, Hector or Achilles, Pallas or Turnus, Turnus or Aeneas. The hero seeks always to be first and to attain glory. This heroic ethos is originally a moral code of individuals, but it can be extended to political communities, too: Athens or Sparta, Rome or Carthage. After all, such communities are as fully engaged in a network of competitive relations with other communities as individuals are with other individuals. When the city itself comes to be construed as a possible subject that can exhibit excellence, can succeed or fail, or gain glory, then these can become the goals of conscious political action. Thus agrarian reform in the ancient world could be thought to be connected with and justified by reference to the political power, strength, and security of the city.<sup>9</sup> For the city to be secure, powerful, and renowned, it needed soldiers. Under ancient conditions the best soldiers were expected to arise from the class of independent peasant farmers. Thus the city could have an interest in the redistribution of agricultural land which would turn the landless, and thus militarily useless, rural poor into prosperous farmers who were potential soldiers. This might have had nothing to do with the happiness of the individuals who were the beneficiaries of that redistribution.

Happiness, in any case, was not at all a necessary part of the heroic package. Achilles can choose a short, glorious life or a long, presumably comfortable life at home in fertile Phthia; Ajax is humiliated by the gods and commits suicide; Aeneas’ life is a model of *pietas*, *virtus*, and *labor*, but hardly of happiness.<sup>10</sup> In ancient drama, “happiness” is the lot not of the heroic protagonist of tragedy, but of the anti-hero who is the central character in comedy—the Dicaeopolis in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* who wants peace, feasting, and sex, not war and glory. Thus it is not unreasonable to think that regardless of what a handful of politically marginal philosophers might have thought or said, real public action in the ancient world was characteristically conducted by reference to one or another of the complex of terms like basic security, virtue, success, glory. The claim that one would orient political action

<sup>9</sup> Public defense on these grounds is, of course, compatible with a determination to see to it that one’s *own* partisans are the particular beneficiaries of the proposed policy.  
<sup>10</sup> *Aeneid* 1.5–11, 12.435–36, etc.

toward "happiness" might then well be conceived to represent a historical departure.<sup>11</sup>

The Christian Middle Ages in Europe was no stranger to the politics of individual and dynastic competition, heroism, and the pursuit of glory. These seem *de facto* to have continued to inform the living and thinking at least of the politically dominant classes, but the advent of Christianity meant the recognition of another ideal: the quest for the salvation of the individual soul, or "beatitude." One might think of this as a recognition of two distinct concepts of happiness: a terrestrial kind ordered around the peaceful enjoyment of the goods of life, and a celestial kind, the possibility of which was disclosed to humanity by Divine Revelation, and the full realization of which could be attained only after death. There was wide disagreement on the relation between these two kinds of happiness, but even those most disposed to see beatitude and earthly happiness as compatible tended strictly to subordinate the latter to the former.

So one can, after all, make reasonable sense of Saint-Just's announcement. What is new in the eighteenth century is that "happiness" gets added to the possible list of freestanding grounds for public action.<sup>12</sup>

We can speak then of individual happiness or of the happiness of a group, and one can think of the happiness of a group in either of two ways. First, it can be thought of as some more or less simple aggregate of the happiness of the constituent individuals, just as one can speak of a city as "wealthy" if many individual citizens are wealthy or as "glorious" if many citizens are glorious. Second, one can think of the happiness of the group as something that is not thus reducible. That is, we can construe speaking of the "happiness" of a group in analogy to the cases in which we speak of a city as "wealthy," meaning by that to designate a high level of public wealth even if all the individuals are poor; or of a city as "glorious" if its armies or football teams defeat, by virtue of their extreme discipline and coordination, all comers even though no individual member is particularly glorious (or, if any glory an individual has derives from the glory of the army or team as a whole rather than the other way around).

This still, to be sure, leaves open the question of just what "happiness" means either in the individual or in the group case. I wish to distinguish three families of conceptions of happiness: first, externalist or objectivist views, second, desire-relative views, and finally, overall-assessment views.

To the modern temperament, the most convincing forms of externalist or

<sup>11</sup> Saint-Just does not claim that happiness is the *only* goal of the revolution. Other goals would include liberty, equality, and fraternity; also virtue, frugality, and glory (as mentioned, for instance, in the discourse on the reorganization of the army, *Oeuvres Complètes de Saint-Just*, ed. Michel Duvall Jaurès, Gérard Labovici, 1984), 412).

<sup>12</sup> See A. Hirschman, *Ritual Views of Market Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 105–7.

objectivist conceptions of happiness are naturalist ones which start with some notion of basic forms of minimally healthy or especially vibrant or vigorous functioning of a human being, and then go on to define happiness as the exercise of these functions in a minimally viable or an especially vibrant and vigorous way. What counts as the healthy, robust functioning of an individual is in principle independent of the shifting beliefs, desires, feelings, and opinions of that individual. A human who was functioning in a vigorous way would be likely to know that and to feel pleased, but this might not invariably be the case, and even when it was, the feeling and knowledge would be secondary to the functioning.<sup>13</sup> Being happy would consist not in being pleased but in being well fed, fully mobile, able to work and reproduce, etc. The views of Plato and Aristotle are most naturally construed as having this structure. To move now from the individual to the collective case, we have seen how Plato's theory seems to posit a functioning of the whole which would in principle be distinct from functioning of the individuals. Despite our disinclination to take seriously the teleological metaphysics which underpins the Platonic and the Aristotelian view, there is something to be said for thinking of a society as a continuing enterprise that lasts potentially beyond the lifetime of any given individual and for countenancing it as a distinct level of functioning having its own integrity. Without *some* conception like this, albeit a nonmetaphysical one, it is very hard to see how we could even begin to think about, for instance, our relations to future generations.

Such an objective conception of happiness seems to play a role in some versions of the theory of the welfare state. Individual happiness may be connected with idiosyncratic forms of private enjoyment and may thus be both unpredictable and an inappropriate object of governmental action, but *public* happiness means providing some objectively specifiable set of accessible resources and services to all members of the society so as to ensure that each has at least a minimally defined standard of living: health care, food, shelter.<sup>14</sup> There is no need to be philistine about what this comprises; it can include an established church with extensive pastoral services, a national radio service that broadcasts performances of concerts, public picture galleries, and the satisfaction of various human psychic and emotional needs, as long as these can be shown to be objectively necessary for human flourishing. As noted above, on an objectivist view it need not invariably be the case that successful functioning was attended by enjoyment—some perverse people might not enjoy being healthy, but even so, health could retain its standing as a con-

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of this with special reference to Aristotle, see Richard Krant, "Two Conceptions of Happiness," *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979), 167–97.

<sup>14</sup> That the provision be presented as one that will be a universal distribution of equal benefits to all—or that North American *falsa moragna* "equal opportunity for all"—is not a matter of any logical necessity, but merely a fact about what seems politically viable under modern circumstances where notions of equality have become ideologically deeply embedded.



stituent of public happiness—but this is compatible with there being an important range of aspects of human life in which knowing that the function was being successfully performed and enjoying that activation of the function was an integral part. It would then be an objective truth about our nature that in *some areas* we needed forms of activity that permitted this kind of self-awareness and self-affirmation. This can still be an “objective” conception if one thinks that it is true that one must have some kind of self-affirmation (in order to function in a healthy way) independent of whether one knows that this is the case or not.<sup>15</sup>

The second family of conceptions of happiness start from the idea that we humans are creatures of desire. These desires are real internal states of some kind that have a power to move us to do things in the world, although not necessarily an irresistible power—I might be very self-controlled or in the grip of another stronger desire. Desires are also highly variable and shifting, may stand in no relation to my basic forms of human functioning, and are not necessarily constrained by being directed at any natural object.<sup>16</sup> When I am hungry and eat, I can be said to be happy in a perhaps rather debased and rudimentary sense. I am happy, however, not because this is a natural function which I am performing but because at that moment eating was what I desired to do. Happiness should be understood as satisfaction of these desires, even if they happen, as they might, to have no relation to the basic needs or the functional imperatives of the human body and soul. I may desire things that in the short or long run are not good for me. To say that I am happy must essentially have something to do with my getting these desires that I have satisfied, whether or not that is even compatible with my physical well-being.

Desire itself is uncomfortable to experience—it might be various other things too, such as oddly, indirectly, or perversely satisfying, but this is in addition to being uncomfortable. As various philosophers, moralists, and religious figures have emphasized,<sup>17</sup> when a desire is satisfied, another one will arise and follow on the heels of the first immediately. It is the nature of human life that it is composed of desires that come and go, and the very idea of an absolute showstopping satisfaction of desire doesn't make sense. The idea of having all desires maximally satisfied is the idea of not having any unfulfilled desire, and that is very like the idea of being dead.<sup>18</sup>

As if this were not enough, many have argued that there is a distinction

<sup>15</sup> This was the view of the early Marx.

<sup>16</sup> Hobbes gives perhaps the most striking early modern theory of a form of desire that is in no way subordinated to an antecedent good, whether real or apparent; see *Leviathan*, chapters 6, 11.

<sup>17</sup> In particular Buddhists, and, among Western philosophers, Schopenhauer.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

between a truly and fully happy life and a merely contented one. A happy life is not sufficiently characterized as one in which given desires are maximally satisfied, but must have a certain minimal richness, variety, complexity, novelty, and intensity. Thus some would say that a person with an exceptionally low level of desire and aspiration is less happy than a person with more complex and demanding desires, even if more of the first person's desires were in fact satisfied. Some have even claimed that a fully happy human life must be devoted in part to *developing* human powers. If this is the case, then the generation of new desires will be an integral part of the happy life,<sup>19</sup> and that means that a certain amount of nonsatisfaction will have to be part of a fully happy life, since “new” desires will by their very nature be ones I have not yet been able to satisfy. If this is the case, the pursuit of happiness might seem to require us to move in two incompatible directions at once: toward maximal satisfaction of the desires we have, and toward going beyond the set of desires we have evolved in the direction of as yet unsatisfiable new desires.

There is a degenerate form of the idea that happiness consists in satisfaction of desires which has played an important role in much recent social theory.<sup>20</sup> This approach identifies satisfaction of desires with satisfaction of one's *preferences*, where “preferences” are taken to mean *articulated* wants, i.e., what you *say* you want or what your behavior in highly controlled conditions (such as betting) indicates you want. There might be all sorts of good reasons to prefer preferences to desires as the basic entities with which to work in certain areas of life and politics—for a start, desires are frequently deeply buried, ill-formed, unfocused, and for various reasons not fully and clearly articulated or even articulable; preferences, on the other hand, are epistemically accessible and well defined in a way desires are not. One can thus work with them more easily, use them to evaluate the success or failure of various government programs, etc. However, it is also precisely this relative clarity and precision that makes them inappropriate as the final objects relative to which we think about such things as human happiness.

One major reason one might object to the whole ideal of public happiness is a difficulty in the very idea that there is anything at the collective level that *could* be sufficiently like a human individual as locus of desire for one to speak in a clear and coherent way about those collective desires being satisfied. The best one could get would seem to be some version of a collective analogue to

<sup>19</sup> See Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen* (originally 1792–95, now most conveniently in modern edition, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> Classic works in this tradition include: K. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values* (New York: Wiley, 1951); and A. Sen, *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (San Francisco: Holden Day, 1970).

what I have called the "degenerate" form of happiness, a social welfare function.<sup>21</sup>

The third kind of conception of happiness takes it to consist not in the satisfaction of my desires, but in some form of self-approval. I am happy if I find my life worthy of approval as a life for me to live.<sup>22</sup> What is at issue here is an attitude or a judgment. This sense of "happiness" is clearly distinct from the previous two. It is obviously the case that I need not approve of healthy human functioning—lots of religious ascetics do not—nor must I approve of what I in fact desire, even ineluctably desire—many addicted smokers disapprove of smoking. One might expect that the judgment and attitude one has toward one's own life will not, as a matter of fact, be completely disjoint from the rhythm of origination and satisfaction of desire—I will be more likely to make a positive judgment about my life and say that I am happy if I have just satisfied a pressing desire than if I keenly feel an unfulfilled desire. This suggests that our attitude or judgment about our lives might be as shifting and unstable as our desires (and their satisfaction) are. The characteristic view of ancient philosophers seems to have been that one ought to try to find a stable attitude toward one's life *as a whole* which is based on a correct assessment of it.<sup>23</sup> This presupposes that I have at my disposal a standpoint from which I can see my life as a whole, even if only in recollection and imagination, and moreover that I have it in my power to see my life clearly and without illusion, to see it as it really is. Many ancient philosophers, especially Stoic philosophers, seem to have believed that, particularly with a bit of training and reflection, one can learn to retain such an attitude, even when in the presence of an otherwise disablingly insistent unsatisfied desire—like the ancient philosopher who claimed to be happy even while being tortured, because he knew he had given his life an overall shape of which he was right to approve. Modern people are perhaps less sanguine about this possibility. I may well never settle into a *fixed* judgment on my life as a whole, or I may not be able to attain fixity of judgment until it is too late for it to matter. By extension, not everyone may be in a position to adopt the Olympian, or perhaps I should say Mandarin, attitude of Zhou En-lai, who, when asked whether he thought the French Revolution had been a good or a bad thing, famously replied that it was too early to tell.

If the account I have given above is approximately correct, the prospects for individual happiness do not look encouraging: We no longer accept the

<sup>21</sup> To pursue this further would require discussion of Nietzsche's view of the Dionysian (especially in *Geurt der Tragödie*), and subsequent accounts by Durkheim, Freud, and Castoriadis.

<sup>22</sup> To judge that a life is worthy of approval as a life *for me to live* is not necessarily to judge that it is worthy *simpliciter*, so it is still possible to distinguish between "happy" and "good."

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1098a16–17, 1098b9–1101a21, 1177b24–26. The modern philosopher who seems to have been most interested in this issue is the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit* (see especially §§ 46–60).

natural teleology that underwrote the objectivist approach; the complete satisfaction of desire is radically unstable and even, to put it paradoxically, inherently unsatisfactory as a general human goal because any satisfaction of a given desire will give rise to a new desire. Finally, we are no longer so sure we will be able to come to a single, stable evaluative assessment of our lives as a whole, much less to one that has some property of "truth."

What kind of happiness then is at issue in the politics guided by Saint-Just's "new" European idea? Could a politics directed at happiness ever hope to be successful?

In his speech in favor of the Ventôse Decrees, Saint-Just says that by passing the decrees France will show Europe that it is no longer willing to tolerate "even one unfortunate (*malheureux*) or oppressor" on French territory.<sup>24</sup> It is perhaps not completely fanciful to see these two terms as designating slightly different dimensions of the "happiness" Saint-Just goes on to laud. On the one hand, the succoring of individual need is most naturally located within a program of public happiness which takes this to presuppose the maintenance of the minimal welfare of all individuals in the society. From the fact that the government cannot effectively undertake the incoherent task of rendering people positively happy by maximizing the satisfaction of their desires, it by no means follows that it cannot sensibly prevent distinct "*malheur*" by maintaining minimal standards of living. The second dimension of "happiness" refers to the absence of "oppression." "Oppression" is conceptually distinct from poverty. It seems but a step from the project of the elimination of oppression to democracy, as a political system in which equal citizens rule themselves. In its worst incarnations, "poverty" might be conceived as having an almost purely naturalist component even by people who are inclined to give great weight to the variability of human helieths and the autonomy of human desire. Whatever public happiness is, and no matter what people's opinions are, we might think that public happiness is not compatible with gross malnutrition among large segments of the population. Public happiness as absence of oppression seems to fit most easily into the third of my three families of conceptions of happiness. That means that there must be a clear social locus or position or standpoint from which some general judgment about the society as a whole can be made, which will be like the judgment the individual was supposed to be able to make about his or her life as a whole. There must be a voice that gives this judgment or assessment embodiment or a clear social agent who can adopt the relevant attitude. If happiness is absence of poverty and of oppression, then there must be no poverty and some-

<sup>24</sup> "Que l'Europe apprenne que nous ne voulons plus un malheureux ni un oppresseur sur le territoire français . . .," *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 715. The word I have translated as "unfortunate" above, "*malheureux*," of course, means "unhappy."

one has to have formed a moderately stable judgment to the effect that no oppression exists. If, when what is at issue is *my* happiness, then I am the final judge of that, so similarly when what is at issue is "our" collective happiness, "we" should make the final assessment of that. Who, though, is "we?" To say that "we" should be "everyone" is no answer to the question because that question is precisely the question of who speaks for everyone—that is, what real agency or instance is "our" real voice?

There are three candidates for this honor. The first is the governmental structure which is the designated official speaker for "us all." In a democracy like that of contemporary Britain, that is presumably the Parliament, or the Queen-in-Parliament, or perhaps the Cabinet, that is, nowadays effectively the Prime Minister. They will speak for us when they speak in their official capacity following all the established rules correctly. It might seem that if such a system is functioning properly it will instantiate a very quick and straightforward way of moving from democracy to human happiness via a direct conceptual link. Democracies will by their very nature be happy polities in the most significant of the senses of "happy" that can be of concern to politics. After all, one might argue, a democracy is by definition a system in which whatever the society does is the result of a decision by its members. If what collective political life people have depends—as much as it can depend on any human agency—on what they themselves decide, surely in a democracy they have the best chance to live a collective life of which they will approve. In such a system, if it works, there are no individual "oppressors" like Louis Capet, or the members of the French aristocracy.

I think one should resist this shortcut because there is an important difference between democracy as an ideal and as the designation of any real political mechanism.<sup>25</sup> To speak of democracy as an ideal is to speak of a political system in which "the people have the power." In the ancient world of small direct democracies, it was perhaps relatively unproblematic to see what was being meant by saying that the people ruled: whatever decisions were made, were made by an assembly which in principle anyone could attend, and which many people did regularly attend. In contrast, to speak of any real modern representative system of parliamentary rule as a democracy is to engage in an extremely contestable form of theoretical interpretation of what is going on when the system functions in its everyday way.<sup>26</sup> Do multiparty elections by themselves (or, for that matter, in conjunction with any specifiable further set of real political institutions) *ensure* that societies in which they exist are ones in which the people rule? Does Tony Blair necessarily speak for me

when he repeatedly gives us and the rest of the world to understand that Britain under New Labor is a happy, morally admirable society? I submit that a moment's serious reflection on these questions will incline the thoughtful toward a negative answer to them.

The second candidate for the position of *vox societatis* is "public opinion." This seems to me a totally hopeless choice. Public opinion is exceedingly fragile, and its utterances can be very indistinct: more importantly, if the official political structures do not reflect my views about whether the life we are leading is worthy of approbation, why should I have any more reason to expect public opinion always to do so?

The third possibility is the voice of the people speaking directly, if randomly, in civil disturbance, riot, lynching, pogrom, eventually civil war or revolution, or alternatively in vivid expressions of approval—torchlight parades to see the troops off to the front, spontaneous celebrations of sporting victories, etc. Here again, if not literally everyone is out on the streets, that will mean that there are two sides to this story, and thus there will not be an obviously privileged position from which to make a definitive judgment. Even when the voice is strong, direct, and virtually unanimous, the message may be indistinct, and the transmission will usually be extremely intermittent.

Democracy raises the ideological stakes and human expectations, without necessarily commensurately increasing our ability to satisfy our desires, or to adopt a positive attitude toward our life as a whole. It is a standard liberal sentiment<sup>27</sup> that I might find it more galling to tolerate a situation in which someone *else*, some collective political institution, is effectively defining what *attitude* I am to have toward my own life and my assessment of my own happiness, than a situation in which money, resources, or services are straightforwardly extorted from me by an individual oppressor who makes no claims to be contributing to my happiness. This may be a relic of Christian religious views about the inviolability of the soul, but it is one that continues to have a firm hold on the minds of many in the West. Under what circumstances do I experience a "democratic" decision in which I belong to a defeated minority as a decision of "someone else?" This is obviously a question of capital importance for any democracy and one the answer to which will depend on a wide variety of factors, many of which are probably extra-political and few of which are at all well understood. It underlines the need to take the widest possible view of the context within which politics takes place.

The story has been told many times how, as he was led out to be guillotined, Saint-Just pointed to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen inscribed on the wall of the Conciergerie, and said: "After all, I was the one

<sup>25</sup> See my *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 110–28.

<sup>26</sup> See J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), esp. part 4.

<sup>27</sup> Given its classic formulation, although with specific reference to the concept of "liberty," not "happiness," by Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).



who did that."<sup>28</sup> In the debates that preceded the promulgation of the Constitution of 1793, Saint-Just took the view that the task confronting the Convention was simple: "If you want a republic, attach yourself to the people and act only for it. The form of its happiness is simple. Happiness is no further away from peoples than from the private person."<sup>29</sup> Saint-Just obviously took this to be an optimistic thought. I have tried to suggest here that it can equally be taken as a rather pessimistic one.

<sup>28</sup> "C'est pourtant moi qui ai fait cela," K. Marx, *Die Heilige Familie*, in *Marx-Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1980) vol. 2, p. 129. See also B. Williams, "Saint-Just's Illusion," in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> "Si tous voulez la république, attachez-vous au peuple, et ne faites rien que pour lui. La forme de son bonheur est simple, et le bonheur n'est pas plus loin des peuples qu'il n'est loin de l'homme privé," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 423.

## 7

### Suffering and Knowledge in Adorno

SUFFERING, MANY REFLECTIVE PEOPLE HAVE THOUGHT, is simply an integral part of any human life; since there is no certain remedy for it short of death—which many believe carries its own disadvantages—one might as well learn to tolerate it as best one can. Some philosophers, to be sure, have thought that this reaction is too undifferentiated: if one wishes to think seriously about suffering one must begin by distinguishing different kinds of suffering toward which perhaps very different attitudes would be appropriate. Thus Nietzsche<sup>1</sup> distinguishes very sharply between suffering that has a meaning—the pain experienced during training by an athlete preparing for an important event—and “senseless” suffering. Humans, Nietzsche thinks, do not in general find the former kind of suffering problematic, but the latter is intolerable; so intolerable, in fact, that they will invent or accept the most ludicrous fantasies—stories about the will of imaginary gods, theories of antenatal existence and the transmigration of souls, the doctrine of original sin, etc.—to endow suffering with the appearance of “meaning.”

Nietzsche further distinguishes very sharply between self- and life-affirming interpretations and life-negating or -denying ones. The suffering the athlete in training undergoes is not simply an incomprehensible series of random events that form no pattern and of which he can make no sense at all, but is part of a structured set of events that he or she can see is integral to a project of affirmation of self. Even if the athlete does not in fact win the race, the project is an affirmative one. In contrast to this, most traditional religious interpretations of the world have been life- and self-denying. Thus for the traditional Calvinist believer, too, the world and human life makes perfect sense. At the end of a long life of exhausting labors most people can look forward to sharing with the overwhelming majority of humanity (the “*masse damnée*”) in an infinity of exquisite torments invented and inflicted on them by God. God, to be sure, has predestined us for this, but that is no excuse for us. Since, for whatever reason, we are in fact all sinners, this infinite punishment is also our just desert, and the meaning of our infinite suffering is that it contributes to God's glory. Not only, that is, will people make up the most implausible tales and theories to give some apparent meaning to their lives, they would also prefer even radically masochistic, self-abnegating interpretations

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Colli and Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 5.