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INTRODUCTION

Invisible Penitence



In 1738 the young Mirabeau sent a letter to his friend Vauvenargues, reproaching him for living from day to day without having any plan for achieving happiness: “See here, my friend, you think all the time, you study, and nothing is beyond the scope of your ideas; and yet you never think for a moment about making a clear plan leading to what should be our only goal: happiness.” He went on to list for his skeptical correspondent the principles that guided his own conduct: ridding himself of prejudices, preferring gaiety to moodiness, following his inclinations and at the same time purifying them.¹ We may laugh at this juvenile enthusiasm. Mirabeau, who was the child of a time that thought it could reinvent the human being and do away with the plagues of the Old Regime, was concerned about his happiness the way people before him had been concerned about the salvation of their souls.

Have we changed that much? Consider today’s Mirabeaus—young people of all backgrounds and opinions, anxious to begin a new era and move beyond the ruins of the frightening twentieth century. They launch out into

¹Quoted in Robert Mauzi, *L’idée de bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1965; rpt. Geneva: Slatkine, 1979), pp. 261–262.

life eager to exercise their rights and first of all to construct their lives as they see fit, sure that each of them has been promised everything. From their infancy they have been told: *Be happy*, because nowadays we no longer have children in order to transmit to them values or a spiritual heritage but rather to increase the number of fully realized individuals on Earth.

Be happy! Beneath this apparently amiable injunction, is there another, more paradoxical, more terrible? The commandment is all the more difficult to elude because it corresponds to no object. How can we know whether we are happy? Who sets the norm? Why do we have to be happy, why does this recommendation take the form of an imperative? And what shall we reply to those who pathetically confess: "I can't"?

In short, for our young people, this privilege quickly comes a burden: seeing themselves as solely responsible for their dreams and their successes, they find that the happiness they desire so much recedes before them as they pursue it. Like everybody else, they dream of a wonderful synthesis that combines professional, romantic, moral, and family success, and beyond each of these, like a reward, perfect satisfaction. As if the self-liberation promised by modernity were supposed to be crowned by happiness, as the diadem placed atop the whole process. But this synthesis is deferred as they elaborate it, and they experience the promise of enchantment not as a blessing but as a debt owed a faceless divinity whom they will never be able to repay. The countless miracles they were supposed to receive will trickle in randomly, embittering the quest and increasing the burden.

They are angry with themselves for not meeting the established standard, for infringing the rule. Mirabeau could still dream, conceive unrealistic projects. Three centuries later, the rather lofty ideal of an Enlightenment aristocrat has been transformed into penitence. We now have every right except the right not to be blissful.

◆ There is nothing more vague than the idea of happiness, that old prostituted, adulterated word so full of poison that we would like to exclude it from the language. Since antiquity, it has been nothing but the history of its contradictory and successive meanings: in his time, St. Augustine already counted no less than 289 differing opinions on the subject, the eighteenth century devoted almost 50 treatises to it, and we are constantly projecting onto earlier periods or other cultures a conception and obsession that belongs solely to our own. It is in the nature of this notion to be an enigma, a permanent source of debates, a fluid that can take every form, but which no form exhausts. There is a happiness of action and another of contemplation, a happiness of the mind and another of the senses, a happiness of prosperity and another of deprivation, a happiness of virtue and another of crime. Theories of happiness, Diderot said, are always only the histories of those who formulate them. Here, we are interested in a different kind of history: that of the desire to be happy as a passion peculiar to the West since the French and American revolutions.

The project of being happy encounters three paradoxes. Its object is so vague that it becomes intimidating because

of its imprecision. It leads to boredom or apathy as soon it is realized (in this sense, the ideal happiness would be one that was always satisfied and always arising anew, thus avoiding the double trap of frustration and satiety). Finally, it avoids suffering to the point of being helpless when it occurs.

In the first case, the very abstraction of happiness explains its seductive power and the anguish it produces. Not only are we wary of prefabricated paradises, but we are never sure that we are truly happy. When we wonder whether we are happy, we are already no longer happy. Hence the infatuation with this state is also connected with two attitudes, conformism and envy, the conjoint ailments of democratic culture: a focus on the pleasures sought by the majority and attraction to the elect whom fortune seems to have favored.

In the second case, the concern about happiness in its secular form is contemporary in Europe with the advent of banality, a new temporal system that was set up at the dawn of the modern age and that sees secular life, reduced to its prosaic form, triumphing after the withdrawal of God. Banality or the victory of the bourgeois order: mediocrity, platitude, vulgarity.

Finally, seeking to eliminate pain nonetheless puts it at the heart of the system. As a result, today we suffer from not wanting to suffer just as one can make oneself ill by trying to be perfectly healthy. Furthermore, we now tell ourselves a strange fable about a society completely devoted to hedonism, and for which everything becomes an

irritation, a torture. Unhappiness is not only unhappiness; it is, worse yet, a failure to be happy.

◆ By the duty to be happy, I thus refer to the ideology peculiar to the second half of the twentieth century that urges us to evaluate everything in terms of pleasure and displeasure, a summons to a euphoria that makes those who do not respond to it ashamed or uneasy. A dual postulate: on the one hand, we have to make the most of our lives; on the other, we have to be sorry and punish ourselves if we don't succeed in doing so. This is a perversion of a very beautiful idea: that everyone has a right to control his own destiny and to improve his life. How did a liberating principle of the Enlightenment, the right to happiness, get transformed into a dogma, a collective catechism? That is the process we will try to trace here.

The supreme Good is defined in so many different ways that we end up attaching it to a few collective ideals—health, the body, wealth, comfort, well-being—talismans upon which it is supposed to land like a bird upon bait. Means become ends and reveal their insufficiency as soon as the delight sought fails to materialize. So that by a cruel mistake, we often move farther away from happiness by the same means that were supposed to allow us to approach it. Whence the frequent mistakes made with regard to happiness: thinking that we have to demand it as our due, learn it like a subject in school, construct it the way we would a house; that it can be bought, converted into monetary terms, and finally that others procure it

from a reliable source and that all we have to do is imitate them in order to be bathed in the same aura.

Contrary to a commonplace that has been tirelessly repeated ever since Aristotle (although in his work the term had a different meaning), it is not true that everyone seeks happiness, which is a Western idea that appeared at a certain point in history. There are other ideas—freedom, justice, love, friendship—that can take precedence over happiness. How can we say what all people have sought since the dawn of time without slipping into hollow generalities? I am opposing not happiness but the transformation of this fragile feeling into a veritable collective drug to which everybody is supposed to become addicted in chemical, spiritual, psychological, digital, and religious forms. The most elaborate wisdom and sciences have to confess their inability to guarantee the felicity of peoples and individuals. Felicity, every time it touches us, produces a feeling of having received a grace, a favor, not that of a calculation, a specific mode of behavior. And perhaps we experience the good things of the world, opportunities, pleasures, and good fortune to the degree that we have abandoned the dream of attaining Beatitude with a capital letter.

To the young Mirabeau, we would like to reply: “I love life too much to want to be merely happy!”

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