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Is There Happiness After Death?

ROBERT C. SOLOMON

Should no man be called happy while he lives?

Must no one at all, then, be called happy while he lives; must we, as Solon says, see the end? Even if we are to lay down this doctrine, is it also the case that a man *is* happy when he is *dead*? Or is not this quite absurd, especially for us who say that happiness is an activity? But if we do not call the dead man happy, and if Solon does not mean this, but that one can then safely *call* a man blessed, as being at last beyond evils and misfortunes, this also affords matter for discussion; for both evil and good are thought to exist for a dead man, as much as for one who is alive but not aware of them; e.g. honours and dishonours and the good or bad fortunes of children, and in general of descendants. And this also presents a problem; for though a man has lived happily until old age and has had a death worthy of his life, many reverses may befall his descendants—some of them may be good and attain the life they deserve, while with others the opposite may be the case; and clearly too the degrees of relationship between them and their ancestors may vary indefinitely. It would be odd, then, if the dead man were to share in these changes and become at one time happy, at another wretched; while it would also be odd if the fortunes of the descendants did not for *some* time have *some* effect on the happiness of their ancestors.¹

It appears to be something of a logical truth that happiness and unhappiness, like pleasure and pain, are exclusively properties of the living. Even those who believe in divine reward and punishment after death find it necessary to believe in an *afterlife* as well. But Aristotle seems to agree with Solon that happiness transcends life, and that no man can truly be called happy while he lives. Since my students agree among themselves that this is the Achilles' heel of Aristotle's notion of 'happiness', I shall yield a half a foot towards their opinion by referring to this doctrine as 'Aristotle's sole' (*kassyma*, not *psyche*).²

The apparent absurdity can be accounted for, we are told, in the difference between Aristotle's concept of '*eudaimonia*' and our concept of

¹ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* ('*NE*'), translated by W. D. Ross, Oxford (Oxford University Press, 1925), this ed. 1954 *NE* 1100a, Book I, Ch. 10, Ross pp. 19–20.

² I thank Alex Mourelatos for supplying the Greek. *Kassyma* is from Aristophanes, *Acharnes*, 301.

'happiness', its usual translation (e.g. in Ross, above). '*Eudaimonia*', our classicists tell us, is not 'happiness' with its associations of *feelings* of contentment, but more like 'doing well', or 'good fortune, often with special reference to external prosperity' (Ross, *Aristotle*, N.Y. Meridian, 1959, p. 186). And surely a man's 'external' prosperity, as opposed to his happiness, might survive him, just because it is 'external'. So construed, a man's *eudaimonia* remains after his death, in the care of his family and friends, much as Sartre's condemned *personae* in *Huis Clos* find their expired lives in the cruel grip of their survivors.

But this traditional attempt to save Aristotle's sole does not succeed. If *eudaimonia* is 'activity of the soul' as Aristotle *defines* it (NE 1098a16), then

. . . surely this is a paradox, that when he is happy the attribute that belongs to him is not to be truly predicated of him because we do not wish to call living men happy, on account of the changes that may befall them, and because we have assumed happiness to be something permanent and by no means easily changed . . . (NE 1100a-b, Ross, 20).

Aristotle's sole can be saved, not by a further account of his unfamiliar notion of *eudaimonia*, but by an appeal to the logic of our own notions of 'desire', 'satisfaction' and 'happiness' (in so far as happiness is to be construed in terms of the satisfaction of our desires).

A man can have desires only while he is alive. But it does not follow that his desires can be satisfied only while he is alive. A desire is not simply a feeling or a sensation, and consequently the satisfaction of desire is not the dulling or extinction of a feeling, nor is it a peculiar feeling or sensation of being satisfied. In accordance with a now-established philosophical tradition, we may say that desire is 'intentional' or 'necessarily takes an object': that is, a desire is always a desire for something, to do something, that something be the case. One desires a drink, or to get a drink, or that there should be a bar nearby. Accordingly, what will satisfy a desire is 'its object', a drink, getting a drink, or that there is a bar nearby. (The desire for an x is not equivalent to, does not entail and is not entailed by, the desire to get an x . Similarly, both the desire for an x and the desire to get an x must be distinguished from the desire that there be . . . x . . . Only an action can satisfy a desire to get x , while no action can satisfy the desire for x or the desire that there be . . . x . . . unless in fact *what* is wanted is brought about by the action.)

It is necessary to distinguish between the *satisfaction* of desires and their *extinction*. If I want to get up and get a beer (as a way of having something to do), my desire will not be satisfied, but may be extinguished, by your getting up and getting me a beer. If I want a beer, but drink a quart of milk, I do not satisfy my desire for a beer, I extinguish it. (But I do satisfy my thirst.) One can always extinguish desires without satisfying

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them. Both the gourmet and the dieter get rid of their hunger, but only the gourmet satisfies his hunger; the dieter extinguishes his. And, looking ahead to Aristotle, we might note that death extinguishes all desires, but surely does not satisfy them.

Now it may be that *I* am satisfied even when my desires are not. Having desired a beer, I may find that I am now perfectly satisfied, having drunk a quart of milk. And so one might suggest that what ultimately satisfies is *my* satisfaction rather than the satisfaction of the desire. But 'I am satisfied' is seriously equivocal. On the one hand, it may mean that 'I have no noticeable presently-felt unsatisfied desires', which may be a result of having extinguished them. (Heavy drugs will do this generally.) But 'I am satisfied' might also mean 'my desires are satisfied'. And to satisfy one's desires is not to feel satisfied but to have one's desires satisfied. Accordingly, I will refer to this as *being* satisfied as opposed to *feeling* satisfied.

If I desire a beer, but drink a quart of milk, I may feel satisfied. But whether I am satisfied, that is, whether my desire for beer is satisfied, depends upon whether I wanted a beer *as opposed* to simply satisfying my thirst or whether I wanted a beer *in order* to satisfy my thirst. I am satisfied only if my desires are satisfied. But I might feel satisfied in either case.

Now it might be suggested that it is impossible for a man to be satisfied, because it is impossible that he should be able (logically) to satisfy his desires. Desire, like the hydra half-slaughtered, springs new desire and more, and with each satisfied desire, less satisfaction for man.³

What satisfies a desire is its object. Thus, except in those special cases in which what is desired is a feeling, or a belief, a feeling or a belief will not satisfy my desire. If I desire to feel cool, a cool feeling will satisfy my desire. But if I desire to be cool (having a fever of 101°F), a cool feeling will not satisfy my desire. (One might add that an intense desire may *cause* a feeling of satisfaction, through what Freud called 'hallucinatory wish-fulfilment', which surely is not the satisfaction of the desire.)

Neither is a desire satisfied by the belief that it has been satisfied. Again, there are those special cases where the object of the desire is a belief, e.g. the desire to believe one's brother innocent, or the desire to believe in God. But satisfaction of desire is not the same as believing one's desires satisfied. (Although, again, such belief may extinguish desire and cause a feeling of satisfaction.) If I desire to win the coveted Delluc prize in the Cannes film festival, it is necessary, for me to be satisfied, that I win it. If I desire to win the prize, and, confident of the perfection of my entry in the

³ See, for example, Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Part B ('Self-Consciousness'), Chapter 4, Section 3; also Kierkegaard *Either/Or*, Vol. I; and Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, especially Part I, Chapter 1, Part II, Chapter 1, Part III, Chapter 3.

festival, I take off on an extended vacation in Tunisia, I might well feel satisfied. I believe that I have won the prize. But suppose that in fact I have not won. Then my desire is not satisfied, and I may (if I am killed crossing the Mediterranean on the return journey) never know that I am not satisfied. Or, stepping toward Aristotle's sole, if the award is given to me and then taken away after my death (when it is discovered that my entry was a random splicing of refuse film strips from Warner Brothers' trash bin), my desire is not satisfied, even though I justifiably believed that it was (and therefore that I was) during my lifetime. It is not sufficient to believe that one is satisfied, one must be satisfied.

In a last effort to keep the notion of satisfaction 'subjective', in the subject rather than in the object and the 'external' conditions which control the object, it might be suggested that it is not sufficient that the person believe that he is satisfied, but it is sufficient that he *know* that he is satisfied. And of course this is a sufficient condition for satisfaction, because knowing that one is satisfied presupposes that one is satisfied. The question is perhaps whether the knowledge of being satisfied is a *necessary* condition for being satisfied. But surely this is too strong. If I win the Delluc prize at Cannes while remaining incommunicado in Tunisia, my desire to win the prize is satisfied though I may never know it.

Happiness, we may now say, is akin to being, not feeling, satisfied. Happiness is more 'durable' than feelings, which might fluctuate by the quarter-hour, and Aristotle's constant insistence upon this characteristic of *eudaimonia* (*NE* 1106, Ross 20-21) (and Ross's insistence upon the same) is captured by being satisfied (which is, in the required sense 'permanent' and 'eternal') while feeling satisfied is transitory. Happiness is not merely the satisfaction of one desire but the satisfaction of one's desires, not all or even most, but perhaps the most important of one's desires. But we need not attempt a felicific calculus here. Happiness, we may simply suggest, is tied to the satisfaction of desires, and is thus akin to being satisfied, not feeling satisfied. I may feel satisfied (and we might say, feel happy) as I awake into a bright morning after a good night's sleep, momentarily unaware of the utterly miserable condition of my life and the utter frustration facing all my treasured desires. But this is not happiness, even if it is a very long good morning.

(One might add here that the desire for happiness, which Aristotle suggests is a very peculiar desire, is not a desire as such but a meta-desire, the desire that one's desires be satisfied.)

A man's happiness, the satisfaction of his desires, may, in a sense, have little to do with him. The satisfaction of my desire to win the Delluc prize at Cannes requires my making and submitting a film, but it also depends upon the decision of the judges. Accordingly, while I can only have the desire and make the film in my lifetime, the satisfaction of the desire may well come about after my death. Now we can distinguish two sorts of

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desires, *personal* desires, whose satisfaction depends upon my being alive, and *transcendent* desires, whose satisfaction does not depend upon my being alive. Desires which involve my feelings, my enjoyment, my activities, are personal desires. My desire to see Truffaut's new movie, my desire to make love to Frau K., my desire for a taste of Chef André's pâté are all personal desires. The desire that my sons should be wealthy and honourable, and my wish that my bust should stand in the public square for two hundred years, these are transcendent desires. Again, we must warn ourselves of the finicky nature of desires because of their opacity. 'One and the same' desire may bear two different (descriptions of) objects, one personal and one transcendent. For example, my desire to break the world record for the mile run is a transcendent desire, depending upon judges and officials. But my desire to run a mile in less than 3·82 minutes is a personal desire. Notice that a transcendent desire (perhaps all transcendent desires) may involve an action of mine and so may be inseparably linked to a personal desire. Notice also that a personal desire (perhaps all personal desires) may involve conditions which are not dependent upon being alive and so need not exclude linkage to a transcendent desire. But these complications need not detain us here. A transcendent desire is a desire satisfiable whether or not I am alive. I may succeed in satisfying my desire to run a mile in less than 3·82 minutes and can only do so in my lifetime. But my desire to break the world record depends not only upon my running but upon the judges, who may squabble over my qualifications, due to my having run in oddly coloured sneakers, until long after my death. And, if breaking the world record is very important to me (and my desire to run is only a means to breaking the record), I cannot be truly called happy until perhaps years after my death.

All the ingredients of Aristotle's *eudaimonia* are transcendent desires. Accordingly, their satisfaction may come, or may be denied, long after our lives are spent. If the honour of one's children is, as Aristotle thinks it must be, necessary for *eudaimonia*, then surely a man cannot truly be called *eudaimon* until considerably after his death. Unlike Aristotle, we do not insist that happiness consist so extensively of transcendent desires, and this, rather than the 'externality' of *eudaimonia* and the 'subjectivity' of happiness, is our main disagreement with him. Yet our values of success and friendship, our concern for the welfare if not exactly the honour of our families, and our atavistic prejudices of religion and patriotism, betray our own stress upon transcendent desires. And if transcendent desires are so much a part of our lives, then we too cannot truly be called happy while we live. Aristotle's sole is satisfied.

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