

Philippe Van Parijs

## A Good Life

in *The World Book of Happiness* (Leo Bormans ed.), Tielt: Lannoo, 2010, 302-305.

**“Individually, we need to strive for a good life, not for a happy life. Collectively, we need to strive for a just society, not for a happy society. Only if we are lucky will this striving make our lives, and hence our societies, happier than they could otherwise have been. But there is no guarantee.” Philippe Van Parijs asks himself “Why not? And does it matter?”**

What would make our societies more just? What would make them happier? Are the two not intimately connected? In several ways, they are. For example, making our societies more just involves granting everyone basic material security. This should help remove much of the anguish that plagues the lives of those now doomed to a precarious existence. Making our societies more just also involves getting rid of blatantly unfair privileges. This should help alleviate the resentment, the indignation, the anger that often mars the lives of those who do not share in them.

And yet, there is no guarantee that making our societies as just as possible will make it as happy as possible. Greater justice may demand that we should take from more advantaged people some of what they are used to and will badly miss, and transfer it to other people who are objectively less advantaged yet happier, because of having adjusted their wants to their modest condition. Greater justice also requires that opportunities be equalized. But as documented by sociological studies from Samuel Stouffer's *American Soldier* (1949) onwards, giving more opportunities for upward mobility to a category deprived of it can unleash a dynamics of relative deprivation that ends up creating more dissatisfaction than before both in the category in which opportunities have improved and in the one in which they have worsened.

The general point is that unhappiness is about the gap between what you have and what you want, whereas injustice is about the gap between what you have and what you can fairly claim. There is no general reason to expect wants and fair claims to coincide. It is therefore not surprising that reducing injustice, as we must, could increase unhappiness.

While making no sense as our collective goal, might maximal happiness not make sense as the aim of our lives as individuals, albeit within the limits set by fair collective rules. There are two and only two ways in which each of us can try to become happier: by moving what we have closer to what we want and by moving what we want closer to what we have. Neither of these two strategies is confined to material goods. Each of them is relevant to our

philanthropic ambitions no less than to our consumerist appetites. Each is relevant to our craving for power no less than to our romantic loves.

Whichever of these two strategies we consider using, can it not be said that the aim of our lives is to achieve happiness? No, it cannot. Our aim is and should be to have a good life, a life we can regard as good, on due reflection, by our own standards. We can think of people we despise who led or are leading a pretty happy life, and of people we admire who are leading or led a pretty miserable one, constantly trying to achieve the unachievable. There is no lack of artists who tortured themselves into the grave, nor of rebels who lost their families and themselves in a vain attempt to oppose situations to which their neighbours happily adjusted. Thus, happiness is not what makes our lives good lives as a matter of conceptual or moral necessity. As a matter of fact, however, it can often be a factor and sometimes a by-product of our leading a life we can regard as good.

Happiness can help us lead a good life by making us stronger. Frustration, envy, disappointment, despair, gloom are all debilitating. It is therefore helpful, not just for the sake of making our lives happier, but also for the sake of making them better, to try to manage our psyche so as to navigate away from these feelings. For example, it is wise to escape "luxury fever", the self-defeating race for ever more lavish material consumption, by adopting sober tastes that keep us living happily well below our means. In the same spirit, we must learn to transform setbacks into opportunities. We must learn to forget our failures and our blunders — except in order to learn how not to repeat them — and keep looking ahead instead of wasting our time on pointless regrets. We must learn to view each additional day, especially after a certain age, as yet another undeserved present of life. We must learn to accept quietly, as facts of life, what we cannot change, including the unavailability of our own death. And we must learn to use pessimism as a recipe for cheerfulness: if we temper our positive expectations and exaggerate our negative predictions, our lives will be filled with good surprises.

In these diverse ways, we can avoid debilitating unhappiness and thereby keep nurturing the hope, the balance, the enthusiasm that we need in order to undertake and pursue the many things, small and big, that make our lives good. Conversely, the goodness of our lives can also contribute to our happiness. If our life is a good life by our standards, or as good a life as it can be, it need not be the happiest life it could have been. But our having tried and trying to make our life as good as possible should give us a serenity, a peace of mind that we would otherwise lack. At least if some conditions are met. For us to be able to achieve this sort of happiness, perhaps we need to view the project of our life as a contribution to something that transcends the borders of our little ephemeral person, to a family or a cause, to an organization or a community, small or large, to which we devoted some of our care, of our efforts, of our happy and less happy moments. Many of the things that make our lives good will only show up or come to fruition after we are gone. We shall, of necessity, never know whether they will. But we can hope so. And if we do, we can be happy. Not because we tried to be happy. Just as a welcome by-product of our doing what we thought we had to do.