

## **Happiness and Chance: A Reappraisal of the Psychoanalytic Conception of Suffering**

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Freud's allusion to the goal of analysis as that of transforming neurotic misery into common unhappiness implies that the outcome of treatment is not concerned with happiness but with the reduction of suffering. In fact, there is no single standard for happiness but many, some of which bear Freud's thesis out whereas others contradict it. The author examines Freud's views about happiness and compares them with other conceptions of it from antiquity that influenced Freud's distinction between pathological and ordinary suffering. It is argued that psychoanalysis is indeed concerned with the pursuit of happiness but is obliged to treat it in Zen-like fashion because of the typical analysand's resistance to enduring the sacrifices that the pursuit of happiness entails.

*Much will be gained if [psychoanalysis] can succeed in transforming hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health [the individual] will be better armed against that unhappiness. (Breuer & Freud, 1893-1895/1955, p. 305)*

Once upon a time there was a young prince who was inconsolably unhappy, and there was nothing the king could do to bring his son out of his doldrums. With some trepidation the king's advisers reluctantly informed his majesty that the only thing that could cure the prince of his misery was to obtain the shirt of a happy man. After searching far and wide throughout the vast kingdom, they finally located a poor farmer who they determined was supremely happy. But much to their dismay, they discovered that this poor but contented soul did not own a shirt!

The moral of this story can be interpreted in any number of ways, including the observation that wealth and power do not guarantee happiness, but all interpretations point to one inescapable conclusion: Happiness is inherently enigmatic and elusive, and for all

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our efforts to obtain it, it always seems just beyond our reach, no matter how hard we try or how devoted to our quest we may be. For some, the very idea of happiness is viewed as a form of denial or delusion, perhaps a manic episode. After all, mental health professionals are supposed to be concerned with healing sick minds, not improving healthy ones. Moreover, for all the prosperity Americans currently enjoy—a standard of living that has long been the envy of the world—all the money in this world, according to that old adage, cannot buy happiness. Each year we spend billions of dollars on the latest antidepressant or anti-anxiety medication, but for all their success in relieving our suffering, they do little in the way of making us happier human beings.

Yet the vast majority of people who come to psychoanalysts for help complain not about this or that ailment but of being unhappy in their lives. Whether we like it or not, there is an expectation among analytic patients that somehow or other, psychoanalysis will succeed where all previous efforts to obtain happiness have failed. Perhaps the observation that most of our patients leave their analysis no happier than when they began can be explained by a recent article in the *New York Times* (“**Arts and Ideas,**” 2001), which reported that even though people today say they value happiness over money, they also admit that they don't want to work for it. Yet the pursuit of happiness is not a luxury that only the prosperous or leisure class ponder. It is the driving force of every person's existence, no matter how poor, wealthy, educated, or simple minded we are. According to Irwin (1999),

*We reveal our conception of happiness in so far as we articulate what we ultimately aim at in our lives, and which aims make it worth while to aim at the other things we aim at. Different people dispute about whether we are well off by enjoying ourselves, by devoting ourselves to the good of others, or by pursuing our own intellectual or artistic development. These disputes are disputes about the character and constituents of happiness. (p. 251)*

In this article I explore the question of whether psychoanalysis has anything to do with the pursuit of happiness by reviewing Freud's observations on the nature of happiness and, specifically, the relation between suffering and unhappiness. Freud devoted an entire book to this topic, published in English as *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1961b). Although this was Freud's most popular work, its title is widely acknowledged to be somewhat misleading.

According to Strachey (in Freud, 1930/1961b, pp. 59-60), the original title Freud chose for this book was *Das Unglück in der Kultur*, a rough translation of which would be *Unhappiness in Culture* or, better still, *Society*. A more literal translation of the German *Unglück* into English would be misfortune, or simply, bad luck. In German, the concept of happiness is commonly conceived as good fortune, or a stroke of luck. Freud subsequently changed the German *Unglück* in the title to *Unbehagen*, a term that Strachey noted is more difficult to translate into English but suggested that the French *malaise* (a state of discomfort or uneasiness) or even *dis-ease* would have made an apt choice. When the book was translated into English, however, in 1930, Freud proposed the title *Man's Discomfort With Civilization*, to his translator, Joan Riviere. Ignoring Freud's recommendation, Riviere chose *Civilization and Its Discontents* instead, and for all its faults, this is the title we've been stuck with ever since.

Naturally, Freud's own culture played a role in his conception of happiness, though there is little evidence that either Viennese, Austrian, German, or Jewish cultures played a decisive role in his views about the human condition. In fact, his conclusions about this question were primarily rooted in the Europe of the late 19th century and the Greek classical literature that every educated European studied at university. Every culture in the

world has its own term for happiness, and every culture in history has tried to find ways of obtaining it. Although every culture agrees that happiness is desirable, not all cultures agree as to what happiness specifically entails. I aim to examine Freud's views about happiness with a view to determining the role contemporary psychoanalysis plays in a typical patient's quest for it.

Virtually every psychoanalytic practitioner is familiar with Freud's enigmatic comment about the relation between psychoanalysis and happiness—that the aim of analysis is to “transform hysterical suffering into common unhappiness”—but few analysts could name precisely where Freud made this remark. In fact, Freud made this cautionary statement about the limited role psychoanalysis plays in procuring happiness all the way back in 1895, in the book he coauthored with Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (**Breuer & Freud, 1893-1895/1955**), buried on its very last page. Because we have all heard variations on what Freud was presumed to have said, it should prove instructive to see what he actually said and the context in which he said it:

*When I have promised my patients help or improvement ... I have often been faced by this objection: “Why, you tell me yourself that my illness is probably connected with my circumstances and the events of my life, [and that] you cannot alter these in any way. How do you propose to help me, then?” And I have been able to make this reply: “No doubt fate would find it easier than I do to relieve you of your illness. But you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. [Thus] with a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness.” (Breuer & Freud, 1893-1895/1955, p. 305)*

At the very least, one is liable to agree that Freud's statement about the relation between happiness and psychoanalysis is a surprisingly enigmatic way of ending a book whose purpose was to inform his suspicious Viennese colleagues about the nature of his novel treatment method, psychoanalysis. More surprising still, Freud waited until 1930—9 years before his death and 35 years after his book on hysteria was published—to resume his query into the nature and causes of unhappiness. Obviously, he had a lot of time to think about it during the interim. By 1930 the world had suffered its first world war, arguably the most horrifying conflict in history, and life in both Germany and Austria had been profoundly affected by the war when Freud returned to this important subject. Yet his famous statement about unhappiness (and implicitly, happiness as well) and analysis had been made before The Great War, long before becoming identified with the alleged pessimism of his later years. Certainly, nothing happened in the interim that made Freud any less pessimistic about the human condition and what measure of relief from unhappiness psychoanalysis could be expected to offer.

## **Culture and Unhappiness**

Before turning to Freud's views about the relation between happiness and the outcome of psychoanalysis, I want to say something about Freud's intellectual and cultural environment. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that human suffering and unhappiness are the same thing. Later, we will take a closer look at Freud's distinction between psychological suffering—epitomized by, but not limited to, neurosis—and common unhappiness. Freud's views on happiness and unhappiness were derived from many of the great philosophers over the past two thousand years or so with whom Freud enjoyed some measure of familiarity, including Heraclitus and Empedocles in the pre-Socratic era; Plato and

Aristotle, by far the West's greatest philosophers; the Cynics, Stoics, and sceptics in the Hellenistic era; more recently, the 16th-century essayist and philosopher Michel de Montaigne; and more recently still, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Freud studied virtually all of these philosophers in his youth or later in his maturity. In the main, all of these great thinkers agreed that life challenges us from the moment we are born with pain, frustration, and disappointment and that it confronts us with tasks that are extremely difficult to perform and that leave scars impossible to erase. Though as children we are convinced things will become easier as we grow older, experience teaches us the opposite—that life becomes more difficult and that this state of affairs persists throughout our existence until finally we are faced with the inevitability of our death.

In fact, so much of our lives is focused on one form of suffering or another that we spend a great deal of our time pursuing relief from the burdens that our trials thrust upon us, from one day to the next, and so on, in perpetuity. Freud, the great systematizer, believed we could cluster the devices we typically use for obtaining relief from such suffering into three categories: (a) the first are what he terms deflections from our suffering, such as work and intellectual activity, which help keep us preoccupied from the weight of our misery; (b) the second are substitutive satisfactions, characterized by the pleasure we derive from art and entertainment, which help to diminish our suffering; and (c) the third involve intoxicating substances that render us insensitive to the pain and misery that are otherwise inescapable. All three figure to one degree or another in all of our lives, and all three are readily available to us. Yet if we devote ourselves to just one at the exclusion of the others, we eventually become addicted to it, and the momentary relief from suffering it previously afforded us diminishes, accordingly. Though Freud's formula is derived from the basic outline of his drive theory, it is perfectly amenable to virtually any theoretical formulation one might substitute in its place. In fact, Freud's observations on the matter make perfect sense even without a supporting theory of any kind, because we can confirm their efficacy from the fruits of our experience, including what we have learned as psychoanalytic patients or practitioners.

Yet none of the methods Freud enumerates ever succeeds to the degree we would like, no matter how clever, resourceful, or enlightened we are in our pursuit to gain mastery over our emotions. This raises the inevitable question as to why life is so unremittingly difficult and, allowing that we agree this difficulty is intractable and more or less consistent with living, what purpose the trying nature of our troubled existence can ultimately serve. This is a question that has been examined from the beginning of recorded history, and we have yet to find a satisfactory answer. Of course, we are all familiar with Freud's dismissal of the religious argument that he outlines in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1961b) and its earlier, companion publication, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927/1961a), which more or less suggests (depending on the religion in question) that human suffering is something of a test and a means of preparation for a future life that becomes available only if we are willing to endure our suffering on this earth with a benign sense of acceptance. Those who lack recourse to such a comforting solution are left to wonder what to do with their suffering and to ponder its effects on their attitude about life and, of course, death.

Naturally, the question of suffering is uppermost on the minds of everyone who turns to psychoanalytic treatment, as relief from suffering is the principal motivating factor that brings people to therapy in the first place. About this I shall say more in a moment, but first, what are the effects of a lifetime of pain and frustration on the human soul? How does such suffering affect us, and what does it inspire us to seek from life to relieve it, not only in spite of our suffering but because of it? For Freud (1930/1961b), the answer to this

question was never in doubt: Our suffering inevitably causes us to seek happiness, to want to become happy, and, ultimately, to remain so (p. 76). Suffering and happiness, then, enjoy a complementary relationship. It is because of suffering that we seek a happy state whose purpose is to alleviate it—and when we obtain happiness, we naturally want to preserve it as a means of insulating ourselves against the inevitability of suffering again. But the quest for happiness is not as simple as it appears, because the nature of happiness is such that we typically experience it not as simply relieving our suffering but, more important, as a source of well-being in its own right, a point that Freud does not appear to emphasize. In fact, we must ask ourselves if it is even possible to attain genuine happiness if our sole purpose in obtaining it is to serve a utilitarian relief from suffering at the expense of everything else.

Most of us would probably agree that relief from pain and the incidence of happiness are not the same thing, though it is probably the most difficult distinction that any human being is ever asked to consider—and one, I submit, that the majority of analytic patients struggle with throughout the course of their treatment experience.

## The Sources of Unhappiness

But what are the principal sources, or causes, of our suffering? The first is perhaps the most obvious: our own body, which, according to Freud (1930/1961b), “is doomed to decay and dissolution” (p. 77) and even relies on pain and anxiety as warning signals. Indeed, infirmity is a constant presence in all our lives, though some of us appear to suffer from somatic symptoms more than others, whether such suffering can be attributed to accident, constitutional factors, or hypochondriasis, the manifestation of which is a prominent feature of many of our analytic patients. In some cases we take such suffering in stride, whereas in others it is a source of unremitting and inconsolable misery. And though we probably do not give it much thought until disaster strikes us, we cannot deny that the external world is another ready source of suffering that, says Freud (1930/1961b), “[periodically] rages against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction” (p. 77), in the form of hurricane, earthquake, flood, and the like. This source of suffering is closely related to the first because it inevitably affects us physically, but it is also a potential source of financial hardship or ruin, a threat to our physical and emotional health, and the cause of death or infirmity to loved ones. Though it is possible to minimize the potential for earthquake or hurricane or flood by living in areas that are impervious to them, we invariably substitute in their place other unavoidable disasters that are native to any geographical locale. Ultimately, there is no escape from such dangers, and wherever we live we become reconciled to them and learn to live with the risks they entail. Of course, both of these sources of hardship are undeniable causes of suffering, even if we are reluctant to equate such suffering with unhappiness, *per se*. It is perhaps curious that Freud would include them in a discussion about unhappiness, except for the possibility that he sometimes equates suffering with unhappiness, though in other contexts (as we shall see) he separates them. Lest we hasten to conjecture that Freud overlooks such distinctions, his third category of suffering alerts us to a more ambiguous and, no doubt, axiomatic edition of it. In fact, the most pervasive source of suffering in our lives is our relationships with other human beings, the consequence of which, says Freud, is more painful to us than any other kind of suffering we can endure.

Freud's emphasis on the third of the three sources of suffering is worth noting, not only because it is the only source of suffering on which psychoanalysis can have the

slightest degree of influence, but because this is the one area about which Freud's critics claim he has the least to say. Despite his emphasis on biology—and his arguable overemphasis on the pervasive presence of sexuality in our symptoms—at bottom, Freud argued that our interpersonal relationships constitute the most painful experiences of which we are humanly capable and, moreover, the bedrock of what it means to be human. It goes without saying that one could write a treatise enumerating the many ways in which human beings are capable of making others unhappy, but Freud reduced virtually all of his patients' complaints about their respective sorrows to one ineluctable foundation: the trauma of unrequited love. Hence, no matter what neurotics complain about during the course of their treatment experience, the prevailing tragedy from which all of them suffer is, at bottom, that of the Oedipus complex. In one way or the other, Freud surmised, that is the one injury that neurotics have not put to rest and the remaining obstacle to their chance for happiness.

It follows that all human beings seek to avoid suffering, and the ingenuity with which we are capable of engaging in all manner of scheming, denial, and vindictiveness is, as we know, legion. Hence, some people opt to avoid relationships altogether—or at any rate, the most intimate forms of relation—in their abandon to protect themselves from being rejected, frustrated, or disappointed by others. Of course, this strategy is never entirely successful, because there is also no greater source of happiness than in our associations with other people, whether they be lovers, spouses, friends, children, comrades-in-arm, or colleagues. Without them we feel unremittingly unhappy, and because of the weight of isolation, alienation, and loneliness, we are eventually obliged to seek an alternative means of relief from our self-imposed isolation.

But why, one wonders, do our relationships with others cause such suffering in the first place? And, if Freud is correct, why should it be the one source of suffering that is unparalleled? What do other human beings promise that is, in every case, ultimately thwarted? Freud suspected that the answer to this question lay in a quest that endures throughout our existence and never ceases to compel: the so-called oceanic feeling that a friend of Freud's described as the kernel of the religious experience. Consistent with certain forms of love,<sup>1</sup> this feeling was described to him as something akin to eternity, a feeling, says Freud (1930/1961b), “of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (p. 65).

Freud admitted to never having experienced such a feeling himself and even questioned whether it could be described as a feeling at all. It seemed more likely to him that the oceanic feeling is the consequence of an *idea* that one finds pleasing, which in turn results in the feeling it elicits secondarily. In fact, Freud found the notion that one could ever feel “at one” with society so alien to his experience that he wrote *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1961b) to offer an alternative explanation for the source of this alleged sensation. He concluded that the only experience any of us ever has of this feeling is during the earliest stages of infancy, when the child is welcomed into the bosom of its family. As the child develops, however, and discovers that the paradise it enjoys with its mother is doomed, it seeks alternative sources for this feeling of oneness that had previously required virtually no effort on its part whatsoever.

On the basis of this formulation, Freud appears to reserve the word *happiness* for any

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<sup>1</sup> Christianity recognizes three forms of love: *eros* (erotic love), *philo* (brotherly love, or friendship), and *agape* (ostensibly the love of God but also consistent with the oceanic feeling to which Freud is alluding).

experience that serves to return us to that original, momentary bliss that our relationships with others often promise but ultimately are unable to approximate. This characterization of happiness is obviously more ambitious than the mere cessation of suffering, but it is also a conception of happiness that Freud finds the most elusive, and perhaps the most dubious. Thus happiness is fleeting because we experience it in contrast to the drudgery and frustration that our daily existence entails. Though we are loath to admit this, we cannot be happy all of the time. If we were, hypothetically, capable of preserving the happiness that we occasionally enjoy, our life would become an occasion for boredom, and the happiness we had previously cherished would evaporate into that familiar state of anxiety that characterizes the basis of our existence. Then the quest for happiness would begin all over again, only to be doomed to erosion the moment we succeed in approximating it again, and so on. This observation can best be summarized with the adage “No honeymoon can last forever,” a phenomenon to which all analytic patients become reconciled when the honeymoon they once enjoyed with their analyst eventually disappoints.

## **Neurotic Misery and Common Unhappiness**

This somewhat gloomy portrayal of happiness, however, is not the whole story. Though Freud fancied himself a realist and believed that the analyst's role is to impress upon patients realities that they are wont to avoid, he also believed this bitter medicine holds out hope for a far richer existence than the neurotic had been capable of before analysis. By way of illustration, I now revisit Freud's earlier, enigmatic thesis that the goal of analysis is to prepare us for common unhappiness. It seems to me this comment—if it is to make any sense at all—hinges on Freud's distinction between hysterical (or, for all intents and purposes, pathological) misery and common unhappiness. The distinction between these two forms of suffering is more or less predicated on two other distinctions that are unique to psychoanalysis. The first concerns the distinction between the etiology of the respective *sources* of human suffering, and the second concerns a similar distinction between the respective *experiences* of each, which is to say, between pathological suffering and unhappiness. Unfortunately, Freud's impatience with philosophical reflection prevented him from examining his enigmatic statement about common unhappiness more thoroughly. But having made this statement, he raises a philosophical question about the nature of human misery and what, if anything, psychoanalysis can do about it. It is incumbent on us to examine this distinction more thoroughly and to correct Freud's oversight in the process of doing so.

Throughout Freud's analytic career he confronted his patients with a choice: to either do something about the sorry condition they were in or accept it. The ability to choose one or the other and resign oneself to the choice one makes is, in Freud's estimation, the hallmark of mental health, even when the outcome leads to an increase in suffering! We saw earlier that Freud assigned the possible causes of unhappiness to three principal sources: (a) physical disability or infirmity; (b) natural calamities; and (c) our relationships with other human beings. Moreover, of these, our relationships with others is the source of the greatest unhappiness we can experience. But what do these three sources of unhappiness have to do with the motives that typically bring people into therapy? Of the three, only the third—one's relationship with others—serves as an ostensible motive, but difficulty with other people isn't necessarily evidence of psychopathology. Besides, these three sources of unhappiness ostensibly have little to do with the kind of suffering that patients initially complain about. In fact, when talking about unhappiness, Freud says

nothing about the most common presenting symptoms with which every analytic practitioner is familiar, such as alienation, depression, or anxiety—in other words, *unbearable feelings*. Why is anxiety, for example, or alienation not treated as a cause of unhappiness instead of merely symptomatic of it?

The answer to this question is no easy matter to explain if, indeed, neurotic (or pathological) misery must be distinguished from common unhappiness. In Freud's estimation, the neurotic has difficulty with accepting the brutal choice all analytic patients, sooner or later, must face in the course of their analysis. Freud made his most eloquent portrayal of the neurotic's plight in a relatively early paper, *Future Prospects of Psycho-Analytical Therapy (1910/1957)*, 15 years after his enigmatic statement about the relationship between hysterical suffering and common unhappiness:

*A certain number of people, faced in their lives by conflicts which they have found too difficult to solve, have taken flight into neurosis and in this way won an unmistakable, although in the long run too costly, gain from illness. What will these people have to do if their flight into illness is barred by the indiscreet revelations of psychoanalysis? They will have to be honest, confess to the [forces] that are at work in them, face the conflict, fight for what they want, or go without it. (pp. 149-150)*

Freud found that the typical analytic patient rejects this choice and devotes his efforts to devising a “third,” but inherently magical, choice instead: to pine away his life in fantasy or bitterness, waiting for the day when fate—in the form of good fortune—will reward him for his obstinate refusal to face up to the realities (i.e., disappointments) of life. This so-called third choice, as all of us know, is the ingeniously fashioned neurotic symptom (or compromise formation), to which the neurotic clings no matter how unreasonable or illogical one's attachment to such symptoms may seem. Thus, the neurotic solution provides a respite from unhappiness in the form of *anticipation* of what we long for, but at a price that is more costly than we can afford: the consequent pathological conflict that we end up imposing on ourselves.

This formula for the etiology of neurotic conflict also explains why Freud makes a distinction between the respective sources of neurotic misery and common unhappiness. Freud perceived the causes of unhappiness to originate from *outside* the individual and, therefore, due to circumstances impossible to control. This is why he concluded that fate plays a decisive role in the etiology of happiness and unhappiness alike. On the other hand, neurotic and other psychological conflicts do not, strictly speaking, originate from outside but rather, in a manner of speaking, from “within.” In fact, our conflicts are with *ourselves* and are thus self-imposed, though the inspiration for such conflicts derives from those very relationships with others that we cannot, no matter how much we want to, control. Consequently, one may conclude that unhappiness can cause an individual to become neurotic when he is unable, as Freud proposes, to either accept his unhappiness or, to the degree that is practicable, do something about it.

Thus the analytic task, on the basis of Freud's hypothesis, is to become more effective in *fostering happiness* in our lives but, when this fails, to accept our unhappiness with equanimity and move on.

But if the etiologies of common unhappiness and neurotic misery differ—the former being the result of circumstances beyond our control and the latter a creature of our own device—is the *qualitative experience* of each different or identical? Typically, the neurotic is unable to tell the difference. But even if neurotics are incapable of making such a distinction, Freud expects that the psychoanalyst is able to do so, or should be, by extrapolating the respective sources of the patient's misery. Sometime after the fact, when



a patient, for example, has succeeded in abandoning the “third choice scenario,” he too will be capable of discerning the difference between ordinary frustration—in other words, common unhappiness—and the legacies of unreality and alienation that are the hallmarks of psychopathological suffering, compounded by the guilt one unconsciously derives from being the instrument of one's suffering and the anxiety that this terrible secret will be discovered. Even if patients do not leave analysis with the feeling that all of their aspirations have been met, they oftentimes obtain a sense of serenity with the life they are living and a better understanding of the role they play in their misfortunes.

## Alternative Conceptions of Happiness

A nagging question persists in Freud's carefully wrought distinction between neurotic misery and unhappiness. Why is the newfound serenity that patients sometimes achieve as a consequence of their analysis not a feature of Freud's conception of happiness? In fact, isn't serenity—which is to say, being at peace with oneself—a valid characterization of happiness? Moreover, isn't this characterization of happiness one that is not at the mercy of fate and misfortune but one we can accrue for ourselves, with concerted effort and perseverance? As we saw earlier, the German word for unhappiness, *Unglück*, means misfortune, whereas the German word for happiness, *Glück*, means fortune or good luck. The idea is to be lucky or fortunate in life, as when things are going one's way. Every culture has its own term for happiness, and although the etymology oftentimes derives from the same root, the respective meanings, nuances, and emphases can vary enormously. Moreover, history also plays an important role in a culture's conception of happiness. Periods of prolonged peace or war, for example, can alter a culture's notion of the good life, but not necessarily in ways we can predict. Although Freud never explicitly said so, his knowledge of ancient Greek culture and language coupled with his fascination with history gave him a sophisticated appreciation of what human suffering entails and how all cultures throughout history have grappled with the same dilemmas and misfortunes.

I now take a moment to review other conceptions of happiness that are not limited to, or necessarily dependent on, good fortune and compare them with how Freud conceived the outcome of therapy. In other words, is the serenity Freud believed to be obtainable as a consequence of analysis consistent with other conceptions of happiness, either in present-day cultures or at earlier epochs in history?

In fact, there are two Greek terms that are usually translated into English as happiness. The more common is *eudaimonia*, the root meaning of which is to flourish, or to make one's life a success. Some of the Greek philosophers are concerned with the experience of *eudaimonia*, whether it can be reduced to a feeling that comes and goes, or a state or condition that is enduring, whereas other philosophers are concerned with the source of happiness, whether, for example, it depends entirely on external circumstances beyond our control or is something we can strive for and achieve and, hence, a consequence of effort. It is important to note that in contrast to Greek philosophers, most people today identify happiness with simply feeling happy and, thus, feeling pleased, so that happiness is identified with feeling pleasure. The equation of happiness and the feeling of pleasure was, with only minor qualifications, rejected by the Ancients and, according to Annas (2000, p. 40), is of modern origin. Although its precise origin is unclear, Annas traces the contemporary equation of happiness with pleasure to the 19th-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill, who defined happiness as the feeling of pleasure and the absence of pain, now a popular American perception of happiness.

Given Freud's emphasis on the ubiquitous presence of the pleasure principle and the prominent role it plays in his metapsychology, it is tempting to surmise that Freud, too, reduces happiness to the feeling of pleasure. But this conclusion would be mistaken for the simple reason that Freud's conception of pleasure is more than a theory of affect but an ontological category that is concerned with a much larger question: what it means to be human. Thus, for Freud, pleasure is not merely a feeling but an underlying principle of human motivation. As such it is largely unconscious so that whenever (the sensation of) pleasure becomes conscious, its manifestation often occasions feelings of anxiety, dread, longing, sacrifice, and the like.

With the exception of the Epicureans and Cyrenaics,<sup>2</sup> attributing happiness to the experience of pleasure was of marginal significance in the Greek literature on eudaimonia. In fact, one of the most protracted arguments among the Greek philosophers concerns the relationship between pleasure and eudaimonia. There are numerous arguments, for example, throughout Plato's (1963) dialogues, where the nature of pleasure is discussed, including the relationship between pleasure and suffering and pleasure and happiness.<sup>3</sup> Plato anticipated a fundamental principle in Freud's conception of neurosis when he argued that in order to obtain pleasure one must be able to endure hardship. Moreover, Plato argues that happiness cannot be reduced to simple pleasures because happiness derives from the sense that one is in the game of life, so to speak, and not merely a bystander. Following Socrates, Plato emphasizes the capacity to reflect on one's life and the crises that accompany it, and the ability to step back from the troubles of daily living by taking stock of how events have led one to where one is today and what sense can be made of it. According to Annas (2000),

*For the ancients this is the beginning of ethical thinking, the entry-point for ethical reflection. Once you become self-aware, you have to face choices, and deal with the fact that certain values, and courses of action, exclude others. You have to ask how all your concerns fit together, or fail to. (p. 41)*

Plato's teacher, Socrates, argued that despite the importance pleasure occupies in our lives, genuine happiness is not incumbent on good fortune or the feeling of pleasure but follows from living a virtuous life, epitomized by a capacity for honesty and openheartedness. Socrates argued that as long as a person is virtuous it doesn't matter if his life is saddled with hardship and difficulty, because virtue is impervious to external circumstances, so that as long as one is virtuous one will be happy. Indeed, it is when we are confronted with hardship that our capacity for virtue is most poignant. Thus for Socrates, happiness cannot be reduced to a feeling, because it is one's *life as a whole* that is happy (or not), whereas pleasure is episodic, something one feels now and then, here today and gone tomorrow. One cannot be happy one moment and unhappy the next, because happiness is the ability to live life by a set of principles that serve to make one the person one is. Similarly, Socrates rejects the notion that happiness can be reduced to the consequence of achieving the conventional standard of success because such standards are driven by ambition, not character. This implies that happiness is not the result of achievement but the consequence of becoming self-aware. In other words, Socrates sees happiness (eudaimonia)

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<sup>2</sup> The Cyrenaics qualified their conception of pleasure so extensively that it was no longer reduced to a simple *feeling*, whereas the Epicureans conceived pleasure as the reduction of pain, a notion of pleasure that Freud would have characterized as neurotic.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these dialogues include *Gorgias*, 494d; *Laws*, 2.662e; and *Philebus*, 47b (for the pagination references cited, see **Plato, 1963**).

as the ability to make sense of one's life by determining how its components come together to make one's life what it is (see Plato, **1963** [Gorgias, pp. 229-307]). Another way of saying it is that we are content with life when it has meaning, and we are troubled with life when it doesn't make any sense. A great deal of therapy is devoted to making sense of our suffering, even when we can do nothing about it, and such insights can serve as a vehicle to relieve the weight of disappointments we just have to live with.

But this raises a critical question: Can one obtain happiness through a form of ethical practice that is impervious to external events, or is happiness at least partially dependent on external circumstances, in which case we are always at the mercy of others for our happiness? This is the principal debate that runs throughout the classical literature on happiness. It is questionable, for example, how the capacity for virtue can necessarily make one happy in the face of unremitting pain or torture; virtue may serve as consolation for not behaving like a coward before a firing squad, but can such consolation be equated with *happiness*? Aristotle—whom Freud studied while a student of Franz Brentano at university<sup>4</sup>—integrated Socrates' and Plato's respective views about happiness and concluded that happiness depends on both living a virtuous life and external circumstances, or fate (Annas, **2000**, pp. 48-50). In adopting this view, Aristotle agreed that pleasure is a necessary component to happiness but not sufficient for it. In his view, the greedy or narcissistic individual who looks out only for himself may obtain enviable pleasures, but he will never be happy because his relationships are self-serving and the price of his success will eventually come back to haunt him, thus injuring his narcissism.<sup>5</sup>

Because Aristotle integrated the least controversial features of Plato's and Socrates' respective notions of happiness—that it is both the consequence of character and fate, effort as well as good luck—his views are the least radical and the most commonsensical of the Greek philosophers, and hence the most popular and historically influential. Aristotle possessed an uncanny ability to make complex ideas appealing and was the most lucid and palatable of the Greek commentators on the nature of eudaimonia, which he characterizes as making one's life a success. Though the emphasis Aristotle gives it sounds suspiciously conventional, Aristotle qualified his depiction of happiness in acknowledging that pursuing success by *any* means will eventually lead to guilt and, hence, more suffering, so that to flourish in the sense he intends is considerably more difficult than it sounds. Conscience plays just as pivotal a role as effort, and consideration for the feelings and respect of others is just as important as achieving personal success. In a sense, what one is achieving is a *life*, which is never static or completed because it is always alive and in a process of unfolding, so one also possesses the power to ruin it and render earlier successes the instrument of a future downfall. Thus there is a tension in Aristotle's reading of eudaimonia between what is beneficial for oneself on the one hand and for the community in which one lives on the other, a formula that is so commonsensical to us today that we sometimes forget it is merely one interpretation among many of what happiness can mean. Even if Aristotle's views about happiness are not the most radical among the Greek philosophers (Socrates or the sceptics would get the credit for that), they have proved to be the most popular and enduring. It is also the standard for happiness that most impressed Freud's views about suffering, informing, for example, the tension he established

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4 Freud was so taken with Brentano's courses on Aristotle while a student at university that he confided to a friend, “Under Brentano's influence I have decided to take my PhD in philosophy and zoology” (Vitz, **1988**, p. 52).

5 See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (**2000**, pp. 3-22) for his views on the nature of eudaimonia.

between desire and conscience (i.e., id and superego) and the role the ego plays in orchestrating the most viable and, hence, satisfying outcome.<sup>6</sup>

But what does Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia entail, in practice? A recent example may serve to illuminate this question. It concerns the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center in New York, when Rudolph Giuliani, the mayor of New York, was serving the last months of his term in office. Giuliani, a decidedly controversial mayor, was much maligned in the media, and many were looking forward to the end of his administration. Yet when the terrorist attack on New York occurred, Giuliani rose to the occasion and by dint of his courage, leadership, and ability to reassure the citizenry, his popularity skyrocketed. In the disaster's aftermath Giuliani was lauded for his ability to bring calm during a moment of unprecedented crisis and for the unanticipated depths of humanity in his character. This transformation in Giuliani's public persona is an apt example of how Aristotle characterized the emergence of eudaimonia in a person's life. Fate brought Giuliani an opportunity to see what he was made of, and owing to the latent characterological gifts in place, he made the most of it. Of course, one wouldn't say that the disaster itself was a stroke of "good luck," but it did prove fortuitous in helping the mayor rally the forces inside him and to lead the citizens of New York through a period of incredible agony. Had Giuliani lacked the strength of character to respond in the way he did, he would have been incapable of rising to the challenge, and his opportunity for eudaimonia would have passed. The outcome was an incidence of eudaimonia because of the manner in which his character and fate intersected. By it, Giuliani's *daimon* (the spirit that inhabits every incidence of eudaimonia) came into being and brought his administration to an unexpected conclusion.

Of course, having been touched in this fashion does not guarantee that Giuliani's subsequent life will remain so. Though his character may remain intact, circumstances will inevitably change, so there is no way of knowing whether he will die a happy man or a miserable one. Try as one may, one cannot use happiness as a means of inoculating oneself against future calamity in the way the neurotic hopes it will. It is perhaps this element of the daimon, a spirit that comes and departs of its own accord, that contributes to its transitory nature. If Freud indeed derived his views on happiness from this standard, it is possible to understand why he suggested psychoanalysis is helpless to procure happiness, because it inevitably relies on circumstances beyond one's control.

Despite his extraordinary impact on contemporary European and American cultures, Aristotle's views about happiness are not the most radical of the ones available to us, or even the most useful. After Aristotle's death Greek philosophy entered the Hellenistic era, which endured until the rise of Christianity, around 300 C.E. The main philosophers in this period were the Stoics, Epicureans, and sceptics. The Hellenistic philosophers are important because they were even more interested in the nature of happiness than Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. They deemed ethical concerns to be so central to the philosophical temperament that they conceived philosophy as a therapy whose purpose is to heal the human soul, by determining the right way to live. It was also during the Hellenistic era that the second term for happiness I alluded to earlier (in addition to eudaimonia) came into prominence, *ataraxia*. Usually translated as serenity or equanimity, the Greek depiction of *ataraxia*, following Socrates' conception of eudaimonia, minimizes the role of both pleasure and environmental factors in the pursuit of happiness. The Hellenistic philosophers

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<sup>6</sup> See Thompson (2001, pp. 400-410) for a detailed explication of Freud's views about the role the ego plays in the exercise of conscience.

most preoccupied with obtaining ataraxia, or equanimity, were the sceptics and Stoics, but their respective conceptions of it were not identical. They were nevertheless aligned in common cause in that both approaches distanced themselves from Aristotle's more pragmatic notion of happiness in favor of Socrates' argument that happiness culminates from moral virtue, so that virtue is the principal vehicle for happiness. Like Socrates before them, both schools emphasized the cultivation of character and freedom from suffering in preference of Aristotle's combination of good luck and success as the critical element in happiness. Moreover, whereas Aristotle advocated the integration of one's goals in tandem with the values of the society in which one lives, the sceptics and Stoics taught that one should reject society's standard for happiness, because the conventional standard of success is obtained by prevailing (through competition) over others. According to this view, competition elicits emotions such as envy, aggression, and hubris that are detrimental to achieving equanimity (see Irwin, **1999**, pp. 250-277, for an excellent review of the Stoic and sceptic respective conceptions of ataraxia).<sup>7</sup>

Some might argue this is rather like comparing apples and oranges because these respective notions of happiness—*eudaimonia* (flourishing) and *ataraxia* (equanimity)—are so different. Whereas *eudaimonia* is epitomized by a state of flourishing that, as with Giuliani, derives from the adulation (or love) of others, *ataraxia* becomes accessible only when withdrawing from others in a private meditation or communion with *oneself*. Even more than *eudaimonia*, *ataraxia* is predicated on the premise that one cannot be happy with one's life if one is not happy with oneself, so the sceptic and Stoic emphasis on moral character entails a deepening of and transformation in one's relationship with oneself. If a person isn't happy with who he is, he may expend all of his efforts preoccupying himself with ambitious pursuits instead of examining the things about himself that make him unhappy, in the mistaken belief that he can change himself in and through the eyes of others. On the other hand, if a person is happy with himself, he is more liable to be happy with his life and, when that fails, more accepting of those incidents in his life that don't go his way. In this respect the search for equanimity is open to the accusation of being more elitist than a simple state of flourishing, and even subversive, because the equanimity it offers cannot be derived from others or even enjoyed with them—but then the same could be said about psychoanalysis.

Despite all of the elements that the sceptics and Stoics have in common in their pursuit of equanimity, their views about how to obtain it are quite different. The Stoics, for example, argued that the key is a life of contemplation and the ability to use one's powers of rationality over emotion. The ability to suffer without bitterness or resentment was such a prominent feature of Stoicism that even today we equate the “stiff upper lip” syndrome with a stoic sensibility. Of course, the Stoics were more sophisticated than that. Perhaps the greatest Stoic of all, Epictetus, was a font of wisdom who inspired great thinkers throughout history, including Freud. Perhaps the greatest merit in Stoic philosophy is its emphasis on the ability to interpret the meaning of life for oneself instead of aping the community in which one lives. Some of the features of Epictetus' philosophy were so compelling they were subsequently incorporated into Christianity. His counsel for a happy life continues to inspire us today as much as when it was written owing to his capacity to synthesize the elements of his philosophy into adages that could be remembered and called on when needed. Some typical examples follow:

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<sup>7</sup> See also Sextus Empiricus (**2000**, pp. 172-177) for his treatment of sceptic and Stoic conceptions of happiness.

Character means more than reputation.  
Happiness can only be found within.  
Spiritual progress is made through confronting calamity.  
Seeking to please is a perilous trap.  
Conduct yourself with dignity.  
Inner excellence matters more than outward appearance.  
Be suspicious of convention.  
Forgive over and over and over again.  
Mind your own business.  
Your will is always within your power.<sup>8</sup>

One can readily detect the Stoic influence on Freud's views about unhappiness—if one compares the way he contrasts happiness and unhappiness with the Greek distinction between eudaimonia and ataraxia—including the emphasis on rational means to better living. On the other hand, Freud was equally drawn to Aristotle's depiction of happiness as incumbent on motivation and fate and was not indifferent to the conventional pursuit of success. Indeed, Freud would have been suspicious of anyone who claimed to have risen above conventional notions of happiness as one who suffered from self-delusion or repression, a victim, no doubt, of the nirvana complex. Another point to consider is the Stoic rejection of eudaimonia with its emphasis on success (i.e., that things are going one's way) in favor of a more quiet and inherently passive sensibility that is impervious to disappointment and striving. This prospect, of course, would have exercised little influence on Freud, who believed that the irrepressible force of one's libido will not tolerate such a measure of quietude without savaging the very instincts that, given the right circumstances, make a person's life worth living. This is not to say that the Stoics shunned life, but there is no denying that when one paints the differences in emphases between Epictetus and Aristotle in broad strokes, the former emphasized a means for diminishing suffering and saw ambition as a vehicle of suffering, not happiness.

Like the Stoics, the sceptics devoted themselves to the pursuit of equanimity, but they rejected rationality as the principal means of obtaining it and even rejected the Stoic characterization of equanimity as a state of unadulterated serenity. Moreover, the sceptics claimed to not know the path to happiness for everyone; they simply observed that if one were to do such and such, the result was oftentimes a state of happiness, meaning peace of mind or peace with the world, which amounts to the same thing. The sceptics even allowed that fate—or at any rate, happenstance—indeed plays a role in the experience of equanimity. Unlike the Stoics, who emphasized an attitude of contemplation, the sceptics believed it best to adopt a quizzical, inherently befuddled frame of reference, so that the less one anticipates things will go one's way, the less one will become disillusioned. Perhaps the most important aspect of sceptic philosophy is the counsel to stop trying to anticipate what will come next and to develop a capacity of courting the unexpected, instead.<sup>9</sup> In other words, instead of plotting your life according to a preconceived scheme, allow your existence to create a groove of its own that will, in turn, fit your temperament and allow you to flourish, but without striving for success. Unlike the Stoics, the sceptics

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<sup>8</sup> See Lebell (1995) for a synthesis of Epictetus' philosophy and Long (2001, pp. 179-201) for a more general overview of the Stoic conception of happiness.

<sup>9</sup> The notion of “courting surprise” as a vehicle to a state of well-being has also been noted by Stern (1997).

did not reject the pursuit of eudaimonia and even argued that one's chances for flourishing would increase once one had obtained equanimity.

Although the sceptics never claimed to know the steps that should be followed to achieve happiness, they believed the therapeutic component of their philosophy can nonetheless lead to happiness, leading some commentators to see a contradiction in their argument. Ironically, this observation enjoys a remarkable similarity to contemporary psychoanalysts who don't claim to cure their patients but who nonetheless hold that analysis can be helpful. How is it possible, you might ask, to have it both ways? According to Nussbaum (1994),

*The sceptic's official answer goes like this. Ataraxia just comes by chance, tuchikos, as the result of a process he is following out of some non-dogmatic motivation—say, because it is his trade. He does not seek it out, he does not believe in it: it just happens to him. (p. 300)*

In other words, happiness is a consequence of chance in that it happens of its own accord, by giving ourselves to what life asks of us. The sceptic notion of chance, however, is not the same as Aristotle's conception of fate. For the sceptic, my chance for happiness is not *determined* by fate because it only becomes available to me when I adopt the right frame of mind. The critical point is that I don't *expect* things to go my way, though I would like them to. If they don't, I'm not disappointed, and if they do, I'm pleasantly surprised. I neither expect things to go my way because I strive for them, nor do I hope things will come to me if I am “lucky.” My life benefits from my efforts in mysterious ways; although much of what I want never comes to pass, a great many things do come my way that I never anticipated or imagined. If I am preoccupied with the things I strive for and measure my life by the endeavors I set out to achieve, I may ignore the things that happen to me incidentally and shrink my life accordingly. Thus my attitude is crucial, because by it I can avoid the kind of bitterness and resentment that may lead to withdrawing from life instead of embracing it wholeheartedly. Similarly, psychoanalysis can be seen as a method for achieving happiness, but only in the sense that I position myself to courting its likelihood—in other words, by taking chances, but without knowing if the outcome will be fortuitous or disappointing, the very attitude neurotics find most difficult to adopt. The person who is dedicated to minimizing suffering in favor of risking happiness will, perhaps, suffer less but will never enjoy the kind of happiness the sceptics cultivated: the uncritical acceptance of one's life as it unfolds.

The sceptic sensibility is far more subtle than that of the Stoics, and more paradoxical—impediments to their transmission that are compounded by the absence of surviving source materials, except for Sextus Empiricus (1949), who lived some five centuries after the founder of scepticism, Pyrrho, died. The relative impact of the Stoics and sceptics on contemporary culture has been difficult to assess, but it is undeniable that important features of many of the 20th-century's most important philosophical developments, including phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, deconstructivism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, all have their origins in the sceptic tradition. On the other hand, the Stoics have had an enormous impact on our views about ethics and, after Aristotle, are the most important moral philosophers from antiquity.

Though the sceptics were not as important an influence on Freud's conception of happiness as was Aristotle, their method for achieving equanimity, through the capacity to suspend judgment and, hence, expectations, had an impact on the two most important

technical principles in Freud's treatment philosophy: free association and neutrality. Whereas the sceptics equated the ability to rid ourselves of neurotic conflicts with happiness, Freud saw it as simply a means to reducing suffering, which, he observed, doesn't necessarily make us happier. So if equanimity is a kind of happiness, what form of happiness does it offer? The principal feature of equanimity is the ability to face life's frustrations and setbacks with what the sceptics depict as "unperturbedness"—in other words, the ability to not become anxious or upset when something in one's life goes wrong. A famous example of this capacity is the serenity with which Socrates faced his own death, which subsequently served as the example on which both Stoic and sceptic philosophers modeled themselves. The Hellenistic philosophers, Anaxarchus and Seneca, similarly met their untimely deaths with equanimity when, like Socrates before them, they were executed for simply teaching their students how to think for themselves. In each case, all of these philosophers accepted their deaths in the same manner by which they had lived their lives, free from fear or bitterness irrespective of how life treated them. Whereas Freud's conceptions of free association and neutrality, which embody the ideal attitudes with which patient and analyst carry out their respective roles, owe much to the sceptics (Reidel-Schrewe, 1994, pp. 1-7), Freud believed it unlikely that anyone is capable of obtaining such serenity as a permanent feature of his or her character, though he believed it was possible for momentary periods of time.

## Happiness and Chance

Two thousand years later, philosophers are still debating whether it is possible to become happy by any means other than blind luck or chance. In Freud's case, he believed that fate plays the larger role, but he also advocated a state of equanimity—free association for the patient, neutrality for the analyst—as a means to guide us through the troubled waters of analysis. I now return to Freud's views on the matter and examine how his conception of happiness compares with the arguments we have explored from antiquity.

Though Freud was a creature of his culture and his views about happiness were rooted in his experience as a psychoanalyst, he was also an astute observer of cultural mores and viewed society as the principal source of our unhappiness. Indeed, this observation is the premise of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1961b). The most telling aspects of how analytic patients use their search for happiness as a source of resistance to analysis are embodied in two pivotal themes in Freud's treatment philosophy, the patient's transference with the analyst and the problem of neurotic guilt.

One of the reasons Freud rejected happiness as a goal of analysis was the way he conceived of the transference, that patients harbor fantasies about what the analyst will or should do to make them happy. In Freud's opinion, this amounts to eliciting the analyst's love—the easy way, he says, of obtaining momentary happiness, but without having to work for it; so it cannot endure. Thus, if we follow Freud's views about the role of abstinence in the analytic relationship to its logical conclusion, the analyst is obliged to *thwart* such longings instead of helping to make them come true. In other words, it is through disillusionment that analysis effects its power to transform the neurotic from a hopeless dreamer into an individual who is willing to take life by the horns and accept its conditions, by fighting for what he wants or going without.

Thus, psychoanalysis promises us nothing except to know where we stand. It serves as both a hedge against hubris and a vehicle for reflection about the course our life is following, how we got to where we are today, and what we can do to make it better. More



important, analysis helps us determine the role we play in our unhappiness and the role assigned to fate. It is only natural to seek love both as a source of happiness and as inoculation against unhappiness. Not surprisingly, this stratagem inevitably worms its way into the transference until the patient, eventually defeated, abandons all hope of procuring it, by which time, if he is lucky, this well-meaning dose of reality is accepted, not as a personal affront but as a challenge to face his needs realistically. Following Santayana's dictum "He who lives in hope dies in despair," the analyst knows (from the experience of his own analysis) that he must avoid colluding with the neurotic expectation that love from another can ever finally compensate for one's shortcomings. If love is not only a source of happiness but perhaps the greatest source at our disposal, it is also the cause of our gravest sorrows. Thus the transference is the stage where these cruel but necessary lessons are encountered and suffered, not once, but again and again until, through perseverance, we learn these lessons and move on. Although there is a measure of love that imbues every analytic relationship, it was Freud's observation that satisfying the patient's craving for it can never serve as a catalyst for emancipating oneself from one's narcissism. In Freud's estimation, it is the neurotic's *inability* to love that is the principal source of his unhappiness.<sup>10</sup>

As we have seen, love relationships and their relation to both unhappiness and psychopathology figure prominently in Freud's thinking. Yet even though Freud traces virtually all pathological conditions to the experience of unrequited love, he is reluctant to attribute the principal source of happiness to the gift of love. Perhaps this is because he sees love as a burden and responsibility that can never satisfy as much as we expect, or perhaps this says something about the era in which Freud lived and how times have changed, especially in America, over the past century. Increasingly, marital and other forms of intimate relations are seen as one's best hope for happiness and the dissolution or loss of such relationships as the principal source of misery. So why is the analytic relationship itself not an opportunity to fashion such a relationship, which in turn may serve as a prototype for future, postanalytic relations? Freud has his own answer to this question, rooted in the economics of libido, yet even analysts who reject Freud's drive theory agree that love is of limited value in the neurotic's quest for relief from mental conflict.

This is because psychoanalysis is more concerned with managing loss and frustration than with orchestrating success. In this respect analysis is not prophylactic but retrospective in nature: Its aim is to understand the past—including the immediate past that accrues from one's analysis—and to learn from it. So even if love is a source of happiness in every person's life, the inability to accept losses and put them behind one serves to mitigate the potential to love again, the prototypical picture of the contemporary neurotic.

Similarly, Freud's views about guilt offer equally important insights into our unhappiness and, by extension, our resistance to therapy. Society, Freud observes, is concerned not with supporting our endeavors but in spoiling them. As Freud (1930/1961b) puts it,

*What we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery ... [Moreover], a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals ... [Therefore, any] reduction in those demands should result in a return to possibilities of happiness. (pp. 86-87)*

Later he adds, "[in other words], the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of ... guilt" (p. 134). And in a footnote citing

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<sup>10</sup> See Thompson (1998) for a more exhaustive treatment of the role love plays in the analytic relationship.

Shakespeare, he gravely concludes, “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all ...” (p. 134).

Freud's principal thesis about guilt is that once we internalize the guilt society imposes on us, our conscience becomes our worst enemy. Of course, our conscience helps to keep us in line, and this serves the motives of others very well, but often at the sacrifice of our own happiness. As one would imagine, Freud was dubious of moral philosophers who promote self-effacing contributions to society, not out of benevolence but because of the (internalized) social pressure to do so. The line between generosity and guilt is notoriously difficult to draw, and even the most successful analysis cannot inoculate us from the relentless pressure to conform. If we can overcome at least some of the guilt that society imposes on us, says Freud, our chances for happiness can only increase. Freud wasn't insensitive to our quest for happiness, nor did he believe that happiness, by any definition, is impossible; he simply observed that it is elusive and that our efforts to procure it are only partially successful. This, of course, is the most difficult line to straddle as a psychoanalytic practitioner: to encourage patients to pursue their ambitions and even their folly, while taking care never to promise that all—or for that matter, any—of their aspirations will come true.

As we have seen, the Greeks placed considerable importance on the experience of happiness as well as the means of obtaining it. Their arguments about the nature of pleasure, though complicated, no doubt influenced Freud's thesis that life is governed by a striving for pleasure. On closer examination, however, Freud's conception of pleasure—more an ontological category than a simple emotion or drive—includes the experience of pain and the capacity to delay gratification in order to further one's prospects for happiness. Unlike the Epicureans, Freud did not equate happiness with pleasure.

A few years before he wrote *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1961b), Freud revised his views about suffering and replaced the pleasure principle with the “life” or love principle—Eros—which he juxtaposed against Thanatos, his controversial thesis of a death drive. In this formulation, individuals who are incapable of bearing frustration “deadened” their capacity for pleasure to minimize the pain of disappointment, whereas healthy individuals are able to bear hardships to maximize their chance for happiness. Thus the capacity for risk and the courage to take chances play a pivotal role in becoming a more viable person and, hence, a happier one.

On this note, it is interesting that the etymological root of the English term *happy* derives from the Middle English *hap*, meaning chance. This observation can be taken in two ways. The first is consistent with the commonsense understanding of happiness as good fortune, or a stroke of luck—in other words, a chance happening. We also characterize the unlucky person as one who is hapless. But the other meaning of happenstance emphasizes the element of risk in life and the chances we invariably take in our endeavors. Freud saw the neurotic as a person who typically plays it safe to minimize the risk of disappointment. Seen in this light, psychoanalysis offers the neurotic a second chance at happiness, by coming out of his self-imposed exile and placing his future prospects at risk. As early as 1885, during his long engagement to Martha, Freud had discovered the dynamics of the neurotic personality, engendered by a society that restricts its members to gratifications it deems appropriate. In a letter to his then fiancée, Freud wrote:

*We [neurotics] economize with our health [and] our capacity for enjoyment.... We save up for something, not knowing ourselves for what. And this habit of constant suppression of natural instinct gives us the character of refinement.... Why do we not get drunk? Because the discomfort and shame of the hangover give us more “unpleasure” than the pleasure of getting drunk gives us. Why don't we fall in love again every month? Because with every*

*parting something of our heart is torn away. ... Thus our striving is more concerned with avoiding pain than with creating enjoyment [happiness]. (Rieff, 1959, pp. 309-310)*

This makes for interesting commentary on those analysts—as far as I can see, the majority of them—who see the psychoanalytic setting as a *safe harbor*, with the emphasis on safety. Perhaps one of the reasons for Freud's decline in popularity among contemporary analysts is that they feel he was unnecessarily reckless with patients and because so many of his analyses, including some of his ostensible successes, are considered failures by contemporary standards. Implicit in Freud's technical writings is the view that to increase our chances for happiness, we must place ourselves at risk, including our chances at love, the risk neurotics fear the most. From this angle, happiness depends not on the quota of our successes but on the satisfaction derived from knowing that we are willing to *be* at risk, in the first place, win or lose, or as Plato put it, to simply be “in the game.”

## Conclusion

There are three distinct conceptions of happiness I have reviewed and contrasted: (a) The first equates it with a feeling of pleasure or well-being that is episodic and depends principally on fate; (b) the second is the satisfaction of having done something with one's life and is the consequence of both personal effort and good fortune; and (c) the third is a state of equanimity that depends on the cultivation of character and is more or less impervious to misfortune. These forms of happiness are not, however, mutually exclusive. We can accept all three as an intrinsic part of our existence and pursue the ones that are responsive to our efforts, while developing a means within ourselves of reacting with serenity when fate deals us one of its inevitable blows. Moreover, all three enjoy a place in the psychoanalytic situation and are just as applicable to the analyst as they are to the patient.

In the final analysis, happiness is never solely dependent on the degree to which a life flourishes or the passive happenstance of Lady Luck smiling on us, but on the virtue of participating in the game of life to which all of us have access, and playing the game the best we can.

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