

‘Not lost in loss itself’: On the consolations of morality

Michael Campbell

But he lives, and cannot bear to be
unworthy of life in his own eyes.¹

On a certain conception of moral value, it is both *sui generis* and absolute.² Just what is involved in conceiving of morality in these terms is an important issue, and one which has received a fair amount of attention. Herein I am interested in a different, though related, question – namely, how we ought to conceive of the relationship between an absolute conception of morality and happiness.³

Part of the reason for asking this is the hope that in postulating a connection between these concepts the former will be rendered less puzzling. It is often said that there is something especially problematic about moral demands.⁴ By contrast, few people are inclined

¹ Kant, Critique of Practical Reason sc.86

² Note that I say that this is *one* conception of morality – not the only one going. As sensitivity to historical realities as well as contemporary conflicts should teach us, there can be more than one coherent moral outlook (cf. Williams). Furthermore, the dispute between adherents to absolute and non-absolute moralities cannot be settled (even ideally) by a more perspicuous grasp of all the relevant facts; that would be to assume that there is a realm of ‘facts’, available to proponents of any moral outlook, that uniquely determine which one is correct. But what considerations count as morally relevant is itself a moral matter. For present purposes, I set aside the task of rendering this underdetermination of outlooks consistent with moral realism.

³ In what follows I will frequently drop the caveat ‘absolute’ and just speak of morality, intending it to be understood in absolute terms.

⁴ Witness, in this context, the various forms of scepticism about the reality of morality, the first and most

to doubt the reality of happiness or the value of being happy.⁵ Therefore, an explanation of morality that relates it to happiness is tempting in part because it may provide the materials for answering the interrelated questions of what morality is and why we should be interested in it.⁶

In what follows I will set aside, as far as possible, the question of how we are to understand ‘happiness’ – whether, for example, it is a purely psychological notion, or, rather, involves judgements about an individual’s meeting certain objective criteria. Following J.L. Stocks, I will understand an individual’s happiness as the satisfaction of their interests (i.e. their ends), leaving it open how those are to be determined.⁷ I will also speak of happiness as consisting in an individual’s enjoying success in their purposes.⁸

I will argue that morality and happiness are trapped in a dialectic; being both necessary for each other and yet mutually antagonistic at the same time. This dialectical relation reflects itself in two points of view to which we are equally prone, but which exclude one another. The first of these is the thought morality and happiness are harmonious, and not accidentally so; that being moral provides, if not a guarantee of happiness, then at least a uniquely secure route to its realisation. The second is that morality and happiness are, if not antagonistic to one another, then at least in tension; inevitably there come times where we have to choose whether to satisfy our own interests or to do the right thing.

This vital but strained relationship is a product of these two realms of value sharing a common source; they both emerge from our humanity, which is characterised by what is called by Wittgenstein our characteristic *Einstellungen* and by Watsuji our essential 間柄 (*aidagara*).

However, before getting on to this it is worth clarifying the different ways in which one might understand the relationship between these two concepts. Here we can distinguish famous of which being the Thrasymachean claim that moral norms are in reality nothing more than a tool which the weak use to protect themselves against the strong.

⁵ Save perhaps a particular strain of dour protestant. On the reality of happiness cf. Hume’s remark on pain and pleasure. That Hume takes this relevant to the question at hand shows his psychologised conception of happiness.

⁶ If happiness is understood as a definite physical state of an individual, in principle measurable, then it promises a kind of naturalism of morality as well.

⁷ I use *eudaimonia* and its cognates to denote happiness in this broad sense.

⁸ As it will turn out, this question can only be postponed and cannot be avoided entirely. It is only if happiness is understood neither as a merely occurrent psychological state, nor as the satisfaction of an objective set of criteria, that we are able properly to understand the relationship between morality and happiness.

four positions:

- (1) *Instrumental*: morality is a means to the securing of our happiness, which is in turn independent of the morality or immorality of our behaviour. Alternatively, happiness is a means to being moral, which is in turn to be understood as a state which is independent of the happiness or unhappiness of any person’s circumstances or life.⁹
- (2) *Partially constitutive*: being moral constitutes a part of our being happy. It is an occasionally sufficient and always necessary component of happiness.¹⁰ Alternatively, being happy constitutes a part of being moral. It is an occasionally sufficient and always necessary component of being morally good.
- (3) *Identical*: to be moral is to be happy, and to be immoral is to be unhappy.
- (4) *Independent*: moral assessment is independent of judgements of happiness. One’s degree of happiness has no necessary connection to one’s standing vis-à-vis morality. Alternatively, happiness is independent of judgements of morality; one’s degree of happiness has no necessary connection to one’s standing vis-à-vis morality.¹¹

The last of these positions differs from the first three in asserting that morality and happiness are two *sui generis* realms of value. In different ways, all of (1) – (3) hold that there is but one ground for our value-judgements, and that those which do not make direct reference to this ground gain their traction by being nevertheless related to it in some way.

(1) and (4) share the common presumption that we can understand at least one of our two terms without reference to the other. According to the usual instrumentalist conception of the relation between happiness and morality, happiness forms an independent yardstick against which moral requirements can be assessed. This requires that we have a conception of happiness which is independent of the deliverances of morality, but not *vice versa*; if morality is *nothing more than* a tool for ensuring that our lives go well according to a non-moral understanding of ‘well’, then morality is to be understood in terms of its functional

⁹ Due to its being more commonly expounded, I will call the first of these positions ‘standard’ (or ‘usual’) instrumentalism.

¹⁰ If we were to drop the caveat that morality is always necessary for happiness, and hold instead that it is only sometimes necessary, this view would collapse into a form of instrumentalism.

¹¹ Whether there are two bona fide positions here depends on whether one takes the relation of independence to be symmetrical – I touch on this below.

role.¹² View (4), on the other hand, holds that we can understand happiness without reference to morality, and *vice versa*; we have two *sui generis* realms of value, whose natures can be grasped separately to each other.¹³

It should be noted that although (4) holds that the two kinds of value are *sui generis*, it is consistent with that to maintain that the two realms are non-accidentally connected. For example, one might hold that in the absence of personal projects, morality would have no content – even though the content of morality (and the bindingness of its requirements) is not derived from those personal projects. In addition, one might hold that being morally good non-accidentally affects one's degree of happiness – because a moral individual's interests are simpler and are more reliably satisfied than the interests of an immoral or amoral person.^{14 15}

Postulating a conceptual connection of this sort is consistent with holding moral value to be *sui generis*, on the condition that there be available, at least in principle, both an explanation of the mechanism by which morality has that psychological effect (e.g. 'morality requires humility, humble people do not care whether they get attention from others...' etc.) and a characterisation of happiness in morally neutral terms (e.g. in terms of a preference ranking of states of affairs, or in terms of what Hursthouse calls "the smile factor" –dispositions to certain kinds of behaviour that we would all, regardless of our particular moral outlook, describe as manifestations of happiness).

Options (2) and (3) deny that these two realms of value are independently intelligible. But (2), unlike (3), holds that one of the realms is a proper part of the other. Thus, on the most common version of this viewpoint, morality is one part of the broader category of happiness. Accordingly, an adherent to viewpoint (2) may believe (what an adherent to (3) may not) that happiness provides a partial justification for morality; from within a shared evaluative standpoint, we can recognise that certain moral commitments are better

¹² Adopting the standard approach for understanding tools in terms of the functions which they are designed to serve.

¹³ Of course, (1) and (4) differ in that according to the former and not the latter we can offer a justification of one of our two concepts in terms of the other.

¹⁴ A point Plato makes when exhorting the pursuit of desires which are easy to both attain and maintain.

¹⁵ Kant in fact goes beyond this, in that he takes there to be a necessary connection between being moral and being happy – so that happiness will be apportioned to individuals in proportion to their moral worth, in the afterlife. As already noted (cf. n.16 above) this doesn't undermine the distinctiveness of morality only because it does not provide us with a ground for moral norms – i.e. it describes a consequence of morality, but does not constitute a reason to be moral.

than others, overall. On view (3), by contrast, happiness and morality are two sides of the same coin – so that the question ‘why ought I do what morally I must, if it is contrary to my interests?’ exhibits a rational failing parallel to that in the question ‘I know Hesperus shines brightly, but mightn’t Phosphorus be dim?’ – viz., it is intelligible only in the absence of a complete understanding of the subject in question.

Faced with this plethora of alternatives, we may be tempted to conclude, with Foot, that the concept of happiness is protean, and that our choice of position is therefore simply a matter of definitional preference.¹⁶ Foot suggests that one’s conception of the relationship between morality and happiness will depend on what one will is willing to count as part of the content of happiness – that if one is inclined to equate it with the enjoyment of certain psychological states, then answers (1) or (4) will seem plausible, but that on a richer conception of happiness (and one which thereby sustains the distinction between deeper and shallower forms) a view such as (2) can be maintained. (She does not consider view (3).)

However, this answer seems to me to be too quick. It is true that we are free to understand happiness in a broader or narrower sense, and that this makes a difference to how we conceive of its standing vis-à-vis morality. But it is equally true that we have an equal degree of freedom in the case of our understanding of the requirements of virtue. It is not a coincidence that both of these concepts are kaleidoscopic in content.¹⁷ Thus, rather than conclude that the difference here is a matter of preference only, we ought to see if we can find an underlying ground for this variation; not in order to replace a multiplicity with a unity, but simply to show how these two multiplicities grow out of the same source.

I want to defend what has often seen to be the least plausible of the alternatives, option (3). Depending which way round the identity claim is read, it can seem to provide us only with either an unpleasantly moralised conception of happiness, or else an implausibly psychologised conception of morality. (The former if we simply refuse to countenance the prospect of immoral people being happy, or moral people unhappy; the latter if we take a truly happy person to be our yardstick for moral rightness. The first of these alternatives is unduly doctrinaire, the second fails to give doctrine its due.) I will try to suggest that this is not so.

The notion that happiness and moral goodness are identical is due originally to Socrates, and in particular his declaration at the conclusion of his trial that “no evil can happen to a

¹⁶ Strangely, she does not pause to consider whether the concept of morality might equally be so.

¹⁷ And not only in content; opinions diverge also over the importance of these requirements and their scope.

good man, either in life or after death”.¹⁸ We may call this the *Socratic thesis*.

Taking that passage in its context, we may be inclined to dismiss it as either a rhetorical flourish or else as the expression of a religious outlook. In the sentence immediately following it Socrates says that “[the good man and his affairs] are not neglected by the gods; nor has my own approaching end happened by mere chance.” This might make us say, with Hursthouse, that only a belief in divine justice – and attendant notions such as fate – could justify a conviction that the good man cannot be harmed.

Hursthouse’s thought here seems to be as follows: only if we see this life as preparation for an afterlife, which in turn is understood as a state in which we are happy in direct proportion to our virtue in this life, can it be intelligible to say that a virtuous person cannot be harmed. For then (and only then) can we think that the pains we suffer now are compensated for by gains which we will enjoy later on. This, in turn, depends on the contiguity of this life and the next, which can only be guaranteed if there now exists some thing (a soul) which is the seat of our individuality and which persists after death.¹⁹

That this thesis is not simply a rhetorical flourish part is clear from the fact that the very same conception of the virtue and *eudaimonia* takes centre stage in the *Gorgias*, where Socrates says:

*A man who acts unjustly, a man who is unjust, is thoroughly miserable, the more so if he doesn’t get his due punishment for the wrongdoing he commits, the less so if he pays and receives what is due at the hands of both Gods and men.*²⁰

More difficult is the question of whether this attitude is intelligible only against the background of a religious sensibility. On the one hand, it is certainly true that in both of these dialogues Socrates makes appeal to divine – by contrast to human – justice. On the other hand, it is unclear just what role an appeal to the Gods is supposed to play vis-à-vis one’s moral outlook, and in particular in relation to the putative harmfulness of unjust punishment. After all, both in the *Apology* and (more explicitly again) in the *Phaedo*, Socrates argues that we do not know what will happen to us after death. He therefore certainly does not take for granted the immortality of the soul, and therefore does not assume that one will receive *compensation* after death for wrongs that one has suffered in life.

¹⁸ *Apology* 42, Jowett trans.

¹⁹ What follows is speculation, since Hursthouse herself does not expand upon her criticism in any detail.

²⁰ 472e, emphasis mine.

This is not to deny that the Socratic attitude may depend on a religious context for its intelligibility, but it is to call into question the nature of that putatively necessary religious context. We may be inclined to say that in order to understand Socrates what matters is not adherence to any particular doctrine *per se*, but rather the adoption of a certain religious attitude towards the world. However, that would call into question in turn the idea that the Socratic thesis depends for its sense on the truth of a conceptually prior metaphysical claim concerning the existence of immortal souls.²¹

A number of contemporary thinkers have defended versions of the Socratic thesis.²² In what follows I will briefly describe three such accounts. The first of these invokes religious concepts in its elaboration, the subsequent two do not.

DZ Phillips has argued that we should see our conception of what counts as a flourishing individual as being itself morally inflected. Someone may behave immorally and in so doing gain material possessions, health and the (mistaken) respect of his peers, but we are not required therefore to call them even part of the way towards *eudaimonia*. Indeed, we may say that their various 'gains' take them further from happiness than they would be if they had pursued the same course and, through chance, ended up with nothing. In other words, the identity between morality and happiness entails that material possessions, and our enjoyment of them, only have value when virtuously gained. Any enjoyments which are gained at the expense of virtue (whether that means that they are a product of vice, or merely that they have the effect of distracting us from the pursuit of virtue) multiply our unhappiness; appearances to the contrary, in enjoying their super-yachts, the super-rich only multiply their misery.

The contrapositive of that is the thought that so long as one is virtuous one cannot be harmed in ways that would undermine one's status as *eudaimon*. Hence:

For anyone concerned about justice, death for the sake of justice is not a disaster. The disaster for him would be to be found wanting in the face of death, and to seek the path of injustice and compromise.²³

This is the point of the rhetorical challenge: "what profit a man to gain the whole world if he lose his soul?" The concept of the soul in this context functions as a necessary pre-

²¹ If even the latter claim is correctly understood as metaphysical.

²² Although it may be argued that both Gaita and Phillips are, in the elaboration of their moral outlooks, both sensitive to, and dependent on, a tradition of religious thought.

²³ *Interventions in Ethics*, pp. 115–116

condition of value but not as something that is valuable in itself. Thus, images of hell as the consequence of wrongdoing are intended to be a pictorial representation of the unhappiness that is attendant on being in the condition of a sinner. This fate is one in which one plumbs the depths of misery, but one oughtn't assume that this misery manifests itself in the subjective experience of the sinners. This is reflected in the observation that genuine sinners go to hell gladly. Their gladness is a product of their ignorance about the real values of heaven and hell. Furthermore, we needn't suppose that their ignorance is just that they do not understand the objective nature of the two alternative states – that if they knew what hell was like (if they could sample it ahead of time), they would see that its condition was inhospitable to them. As Milton's Satan declares, the mind is its own place, and we have no reason to think that a sinner might not be able to make themselves at home in hell (as the Satanic hordes quite literally do). If their condition in hell is one of conscious misery then that is because they are no longer ignorant about the objective happiness of the condition of the blessed.

It is possible to interpret the promise of judgement after death as the offering of a prudential reason to be moral – either one abstains from certain deeds now or else one pays an immeasurably great cost later. But that invites the thought that were someone impulsive enough, they could prefer immediate pleasure over the prospect of a future life in Heaven. Their problem is not that they have their priorities to do with compound values wrong (as in: 'any rational individual would prefer an eternity of heavenly bliss to the enjoyment of a few years of sinful profit on earth'); it is rather that they have tried to compare two incommensurate values. As Faust learns the hard way, to trade with the devil is imprudent, but not because one's soul is likely to be undervalued!²⁴

John McDowell draws on Phillips' paper to express a similar view. He argues that once one has been appropriately inculcated into virtue the standards by which one assesses one's life (and the lives of others) are totally transformed. In response to the question why stay on the rack the only answer (though it is one which entirely satisfies the virtuous agent) is that it is the virtuous thing to do. No alternative presents itself.²⁵ Because of this, the prospect

²⁴ That this is relevant to contemporary moral philosophy is apparent in the intuitive power of the concept of *dehumanisation*.

²⁵ McDowell develops this thought in a different direction to Phillips, when he argues that the reason that no alternative presents itself is because it is only by acting in conformity with virtue's requirements that one can be truly happy, and happiness is the end of all action. This is to graft the Socratic thesis onto an Aristotelian conception of practical rationality in a way which is, I think, finally untenable. But I will not discuss that point

of intense sufferings is not even the beginning of a reason against acting virtuously. As McDowell puts it, moral reason “silence rather than outweigh” considerations which would purport to speak against them.

Finally, consider the following example:

Robert Papazian was born in an Armenian family in Tehran, Iran in 1954. He studied Politics and International Relations at Ecole des relations internationales in Paris. Like many other Iranian political activists abroad, Robert returned to Iran in the summer of 1978, during the last months of the uprising against the Shah, to join the revolution. Subsequent to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, he continued his activities in Kurdistan as a political and theoretical instructor to a left wing opposition group. He was arrested in Tehran in February 1982.

In prison, Robert did not have access to a lawyer and was denied visits by friends and family members. Throughout interrogations in Evin prison, he remained steadfast in his ideals and refused to co-operate with the authorities. It is known through surviving prisoners that he also helped others to be strong and defiant.

Robert Papazian was executed along with a large number of other political prisoners in July 1982. He was buried anonymously in the mass graves of the Khavaran cemetery in the outskirts of Tehran. His parting words to fellow-prisoners were: “It’s not the number of years that counts but the effect of one’s life and death on others... Life in a broader sense continues...”

Papazian’s final words seem to me to be a perfect statement of the Socratic thesis.²⁶ Here we have a conception of happiness in which it is not measured in terms of the length of one’s life, nor in terms of the quantity or quality of one’s experiences. What we have instead is an understanding on which to be happy is to be happy to die.

further here.

²⁶ The pressing question which this raises is as follows: what concept of ‘life’ is necessary in order to make sense of this moral attitude? Clearly it is one which sustains the possibility of identifying one’s interests with the continuance of life as a whole, such that one’s own death becomes a relatively unimportant matter. I would suggest that the concept of life as it appears in Aristotelianism – as a biological category – is inadequate to this.