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## Is God Happy?

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*Leszek Kolakowski, 1998*

The first biography of Siddhartha, the future Buddha, reveals that for a long time he was entirely unaware of the wretchedness of the human condition. A royal son, he spent his youth in pleasure and luxury, surrounded by music and worldly delights. He was already married by the time the gods decided to enlighten him. One day he saw a decrepit old man; then the suffering of a very sick man; then a corpse. It was only then that the existence of old age, suffering, and death—all the painful aspects of life to which he had been oblivious—was brought home to him. Upon seeing them he decided to withdraw from the world to become a monk and seek the path to Nirvana.

We may suppose, then, that he was happy as long as the grim realities of life were unknown to him; and that at the end of his life, after a long and arduous journey, he attained the genuine happiness that lies beyond the earthly condition.

Can Nirvana be described as a state of happiness? Those who, like the present author, cannot read the early Buddhist scriptures in the original, cannot be certain; the word “happiness” does not occur in the translations. It is also hard to be sure whether the meaning of words like “consciousness” or “self” corresponds to their meaning in modern languages. We are told that Nirvana entails the abandonment of the self. This might be taken to suggest that there can be, as the Polish philosopher Henryk Elzenberg claims, happiness without a subject—just happiness, unrelated to anyone’s being happy. Which seems absurd. But our language is never adequate to describe absolute realities.

Some theologians have argued that we can speak of God only by negation: by saying what He is not. Similarly, perhaps we cannot know what Nirvana is and can only say what it is not. Yet it is hard to be satisfied with mere negation; we would like to say something more. And assuming that we are allowed to say something about what it is to be in the state of Nirvana, the hardest question is this: Is a person in this state aware of the world around him? If not—if he is completely detached from life on earth—what kind of reality is he a part of? And if he is aware of the world of our experience, he must also be aware of evil, and of suffering. But is it possible to be aware of evil and suffering and still be perfectly happy?

The same question arises with regard to the happy residents of the Christian heaven. Do they live in total isolation from our world? If not—if they are aware of the wretchedness of earthly existence, of the dreadful things that happen in the world, its diabolical sides, its evil and pain and suffering—how can they be happy in any recognizable sense of the word?

(I should make it clear that I am not using the word “happy” here in the sense in which it might mean no more than “content” or “satisfied,” as in “Are you happy with this seat in the airplane?” or “I am quite happy with this sandwich.” The word for happiness has a broad range of meaning in English; in other European languages its meaning is more restricted, hence the German saying “*I am happy, aber glücklich bin ich nicht.*”)

Both Buddhism and Christianity suggest that the ultimate liberation of the soul is also perfect serenity: total peace of the spirit. And perfect serenity is tantamount to perfect immutability. But if my spirit is in a state of immutability, so that nothing can influence it, my happiness will be like the happiness of a stone. Do we really want to say that a stone is the perfect embodiment of salvation and Nirvana?

Since being truly human involves the ability to feel compassion, to participate in the pain and joy of others, the young Siddhartha could have been happy, or rather could have enjoyed his illusion of happiness, only as a result of his ignorance. In our world that kind of happiness is possible only for children, and then only for some children: for a child under five, say, in a loving family, with no experience of great pain or death among those close to him. Perhaps such a child can be happy in the sense that I am considering here. Above the age of five we are probably too old for happiness. We can, of course,

experience transient pleasure, moments of wonderment and great enchantment, even ecstatic feelings of unity with God and the universe; we can know love and joy. But happiness as an immutable condition is not accessible to us, except perhaps in the very rare cases of true mystics.

That is the human condition. But can we attribute happiness to the divine being? Is God happy?

The question is not absurd. Our conventional view of happiness is as an emotional state of mind. But is God subject to emotion? Certainly, we are told that God loves His creatures, and love, at least in the human world, is an emotion. But love is a source of happiness when it is reciprocated, and God's love is reciprocated only by some of His subjects, by no means all: some do not believe that He exists, some do not care whether He exists or not, and others hate Him, accusing Him of indifference in the face of human pain and misery. If He is not indifferent, but subject to emotion like us, He must live in a constant state of sorrow when He witnesses human suffering. He did not cause it or want it, but He is helpless in the face of all the misery, the horrors and atrocities that nature brings down on people or people inflict on each other.

If, on the other hand, He is perfectly immutable, He cannot be perturbed by our misery; He must therefore be indifferent. But if He is indifferent, how can He be a loving father? And if He is not immutable, then He takes part in our suffering, and feels sorrow. In either case, God is not happy in any sense we can understand.

We are forced to admit that we cannot understand the divine being—omnipotent, omniscient, knowing everything in Himself and through Himself, not as something external to Him, and unaffected by pain and evil.

The true God of the Christians, Jesus Christ, was not happy in any recognizable sense. He was embodied and suffered pain, he shared the suffering of his fellow men, and he died on the cross.

In short, the word “happiness” does not seem applicable to divine life. But nor is it applicable to human beings. This is not just because we experience suffering. It is also because, even if we are not suffering at a given moment, even if we are able to experience physical and spiritual pleasure and moments beyond time, in the “eternal present” of love, we can never forget the existence of evil and the misery of the human condition. We participate in the suffering of others; we cannot eliminate the anticipation of death or the sorrows of life.

Must we, then, accept Schopenhauer's dismal doctrine that all pleasant feelings are purely negative, namely the absence of pain? Not necessarily. There is no reason to maintain that the things we experience as good—aesthetic delight, erotic bliss, physical and intellectual pleasure of all kinds, enriching conversation, and the love of friends—must all be seen as

pure negation. Such experiences strengthen us; they make us spiritually healthier. But they cannot do anything about either *malum culpae* or *malum poenae*—evil or suffering.

There are, of course, people who consider themselves happy because they are successful: healthy and rich, lacking nothing, respected (or feared) by their neighbors. Such people might believe that their life is what happiness is. But this is merely self-deception; and even they, from time to time at least, realize the truth. And the truth is that they are failures like the rest of us.

An objection could be raised here. If we have absorbed true wisdom of the higher sort, we might believe, like Alexander Pope, that whatever is, is right; or, like Leibniz, that we dwell in the best of all logically possible worlds. And if in addition to accepting something like this intellectually, in addition, that is, to simply believing that all must be right with the world because it is under the constant guidance of God, we also feel in our hearts that this is so, and experience the splendor, goodness, and beauty of the universe in our daily life, then can we not be said to be happy? The answer is: no, we cannot.

Happiness is something we can imagine but not experience. If we imagine that hell and purgatory are no longer in operation and that all human beings, every single one without exception, have been saved by God and are now enjoying celestial bliss, lacking nothing, perfectly satisfied, without pain or death, then we can imagine that their happiness is real and that the sorrows and suffering of the past have been forgotten. Such a condition can be imagined, but it has never been seen. It has never been seen.

—*Translated from the Polish by Agnieszka Kołakowska*

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