

## Are we feeling happy now?

JAMES F. O' CALLAGHAN\*

*Following after God is the desire of happiness;  
to reach God is happiness itself.*  
St. Augustine

When asked, "What is happiness?," a philosopher like St. Augustine responds with an entire worldview. We're more comfortable with the man who shrugs and says, "Hey, if you have to ask you wouldn't understand." With him we think we know, pretty much, what it means to be happy. Invoking God and human nature and all that makes us impatient and uncomfortable and, well, unhappy. The trick is not to ask questions but just to be happy with never a philosophical thought. But there's sort of a Catch-22 involved. In pursuing the things we need or want in education or work, in relationships or social issues, we bump up against questions of the good life and the bad life, of duty and justice and more. When we try to fall asleep we discover we have become philosophers and theologians, mulling over gloomy thoughts of death and destiny.

It seems unfair. Happiness is what Thomas Jefferson said we have a right to pursue, and we catch it in a warm puppy, a wedding day, a long-desired bicycle on Christmas morning, the birth of a child, a football or political victory, or family members actually speaking to one another around a Thanksgiving table.

Why need we analyze everything? I'll tell you why.

The puppy will prove a huge nuisance, the happy wedding may initiate a miserable marriage, the bicycle will rust, and your team will lose soon enough and your successful candidate will disappoint. Then we wonder what went wrong. We want to pluck happiness from its transient moments and make it endure. The pursuit of happiness becomes the analysis of happiness and the Big Questions appear inexorably however much we dodge them, and even if we don't recognize that we're seeking a place in the universe. We find ourselves batting around observations so timeless that they have become truisms and clichés, even contradictory clichés, which we can't help rolling out one after another:

Cliché 1: You need health and some money for happiness.

Cliché 2: But we all know happy people with neither.

Cliché 3: Health and money don't guarantee happiness: legions of unhappy lottery winners and sports stars regularly confirm this one.

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Some clichés have more staying power. When the Beatles sang that all you need is love, we hummed along with this hoary chestnut that we had heard in one form or another from our parents and grandparents. We keep humming because it stands up: people who clearly love and are loved seem to avoid deep unhappiness even in the midst of adversity. Experience confirms that our own happy moments involve wives, parents, children, or friends. Fame and fortune count for little if there's no one to share them, and their absence hardly matters if one is in love. When grinding poverty erodes happiness it seems to do so by sabotaging relationships: a man who can't provide for his children may lose the respect of his wife, or her preoccupation with debt may destroy their love life. So maybe all we need are love and a higher minimum wage, or more generous doles? Not quite, or not quite so easy.

If loving someone is a *sine qua non* of happiness, how do we learn to love? A foolish question. Who ever learns to love? You just do it. You love your mother instinctively, and your father and brothers and sisters, and when you grow up you hope to fall into it with someone. But love can also be a conscious choice: Judaism and Christianity command us to love God and neighbor, not to fall in love with them. Many people, not just priests and nuns, seem to do so and to be happy. So then: if love leads to happiness (or at least makes it possible), and if you can choose to love, can you choose happiness? That seems to claim too much; libraries are full of unhappy love stories. Nonetheless, we face a recurring question: Was Augustine right? Is religion essential to happiness?

Atheists happily disagree and only great arrogance would presume to judge their contentment or how much they love.

Absolute statements are out of order here. But I myself, not having experienced atheistic happiness, cast my lot with the religious people because I agree that happiness depends not only upon loving someone, but upon being loved, and all the better if it's by Someone who will be there at the end and forever.

I have friends who seem to get along very well without asking why there is something instead of nothing in the universe, or if their life has any purpose. Yet these questions are so typically human that I think we all have considered them at some level, if only to move on quickly to something else. The Catholic Church assumes even children have an interest, and the first book of the old Baltimore Catechism taught that "God made us to know, love, and serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him in the next." It seems to me that such belief contributes to happiness, and for obvious reasons.

If you need not believe to be happy, you must in those midnight moments replace faith with some other construct to give life meaning. Either that or find the courage, as Camus would have it, to live in an absurd universe without meaning. We may admire the Frenchman's bravery but his happiness, such as it was, must have been grounded in satisfaction at living "authentically" with no one to appreciate it but himself and a few intimates. Atlas had a tough job supporting the world on his shoulders, but Camus' task was harder: to support that world while he himself was in it. I doubt many people are up to this. I know I am not.

Nonetheless, and despite the fact that most people who ever lived had some sort of religious belief, Camus has many followers today even if they never heard his name. Religious practice has all but

disappeared in Western Europe and among whole categories of Americans. So what has this meant for happiness? Has it increased or decreased? God knows. Or if you prefer, no one knows.

That there is much unhappiness in Europe and America and the rest of the world, none would deny. Yet who can tell if there is more or less happiness today than one hundred or one thousand years ago? Thanks to painless dentistry, the welfare state, and modern agriculture there is clearly less misery today than in the past, but happiness is more than the absence of misery. In the midst of plenty we pursue ever more plentiful ways to grasp it, from new cars and I-Pods and drugs to diets, psychiatry, plastic surgery and hair restorations which make us “feel better about ourselves.” But this doesn’t prove we are less happy than the medieval nobility who, their food and shelter as assured as possible in that age, chased after troubadours, spices from India, new fashions in clothes and such technological innovations as the fork. How can we weigh it all out? With or without religion happiness is damnably hard to measure or even to identify beyond an intimate circle. Even then we often get it wrong.

Another sort of cliché is the observation that “those were the happiest days of my

life” when one recounts youthful struggles that seemed overwhelming at the time. Which is to say, one may be happy without appreciating it. Can you be unhappy without knowing it? I don’t think so, even though one may also look back and judge some youthful love or enthusiasm as a “fool’s paradise.” Happiness based upon ignorance or illusion may not endure, but while it lasts we enjoy it well enough.

If we can mistake our own happiness, we can misjudge that of close friends and relatives even more. After a suicide friends often say in sad amazement, “he seemed so happy!” Similarly, we are shocked when the perfect couple next door announce their divorce.

We end where we began. Augustine tells he could not be happy without God, and we infer he would not have been happy without philosophy. The rest of us agree or disagree but try not to think about it much, and when we do think about it we find the reality and the sources of happiness so slippery that we throw up our hands. It is either a blessing or a welcome evolutionary outcome that we need not understand happiness to enjoy it. For myself, I’m happy to conclude it’s a blessing, and to think happiness itself a sort of commandment, and our proper destiny.