

The Unhappy Immoralist

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All that you've just noted merely confirms my belief . . . that if we are to talk philosophy to any purpose, language must be re-made from the ground up.

—Hjalmar Söderberg, *Doctor Glas*

When presenting his version of the ancient and well-known challenge that the Sophists long ago posed to Socrates, Steven Cahn seems, in his essay “The Happy Immoralist,” to be assuming at the outset—and asking us to grant—that the man he describes *is* happy. But such an assumption begs the whole question at issue here.

In both *Republic* and *Gorgias*, Plato has Socrates argue that the immoral man—even a tyrant with great power—may of course be happy as the ignorant world understands happiness but will not be happy as this concept will be truly understood by the wise philosopher.

Cahn dismisses this as verbal “sleight-of-hand,” but I think that such dismissal is hasty. Plato is trying to advance our philosophical understanding by making a conceptual or linguistic claim—no doubt a revisionary one—and surely not all such claims are merely useless verbal tricks. As I read Plato, he (like Philippa Foot) is suggesting that full human happiness is to be understood as the satisfaction one takes in having a personality wherein all elements required for a fully realized human life are harmoniously integrated. The immoralist lacks some of these attributes—integrity, moral emotions, and the capacity for true friendships, for example. Given what he lacks, it can be granted that he may indeed be happy in some limited way—for example, enjoying a great deal of pleasure—while insisting that he cannot be happy in the full sense.

As a matter of common language, of course, many people do not use the word “happiness” in this rich sense but tend to mean by it something like “has a whole lot of fun.” Because of this, the Greek word *eudaimonia*, which in the past was generally translated as “happiness,” is now often rendered as “flourishing” to avoid confusion. But some are not so quick to give up the older and deeper usage:

[Realizing how little the clergyman cared about his wife's health or even his own] I began to think that Markel and his Cyrenäics are right: people care nothing for happiness, they look only for pleasure. They seek pleasure even flat in the face of their own happiness.¹

Some of the spirit of Plato and Socrates is to be found in Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, in which Kierkegaard seeks to expose the conflicts and deficiencies present in the “double-minded” person who does not organize his life around the moral good, a person whom Kierkegaard

regards as self-deceived if he thinks of himself as truly happy. Kierkegaard argues for this with a blending of conceptual and psychological claims—claims about the nature of those desires he calls “temporal.” The person who wills only in pursuit of temporal rather than eternal (i.e., ethico-religious) desires will, Kierkegaard maintains, ultimately fall into boredom and despair, since the objects of these desires are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of fate and fortune and carry only temporary satisfaction. The apparent happiness of the person in bondage to temporal desires will be momentary and will mask what is in fact that person’s desperate attempt to generate and satisfy new desires as the old ones become boring or their objects pass away. Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, calls this boredom avoidance strategy “the rotation of crops.” The person who lives solely for temporal values will, according to Kierkegaard, remain in his deficient state unless he experiences and listens to the moral emotions of regret and remorse—those “emissaries from eternity” that call us to our full humanity.

Is Cahn’s “happy immoralist” captured by Kierkegaard’s diagnosis? I think that he is. He does, after all, “relish[] praise,” “bask[] in renown,” and smugly “revel[] in his exalted position.” This suggests that, like the tyrant discussed by Plato, he is attached to temporal values that are *vulnerable*—for example, dependent on the responses of others. Since these are ultimately out of his control, must he not consciously feel or repress *fear*—a fear that may not be compatible with happiness? Cahn admits that there may be a future time when his immoralist becomes unhappy, and I am inclined to think that the immoralist’s conscious or repressed realization of this possibility would at the very least pose a serious obstacle to his being fully happy now. And is happiness simply a matter of *now* anyway? Perhaps, as Aristotle sometimes suggests, happiness is better understood as an attribute, not of a present moment of one’s life, but of a whole life—the wisdom in the ancient Greek saying that we should call no man happy until he is dead. Finally, if there is any truth in the idea that love and friendship are among the constituents of the happiest of human lives, must not the immoralist’s nature—his inability to make and honor binding commitments—forever foreclose these goods to him?

There is no doubt that Plato’s and Kierkegaard’s understanding of happiness does not capture everyone’s understanding of the concept, and thus it must be acknowledged that some conceptual or linguistic revision is going on here—just as Socrates was engaged in such revision when he made the revolutionary suggestion (*Apology*) that a good person cannot be harmed because harm (*kakon*), when properly understood, will be understood as loss of moral integrity and not as personal pain or disgrace. And if this was “sleight-of-hand,” it strikes me that our concept of morality—indeed our civilization—was enriched by it. Cahn’s attempt to undermine the Platonic happiness tradition with his story of “the happy immoralist” thus strikes me as no more successful than an attempt to refute Socrates’ claim about a good man’s insulation from harm by finding a good man and hitting him in the head with a baseball bat. Doctor Glas’s friend certainly overstated the case when he said that philosophy requires that language be remade from the ground up, but it is true, I think, that conceptual or linguistic revision can

sometimes enlarge and deepen our moral understanding—perhaps bringing to consciousness something that was latent all along.

To sum up: When I think of the man described by Cahn, I find that I *pity* him—pity him because, with Plato, I think that he is punished simply by being the kind of person that he is. But why would I pity him if I thought that he was truly happy?

Note

¹Hjalmar Söderberg, *Doctor Glas* (New York: Anchor, 2002), 111–12.