The Quest for Happiness

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Academic year: 2019

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Abstract

The desire to attain happiness is inescapable for every human being and, as such, it has always been a central matter of discussion in the history of philosophy. Many philosophers advanced different theories and put forward specific notions of happiness. Some of these call for a positive account on it (suggesting specific objective practices and strategies in order to reach it and even quantify it), others believe it to be a psychological state of enjoyment and pleasure, others again are inclined to consider happiness as something unreachable or just as a mere avoidance of suffering. No matter how different these interpretations can be, though, all of them have in common the shared assumption that everyone wants to be happy in the first place.

This work starts from this acknowledgement and it moves forward, chapter by chapter, trying to critically analyse some of the main accounts on happiness that have been developed in the history of philosophy. After having outlined these schools of thought and after having presented their strengths and the weaknesses, the final part of this dissertation is dedicated at trying to give a proper definition of what happiness is (also by pointing out what happiness is not) that takes into consideration what was discussed before.

The conclusion of this work points in one direction, which will be better explained in the main body: only through an honest process of self-analysis and self-knowledge which can be conducted thanks to a philosophical attitude can we come to understand that happiness consists in staying true to our 'objective subjectivity', directing ourselves towards our purest desire.

Introduction.

This work is born with the intention of understanding what the most important aim in every person's life is. Despite all the possible different answers and declinations of it (e.g. to get a good job, to build a family, to find love and so on), I believe that if we consider human thoughts and behaviors we will have to agree to the fact that they are all driven by a specific quest, which is the primary cause-giving sense to everyone's life: the quest for happiness. This quest (regardless of the specific meaning given to this term and the strategy attempted in order to reach it) is something inescapable for every single human being. The desire to attain it is pervasive and it has to be considered as the starting point and the essential horizon of every investigation on what a 'happy life' means.[1] It is clear, though, that many problems arise with trying to define happiness, inasmuch it is an evaluative concept and different interpretations on it can be conceived. What is real happiness? How do we reach it? Is happiness something objective, that we can meet just by following a practice? Or is it something subjective? Is it transitory or permanent? Many philosophers dedicated their studies to the attempt to find an answer to these questions, elaborating some completely different theories on it.

The decision of focusing this dissertation on these topics comes from the desire to study how different philosophers dealt with the matter of happiness and fulfilment, in order to properly examine them from a philosophical point of view. The aim of this work is thus to present some of the main views on happiness and to critically analyse them in order to underline their strengths and weaknesses and to come up with a positive personal answer on what happiness is.

[1] Arianna Fermani, *Vita felice umana: in dialogo con Platone e Aristotele*, (Macerata: Eum edizioni, 2006), p. 26.

1. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle: the ethical conception of happiness.

The first view on happiness I would like to analyse in this work is the one related to a moral conception and to a certain notion of virtue. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are supporters of this view, even though their opinions differ on some aspects. Since Socrates was Plato's teacher and so was Plato for Aristotle, we can try to orient ourselves in the development of their ideas keeping in mind that they are all closely bound together. For what concerns the first two, it is sometimes even difficult to distinguish one's conception from the other, because Socrates did not write anything: all we know about his thought was mainly written by Plato.

Before coming to analyse their views on happiness, it is necessary to properly explain what the three of them meant by it. The word used to express it is *eudaimonia* (*eu* means 'good' and *daimōn* 'spirit'), that should be translated as 'human flourishing', fulfilment, rather than merely 'happiness' as some might intend it nowadays (a subjective psychological and temporary state of enjoyment). *Eudaimonia* is intended by the Greek philosophers as the good life, the ideal life for human beings, and therefore it cannot be just a mental state: it requires more than that. In their theories, happiness is not something subjective either, but, rather, it is objective, a conception that provides an ideal standard to be met. Hence, only those who will put these standards into practice will be truly and fully happy.[2]

There is not a proper translation of the term *eudaimonia* in the English vocabulary: it is thus important to specify that every time I will mention the world 'happiness' in this chapter, I will refer to *eudaimonia*. Given these coordinates, I will briefly show the three accounts on happiness, highlighting the main differences.

Socrates

Socrates was very much concerned with the quest for *eudaimonia*, remarking that every individual wants to be happy and searches what is

[2] Richard Kraut, 'The Peculiar Function of Human Beings', in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy IX*, No.3,1979, pp. 180-181.

good in the first instance. *Eudaimonia* is therefore everyone's goal, it is an unconditional good. In trying to define it, the Athenian philosopher starts underlying the centrality of philosophical research as the only possible way to reach a certain knowledge on virtue, on the good and, consequently, happiness.[3] The path of knowledge starts with the awareness of knowing to know nothing: from this position we are freed from any kind of preconceptions. The problem is that, even though Socrates talks about 'good' and knowledge many times, he never gives us a specific definition of these terms, neither does he explain specifically how these would contribute to happiness.[4] He only talks about a link between taking care of the soul (the true self of every individual and the source of rationality) and the virtuous life. It seems that in the sentence 'know yourself' Socrates wanted to argue that, in the effort of prioritizing the soul,[5] one can intuitively come to comprehend what is good for it (and, expanding this concept, this must be also good for others). When one perceives this, one cannot avoid pursuing it and cannot act badly. According to Socrates, those who act badly do not do that out of meanness, but because they ignore what is good: this is nothing but a cognitive failure.[6] Hence, the strong relationship between knowledge, virtue and happiness emerges clearly. Virtue consists in applying in the best way possible our own capabilities using our capacity of reasoning, and *eudaimonia* is the result arising from a rational behavior prompted towards virtue.

It is significant to underline that, although Socrates considers the cure of the soul more important than the cure of the body, at the same time he does recognise the importance of passions, emotions and pleasures. However, everyone must remember that there is a priority order for which the goods one ought to give priority to are the ones related to the soul. Only with the employment of wisdom we can value which desires are worth being satisfied and which can be harmful. We can say, then, that happiness does not depend on external goods (richness, power, health), but it depends

[3] M. M. Sassi, *Indagine su Socrate, persona, filosofo, cittadino*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2015), pp. 84-90.
[4] George Klosko, 'Socrates on Goods and Happiness', in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* , Vol. 4, No. 3, Plato and Aristotle Issue (University of Illinois Press, Jul., 1987), p. 255.
[5] M. M. Sassi, *Indagine su Socrate, persona, filosofo, cittadino.*
[6] C.C.W Taylor, *Socrates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

on how these potential goods are used. If they are used properly, they can be beneficial, but they are not necessarily so: that is why they are not absolute goods, but conditional goods.[7] Instead, what is truly good is *always* and *necessarily* good and beneficial (as, for example, living a virtuous life). 'The main causal claim is that only the presence of knowledge renders weak goods necessarily beneficial'.[8] That is to say, happiness is possible through the enjoyment that results from a proper use of instrumental goods, thanks to the employment of wisdom, which is identified with virtue itself.

Plato

Plato is our chief source for the Socratic theories, as Socrates did not write anything, preferring the oral lecture. The Athenian teacher is always present in Plato's dialogues as a character, and that sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish their thoughts. Nevertheless, we can come to outline some important dissimilarities between the two. We can assume that in the early dialogues (*Apology of Socrates, Crito, Lysis, Protagoras* and *Meno*) Plato stuck with Socrates' ideas, presenting them and mainly agreeing to them, while in the middle and late dialogues (*Phaedo, Symposium, Republic, Cratylus, Phaedrus, Timaeus* and so on) he disclosed his own philosophical theories, drifting apart from those of his teacher.

The first thing to say is that for Plato 'happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*) is the highest aim of moral thought and conduct, and the virtues (*aretê*: 'excellence') are the requisite skills and dispositions needed to attain it'.[9] From this assumption, we can move forward trying to better explain what, for him, can result in making a man happy.

Plato considers the soul as the true self of every individual but, on this matter, some differences in respect of Socrates must be taken into consideration. It is in particular in the *Republic* that Plato differentiates his view, presenting a diverse theory of the soul as not unitary anymore, but

[7] George Klosko, 'Socrates on Goods and Happiness', p. 251.
[8] *ibid.*, p. 252.
[9] Dorothea Frede, 'Plato's Ethics: An Overview', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/plato-ethics/>.

tripartite into reason, spirit and appetite.[10] The rational part of the soul aims at the theoretical knowledge of the Truth and guides man into a moral conduct through ethical values. The spirit is constituted by the aggressive and reactive principle, linked to passions, keen on getting into temper; this part can also be a generous animosity aspiring to glory.[11] The appetite is connected to bodily sensations and desires. This division of the soul in three parts[12] explains why a man can be exposed to different forces at the same time (e.g. I can be trying to make a right decision, but be very hungry at the same time). That is why, in Plato's view, even those who know what is good can act badly, because being driven by other impulses.[13] Thus, for a person to live a virtuous life, reason must be able to rule the appetitive part completely, controlling and overcoming passions through the support of the spirited part. When this occurs, harmony in the soul is generated and the subject can live a just and happy life. In fact, according to Plato, virtue is nothing but the dominium of the rational part on the appetitive part (reached through wisdom, temperance, courage and justice).[14]

Moreover, Plato adds that it is necessary for a man to live in a State where the same harmony between the parts (philosophers-rulers, the guardians and the producers) takes place. Nobody can by happy in a disordered society: the dimension of collectivity in a well-ruled State is fundamental.[15] Justice is the result arising from the harmony in one's soul and in society, when all the parts of the State accomplish their duties and the citizens behave morally, guided by philosophers (the only ones who get access to objective truths).[16]

To grasp what Plato meant by objective truths it is essential to briefly explain his theory of Forms. First of all, if we are to get some knowledge, we can only rely on our reason, as our senses are liable to fail.

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[10] Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Tom Griffith, ed. by G. R. F. Ferrari, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 111-144.
[11] *ibid.*
[12] Hendrik Lorenz, 'Ancient Theories of Soul', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/ancient-soul/>.
[13] Terence Irwin, 'Plato', in *The Development of Ethics: Volume 1: From Socrates to the Reformation*, (Oxford Scholarship Online: October 2011), p. 76.
[14] *ibid.*, p. 84.
[15] Plato, *The Republic*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 55.
[16] Mario Vegetti, 'Introduzione' in Platone, *La Repubblica*, translated by Franco Sartori (Bari: Laterza, 2001).

Men can see only the world of appearance and they formulate beliefs according to particular things around them, but this is an illusory knowledge. For true knowledge (*episteme*) to be possible, it is indispensable to assume something to be permanent, changeless, objective: the Forms. The Forms represent the invariable model through which the other entities are conceivable. They are innate in every soul, since before bodily birth the soul could contemplate them; then, because of the deception of senses, men forgot about them. Only philosophers can come to fathom real things again and get to true knowledge. The superior Form that makes knowledge possible, enlightening and causing all others Forms to be, is the Form of Good, a transcendent principle. 'We have just seen that each Form of X is the best X there can be. So the Form of Form-ness must be the Form of the property of being best – which is to say, it must be the Form of the Good'.[17] Once philosophers intuitively grasp the Form of the Good, they are able to identify and indicate the absolute norms for the moral conduct, both individual and public. These objective norms are the guidelines to a virtuous life and to achieve *eudaimonia*.

For Plato there are two kinds of happiness: the one reachable in this life and the one reachable only after physical death. The first one is a practical happiness, that is attained when the individuals are able to establish harmony between the parts of the soul and can be extended in the State. The second kind of happiness is a contemplative one, accessible only to those who, in the mortal life, got to such an elevated level of psychic purity that in the life after death will be able to contemplate forever the real Good. 'The real self is the intellect, which can achieve its full potential only when it is freed from the shackles of the body'.[18]

Aristotle

Socrates and Plato opened up the path that leads us directly to Aristotle. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, starts his philosophical investigation arguing that the good 'has been aptly described as that at

[17] Nickolas Pappas, *Plato and the Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 103.
[18] C.C.V. Taylor, 'Plato on Rationality and Happiness', in *Pleasure, Mind, and Soul: Selected Papers in Ancient Philosophy*, (Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2008), p. 236.

which everything aims';[19] however, he differentiates his conception of 'the good' from Plato's. For Aristotle, in fact, the good exists ontologically both as a single divine entity (the God that guaranties the movement of everything) and as a concept present in every single thing, not as a common universal. The good is inherent in all the categories, namely in all those concepts that are part of knowledge (substance, quality, quantity, time and so on).[20] Everything has in itself the sense of its existence, and therefore Plato's world of Forms does not exist. Believing in the world of Forms as the only true world would mean to be referring to an abstract reality, meaningless for our life and our actions in this world.

From this premise Aristotle moves on with the question of what the ultimate purpose of our existence as human beings is. As for his predecessors, for him as well *eudaimonia* is the greatest goal: 'this is an end that we pursue for its own sake and for the sake of which we pursue everything else'.[21] Happiness is thus self-sufficient and perfect, it is the ultimate end of our actions and therefore it involves human activity.

The starting point of our study in order to properly define Aristotle's happiness is his conception of men's soul. The philosopher starts catching up on Plato's theories, but he ends up coming to different conclusions. According to Aristotle, man's soul is divided in two parts: the rational part (divided itself into scientific/theoretical, related to eternal and unchangeable things, and calculative/deliberative, related to decisions to make in order to control the impulses of the irrational part) and the irrational part (divided into vegetative, responsible for the activities that we share with plants, and appetitive, linked to desires and sensations). Animals and plants only participate in the irrational part, so their nature is on a lower level. The more complex nature of the human beings allows them to conduct a moral life guided by reason, that will lead them to the complete and choice-worthy end: happiness. Only ethical rules can truly fulfil human nature. As we might understand, the appetitive part of the soul is considered irrational, but it is somehow linked to the rational part, as it can be guided by it. Desires

[19] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. by Roger Crisp, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 3.
[20] *ibid.*, p. 8.
[21] Irwin, 'Aristotle: Happiness', in *The Development of Ethics: Volume 1: From Socrates to the Reformation*, p. 123.

and passions are the origin of the motion of the soul that tries to orientate its action towards the object of the desire. The wise man must thus moderate and orientate them towards the right choice, which is in the Golden Mean,[22] but not annihilate them. This means that virtue, according to Aristotle, is always to find a balance between the two extremes of excess and deficiency. Virtue depends on our behavior in the face of passions: it is the disposition that orientates the choice, and it can be educated thanks to repeated right choices. 'The human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue'.[23]

Virtuous activity is therefore necessary for *eudaimonia*, but not sufficient to obtain it. Aristotle rejects the Cynic position for which virtue is identical to happiness: happiness is a composite end. There are some goods (like honor, friendship, wealth and health) the lack of which does not allow a complete fulfillment. Aristotle dedicates a part of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to talk about those who are virtuous men, but do not possess external goods, or suffer from awful misfortunes or diseases.

> If we identify happiness with virtue, we must claim that someone can be happy when he is asleep or when he is suffering terrible misfortunes. Aristotle thinks we will agree that this is an absurd claim because both conditions prevent rational activity […], that is essential to happiness.[24]

Aristotle does not claim that a man is just happy or unhappy: there are middle ways. These people do suffer sorrows that obscure the achievement of complete beatitude, but still, they can share some part of happiness in living a noble life, trying to bear their sufferings. 'Nevertheless […] Aristotle's ideal for humans, *eudaimonia*, requires virtuous activity and certain other goods in a necessary conjunction'.[25] Those who act virtuously *and* are blessed with certain external goods can be truly happy and find consequent pleasure in living this kind of life.

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[22] Richard Kraut, 'The Doctrine of the Mean', in 'Aristotle's Ethics', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aristotle-ethics/>.
[23] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 12
[24] Irwin, 'Aristotle: Happiness', p. 128.
[25] George J. Grech, *Aristotle's eudaimonia and two conceptions of happiness*, < http://hdl.handle.net/10023/994>, p. 28.

Aristotle conceives, as Plato, two kinds of happiness. The practical happiness is achieved when the rational part of the soul is able to control the other part fully fulfilling its potential, developing all the moral virtues in an excellent and equal way. This kind of happiness needs also external goods that must never be either in excess or deficiency. Through reason and habit men must try to pose ethical norms that allow them to guarantee a peaceful life in the *polis*. Contemplative happiness can be achieved only by philosophers, that are able to strengthen intellectual virtues in order to reach perfect wisdom and contemplation of what is eternal. Philosophers, through theoretical activity, can grasp the divine, becoming much less subjected to physical needs and linked to external goods. Contemplative happiness is thus a kind of perfect beatitude.[26]

The difference with Plato here is that for him true happiness could only be reached after death, while for Aristotle contemplative happiness is fully reachable in this life (dead people cannot carry out any activities, and happiness implies activity).

2. Considerations on Socrates, Plato and Aristotle's accounts on happiness.

Even though these philosophers outlined very well-developed accounts on *eudaimonia*, and their aim is remarkable, I am of the opinion that their notion of happiness is not thorough. With this I do not intend to affirm that their interpretations are completely erroneous: I personally concur with many of their theorizations. However, my thought is that their views are somehow limited and thus not sufficient in order to properly guide us into living an actual happy life. I will present below the aspects I recognise as efficient, followed by those I do not entirely share.

First and foremost, the reason why I have decided to focus my dissertation on happiness is that this is a topic which has always captured my attention. Every person I met, every situation I found myself in, besides my own personal feeling, confirmed that everyone is looking for happiness

[26] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 187.

in the first instance. Happiness is the absolute end everyone wants to reach and it is desired in itself, it is self-sufficient. Taken this for granted, if we are to define what we call 'happiness', I reckon this cannot possibly be interpreted as enjoyment or as a temporary state of pleasure. Believing so would contradict the former assumption, inasmuch as pleasure and enjoyment are not self-sufficient lasting ends. Enjoyment does not satisfy us entirely, and pleasure often leaves us with nothing but the craving of experiencing it again. This is why the ancient Greek conception of *eudaimonia* as human flourishing is what is closer to the idea of happiness as a state of fulfilment, which is, I believe, what everyone actually desires. I am convinced that a long path of self-knowledge is required in order to understand what happiness is. Only those who develop a critical approach when confronted with important matters can come close to get a possible answer. Even though I do not agree with their positions entirely, I believe Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have the merit of having drawn better than anyone else what happiness can be, at least in theory.

Another conception I find particularly adequate is Aristotle's explanation of happiness as a composite of different elements. I do not think for someone to be virtuous would be a sufficient condition in order to be fully happy. In arguing so I am especially referring to some theorizations on Socrates' view that, in my opinion, are wrong. It is important to point out that there can be disagreements on Socrates' views, because he did not develop a moral theory in a systematic way, and some notions seem to be contradictory or are too vague. Some argue, in fact, that Socrates meant virtue as necessary *and* sufficient for achieving happiness. 'In the *Crito* Socrates says that "living well" (*eu zēn*) - which is synonymous with "living happily" – "living honorably" and "living justly" are the same thing (*tauton*)'.[27] This would imply that a virtuous person subjected to an injustice is happy no matter what.[28] This seems to me somewhat extreme. Perhaps, it would be more precise to claim that to be subjected to an injustice does not damage the person's soul, but cannot either secure a full happiness. As Aristotle argues, this does not signify that a person subjected to misfortunes

[27] George Klosko, 'Socrates on Goods and Happiness', p. 253.
[28] Plato, *Gorgias*, ed. by Donald J. Zeyl (Hackett Publishing, 1987), p. 41.

is bound to be unhappy: it means that his happiness would be fuller if he could have avoided that undesirable condition. Therefore, I believe it would be better to agree to a wider idea of *eudaimonia*, for which even the so-called 'weak goods' can contribute.

Another vision I agree with is that, in order to find happiness as individuals, it is necessary to find harmony in the State, in the community. To give an example, it will be enough to think about the Nazi society: could a person fully aware of what was going on feel inwardly happy? I do not think so. We cannot be individually happy when we believe the system we are in is completely wrong and outrageous for some other people. We cannot be fulfilled living in a state of tyranny, in a context where our freedom is limited. In a bad society people can try to live the best life possible, but they will be dissatisfied until the situation will change.

I will now explore the reasons why I believe Socrates, Plato and Aristotle's theorization of *eudaimonia* is not an exhaustive account for happiness.

First of all, I do agree with Plato in denying the Socratic notion of 'cognitive failure'. As Plato states, there are impulses which push us into deliberately choosing what we know or believe to be wrong. Therefore, the knowledge of what is good does not prevent from acting badly. Even so, though, I do not quite follow Plato's consequent theorization. As we have seen, Plato starts from this consideration in order to delineate a division of the soul in three parts, in which he clearly points out the inferiority of the irrational part of the soul. Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* sends the clear message that it is necessary to go beyond the illusory world of the senses in order to reach true knowledge.

It is actually true that sometimes senses and instincts are deceiving, but can we say it is always like that? When I feel that I love reading a book, for instance, maybe this is telling me that I have a passion for literature. If I fall in love with a man, maybe this is telling me he is the right person to share my life with. Of course, it does happen these impulses are mistaken, but it is not always the case: they can even indicate our genuine desires, which will eventually allow us to know ourselves and reach happiness.

Moreover, the senses are the only means through which one can perceive and know the world and other people. Thus, it seems to me the senses are indeed a source of a certain kind of knowledge, instead of a mere deceptive entity (as Drew Leder argues in his book *The absent body*).[29] And even though I believed senses were completely defective, yet it is the reality perceived by senses the only one I am in. What is the use of relying on a 'beyond-world', when it is so far from our direct perception? I agree with Aristotle in arguing that the world of the Forms does not exist and, even if it did, it would be meaningless for our present lives. Consequently, even though it is fundamental to bear in mind the possibility of deceit and the necessity of using wisdom when making choices, I still consider the instincts as something useful for me in order to obtain some knowledge, even on happiness. It is my ability to judge and to act using rationality *and* instincts together that will lead me into right or wrong decisions. If the rational part always guides the irrational, then there will be some psychological consequences: the irrational part must find its dimension. Since I regard the person as a unity, I prefer much more to think about the importance of trying to find harmony between these two parts bearing in mind there is no supremacy of one over the other.

In line with this, I want to underline the inconsistency of asserting that a fully fulfilled happiness can be only reached after death. This would mean postponing the problem of understanding what happiness is to a time we are not able to verify or judge. If happiness exists, it must be possible to find it in this life, because this life is all we have and we are sure of. If we cannot do that, than we should state that happiness is unreachable, avoiding categorizing two kinds of happiness, an inferior one (in this world) and a superior one (after death). It would be more honest to maintain that happiness does not exist at all, or it is not as perfect as one would expect. The claim that there is a perfect world fully knowable only after death is just a palliative. The Aristotelian argument that contemplative happiness is possible in this life, instead, is at least an attempt at responding to the

[29] Drew Leder, 'The Threatening Body', in *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 134.

problem. That is why I find it more acceptable, even if that particular experience is difficult to grasp, and maybe just a few people will reach it.

Thus, Aristotle's argument raises other problems: how about the other people? Is complete happiness forbidden to them? Or if they will practice virtues they will eventually reach it? Are there really some objective standards to be met in order to reach happiness? Where is the Golden Mean to be found?

These questions open up to the main problem of *eudaimonia*, namely the claim of objectivity. First of all, the idea of the Golden Mean seems to me a rather relative concept, a sort of expedient[30] Aristotle uses when confronted with the fact that it is hard to state when one should follow the instincts and when rationality, what virtues are and what is the right attitude towards them. It is hard to try to give a standard for these matters, or consider them objective. Perhaps because they simply should not be. It follows I do not concur with the idea that happiness is objectively reachable practicing virtues. In fact, someone could live a virtuous life just because society taught them it is right or to respond to someone else's expectations, and yet not personally embrace those beliefs. In this cases, happiness does not possibly derive as a consequence, because these behaviours would be imposed, determining several psychological impacts (as, for example, frustrations). And yet, even if one lived following these values because of his convictions, I still do not trust he would be automatically happy. The practice of virtues cannot directly lead to happiness, as in a cause-effect system. If this were always the case, we would be like machines. Instead, we are human beings with a past that characterizes us, a present where we can make decisions that will affect our lives, people around us that influence our conducts, compromises we have to deal with.

There is something these philosophers missed. They left out every individual's singular story and subjectivity, the psychological and familiar background everyone carries. They left out the subconscious that inhabits every man and that must be taken into consideration when talking about 'good life'. Happiness is not objective because, as simple as it may seem,

[30] Kenneth Hamilton, 'The False Glitter of the Golden Mean', in *Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 42, 4, 1963, <http://hdl.handle.net/10222/62663>.

we are all radically different, since before we were born. I believe the account of the three Greek philosopher is defective inasmuch as it claims to be objective.

Nonetheless, I am of the opinion that there is a form of 'subjectively objective happiness', based on each singular knowledge and experiences. I will better clarify this thought in the last chapter of my dissertation.

3. Christian philosophers: God is happiness.

Aristotle's thought builds a bridge between the ancient Greek philosophies and the main Christian philosophers. When Christian religion enlarged the number of adherents gaining authority, becoming the official religion of the Roman empire and the guidance of all social and cultural movements, even philosophy came to be monopolised by its vision. Many philosophers challenged themselves in trying to prove the existence of God. The Christian God was supposed to be the core and the end of all philosophical investigation. Hence, even when confronted with the matter of happiness, philosophers connected it directly to God. In order to illustrate the Christian conception of happiness, I will briefly mention the thought of Saint Augustine, Boethius and Saint Thomas Aquinas. I will present them rapidly, because a great part of their theories has its roots in Aristotle's and Plato's theorizations about virtues and *eudaimonia*, they only differ in the final conclusions.

Saint Augustine

As we know by his *Confessions*,[31] Saint Augustine lived many years of his life seeking sensible pleasures. At some point, after meeting Saint Ambrose, bishop of Milan, he converted: he slowly realized that only God could truly fulfil his personal, infinite desire. While all creatures get their

[31] Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008).

existence from God, existence and essence are one in God. For this reason, God must be the end of all philosophical quests.

In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine explains that men are deeply unhappy because they believe momentary joys can fulfil them, so they keep looking for happiness where happiness cannot be found. All human beings seek for happiness and have an idea and insight of what it is, but since this world is deceiving, we are tempted in pursuing transitory, and eventually disappointing, pleasures. It is our wrong disposition that forbids us to know and find God: we are unhappy because we misplace our desire. Every human being, in fact, stretches out to God, whether aware of it or not, and therefore no material finite thing can be fulfilling. If we understand the priority of seeking God over other things, directing the will through education towards a virtuous life, our soul will come to be ordered and harmonious. However, happiness can be truly complete only in the direct contemplation of God after death. God is the meaning men cannot find in this world; God is therefore knowledge, truth and lasting happiness of the soul. In a world of finite things, our desire is infinite, because our immortal soul is bound to come to contemplate the infinite, and can find its natural accomplishment only in God.[32] Augustine makes clear, in fact, that even though he grasped the idea of true happiness, he could not be totally happy in this life because, as human being, he was constantly tempted to reach misleading joys.[33]

We are not far, here, from the platonic view: Plato as well had placed real happiness in the intelligible world one can actually contemplate only after death. The only difference is in the 'kind' of God: the Christian God and the transcendent Platonic principle.

Boethius

Following this path, it is important to mention Boethius' conception. Boethius (who had translated some of Aristotle's works) ended up in prison

[32] Jude Dougherty, 'In pursuit of happiness' in *The World & I,* 18(9), (2003), pp. 239-247.
[33] Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Happiness in Augustine's Confessions', in William E. Mann, *Augustine's Confessions: Philosophy in Autobiography*, (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), pp. 46-70.

after suffering many misfortunes. While prisoner, he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*,[34] dedicating most of it to the attempt at demonstrating that those who believe and have come to contemplate God cannot be unhappy, even if hit by many adversities. His dialogue with the character Philosophy leads us in the understanding of his consistent account of true happiness (even though there seem to be different lines of argument in Philosophy's discourse): being the supreme and perfect good, happiness coincides with God. Therefore, even if the fortune changes, happiness cannot be harmed. Fortune, wealth, and attachments link us to this sensible world and they are just imperfect goods. Thus, they are not components of true happiness, because happiness is of a completely different nature: it is eternal and inherently good.[35] Again, only virtuous actions can lead us in the accomplishment of contemplating God. Injustice exists because we are sinners, and therefore we can be exposed to troubles, but a correct understanding of providence (as 'the unified view in God's mind of the course of events')[36] will make us truly happy. Indeed, the trials we are asked to face are a way through which we can be sanctified, coming to recognise that God is the supreme good and primary source of love. Christ's sufferings on the cross for the atonement of sins provide the possibility for true happiness to become a reality for sinners.

Saint Thomas Aquinas

We can now come to illustrate the last, and most important, Christian philosopher we will take into consideration, Saint Thomas Aquinas. He, better than anyone, bonded together Greek philosophy with Christian religion, especially in his masterpiece, the *Summa Theologiae*. In a section of this work he outlines a specific guidance for men in order to understand what happiness is and he illustrates the possibility of reaching it in this life. To such a purpose, Aquinas proceeds distinguishing two kinds of happiness: *beatitudo* and *felicitas*. The complete happiness 'would not be the last end,

[34] Ancius Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, (Penguin Classics, 1999).
[35] John Marenbon, 'Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/boethius/>.
[36] *ibid.*

if something yet remained to be desired',[37] so it must be perfect. Since the only perfect, uncreated and absolute good is God, true happiness (*beatitudo*) corresponds to the direct contemplation of God.

> If therefore the human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, knows no more of God than 'that He is'; the perfection of that intellect does not yet reach simply the First Cause, but there remains in it the natural desire to seek the cause. Wherefore it is not yet perfectly happy. Consequently, for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which alone man's happiness consists.[38]

Beatitudo can only be obtained after death, when our immortal soul will be completely purified and freed from the body.

'Such an end lies far beyond what we […] can attain. For this reason, we not only need the virtues, we also need God to transform our nature - to perfect or "deify" it - so that we might be suited to participate in divine beatitude'.[39] In other words, the intervention of the divine grace is needed in order to attain such a complete Vision.

In this life there are too many imperfects goods and evils we are attracted to and tempted by. These limit us in our infinite desire for God (the absolute Being our will can truly be satisfied by). What we can obtain in this world, though, is an imperfect happiness, *felicitas*. Influenced by the Ancient Greek tradition, Aquinas believed that we can reach a certain kind of happiness if we dispose of ourselves in trying to fully accomplish our nature as rational beings. This can be attained by pursuing the traditional virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation, justice, friendship, and the theological virtues of faith, love and hope. *Felicitas* is the most we can achieve in this life. Softening down Augustine's pessimistic vision that

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[37] John M. Connolly, 'Aquinas on Happiness and the Will', in *Living Without Why: Meister Eckhart's Critique of the Medieval Concept of Will* , (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), p. 90.

[38] Thomas Aquinas, 'Whether man's happiness consists in the vision of the divine essence?', in *Summa Theologiae*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Part II.1, Question 3, Article 8, (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947), <https://dhspriory.org/thomas/summa/FS/FS003.html#FSQ3OUTP1>.

[39] Shawn Floyd, 'Thomas Aquinas: Moral Philosophy', in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/aq-moral/>.

sought the possibility of happiness exclusively after death, Aquinas introduces Aristotle's idea of happiness in this life, establishing a link between the two.

4. Considerations on the Christian philosophers' accounts on happiness.

Most of the considerations on the Christian philosophers' accounts on happiness are in line with what maintained about the three Greek philosophers previously analysed. I therefore refer back to those arguments, namely:

- the inconsistency of postponing the possibility to achieve true happiness in a life after death;
- the absurdity of considering our senses as the only source of deceit and evil;
- the inconsistency of categorising two kinds of happiness;
- the impossibility of believing that a virtuous person subjected to misfortunes is happy no matter what;
- the impossibility of finding an objective answer when confronted with topics such as virtues and happiness.

In addition to these arguments, there is something more to say related to the specific Christian vision. According to these philosophers, God is the answer to all questions, the solution to all problems, the guarantor of any order. When confronted with the topic of happiness, they bring up God as a 'great reassurance'. Since happiness is the most important achievement in someone's life, then it must coincide with the contemplation of the greatest entity, God. This affirmation could appear reasonable, from a theoretical point of view. And yet it is not entirely satisfactory. This kind of reasoning sounds, indeed, too abstract and detached from our immediate needs. It does not respond to our inner desire of finding happiness in this world, in our daily life. It leaves us with a bitter taste in our mouth, like if we were referring to something which we cannot actually grasp. To what use is, then, such a distant definition of happiness? My thought is that, since the matter of happiness is of such a complicated interpretation, these

philosophers relied on God as a powerful way to avoid the anxiety and confusion that would derive from a vision without certain guaranteed answers, without absolutes. As many centuries later Nietzsche argued, it is hard to conceive and accept the possibility of God's 'death',[40] because this would expose us to a state of uncertainty and chaos difficult to bear. In Nietzsche's view, it is only by acknowledging the death of God (meaning, by it, not only a religious God, but all strong 'myths', such as morality, science, common sense etc.)[41] that a man can really assume his responsibilities towards life and come to give a personal meaning to it.[42] By reporting part of Nietzsche's thought I do not intend to endorse it entirely. I believe, though, that it is crucial to consider it in order to properly evaluate the Christian account of happiness. Reflecting on Nietzsche's ideas is a step to undertake, because it allows us to develop a critical open way of thinking on the troublesome matters of life. Taking for granted the existence of a 'God-solution', or relying too much on absolutes does not help us in honestly trying to find the right answers and to embrace the unpleasant uncertainty that might derive from them. Surely Saint Augustine, Boethius and Saint Thomas Aquinas did personally feel in their hearts the God they are referring to. However, I do not believe that assuming God as the only true answer could possibly help people who are not at that same stage in life to find happiness. I do not aim to affirm that God does not exist or that God is not the answer at all. Only, I am of the opinion that an objective solution as 'God is happiness' cannot be exhaustive on a first instance. It is instead fundamental to examine each problem evaluating every possibility.

> Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions […], but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation.[43]

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[40] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010).
[41] Peter Fritzsche, *Nietzsche and the Death of God: Selected Writings*, (Waveland: Waveland Press, 2013), pp. 8-14.
[42] R. Lanier Anderson, *Perspectivism*, 'Friedrich Nietzsche', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/nietzsche/>.
[43] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, (Bibliotech Press, 2014), p. 120.

The discovery of God can be, for someone, one of the elements that contribute in making them happy, or the completion of these elements, but only after such a quest. God can be an answer, but it is not *the answer*.

Furthermore, I do not believe in an forever lasting happiness. The possibility of reaching happiness is a long process that requires a positive effort, thus it is not momentary either. I consider happiness as something that can be achieved and that might be weakened or strengthened depending on certain situations. It is not possible for someone to lose happiness in a moment, nor to gain it in a moment. I rather think of happiness as a progression that is never static, but always dynamic and that builds itself through time. As human beings, we can sometimes waste ourselves and find ourselves again, we can try to live according to our deepest desires and we can feel disenchanted or with no hope in life. There is no moment of real joy that, once reached, we can know for sure will last. Happiness can be undermined by external events, but not completely determined by these, not even by the divine grace. It is therefore problematic to believe that without God's intervention we are bound to unhappiness, as this would mean that we have no power over our lives and over our decisions.

In conclusion, I think the Greek and Christian philosophers' mistake was to expect happiness to be something perfect. My thought is that we should lower our expectations on it: happiness is something to be nurtured every day, and that might change according to our attitude towards life and according to events.

5. Happiness as *absence of suffering*.

It is starting with the examination of another Greek philosopher's thought, Epicurus, that I intend to introduce a different way of thinking happiness. This conception takes on the idea that happiness is the greatest goal in human life, and yet it detaches itself from the Aristotelian tradition when defining what happiness consists of. While in Socrates, Plato and Aristotle's theories the path through which one can reach fulfillment is an

'active' one (implying the effort of becoming virtuous), for Epicurus happiness is to be sought in the principle of 'achieving the greatest pleasure possible'. In other words, this corresponds to avoiding suffering. In fact, we must not interpret the word 'pleasure' as 'to get what one wants'. Instead 'pleasure', for Epicurus, means to undertake a kind of life that permits us to live in a state of tranquility. We find similar theories in some Eastern philosophical tradition (especially Buddhism), which I will quickly outline as a basis on which the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer built his own conception on happiness.

Epicurus

Epicurus developed his philosophical theories bearing in mind the thoughts of the great philosophers that preceded him, and he established his own school, 'The Garden',[44] in Athens.

In order to understand his account on happiness, it is indispensable to point out that Epicurus' physics, metaphysics and ethics are strictly bound together and one discipline entails the others. He was essentially an atomic materialist, as he believed that everything, even men's souls, is composed of atoms that move in the void without any transcendent principle's intervention.[45] Thus, another world after death does not exist nor does immortality: changes are simply due to the different movements of the atoms. Gods do exist, but they live in a state of perfection and they are not involved with humans' lives nor concerned about men's behaviours.

From these premises Epicurus explains why men should not worry about the two major fears they are typically affected by, as these apprehensions have no grounds: the fear of death and the fear for a divine punishment. Since souls are made by atoms, death is only a material event consisting of the separation of those particles. Once dead, men will not feel pain nor live another life, they will simply stop existing as individual

[44] Konstan, David, 'Epicurus', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/epicurus/>

[45] George Colang, 'Epicureism or a Philosophy of Pleasure', in *Philosophy, Social and Human Disciplines*, 2011 vol. II, p. 71.

entities. Moreover, since there is no world after death, there will not be consequences such as punishments or rewards based on men's actions.

Through this formulation Epicurus aims at destroying the primary reasons for anxiety in life. Freed from these fears, men can start to think about how to attain happiness in this tangible life. Hence, freedom is the lack of external coercion, and the first step towards happiness.[46] The path men have to undertake is a philosophical one, which implies getting a rational distance from any worries that would falsify reality causing unnecessary pain. This attitude will permit people to realise that a happy life is one that maximises pleasure. Besides, happiness is the 'ultimate justification for ethical behaviour',[47] thus pleasure is the only intrinsic good,[48] and a virtuous action is conceived simply as a means to the achievement of a happy (pleasant) life. In this context, justice is useful because it reduces harm for everyone; it is not regarded as an intrinsic good, but as a means.

About Epicurus' notion of pleasure many misunderstandings are still circulating. In fact, by 'pleasure' Epicurus did not mean the achievement of a full enjoyment of all bodily and mental desires. His theory is somehow just the opposite of this shallow interpretation: the greatest pleasure for men has to be found in the lack of suffering. Epicurus underlines the fact that there are different kinds of pleasures, not all of them worth satisfying: *natural and necessary pleasures* (in line with the human nature and necessary for happiness, namely living in a state of tranquility), *natural but not necessary pleasures* (as, for example, desiring a delicious food; these should be avoided as they imply attachment to external things), *not natural nor necessary pleasures* (for example the desire of a certain social position, which should be eluded as it brings troubles). 'We may recognize that not all pleasures are to be chosen at all times, since some immediate pleasures may lead to long-term pain or harm'.[49] Suffering is often the result of the affection to material goods and emotions. As a matter of fact, if one is in

[46] Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines and Letter to Menoeceus*, translated by Robert Drew Hicks (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).
[47] Adam Barkman, 'Was Epicurus a Buddhist?', in *Florianópolis*, v. 7, n 2, Dec. 2008, p. 290.
[48] *ibid.*
[49] Konstan, David, 'Epicurus', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

love he is immediately exposed to jealousy and fear of losing the loved person. Or, if one aims at gaining a certain social position, he will probably become ambitious and restless. These are all conditions in which one experiences a certain kind of suffering, namely the impossibility of finding peace. Only when freed from all these attachments can men truly flourish by experiencing freedom of the body from pain (*aponia*) and of the soul from suffering (*ataraxia*).[50] 'This state is also called *static* pleasure, because it is thought to arise from the stable atomic structure of our souls'.[51] The happiest man is the one that tries to become accustomed to a simple way of life, minimising desires and finding real pleasures in natural and necessary things.

Happiness though, for Epicurus, is not a private matter: friendship among people who share the same meaningful goal is the best way to inspire others in pursuing it.

Buddhism

A very similar idea on happiness is represented by the Buddhist conception. Siddhârta Gotama was the son of one of the kings of Northern India, and as such he was meant to become king one day. Yet his destiny brought him into another direction. In fact, once having seen the 'Four Signs',[52] he came to understand what suffering (*dukkha*) was (aging, sickness and death) and he also became aware of the possibility of escaping this through a long process of meditation and attainment of wisdom. That is precisely why he abandoned his kingdom and he started his path as 'the Enlightened One', looking for a way of escaping suffering permanently. While acknowledging the Hindu notions of *karma* and *samsâra* (the cyclic process of rebirth)[53] and the idea that the greatest good consisted in being

[50] Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines and Letter to Menoeceus*, translated by Robert Drew Hicks (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).
[51] Ad Bergsma, Germaine Poot, Aart C. Liefbroer, 'Happiness in the garden of Epicurus' in *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *9*(3), (2008), pp. 397-423.
[52] The 'Four Signs' were: an old man, a sick person, a corpse being carried to cremation and a holy man in meditation.
[53] Mark Siderits, 'Karma and Rebirth', in 'Buddha', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/buddha/>.

able to break free from suffering and *samsâra*, he oriented himself on an opposite track when confronted with what to achieve this escape meant. While in the Hindu tradition the enlightenment was conquered with the full realization of the *atman* (the self) as manifestation of *Brahman* in the substantial things, the Buddha sought this enlightenment in an opposite concept, the *anatman*, 'no-self'.[54] The belief in the individual self as a unitary entity distinct from others implies the attachment to personal needs, affections and ownings (to what is 'mine'). All these things are the primary source of suffering and frustration. 'Under the influence of habitual tendencies, we perceive the exterior world as a series of distinct, autonomous entities to which we attribute characteristics that we believe belong inherently to them'.[55] This ignorance leads us into a mistaken conception of reality. Indeed, 'when we explore the body, the speech, and the mind, we come to see that this self is nothing but a word, a label, a convention, a designation'.[56] In the Buddhist tradition the self (this ego's deception that must be unmasked) cannot be found in the body nor in the consciousness, being just a flow which does not last. The self has therefore no consistence. One must accept the denial of the self, intended as a singular and unitary subjectivity with specific desires to satisfy. Once one comes to perceive himself not as a substantial entity, but as something interdependent with others and with the environment, the 'individual self' is completely extinguished. When this occurs it is possible to reach *nirvana*: a full tranquility, the dissolution of all desires. *Nirvana* is the real permanent happiness, a complete avoidance of suffering, it is the acceptance of 'nothingness' (as nothing exists in itself, everything is flux, relation). The process of liberation from suffering starts with the awareness of being 'no-self', that nothing endures changeless.

In his sermon of the Four Noble Truths,[57] the Buddha presents the acknowledgments one should get to in order to undertake the process that leads to true happiness: 1) life is suffering; 2) suffering is nothing but the

[54] Richard Taylor, 'The Anattā Doctrine and Personal Identity', in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Oct., 1969), pp. 359-366.
[55] Matthieu Ricard, 'A Buddhist view of Happiness', in *Journal of Law and Religion*, 29, no. 1 (2014), p. 14.
[56] *ibid.*, p. 22.
[57] Mark Siderits, 'Core teachings', in 'Buddha', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

result of men's ignorance and longing for something or growing toxic emotions; 3) it is necessary to eliminate toxic desires in order to reach *nirvana*; 4) to do so it is essential to acquire wisdom and to meditate, improving some mental practices that purge the mind of venomous emotions. 'In brief, we must: recognize suffering, eliminate its source, and end it by practicing the path'.[58] Through these practices, one can still feel physical pain, but one cannot inwardly suffer, because pain does not disturb someone's mental state of tranquility. Suffering is a state of mind, thus the mind has power over it. Not all emotions are harmful, but only those which obstruct the process of freedom from suffering. The emotions of serenity derived from a wise and peaceful state, for example, are good. 'If an emotion strengthens our inner peace […] it is positive or constructive'.[59]

It is now possible to infer the main difference between the Buddhist conception of happiness and the Epicurean one: *nirvana* does not correspond to the enjoyment of the lack of suffering in a peaceful life; it is, instead, the liberation from the 'samsaric trap' and from *dukkha*, the extinction of suffering, desire and of the sense of the self.

Schopenhauer

We can ascribe to this school of thought a 19th century philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer.[60] Indeed, the German philosopher took on some of the Hinduist and Buddhist's assumptions on happiness, pushing them towards a very pessimistic theorization. He claimed to be a 'truth seeker' and that, although truth is painful, one must recognize it and accept it, insofar as it is the only way we can avoid false illusions that are either a product of ignorance or would cause, at some point, even more suffering. We can derive Schopenhauer's ideas on happiness mainly thanks to his essay *The Wisdom of Life*[61] from his final work *Parerga and Paralipomena,* where he indicates the guidelines for living the most tolerable life possible.

[58] Matthieu Ricard, 'A Buddhist view of Happiness', p. 18.
[59] *ibid*., pp. 19-20.
[60] Robert Wicks, 'Arthur Schopenhauer', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/schopenhauer/>.
[61] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life*, (Dover Publications, 2004).

The German philosopher reckons that human fulfilment would be in the complete realization of all our desires and in the complete avoidance of all our sufferings. However here an obstacle arises, which is inherent in the human nature, in the nature of the Will:[62] as a matter of fact, once men satisfy their desires, they suddenly get bored and wish for something new. A state of complete and permanent realization never occurs. Moreover, the assertion that happiness is *just* to be seen in the absence of suffering would contradict the true nature of human beings, since desire has a central role in it. Our Will aims to accomplish our desires, and the impediments we find on that way generate sorrow. Suffering originates from the interferences between the will and its momentary target. Nevertheless, once the goal is reached, boredom makes its way through: 'it is impossible to satisfy the will, and we are determined to walk the hedonistic treadmill endlessly. […] We are doomed to swing between pain and boredom'.[63] That is why the attempt to find a stable happiness is bound to be frustrated, because happiness is nothing but an illusion.

Because happiness as a persistent state does not exist, the best way for men to live their lives is to reduce suffering. There is no point in constantly trying to seek for something that has no consistence, living between longing and boredom. That is why, according to Schopenhauer, we should not pursue our deepest desires. The most tolerable life is the one in which we make do with simple things, like avoiding pain and emotions, limiting our expectations, pursuing basic needs. 'A painless state is the closest we can get to happiness',[64] although this *does not* correspond to a happy state. I believe that, by distinguishing 'absence of suffering' and 'happiness', Schopenhauer makes an important point I agree with, that shows the inconsistency of Epicurus' and the Buddhist's accounts.

Schopenhauer intends to provide us with some specific guidelines in order to reach this painless state. I will quickly mention some of them. First of all, there are three aspects that determine men's condition: personality

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[62] Robert Wicks, 'The World as Will', in 'Arthur Schopenhauer', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
[63] Rozemarijn Schalkx, Ad Bergsma, 'Arthur's advice: comparing Arthur Schopenhauer's advice on happiness with contemporary research', Journal of Happiness Studies, Springer, vol. 9(3), (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9039-9>, pp. 379-395.
[64] *ibid.*

and health, belongings, social position. Personality and health should be taken into great consideration when planning to reach 'the happiest life possible': one needs to take care of who he is (of his inclinations), to be true to himself and, in order to do so, one must be healthy too. It is not possible to be cheerful and ill or weak at the same time.

> Schopenhauer explains that superior mental ability helps to prevent tedium and keeps people from pursuing passions that lead to problems. We have to take our character into account and should only do things that suit it.[65]

Wealth and fame, as well as a respected social position, are not important in order to attain the happiest life possible. We only need what is enough for us to survive and nothing more: the more money we have the more attached to it we are and the more linked to suffering we are bound to be. Another piece of advice Schopenhauer gives us is that solitude is better than company, for dealing with people implies suffering. Believing the contrary would mean to be optimists, and optimism is just another illusory belief.

6. Considerations on the accounts on happiness intended as *absence of suffering*.

In order to present some considerations on the accounts on happiness intended as 'absence of suffering', I believe it is firstly important to point out the completely different approach of these accounts in respect of the previous ones considered in this dissertation. If Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Christian philosophers saw in happiness the necessity of an active implication of the individuals, the view on happiness as just 'absence of suffering' does not require it. No active search is implied, rather a passive acknowledgement of what we truly need, with a consequent estrangement from all sources of potential pain, until the extreme of the 'nothingness' of the self in the Buddhist account. While *eudaimonia* implies a constant

[65] *ibid.*

research and a personal determination in trying to become better people, the 'absence of suffering-happiness' springs from a process of progressive awareness that the cause for unhappiness is exactly in *that* research and in *that* determination.

Given these two opposite conceptions, it is required to take a side, as one alternative excludes the other. The success of a philosophical quest lies in the capacity of being completely open, trying to get rid of preconceptions or excessive intellectual loops. Now, to comprehend which option seems to be the most reasonable, we ought to make some considerations on the human nature.

On solitude

To start with, let us ponder Schopenhauer's claim that is better to live in solitude than in company. It is hard to support such a hypothesis, for various reasons. The main one is the simple fact that almost the majority of people live in relationships (friendships, working or familiar relationships). Would men have continued to live in such a relational condition for all these centuries if they had experienced they were better off living alone? Absolutely not, they would have chosen another lifestyle. And is it even possible for people to live a completed isolated existence? Well, to a certain extent, yes, and such an existence may have its virtues (for study, meditative reflection and self-analysis). However, that one could live such an existence over length periods of time is questionable as we are so reliant on others. This lends support for the inconsistency of Schopenhauer assertion. I believe Schopenhauer's mistake, when arguing so, was to not be able to recognise that his personal negative feeling towards a relational condition was probably dictated by bad experiences of his life. However, this is not an acceptable general answer. On the contrary, men are social beings, and dealing with other people is a trait that marks them. As such, a social dimension must be taken into consideration as part of happiness too.

Epicurus considered human relationships vital insofar as they are among people with similar philosophical goals. However, I believe there is a contradiction in his theory. In fact, is it possible to be in any kind of

relationship and at the same time to avoid any sort of attachment, hopes, angers, love? We can clearly see there is a contradiction in terms. The kind of happiness Epicurus talks about does not take into consideration the reality of facts. The complete state of inner tranquility could, in theory, be possible only without any contact with other human beings. However, as we have demonstrated, this cannot possibly be considered a happy state.

About passions and desires

The ancient Greek tradition and the Christian tradition distinguished two kinds of desire: a positive one (that guides man into living a good life by actively pursuing virtues and *eudaimonia*), and a negative one (that is irrational and guided by senses). As argued before, I do not agree to such a distinction. However, at this stage it is not relevant to probe once again into these topics. What matters here, though, is a wider conception of passions and desires, for which either they are to take into account or to avoid. According to the 'absence of pain-happiness' accounts it is the active attitude that derives from any passion which has to be circumvented, inasmuch as activity implies desire, desire implies attachment and attachment implies suffering.

Now, is it true that by minimising desires we maximise pleasure? Is it true that by pursuing basic needs we can avoid suffering? Is it realistic to believe that by extinguishing the 'individual-self' we find real freedom?

I propose here to enlarge what I argued in chapter 2 about irrational passions and desires to all human drives and strives. If, on the one hand, it is true that some pain might originate from these, and that the attachment to certain feelings is wrong, on the other hand this is a constituent part of our nature. As Schopenhauer noticed,[66] we are constantly striving for something, whether this is something material or the 'good life', ambitions or practicing virtues. It is this tension that characterizes us as human beings, whether we like it or not. Given this, is it reasonable to claim that the solution is to minimise these strives? This would correspond, from my point of view, to argue that since human nature entails some suffering, we should

[66] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life*, (Dover Publications, 2004).

try to be 'less human'. Since men are bound to suffer to a certain extent, happiness can only be found in trying 'not to be men'. However, this argument appears clearly implausible. And yet I believe that these accounts on happiness are maintaining something similar, just in 'more acceptable' terms. Believing that to eradicate desires is a solution, or even conferring to it the status of happiness seems to me problematic.

Therefore, as desires and feelings are part of the human nature intrinsically, they cannot be set apart when reasoning on happiness. A passive happiness is just not happiness. Schopenhauer has the merit of having understood and underlined this. The consequences in his theorizations are then extremely negative (namely that happiness does not exist at all) and he does not provide us with a positive. Nonetheless, I believe he had at least the courage to truly analyse mankind, facing the fact that happiness is neither something objectively reachable nor a simple 'absence of suffering'. Moreover, he stresses the importance of taking care of individual inclinations and personality, which, I reckon, is the starting point on the way for happiness. Also, I partially agree with his idea that a state of complete fulfilment and satisfaction is not possible for men. Nevertheless, I still think happiness is possible. Perhaps Schopenhauer expected happiness to be something perfect, something completely fulfilling, and this was his mistake.

Desiring, trying to pursue what we feel we are called to and what we love: this is the essence of our nature. To cut this out means to blow out the flame of life in us, becoming indifferent to things around us, anesthetized towards pain, but towards joy, love and life too. As the Russian writer Dostoevsky wrote, 'we can only truly love suffering, or through it'.[67] Suffering is a necessary step in order to grow, to love, to live. It is part of the deal. It is part of our human nature. And we can learn to love suffering and even to come to consider it part of our happiness.

[67] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *White nights; A gentle creature; The dream of a ridiculous man*, translated by Alan Myers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 118.

About the self

Silencing our most intimate drives would result into a neutralization of ourselves as human beings, which is exactly what the Buddhist theory of 'no-self' indicates as the right path. Let us then consider the hypothesis of the dissolution of the individual self as a way of becoming free from this ego's deception.

In the history of philosophy the personal identity, what we call 'self', has been questioned many times and in different ways, not only in the Eastern tradition. Descartes's distinction between mind and body ended up in conferring to the mind the real primate as true self of the individuals.[68] Locke's interpretation of the self as *psychological continuity*[69] is another example, or the materialist view that maintains we are nothing but atoms that move into space.[70] I must also mention the discourse on the subject that starts from Nietzsche and stretches out until the post-structuralists, for who the subject is nothing but a mere convention, while the true identity of an individual is unstructured and pluralistic: the subject is therefore deconstructed.[71] As we have seen, even the Western tradition questioned the subject as such, in different terms. The self seems to be an entity difficult to define. And yet, is the self really something that cannot be considered as an entity at all, something constantly shifting between different states or something constructed by society?

The objection I want to raise to this hypothesis is that, as much as I do recognise that it seems hard to define the kind of entity my 'self' is, I do intimately feel that I am a self. I am a subject different from other subjects, and I feel this as true, with no need for further investigations on this matter. I do perceive my 'self'. And I do not find reasons to doubt what I perceive

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[68] René Descartes, *Meditations* [1641], in *Key Philosophical Writings*, translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane, ed. by Enrique Chavez-Arvizo (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1997).

[69] Matthew Kapstein, 'Review: Collins, Parfit, and the Problem of Personal Identity in Two Philosophical Traditions: A Review of "Selfless Persons" and "Reasons and Persons"', in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (University of Hawai'i Press, Jul., 1986), < http://www.jstor.org/stable/1398781>, pp. 289-298.

[70] William Ramsey, 'Eliminative Materialism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/materialism-eliminative/>.

[71] Heartfield, James, *The 'Death of the Subject' explained* (Sheffield Hallam University, 2006).

so clearly as something veracious.[72] I agree with the post-structuralists' claim that the self is contradictory and fragmented. And yet, even after the deconstruction of the subject, I undoubtedly feel there is *something* left that resists, a personal core that constitutes who I am. I might not be a unitary subject, but I am a self. As much as puzzling, my personal thoughts are the proof that there must be a center of consciousness that is more than a mere collection of mental events and that is not possible to dissolve. After deconstructionism, the idea of a sovereign subject fell apart. The subjects turns out to be a complex and not cohesive entity, difficult to describe and examine. As the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan states: '*I am where I am not thinking* and if *I think where I am not*',[73] but still, I add, *I am something*.

I therefore disagree with the Buddhist hypothesis of 'no-self', as well as I disagree with the idea of happiness as 'absence of suffering'. I rather think of a complex nature of the self, which includes suffering and a positive possibility of finding happiness.

7. Happiness as 'the greatest good to the greatest number': Utilitarianism.

At this point in the discussion, we can somehow infer a connection between Epicurus' theory and another school of thought, Utilitarianism, whose belief is that happiness coincides with the maximisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain for the greatest number of people. Their conception of pleasure, though, differs.

[72] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, (Bibliotech Press, 2014), pp. 97-104.
[73] Jacques Lacan, *The seminar, Book XIV: The logic of phantasy* [1966-1967], <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-XIV.pdf>, p. 157.

Utilitarianism is an ethical teaching rooted in Jeremy Bentham's works[74] that spread and became established in the British philosophical culture of the 19th century, in particular thanks to J.S. Mill's theorization.[75] We can define Bentham and Mill's accounts as the major contributions to the Classical Utilitarianism, as thereafter many other philosophers built on their ideas some new conceptions of Utilitarianism. In the Utilitarian classical account, general happiness is the only thing that has an intrinsic value, and it is the condition in which the overall of pleasure (intended as a psychological state in which one 'feels good') prevails over the amount of pain.

This conception has a long tradition in the history of philosophy:[76] Bentham has the merit of having extended this belief as an interpretative criterion in ethics, economy and law: that simple principle that everyone can understand and experience (pleasure-pain) is the only principle that makes it possible to objectively estimate the norms on which we should base our civil life. Indeed, his attempt at founding such a theory started with his desire of social reform by changing inadequate, corrupt laws. 'For Jeremy Bentham, what made them bad was their lack of utility, their tendency to lead to unhappiness and misery […]. If a law or an action doesn't *do* any good, then it *isn't* any good'.[77]

As we can understand by these premises, a central aspect involved in the Utilitarian doctrine is consequentialism, for which it is possible to evaluate the 'utility' of a conduct only by its consequences. Actions are good if they contribute to happiness, thus they can be estimated depending on the positive outcomes they have in terms of pleasure or pain. Therefore, actions have no *intrinsic* value: they are just *instrumentally* right or wrong.[78] Laws too are not indisputable, hence they can change depending on the social situation: 'a law that is good at one point in time may be a bad law at

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[74] Paul J. Kelly, *Utilitarianism and distributive justice: Jeremy Bentham and the civil law*, (Oxford University Press, 1990).
[75] Christopher Macleod, 'John Stuart Mill', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/mill/>.
[76] John Troyer, *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill*, (Hackett Publishing, 2003).
[77] Julia Driver, 'The History of Utilitarianism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/utilitarianism-history/>.
[78] *ibid.*

some other point'.[79] This conception is the main difference in respect of other accounts on morality (not only the Aristotelean and Cristian accounts, but also the natural law's theory[80] or Kant's ethics,[81] for which an action must be always esteemed in itself and must be chosen because of its rightness, regardless of the consequences).

According to Utilitarianism the greatest happiness, though, is not to be interpreted in an egoistic way, rather right the opposite: one must take into consideration not only his own personal happiness, but also that of others. The criterion to establish the rightness of an action is to find a balance between individual's happiness and that of the community.[82] If my personal happiness deprives someone else of it, than that is not a complete happiness. A man can only be happy in a happy community. From an ethical point of view, the agent should therefore choose those conducts that promote the major happiness possible for the largest number of people or, to use Bentham's formulation, the promotion of a 'fundamental axiom, *it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong*'.[83] The principle of utility becomes therefore the most important moral principle.

Moreover, according to Bentham, the value of pleasure (and happiness) can be measured, since it is determined by some specific parameters: intensity, duration, certainty, proximity, fecundity, purity and extent.[84] These parameters are the standards one should be directed by, helped by the guidance of experience. Since it is possible to 'calculate' happiness it will be consequently possible to also promote a certain kind of morality even in other disciplines, such as law and economy, and this was precisely Bentham's initial aim.

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[79] *ibid.*
[80] Robert P. George, *Natural Law Theory: Contemporary Essays*, (Clarendon Press, 1994).
[81] Robert Johnson, Adam Cureton, 'Kant's Moral Philosophy', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/kant-moral/>.
[82] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, (Courier Corporation, 2012), pp. 2-3.
[83] Jeremy Bentham, 'A Comment on the Commentaries and A Fragment on Government', ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart, in *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham* (London: Humanities Press, 1977), p. 393.
[84] Julia Driver, 'The History of Utilitarianism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

To sum up Bentham's idea: pleasure and pain are the parameters that indicate what is good and they establish *a posteriori* which conducts can be considered right or wrong; the principle of utility becomes therefore the founding principle of moral theory and behavior. As a result, the evaluative moral criterion has to be based on the positive (happy) or negative (unhappy) consequences of our actions. These consequences must be judged according to their utility, namely if they produce benefits, welfare and happiness for individuals and for the community.

J.S. Mill, despite being one of his followers, recognised that some objections could be raised against Bentham's theorization. Mill thought that the main limit of Utilitarianism could be seen in the fact that Bentham's idea of pleasures was too calculative, leaving out consciousness as well as moral evaluations. As a matter of fact, Bentham had maintained that the only differences among pleasures are quantitative ones (the parameters we mentioned just above), not qualitative. Hence his view implies that simple pleasures, as sensory ones, are of the same intrinsic value as intellectual ones. To avoid possible critiques on this matter, Mill broadened the utilitarian views introducing a qualitative consideration on pleasures, showing that there are different kinds of pleasures, some of which are more desirable and fitting for the human nature than others. Thus, according to Mill, intellectual pleasures have more value than sensory pleasures. He proved this by claiming that those who have experienced both pleasures prefer the first ones. 'Or, to use his most famous example - it is better to be Socrates 'dissatisfied' than a fool 'satisfied'.'[85] This supremacy accorded to intellectual pleasures allowed Mill to somewhat open Utilitarianism to other opposed schools of thought.

After Mill many others (like, in particular, Sidgwick)[86] refined the utilitarian theory pushing it into different directions or better defining some peculiar concepts. In the context of this work on happiness though, it will be enough to have mentioned the Classical approach, sketching its main ideas on happiness.

[85] *ibid*.
[86] *ibid*.

8. Considerations on the Utilitarian view on happiness.

I believe this school of thought leaves room for various legitimate critiques, not only by opposed philosophical approaches but within Utilitarianism itself. In this work, I shall confine myself to making some comments just related to the sphere of happiness.

About the possibility of measuring pleasure

The first concept that captured my attention as basically impossible to accept is Bentham's idea that pleasure, and consequently happiness, can be measured based on some parameters. Even assuming these can be some guidelines in order to evaluate pleasure, is anyone really able to esteem, for example, the duration of their pleasure, or its certainty? These cannot be possibly conceived as objective criteria on which to calculate the precise amount of pleasure, just because pleasure is not a neutral data (as, for example, the temperature in a room is). Pleasure and happiness are much more evanescent and abstract concepts, they are subjected to a series of variables one cannot compute. Furthermore, men cannot always act thinking about the consequences of pain or pleasure their actions will cause. Or even if they did, they could do it acting against their feelings. For example, if I thought I should not leave a job because I might be unemployed afterwards, but I hate that job, how do I judge what is best to do? Can I really find an objective answer pondering about the consequences? The assumption that a man's decision must be just based on a rational evaluation is not conceivable. Every person has different demands that cannot be easily subjected to rational preferences.[87] The idea that happiness can be calculated sounds very much pretentious and quite impersonal. Happiness and life must be more than a simple measurement between pleasure and pain. As we are not machines, calculation is a term that does not fit our nature.

Moreover, the calculation of pleasure balanced among all people is a tricky notion. How will I be able to objectively judge when my happiness

[87] Amartya Sen, 'Welfare, preference and freedom', in *Journal of Econometrics*, Vol. 50, Issues 1–2, (1991), pp 15-29.

affects someone else's? If my friend and I aspire to the same job position, should I avoid competing with him/her? Indeed, if I got the job this might compromise my friend's happiness, but if I did not get it this might compromise *my* happiness. Hence, am I really able to foresee and choose the action whose effect would secure the greatest pleasure for both of us? Is it then possible to enlarge this concept to the greatest number of people? I do not think so. From this example it is evident that the Utilitarian aspiration is utopian, it could maybe work in theory, but then reality is much more complicated, and each case works differently. Even assuming that we could measure our personal pleasure, it would still not be clear how to fit this in the notion of a communitarian 'average' happiness.

About the risk of overestimating quantity over quality

And again, even given so, would it be reasonable to look for an 'average happiness' of the overall, instead of taking care of one's personal happiness? I believe the greatest happiness for the greatest number can be only met when everyone looks first for their own happiness, not in an egoistic way. Only when I take care of myself, can I reach a state in which I will be of help even for others, I will build a better community with my behavior. The idea of a happy community can only stand if individuals try their best in order to find their individual happiness first. According to the philosopher John Rawls, the Utilitarian thought ends up legitimising some individuals' sacrifice in order to obtain major advantages for the collectivity in general.[88] In the Utilitarian system the correct decision coincides to a mere matter of 'efficient administration': individual differences are thus not safeguarded.[89] The fact is that a plurality of people with different aims, life plans and needs is the substantial characteristic of any society. That is why even though Utilitarianism might seem coherent in itself it cannot work, because it does not face the reality of society. The extension to a collective dimension legitimises the violation of the fundamental freedom and rights of individuals and it ignores the disparity in the distribution of happiness:

[88] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 231.
[89] *ibid.*, p. 24.

the risk is to overestimate quantity over quality. One of the consequences of this reasoning might be that everyone would end up living a bearable life, but no one would live a fully happy life. In fact, the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen's argues that the individual pleasure can be influenced by mental conditioning and by adaptation. Desires can change adapting to circumstances and ambitions can be scarce just because one thinks only about those actions that are considered feasible in the context they are in.[90] Nonetheless, these are not true desires nor true happiness.

I totally agree with Rawls and Sen's views and I believe the problem of Utilitarianism is that it describes men and society too simplistically.

About the risk of relativism

Finally, I reckon the theorization of consequentialism is open to the risk of relativism. To argue that the worth of an action depends *only* on its effects is quite a strong assumption, because it implies the impossibility of judging an action itself just as right or wrong. Here many objections have been raised against Utilitarianism, because this statement implies several moral problems. In fact, if I rob a rich person that is exploiting other people, then it seems my action is justified because of its good outcomes. Or, is it right to bomb civilians in war in order to subvert a tyranny? If I know that by doing something 'apparently' wrong I will guarantee a good consequence, then I should be allowed to do it. And yet I feel a conflict when reflecting on these possibilities. These moral conflicts are something Utilitarianism does not consider, but actually they are vital to social life, ethical progress and moral integrity. It seems to me impossible to assert that we should judge an action by its effects *only*. To bomb civilians is *always* wrong, no matter the consequences. There are some actions that are just right or wrong intrinsically. To affirm the opposite would open to a radical relativism, for which everything can be allowed. According to the English philosopher Bernard Williams, Utilitarianism potentially authorises even the

[90] Amartya Sen, 'Utilitarianism and Welfarism', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 76, no. 9, 1979, pp. 463–489.

worst actions if the welfare of individuals is safeguarded.[91] However, which consequences can be evaluated as objectively positive and according to who? These notions risk being too vague. It is evident how all this leads us in a vicious circle with no end.

It is in light of all these considerations that I believe the Utilitarian account on happiness cannot be accepted as a valid one.

9. Conclusions

After having analysed some of the most important philosophical accounts on happiness and after having presented their strengths and their weaknesses, in this final chapter I will try to sum up all these considerations so as to delineate what I believe to be a possible right account of happiness. To such a purpose I will first list the characteristics that are not related to happiness, in order to come up with a positive definition of what happiness can actually be.

What happiness is not

1) ***Happiness does not correspond to enjoyment or to a temporary state of pleasure. It is not perfect, everlasting or eternal either.***

I believe that everyone, at least at first, aims to find a state of complete fulfilment in life, in which all desires are accomplished. And yet, when confronted with the fact that such a state is not achievable, many people give up on expecting this kind of happiness and fall back on something that seems immediately satisfactory but that, in the long run, is not: pleasure and enjoyment. My thought is that both of these attempts are fallacious inasmuch as they do not take into consideration human nature for what it is. Believing that happiness corresponds to a perfect and complete fulfilment does not take notice of the fact that men are not perfect, they are

[91] Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in George Sher, *Ethics: Essential Readings in Moral Theory*, (Routledge, 2012), pp. 253-261.

lacking something which cannot be filled with anything wholly. Thus, trying to reach such a state will lead to frustration and major unhappiness. Only by acknowledging the fact that a perfect happiness is not accessible not because people are incapable of reaching it, but just because of human nature, one can find a way towards true happiness.

On the other hand, it is not just because a perfect lasting happiness does not exist that we have to search for it in momentary pleasures. One could try to live shifting from a brief state of enjoyment to another, but this would be very tiresome and dissatisfactory. We are called to something more, we feel the need for something more.

2) ***Happiness does not correspond to 'lack of suffering' nor can it admit adaptation.***

It is not possible to believe in a 'negative' account of happiness because it leaves out what characterizes us the most: our desires. If we had to avoid completely suffering we would have to live in solitude and learn to get rid of feelings, emotions, desires. As shown in this dissertation, this does not make sense as it would lead us into an aseptic kind of life which would make us less 'human'. Furthermore, adaptation is not acceptable as a solution: if one adapts himself in order to live a bearable life, he has already given up on trying to find true happiness, which implies always a positive tension towards what is good.

3) ***Happiness is not objectively reachable, not through the practice of virtues nor by measuring the amount of pleasure.***

As maintained before, it is not suitable to believe that if we put into practice a set of virtues we would objectively end up being happy. We are not machines, we do not work in terms of 'objectivity'. For the same reason, we cannot measure our pleasure. We should not make the mistake of aspiring to fully classify man into categories, because even if this gives us a sense of stability towards the frightening uncertainties of life, it does not respond to our inner questions. Absolutes cannot be taken for granted as imposed, certain answers.

4) ***True happiness is not reachable only after death nor it only coincides with God.***

When people are challenged by the difficulty of reaching a perfect happiness in this world, the alternative of falling back on temporary pleasures is to rely on an 'after death' happiness, on a 'beyond world'. Since I cannot be completely fulfilled in this world, this realisation must be possible after death. Again, these 'myths' have the authority of giving a powerful answer to what seems to be unanswerable, placating our sense of confusion and dismay. However, if we had to postpone the matter of happiness until after death, then we should have to admit that there is no possible happiness in this world. And yet, we cannot have any certainty of a possible 'beyond-world'. Thus, it is not wise to rely on it, as well as God cannot be considered the answer to every question. This is an abstract reasoning far from our immediate needs.

5) ***There are not two kinds of happiness, a superior one and an inferior one, as well as the rational part is not superior to the irrational one.***

In line with what was just said, some philosophers tried to soften down the idea that happiness was reachable only after death by contemplating two kinds of happiness, a superior one (after death) and an inferior one (in this life). The inferiority of such happiness is due to the fact that the rational part of our soul can be compromised by our senses. Nevertheless, once again, it is through my senses, besides my rationality, that I get to know the world I am in. Hence, it is problematic to believe that rationality is superior to senses, as well as it is implausible to categorise different kinds of happiness. The solution does not correspond to minimise desires in order to maximise pleasure, nor to consider irrationality and senses inferior to rationality, trying to suppress the former in favour of the latter.

6) ***The Buddhist theory of 'no-self' is not acceptable, nor is it the Utilitarian idea of an 'average happiness' for the greatest number.***

When thinking about myself I always conceive me as a subject distinct from others. Believing that we can come to a state of rejection of

subjectivity and acceptance of being 'no-self' simply contradicts my most immediate feeling. In line with this, an average happiness for the greatest number is not adequate either, inasmuch as it does not take notice of the individual differences.

Characteristics of happiness

1) ***True happiness is a process of human flourishing and it is a composite of different elements.***

Happiness does correspond to human flourishing, even though it never reaches a state of perfection, insofar as it allows us to live a better life, one in which we can find serenity in doing what we love, respecting others. Human flourishing implies a dynamic progression: it is not permanent when reached, it requires a constant positive tension, because it can be strengthened or weakened according to external events or inner feelings. Happiness is a composite of different elements.

2) ***True happiness requires an active attitude and it involves desires and feelings, as well as rationality.***

Happiness requires an active philosophical attitude and a process of personal analysis. It involves a tension towards our deepest desires, towards a self-knowledge, towards the understanding of what is good or bad for us and for others. In this light, even suffering can become an essential part of happiness, a necessary step in order to better understand ourselves. Feelings, emotions and desires are part of human nature, thus they are involved in the process of happiness. Avoiding suffering by distorting human nature does not help at all.

3) ***Happiness is everybody's absolute end. There is a 'subjectively-objective' happiness.***

Our past and our psychological life do affect our awareness of what virtues are and of what happiness is. There are always differences from individual to individual. With the purpose of finding happiness, we need to take care of our personality and inclinations. However, what is objective is

the fact that happiness is for everyone the absolute end. It is intrinsically desired, not as a means to an end. Starting from this acknowledgement, even though an objective account on happiness for every person does not exist, I believe a 'subjectively-objective' happiness is possible.

4) ***Happiness is possible in this life.***

We must admit that, even though the thought of a possible complete happiness after death comforts us and gives us hope, we have no proof that it actually exists. Moreover, when living our lives, we are not primarily concerned with what will happen when we will be dead. *This* life and *this* world are what we are sure of and what we are primarily concerned about. Thus, the kind of happiness men are looking for must be reachable in this world.

5) ***Happiness arises from harmony.***

The person is a unity, thus only a harmony between the parts of the soul can guarantee happiness. Rationality and senses allow us to get some knowledge and desires are the essence of our nature, while suffering and deceit do not contradict the possibility of being happy.

Also, we are social beings, and thus we need to live in a harmonious society.

6) ***Happiness is 'personal'.***

Since I might be a puzzled self, but *I am something*, happiness must be related to this *something* that I am. Happiness is always personal, it takes into account the individual differences and inclinations. In this respect it is interesting to consider the thought of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan

> It is this subjective singularity, not egoistic individualism, which separates us from the 'herd'[…]. Lacan's emphasis on what is singular, what cannot be counted, what organizes an enjoyment that cannot be shared or exchanged in the form of a commodity, is what arguably

constitutes the most important challenge posed by psychoanalysis to the reigning discourses of happiness and wellbeing.[92]

Happiness

It is only by acknowledging the intrinsic characteristics of a human being that we can come to delineate a possible answer on happiness. As discussed, men:

- are not perfect, they are in a condition of lack[93]
- have desires and passions
- ought to find harmony between rationality and senses
- look for happiness in this life
- are sociable beings
- are very different one from the other.

I will now attempt to define what happiness is and how we can try to reach it in this life.

Happiness is a progression of self-knowledge which derives from having experienced what is good or bad for us personally in the various situations of life we find ourselves in and it does entail suffering and the possibility of making mistakes. This self-analysis process starts with the awareness of what meaningful people in our lives and the society we were born in did about us (e.g. I acknowledge that my parents rose me in a Catholic tradition. I acknowledge that I was bullied when I was a child, and so on). Once recognised so, I can decide to *do something* about what *others did* about me, conscious of the fact that my past is so singular and different from all other people's that I cannot look for absolutes in order to respond to my personal subjective questions. This process continues with the understanding of my inclinations and deep desires, which are the essence of

[92] Colin Wright, 'Happiness Studies and Wellbeing: A Lacanian Critique of Contemporary Conceptualisations of the Cure', in Allan Apperley, Stephen Jacobs, Mark Jones, ed. by, *Theme: Therapeutic Cultures*, vol. 6 (2014), p. 810.
[93] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 2: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, ed. by Jacques Alain Miller, (CUP Archive, 1988).

who I am and what I want. The attempt should always be aimed at directing myself in a right tension towards my true desire, trying to find a harmony between rational and irrational drives. The true desire is the 'purest' one, not driven by other forces (as, for example, the feeling of satisfaction that can derive from meeting someone else's expectations; the temptation of adaptation; the attraction to material objects; escapism). The true path corresponds with getting rid of all 'non-pure' desires, by recognising when these links are still very strong and by being able to let them go. In doing so, I have to be aware of the only moral law which stands the test of objectivity: not to hurt anybody, or at least to try to do so in the way my knowledge enables me, nourishing the possibility of a harmonious society.

This is a process of honesty, where I become aware of the puzzled being that I am and, most importantly, I accept that I will never have comprehensive answers and I will never be completely fulfilled nor know what the perfect conduct exactly is. Following Jacques Lacan's thought: 'The search for meaning is therefore endless, for one cannot find any ultimate meaning that will be absolutely fulfilling, in sex, religion, or anything else, since the human being is founded in loss and separation'.[94] And yet this is not to be seen in a negative light: this 'imperfection', this lack is precisely what enables us to revamp our desire, which is what makes a life worth living. Therefore, even though not perfect, happiness does exist, and it consists in staying true to our 'objective subjectivity', directing ourselves towards our pure desire, in the attempt of not hurting anyone.

[94] Roger Horrocks, 'Lacan: Lack and Desire', in Campling J. (eds) *An Introduction to the Study of Sexuality* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 1997), p. 69.

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