

1

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE UNHAPPY?

Animals are happy so long as they have health and enough to eat. Human beings, one feels, ought to be, but in the modern world they are not, at least in a great majority of cases. If you are unhappy yourself, you will probably be prepared to admit that you are not exceptional in this. If you are happy, ask yourself how many of your friends are so. And when you have reviewed your friends, teach yourself the art of reading faces; make yourself receptive to the moods of those whom you meet in the course of an ordinary day.

A mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe,

says Blake. Though the kinds are different, you will find that unhappiness meets you everywhere. Let us suppose that you are in New York, the most typically modern of great cities. Stand in a busy street during working hours, or on a main thoroughfare at

a week-end, or at a dance of an evening; empty your mind of your own ego, and let the personalities of the strangers about you take possession of you one after another. You will find that each of these different crowds has its own trouble. In the work-hour crowd you will see anxiety, excessive concentration, dyspepsia, lack of interest in anything but the struggle, incapacity for play, unconsciousness of their fellow creatures. On a main road at the week-end you will see men and women, all comfortably off, and some very rich, engaged in the pursuit of pleasure. This pursuit is conducted by all at a uniform pace, that of the slowest car in the procession; it is impossible to see the road for the cars, or the scenery, since looking aside would cause an accident; all the occupants of all the cars are absorbed in the desire to pass other cars, which they cannot do on account of the crowd; if their minds wander from this preoccupation, as will happen occasionally to those who are not themselves driving, unutterable boredom seizes upon them and stamps their features with trivial discontent. Once in a way a car-load of coloured people will show genuine enjoyment, but will cause indignation by erratic behaviour, and ultimately get into the hands of the police owing to an accident: enjoyment in holiday time is illegal.

Or, again, watch people at a gay evening. All come determined to be happy, with the kind of grim resolve with which one determines not to make a fuss at the dentist's. It is held that drink and petting are the gateways to joy, so people get drunk quickly, and try not to notice how much their partners disgust them. After a sufficient amount of drink, men begin to weep, and to lament how unworthy they are, morally, of the devotion of their mothers. All that alcohol does for them is to liberate the sense of sin, which reason suppresses in saner moments.

The causes of these various kinds of unhappiness lie partly in the social system, partly in individual psychology – which, of course, is itself to a considerable extent a product of the social system. I have written before about the changes in the social

system required to promote happiness. Concerning the abolition of war, of economic exploitation, of education in cruelty and fear, it is not my intention to speak in this volume. To discover a system for the avoidance of war is a vital need for our civilisation; but no such system has a chance while men are so unhappy that mutual extermination seems to them less dreadful than continued endurance of the light of day. To prevent the perpetuation of poverty is necessary if the benefits of machine production are to accrue in any degree to those most in need of them; but what is the use of making everybody rich if the rich themselves are miserable? Education in cruelty and fear is bad, but no other kind can be given by those who are themselves the slaves of these passions. These considerations lead us to the problem of the individual: what can a man or woman, here and now, in the midst of our nostalgic society, do to achieve happiness for himself or herself? In discussing this problem, I shall confine my attention to those who are not subject to any extreme cause of outward misery. I shall assume a sufficient income to secure food and shelter, sufficient health to make ordinary bodily activities possible. I shall not consider the great catastrophes, such as loss of all one's children, or public disgrace. There are things to be said about such matters, and they are important things, but they belong to a different order from the things that I wish to say. My purpose is to suggest a cure for the ordinary day-to-day unhappiness from which most people in civilised countries suffer, and which is all the more unbearable because, having no obvious external cause, it appears inescapable. I believe this unhappiness to be very largely due to mistaken views of the world, mistaken ethics, mistaken habits of life, leading to destruction of that natural zest and appetite for possible things upon which all happiness, whether of men or animals, ultimately depends. These are matters which lie within the power of the individual, and I propose to suggest the changes by which his happiness, given average good fortune, may be achieved.

Perhaps the best introduction to the philosophy which I wish to advocate will be a few words of autobiography. I was not born happy. As a child, my favourite hymn was: 'Weary of earth and laden with my sin.' At the age of five, I reflected that, if I should live to be seventy, I had only endured, so far, a fourteenth part of my whole life, and I felt the long-spread-out boredom ahead of me to be almost unendurable. In adolescence, I hated life and was continually on the verge of suicide, from which, however, I was restrained by the desire to know more mathematics. Now, on the contrary, I enjoy life; I might almost say that with every year that passes I enjoy it more. This is due partly to having discovered what were the things that I most desired and having gradually acquired many of these things. Partly it is due to having successfully dismissed certain objects of desire – such as the acquisition of indubitable knowledge about something or other – as essentially unattainable. But very largely it is due to a diminishing preoccupation with myself. Like others who had a Puritan education, I had the habit of meditating on my sins, follies, and shortcomings. I seemed to myself – no doubt justly – a miserable specimen. Gradually I learned to be indifferent to myself and my deficiencies; I came to centre my attention increasingly upon external objects: the state of the world, various branches of knowledge, individuals for whom I felt affection. External interests, it is true, bring each its own possibility of pain: the world may be plunged in war, knowledge in some direction may be hard to achieve, friends may die. But pains of these kinds do not destroy the essential quality of life, as do those that spring from disgust with self. And every external interest inspires some activity which, so long as the interest remains alive, is a complete preventive of *ennui*. Interest in oneself, on the contrary, leads to no activity of a progressive kind. It may lead to the keeping of a diary, to getting psycho-analysed, or perhaps to becoming a monk. But the monk will not be happy until the routine of the monastery has made him forget his own soul. The happiness

which he attributes to religion he could have obtained from becoming a crossing-sweeper, provided he were compelled to remain one. External discipline is the only road to happiness for those unfortunates whose self-absorption is too profound to be cured in any other way.

Self-absorption is of various kinds. We may take the sinner, the narcissist, and the megalomaniac as three very common types.

When I speak of 'the sinner', I do not mean the man who commits sins: sins are committed by everyone or no one, according to our definition of the word; I mean the man who is absorbed in the consciousness of sin. This man is perpetually incurring his own disapproval, which, if he is religious, he interprets as the disapproval of God. He has an image of himself as he thinks he ought to be, which is in continual conflict with his knowledge of himself as he is. If, in his conscious thought, he has long since discarded the maxims that he was taught at his mother's knee, his sense of sin may be buried deep in his unconscious, and only emerge when he is drunk or asleep. Nevertheless, it may suffice to take the savour out of everything. At bottom he still accepts all the prohibitions he was taught in infancy. Swearing is wicked; drinking is wicked; ordinary business shrewdness is wicked; above all, sex is wicked. He does not, of course, abstain from any of these pleasures, but they are all poisoned for him by the feeling that they degrade him. The one pleasure that he desires with his whole soul is that of being approvingly caressed by his mother, which he can remember having experienced in childhood. This pleasure being no longer open to him, he feels that nothing matters: since he must sin, he decides to sin deeply. When he falls in love he looks for maternal tenderness, but cannot accept it, because, owing to the mother-image, he feels no respect for any woman with whom he has sexual relations. Then, in his disappointment, he becomes cruel, repents of his cruelty, and starts afresh on the dreary round of imagined sin and real remorse. This is the psychology of

very many apparently hard-boiled reprobates. What drives them astray is devotion to an unattainable object (mother or mother-substitute) together with the inculcation, in early years, of a ridiculous ethical code. Liberation from the tyranny of early beliefs and affections is the first step towards happiness for these victims of maternal 'virtue'.

Narcissism is, in a sense, the converse of an habitual sense of sin; it consists in the habit of admiring oneself and wishing to be admired. Up to a point it is, of course, normal, and not to be deplored; it is only in its excesses that it becomes a grave evil. In many women, especially rich society women, the capacity for feeling love is completely dried up, and is replaced by a powerful desire that all men should love them. When a woman of this kind is sure that a man loves her, she has no further use for him. The same thing occurs, though less frequently, with men; the classic example is the hero of *Liaisons Dangereuses*. When vanity is carried to this height, there is no genuine interest in any other person, and therefore no real satisfaction to be obtained from love. Other interests fail even more disastrously. A narcissist, for example, inspired by the homage paid to great painters, may become an art student; but, as painting is for him a mere means to an end, the technique never becomes interesting, and no subject can be seen except in relation to self. The result is failure and disappointment, with ridicule instead of the expected adulation. The same thing applies to those novelists whose novels always have themselves idealised as heroines. All serious success in work depends upon some genuine interest in the material with which the work is concerned. The tragedy of one successful politician after another is the gradual substitution of narcissism for an interest in the community and the measures for which he stands. The man who is only interested in himself is not admirable, and is not felt to be so. Consequently the man whose sole concern with the world is that it shall admire him is not likely to achieve his object. But even if he does, he will not be completely happy,

since human instinct is never completely self-centred, and the narcissist is limiting himself artificially just as truly as is the man dominated by a sense of sin. The primitive man might be proud of being a good hunter, but he also enjoyed the activity of the chase. Vanity, when it passes beyond a point, kills pleasure in every activity for its own sake, and thus leads inevitably to listlessness and boredom. Often its source is diffidence, and its cure lies in the growth of self-respect. But this is only to be gained by successful activity inspired by objective interests.

The megalomaniac differs from the narcissist by the fact that he wishes to be powerful rather than charming, and seeks to be feared rather than loved. To this type belong many lunatics and most of the great men in history. Love of power, like vanity, is a strong element in normal human nature, and as such is to be accepted; it becomes deplorable only when it is excessive or associated with an insufficient sense of reality. Where this occurs it makes a man unhappy or foolish if not both. The lunatic who thinks he is a crowned head may be, in a sense, happy, but his happiness is not of a kind that any sane person would envy. Alexander the Great was psychologically of the same type as the lunatic, though he possessed the talent to achieve the lunatic's dream. He could not, however, achieve his own dream, which enlarged its scope as his achievement grew. When it became clear that he was the greatest conqueror known to fame, he decided that he was a God. Was he a happy man? His drunkenness, his furious rages, his indifference to women, and his claim to divinity, suggest that he was not. There is no ultimate satisfaction in the cultivation of one element of human nature at the expense of all the others, nor in viewing all the world as raw material for the magnificence of one's own ego. Usually the megalomaniac, whether insane or nominally sane, is the product of some excessive humiliation. Napoleon suffered at school from inferiority to his schoolfellows, who were rich aristocrats, while he was a penurious scholarship boy. When he allowed the return

of the émigrés, he had the satisfaction of seeing his former school-fellows bowing down before him. What bliss! Yet it led to the wish to obtain a similar satisfaction at the expense of the Czar, and this led to Saint Helena. Since no man can be omnipotent, a life dominated wholly by love of power can hardly fail, sooner or later, to meet with obstacles that cannot be overcome. The knowledge that this is so can only be prevented from obtruding on consciousness by some form of lunacy, though if a man is sufficiently great he can imprison or execute those who point this out to him. Repressions in the political and in the psycho-analytic senses thus go hand in hand. And wherever psycho-analytic repression in any marked form takes place, there is no genuine happiness. Power kept within its proper bounds may add greatly to happiness, but as the sole end of life it leads to disaster, inwardly if not outwardly.

The psychological causes of unhappiness, it is clear, are many and various. But all have something in common. The typical unhappy man is one who, having been deprived in youth of some normal satisfaction, has come to value this one kind of satisfaction more than any other, and has therefore given to his life a one-sided direction, together with a quite undue emphasis upon the achievement as opposed to the activities connected with it. There is, however, a further development which is very common in the present day. A man may feel so completely thwarted that he seeks no form of satisfaction, but only distraction and oblivion. He then becomes a devotee of 'pleasure'. That is to say he seeks to make life bearable by becoming less alive. Drunkenness, for example, is temporary suicide; the happiness that it brings is merely negative, a momentary cessation of unhappiness. The narcissist and the megalomaniac believe that happiness is possible, though they may adopt mistaken means of achieving it; but the man who seeks intoxication, in whatever form, has given up hope except in oblivion. In his case, the first thing to be done is to persuade him that happiness is desirable.

Men who are unhappy, like men who sleep badly, are always proud of the fact. Perhaps their pride is like that of the fox who had lost his tail; if so, the way to cure it is to point out to them how they can grow a new tail. Very few men, I believe, will deliberately choose unhappiness if they see a way of being happy. I do not deny that such men exist, but they are not sufficiently numerous to be important. I shall therefore assume that the reader would rather be happy than unhappy. Whether I can help him to realise this wish, I do not know; but at any rate the attempt can do no harm.