

# Happiness, Temporality, Meaning\*

JOHN COTTINGHAM

## 1. *Beyond isolationism*

In the film *Shadowlands*, about the marriage of C. S. Lewis, there is a sombre yet strangely affirmatory scene where Lewis and Joy Gresham, his desperately ill wife, are walking together in a favourite spot in Herefordshire. Joy's cancer is in remission, and, though they both know the reprieve cannot last long, they feel elated and at peace. Lewis remarks that this is his kind of happiness – when the present moment is entirely self-contained, untarnished by any fleeting thought of what has gone before or what may come later. But Joy gently rebukes him for this temporal isolationism. The happiness, she suggests, cannot be genuine if it involves shutting off the past or the future; indeed, she goes further and says that what is yet to come in the future infuses the very texture of what is now experienced: “The pain then is part of this happiness now. That’s the deal!”<sup>1</sup>

To unravel the full meaning of this claim would probably require a detailed analysis of the context of the film. But even as it stands, it is, I think a highly suggestive remark, which enables us to draw certain philosophical lessons about the nature of happiness. To begin with, of course, it contradicts any simplistic attempt to equate happiness with pleasure and the absence of pain. Among the problems with such an equation, familiar from J. S. Mill's agonizing over his Benthamite inheritance, is that it risks making all enjoyable pursuits, however banal or squalid, equally valid ingredients of happiness. Mill's own well-known (and arguably dubious) way round this was to stipulate a priority for the pleasures judged to be of superior ‘quality’ by the ‘competent judges.’<sup>2</sup> But the *Shadowlands* example suggests that our understanding of happiness needs not just to take account of the quality (as opposed to mere quantity) of pleasure, but also to acknowledge the psychological *complexity* of happiness – the way in which joy and sadness are often subtly intermingled. It also points to the crucial importance of the time dimension – the way in which our individual experiences form part of an overall pattern of life-experience.

That there is what may be called a ‘holistic’ aspect to happiness was first noticed by Aristotle. *Eudaimonia*, he observed, has to be assessed ‘in a complete life’ (*en biō teleiō*): for just as one swallow does not make a summer, so neither one day, nor even a short period of time, can make a human being happy.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, like most of his contemporaries, was keenly aware of the phenomenon of *peripateia*, the reversal of fortune; and cites the gloomy maxim of Solon – ‘call no man happy until he is dead’.<sup>4</sup> The problem was important enough in Aristotle's eyes for him to devote a chapter to cases like that of King Priam of Troy, who enjoyed a long, prosperous and enviable life, but lived on in old age to see his son slain and his city destroyed. Such cases illustrate the fragility of the human lot, and, even now, in our supposedly rational modern age, may encourage those of a cautious or superstitious frame of

---

\* This is a draft of a paper the definitive version of which was published in Lisa Bortolotti (ed.), *Philosophy and Happiness* (London: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 21-36.

<sup>1</sup> *Shadowlands*, directed by Richard Attenborough, 1993. The screenplay by William Nicholson, was adapted from his earlier script of the same name, originally broadcast on BBC television in 1985.

<sup>2</sup> J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* [1861], Ch. 2. For an attempt to defend Mill on this issue, see J. Skorupski, <sup>3</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* [325 BC], Bk I, Ch. 7, 1098a16.

<sup>4</sup> First discussed in Herodotus, *Histories* [440 BC], I, 32. The Latin proverb *respice finem* (which may roughly be translated ‘First check out the ending!’) is a variation on the same gloomy theme.

mind to add phrases like ‘touch wood’, when declaring that their life is going well, or that they are enjoying a happy existence.

In addition to the relatively simple moral that life is a risky business and our assessments of happiness ought to be appropriately cautious in recognizing this, there is implicit and perhaps more interesting further lesson to be drawn from the Priam case, namely that happiness is not something that can be broken into summable units. For the crucial point about the Priam story may not be simply that the later reverses are so terrible as to outweigh the earlier gains (though in this actual case they may have been), but that even if they were not intrinsically so overwhelming, the timing of their occurrence, at the very culmination of Priam’s life, might have a disproportionate effect on our assessment of whether his life was a happy one. So even if a human life is made up of a finite number of discrete experiences, we cannot necessarily evaluate its overall happiness by determining the quantity or quality of enjoyment involved in each of them. The *order* may make a difference: so that an imaginary Priam who suffers great distress in early life yet wins through to achieve joy and prosperity in old age may be judged far happier than the actual Priam for whom things went the other way round.

The holistic nature of our conception of happiness should, to be sure, not be exaggerated. Irrespective of total amounts of enjoyment, and irrespective of the order in which experiences occur, there are, most would agree, moments of exaltation and delight that seem to make everything worth while. So such isolated episodes may be sufficient for us to say a person has known happiness, and they certainly seem to be necessary: it would be odd to call a life happy if it lacked *any* such moments. Conversely, episodes of severe pain can decisively undermine the human capacity for happiness. So there is legitimate scope for giving weight to the ‘episodic’ as opposed to diachronic dimension of happiness. Nevertheless, for human beings, as opposed to simpler creatures who are almost entirely enmeshed in the present, the diachronic perspective can never entirely be bracketed out. This is partly because to be human is necessarily to have a sense of oneself as a being who moves through time. Andrew Marvell’s ‘but at my back I always hear/ time’s winged chariot hurrying near’, or Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Sein zum Tode*,<sup>5</sup> are but two variations on an indelible theme: the human existential predicament is that of a being who is always already aware that each action, each achievement, is enacted against the framework of our finite lifespan. There is, for our species, no ultimate forgetting of that fact. Hence, although such background awareness may fade, or be consciously repressed, or our attention diverted from it for much or even most of the time, no plausible account of what constitutes human happiness can dispense with it entirely. It seems to follow from this that some degree of diachronicity is bound up with the concept of happiness, so that it cannot be understood entirely in episodic terms.

The residual background awareness of our life as extended in finite time, which infuses all human experience, is not just a matter of *Angst* about mortality (though that, to be sure, is likely to be an recurring element in the self-awareness of most reflective beings). In its more general form, it is simply an awareness that all our plans and projects operate in a time-line: we are dependent on the previous history that shaped us, and we reach towards goals and destinations that are still to be achieved. The ‘diachronic’ perspective thus involves a constant and pervasive interplay between our present selves, the future towards which we move, and the past from which we come. In moments of existential intensity, to be sure, we may see this in rather grand and general terms: that is, we may see our present actions as part of a narrative that stretches from the moment of our conception or birth, towards the

---

<sup>5</sup> A. Marvell, ‘To his Coy Mistress’ [1650]; M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). Div. 2, §46.

unknown moment of our inevitable eventual death. But on a smaller scale, at a much more homely and fine-grained level, there are also all sorts of more specific and particular ways in which our actions are, in Leibniz's phrase, 'big with the future and laden with the past'.<sup>6</sup> And the upshot of this is that even what may seem like isolated episodes of happiness or distress typically carry a 'charge' that resonates with previous events, or pre-echoes what is to come. The joy of Emma and Mr Knightley when they embrace for the first time carries the powerful charge held over from the painful misunderstandings and delays that have postponed their eventual declarations of love. And earlier in the novel, Emma's unaccountable distress, on hearing that her protégée Harriet has apparently excited the interest of Knightley, carries a strong proleptic resonance: Emma's discomfort is the first premonition, hitherto not allowed to surface, that her future happiness will depend on him alone.<sup>7</sup>

I shall have more to say about the 'diachronicity' of happiness in the following section. But let me first draw one general conclusion about the concept of happiness from the discussion so far. A great deal of contemporary philosophy is committed to a naturalist agenda – the attempt to explain as many areas of human life as possible in terms that can be included within the domain of empirical science. And in the sphere of moral philosophy, many thinkers are attracted by various kinds of hedonism and utilitarianism on the grounds that such theories appear to offer the possibility of explaining apparently *sui-generis* evaluative and normative notions (such as the good and the right) via seemingly straightforward empirical notions (such as enjoyment, desire, or pleasure) – phenomena susceptible of being measured or otherwise investigated by physiologists, psychologists or other scientists. Yet whatever the prospects for treating pleasure in this way, it should already be clear that happiness is very unlikely to be grist for the naturalistic mill. For in the first place (as we have seen in connection with Aristotle's 'complete life' view), there is a holistic dimension to happiness, which makes it hard to see how it can be a simple function of the individual actions and events that go to make up a given human existence. And in the second place, even when we are focusing on individual episodes, what makes us call them moments of happiness involves not just the presence of a certain hedonic occurrence but rather the *meaning* of the experience for the subject. And exploring that meaning takes us entirely outside the realm of the physiological or psychological transactions studied by the natural scientist (and indeed also beyond the phenomenological domain – the domain of the qualitative 'feel' of a pleasurable or painful experience), and into the quite different domain of *hermeneutics*: the job is to discern how the subject is to *interpret* what they are now experiencing, and how this connects up with their understanding of who they are, how they reached their present position, and where they are heading.

## 2. Narrativity, prolepsis and 'Nachträglichkeit'

With some scaffolding now in place, let us return to our initial example from *Shadowlands*. In saying that the pain to come is part of this happiness now, Joy could, on a crude reading of the remark, simply be saying that present enjoyment is tinged with sadness stemming from her gloomy medical prognosis. But this simplistic reading will not really work. She does not say that the future pain detracts from, or is unfortunately a price to be paid for, the happiness now; she says it is a *part* of the happiness now. And this suggests that the very nature of the happiness in question is inextricably bound up with the future that the couple know awaits them, as indeed it is also bound up with the past that has brought them here.

---

<sup>6</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* [*Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, c.1704; first pub. 1765], Preface. Trans. and ed. P. Remnant and J. Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma* [1816].

The interplay between past, present and future is integral to the conception of happiness being presented: that is, it is impossible to understand the nature of the happiness that belongs to this walk in Herefordshire without being aware of the past and future sequence of events of which it is a part. In the first place, the richness and tenderness of their present relationship, as the film makes clear, directly stems from Joy's fatal illness. I do not here mean to advance some crass judgement like 'it was all for the best', or 'every cloud has a silver lining'. The point, rather, concerns the genesis of the couple's growing self-awareness. Two facts are clear from the way this particular story unfolds (at least in the film: we may for the present purpose bracket off the historical question of how closely it mirrors the actual lives of Lewis and Gresham). The first is that Lewis is, from the first, powerfully attracted to Joy, long before there is any question of any illness. The second is that he unconsciously conceals from himself the nature of his feelings, construing the relationship instead as an unusual but curiously enriching friendship, to be enjoyed on an occasional basis. Joy, for her part, appears to find much of Lewis's donnish reserve and Oxonian stiltedness mildly irritating. The civil marriage ceremony they in due course undergo presents itself to both of them as a convenience – a pure formality enabling Joy to have the right of residence in Britain; it is a 'technical measure', which Lewis regards as at most a considerate act of friendship, and whose deeper meaning he somehow contrives to bracket off. Only when Joy is, quite unexpectedly, diagnosed as having a fatal illness do things change. The shock of the announcement is the mechanism for breaking down Lewis's self-blindness, and he becomes aware that he really does deeply care for her. His resulting vulnerability in turn calls forth an answering response from Joy, who is now able to see him not just as an intriguing but irritating friend on whom she now has to depend, but as someone truly loveable.

So much (albeit in crude summary) for the past. As regards the future – the future pain that is, in Joy's words, 'part of this happiness now' – it is, again, important to see that this is not merely an ominous cloud on the horizon of their present sunny landscape, but is integral to the nature of the happiness now experienced. The Lewis character is unable to see, at the time, the full significance of this walk in Herefordshire, which will in fact turn out to be their last untroubled time together. Only at the close of the film, when, after her funeral, he looks back on that day, does he apprehend the deeper meaning of her remark. And reversing her phrase he says, in the depth of his bereavement, 'I find I can live with the pain after all. The pain now is part of the happiness then. That's the deal!'

We have already commented, in discussing the example of Emma's distress on hearing that Harriet is admired by Knightley, on how human experiences often carry a 'proleptic' resonance which is only fully understood later. Emma, once she can bring herself to admit that she truly loves Knightley, is able, retrospectively, to see her unaccountable annoyance at Harriet's claim to Knightley's attentions as the first sign that shocked her into discovering her own imperfectly recognized love for him. I have elsewhere underlined the importance for understanding the narrative our lives of the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, a term which is hard to render in English, but which conveys the idea of something's being 'deferred' or 'carried over' from the past, with the added implication that, in the understanding of what occurred, something is retroactively 'added on' or reinterpreted. The German noun *Nachtrag* can mean a 'supplement, addendum or postscript', and this gives a certain resonance to the corresponding adverb *nachträglich* ('subsequently'), so that it can suggest that what occurred is later added to or modified in the light of afterthought or further reflection.<sup>8</sup> As we look back on our past experiences, we do not simply 'recall' what

---

<sup>8</sup> See J. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4, §5. Among Freud's

occurred, as if by a simple photographic representation, but always to some extent re-interpret them in the light of what we have since come to understand about their significance. Thus, for example, in Freud's analysis of psychological development, it is argued that the events of infancy, not fully understood or assimilated at the time, lie dormant until, for example in puberty, or in later adult life, they are reinterpreted and restructured.<sup>9</sup> Parallel to this *Nachträglichkeit*, the past that we constantly strive to recover and re-interpret, is the *Zukunftigkeit*, 'the futurity' which will bestow the 'meaning to come' on what we do now. One of the central problems of human existence is, as Kierkegaard famously observed, is that although life has to be lived forwards, its full meaning is to be understood only retrospectively.<sup>10</sup>

For any given individual, unravelling these strands may, if certain Freudian assumptions about the workings of the mind are correct, require a long and hard course of guided self-scrutiny, which aims at releasing those parts of ourselves that are opaque to direct conscious inspection. Many philosophers are sceptical about the effectiveness, or even possibility, of such a process, since they are strongly resistant to the psychoanalytic framework. But although I believe that such a framework is indispensable for a fullest kind of understanding of what is going on in the *Shadowlands* case, and indeed in a vast range of other cases involving moral growth and the struggle for self-awareness, there are certain general structural features of any attempt to interpret the events in our lives that do not have to be cast in psychoanalytic terms. Irrespective of how difficult and complex an exercise it may (or may not) be, placing an event in its timeline, connecting it with its genesis and its outcome, is (we may all agree) the characteristic way in which human beings look for meaning in their lives. There has been a good deal of reflection on this in recent philosophical literature, centring on the idea of 'narrativity' as developed in the work of Charles Taylor. In his seminal *Sources of the Self*, Taylor argued that to make sense of our lives, and indeed to have an identity at all, 'we need an orientation to the good'; we need to have some sense of our lives as shaped by some kind of moral growth and development. It follows from this that our lives have a narrative structure: as I develop, and learn from my failings and mistakes, there is always a story to be told about how I have become what I now am, and where my current journey towards improvement will take me. Just as my sense of where I am in physical space depends on how I got here and where I am going next, so it is, Taylor argues, with 'my

---

several discussions of *Nachträglichkeit*, see especially his account of the 'Wolf man' case: 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis' [1918], Ch. 4 (*Gesammelte Werke*, ed. A. Freud (London: Imago, 1947), Vol. XII, p. 72, note 1; transl. in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), Vol. XVII, p. 45).

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan is a subtle interpreter of this Freudian line: 'Continuity in anamnesis [recollection] has nothing to do with ... a restoration of duration in which the authenticity of each instant would be destroyed if it did not sum up ... all preceding ones ... For Freud it is not a question of biological memory ... but a question of balancing the scales, in which conjectures about the past are weighed against promises of the future upon the single knife-edge or fulcrum of chronological certainty. In psychoanalysis by our use of language we reorder past contingencies by conferring on them the necessities to come ... At each turning point, the subject restructures himself, and each restructuring takes place, as Freud puts it, *nachträglich* [retrospectively and retroactively].' Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966); translated by A. Sheridan in *Ecrits, A Selection* (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1977), pp. 47-8.

<sup>10</sup> 'It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other principle, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition, it become more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time, simply because I at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it backwards' (from Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals*, in the entries for the year 1843; in *Journals* [1834-55], ed. and trans. A. Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 127).

orientation in moral space.’ ‘[A]s a being who grows and becomes I can only know myself through the history of my maturations and regressions, overcomings and defeats. My self-understanding necessarily has temporal depth and incorporates narrative.’<sup>11</sup>

This seems to bear crucially on the concept of happiness. For (as argued in the previous section) judgements about happiness are never simple assessments of the presence or absence of certain hedonic quanta or qualia, either on a particular occasion, or even summed over a period of time; rather, they are intrinsically bound up with notions of meaning and value. And if it is granted that happiness is a hermeneutic and evaluative concept, and if we combine this with the Taylorian narrative conception of meaning and value, then something like the following emerges: to see ourselves as beings capable of happiness, and to see happiness as the goal at which we aim, is ultimately to see ourselves as on a journey, a journey of self-awareness and self-improvement, aimed at continuing moral growth and the deepening our understanding of ourselves and others. It is part of this project that we continually reach forward and backwards in time, to enable us to understand better how we have fallen short and how we are to continue to grow.

To put the matter this way is already to see human happiness as something ‘to be realised’, something as it were in the gerundive mode, rather than as something neatly boxed up, or ticked off, in the catalogue of our achievements. The biblical saying ‘here we have no abiding city, but we seek that which is to come’<sup>12</sup> is generally construed as referring to the afterlife, but it also hints at something important about the ordinary earthly human quest: that it is a struggle for fulfilment by contingent and finite beings, ever dependent on circumstances they cannot fully control, and always aware that that any success they achieve will be only a temporary staging post towards a horizon that continues to recede. To think we can build an ‘abiding city’ is a fantasy – the fantasy of self-sufficiency and total autonomy. To acknowledge that there will always be something unrealized and deferred about our aspirations is to come to terms with the reality of the human condition.

Is this a gloomy conclusion? Some have suggested that it is actually the opposite. The cheerful cliché tells us that ‘to travel hopefully is better than to arrive’; and Bertrand Russell was relatively upbeat when he pronounced his maxim that ‘to be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness’?<sup>13</sup> But the problem runs deeper than the mere fact of unfinished business (which may well, as Russell suggests, be seen as energizing rather than depressing). Nor is the worry simply one about human vulnerability and dependency, serious though that is for any assessment of our prospects for happiness. The deeper worry concerns the connection between happiness and meaning. Human beings are hungry for meaning in their lives, and our happiness seems to depend on this. Yet if our arguments in this section have been persuasive, two conclusions should have emerged, of which the second is in a certain sense subversive of the first. First, meaning arises when we are able to fit the events of our lives into a framework that displays them as stages in a journey towards greater self-awareness and moral self-development. Secondly, however, there is a persistent incompleteness about our grasp of that framework, since the full significance of what we now do may only emerge in the light of future understanding that is not yet fully available.

This latter conclusion appears to lead us in a somewhat pessimistic direction, one which has been explored, in a slightly different context, by Bernard Williams in the course of a subtle discussion of the phenomenon of *akrasia* – that is, knowingly failing to choose the

<sup>11</sup> The various phrases in this and the previous paragraph are taken from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 46-52.

<sup>12</sup> ‘*ou gar echomen hōde menousan polin, alla tēn mellousan epizētoumen.*’ Hebrews 13:14. The Greek effects an elegant antithesis by juxtaposing *menousa* (‘abiding’, or in the King James Version ‘continuing’) with *mellousa* (‘in the future’, ‘about to be’).

<sup>13</sup> B. Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930), Ch. 2.

best option:

The relevant descriptions of what happened are available, in many cases, only retrospectively, as part of an interpretation that establishes or re-establishes one's identifications of the importance of one reason rather than another. Consequently, whether an episode was an episode of *akrasia* at all may depend crucially on later understandings. A married man having an affair with another woman and trying to bring it to an end may find himself wavering in that attempt and seeing his lover when they had decided not to meet. If he ends up with his wife, he may well see those episodes as akratic. But if in the end he and his wife separate and he goes to live with his lover, it may be that those episodes will not count as akratic, but rather as intimations of what were going to prove his truly stronger reasons.<sup>14</sup>

The qualification 'in many cases' is, of course, important. There are no doubt lots of straightforward decisions (to put on a raincoat when it is raining) whose significance is wholly manifest even at the time, and which do not require complex proleptic or retrospective analysis to evaluate their rationality. But the more emotionally charged a decision becomes, the more it connects with our deepest drives and inclinations, the more the predicament described by Williams is likely to come into play. The Williams analysis implies a necessary deferral or incompleteness in our assessments of many of our crucial decisions at pivotal stages of our lives. The future that will bestow the 'meaning-yet-to-come' on our present actions will retrospectively reveal how to interpret the relevant decisions in their full significance, whether as informed by intimations of where our true happiness lies, or as false steps along the way, based on bad or suspect reasons, whose allure we should have resisted. As long as our self-awareness is imperfect, as it is for so many human beings for so much of the time, many of our supposedly rational decisions, directed towards fulfilment and happiness in our lives, may look like gropings in the dark.

### 3. *Happiness objectivity and faith*

Taking stock so far, we have explored the temporal or diachronic dimension which is characteristically involved in ascriptions of happiness, and have argued that judgements about happiness involve an interpretative evaluation of a whole human life, such that a given stage or episode is judged to fit into a pattern of moral significance, in so far as it can be seen retrospectively as constituting a stage in the individual's growth towards self-fulfilment. That may seem quite a mouthful, and also to be a rather 'serious', perhaps even portentous, way of talking about as apparently familiar and ordinary notion as happiness; but the present essay is not a piece of 'ordinary language' philosophy, or an exercise in 'conceptual analysis', so it is not claimed that all the features so far explored will be in the offing (as necessary or sufficient conditions) whenever people are described in common parlance as 'happy'. But the conception we have sketched does, I would suggest, broadly correspond to the rich and complex notion of happiness that runs through the Western philosophical tradition, starting with Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* or fulfilment as the goal of human life,<sup>15</sup> and developed further by the philosophers of the middle ages, who took human felicity to consist in the systematic pursuit of the good, desire for which is naturally implanted in all things.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* [325 BC], Bk I.

<sup>16</sup> Compare Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* [1260], III, 24.

Reflection on the weakness of human beings, however, and their relative lack of self-awareness when it comes to interpreting their own motivations and desires, has led us on to confront a problem about the pursuit of happiness, highlighted in some of the psychoanalytic literature, and brought out with particular force in the argument just referred to from Bernard Williams. If the full meaning of our decisions is often available only retrospectively, then often full self-awareness will come too late to provide what is needed at the moment of action. So our human limitations appear to put serious obstacles in the way of the rational pursuit of happiness – the very objective which moral philosophers have traditionally seen as the goal of human existence.

In this concluding section, I can do no more than provide the outlines of a possible solution to this problem, or at least indicate a possible way to defuse the pessimistic implications for the pursuit of happiness of acknowledging our human lack of self-awareness. One strategy, which I have explored elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> would be to take seriously the psychoanalytic programme for a therapeutic dissolving of the mind's opacity to itself, so that we achieve a greater understanding of our motivations and of the significance of our choices. If the murkier parts of the mind can be exposed, eventually, to the clear light of reason, if 'where *Id* was, there shall *Ego* be',<sup>18</sup> then although we may not be able to do anything about past weaknesses and failures, at least we may hope to be more confidently in control of our future deliberations. This will not of course ensure avoidance of what Freud called 'ordinary human misery' (for example the pain associated with basic human fragility and the inevitable risk of loss), but at least it may protect us against obstacles to happiness which arise from our misidentifying what are, in Williams phrase, our 'truly stronger reasons'.

For present purposes, however, I want to focus instead on why Williams' reflections on our difficulties as agents in identifying our 'truly stronger reasons' should be supposed to have such disturbing or pessimistic implications. Part of the reason for this, I suggest, lies in the fact that the ethical framework presupposed by Williams is a subjectivist one – or what in the rather tiresome jargon has come to be known as an 'internalist' one.<sup>19</sup> In the simplest terms, Williams' account of what are the strongest or best reasons for a given decision is grounded finally on how well those reasons serve the actual set of desires the individual in question happens to have, or the things he happens to care about. At its worst, since desires are contingent inclinations that, notoriously, change and develop over time, this can lead to a kind of 'regress of satisfaction': I cannot know whether my present decision is the right one until I establish what are my 'truly strongest reasons'; but I can only know this in the light of information which will come to light at a later date; yet by that time, my desires may have shifted, so that what I passionately wanted then I find I no longer want now, and so on ... Ultimately, the pessimism here arises, I suggest, not just from the problems about self-awareness which we have been canvassing so far, but from Williams' view of the 'radical contingency of the ethical', as he has called it.<sup>20</sup> This view implies that, in the end, there are

---

<sup>17</sup> Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life*, Ch. 4.

<sup>18</sup> 'Wo Es war, soll Ich werden'; Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [*Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, 1933], Lecture XXXI, in *Complete Works*, trans. Strachey, Vol. XXII, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Tiresome because in the vast literature that has been spawned by Williams original distinction between 'internal' and 'external' reasons (in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Ch. 0), there are now so many different forms and varieties of 'internalism' and 'externalism' about motives and about reasons that any discussion invoking these terms is likely to be mired in pages of caveats and sub-distinctions – a sure sign of a degenerating research programme.

<sup>20</sup> B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 20. See also J. Cottingham, 'The Good Life and the "Radical Contingency of the Ethical"', forthcoming in D. Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2008).

no enduring and stable values independent of what I happen to wish for, as a result of the contingent chain of historical circumstances that has shaped who I am and what I happen to care about.

On an objectivist picture of the good, things look very different. For the ethical objectivist, the pursuit of happiness is no longer a matter of my endeavouring to discern, among the shifting and contingent pattern of my desires, which ones, if any, correspond to what I truly want to be, or where I truly want to go (something which may of course itself shift over time). Instead, I find myself, in the living of my life, confronted by standards and values whose normative status is *not up to me*. Happiness is not ‘what I want’, but involves, whether I like it or not, my orientating myself towards *to anthrôpinon agathon*<sup>21</sup> – the human good which I did not determine myself, and which I cannot alter by any desire or fiat of the will. This does not of course automatically make the pursuit of happiness *easier* than on the subjectivist picture: for a whole variety of reasons connected with human flaws and weaknesses, the struggle to orient oneself towards an objective good that is independent of what I feel like doing may be a very difficult one indeed. But at least it means that there is in principle a right answer to the question of what are my ‘truly strongest reasons’.

‘Right answer’ may suggest the smug and complacent view that pursuing happiness is like buying the right car – a clear and reachable goal that we can be sure of attaining. But our earlier point about ‘no abiding city’ – the element of ‘deferral’ that is inherent to any significant human pattern of aspirations – remains in force. The objectivity of the good does not imply that there must be completion and closure in the attainment of the good; but it does at least imply that there is correctness, or otherwise, about our orientation, about the direction of the journey. I can – the possibility is all too familiar from countless examples in the domain of literature and of real life – determinedly and wilfully pursue the wrong path with great enthusiasm for a long swathe of my life; but sooner or later the objective realities of the human condition will dictate that I must retrace my steps: human happiness, however much I may wish it were otherwise, cannot lie that way.<sup>22</sup>

The kind of objective normativity about ‘the good for humankind’ invoked here raises, to be sure, all sorts of philosophical questions – not least whether it can be grounded on some kind of naturalistic base, or whether it needs to be underwritten by something more than facts about the world and the nature of our species. My own view, for what it is worth, that naturalism will not work, that various kinds of secular ‘non-naturalist’ account of the good are obscure or incomplete, and that only a supernaturalist framework will ultimately be enough to provide a metaphysically satisfying account of the kind of necessity and normativity that moral objectivism requires. But that is a story for another day.<sup>23</sup> For the present, I should like to close at the level of the concrete rather than the abstract, and return to the original example from *Shadowlands* with which we began.

<sup>21</sup> The phrase is Aristotle’s: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I, Ch. 7 (1098a16).

<sup>22</sup> The idea of life as a difficult pilgrimage, which may in fact involve many false detours but in fact has a ‘right path’, is of course an ancient literary theme. See for example Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain* [c. 1175]: *Par montaignes et par valees/ Et par forez longues et lees/ Par maint peril, par maint destroit/ Tant qu’il vint au sentier tot droit*. ‘By rocky crags and valleys steep/through trackless forests dark and deep/with many a danger night and day/until he found the one true way.’ For the application of this poetic idea to a rather different context, see my ‘The Self, The Good Life and the Transcendent,’ in N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (eds), *The Moral Life: Essays in Honour of John Cottingham* (London: Palgrave, 2008). pp. 228-271.

<sup>23</sup> For some preliminary attempts to move towards such an account, See the closing sections of my papers ‘The Good Life and the “Radical Contingency of the Ethical”’, and ‘The Self, The Good Life and the Transcendent.’

The bitter and terrible process of learning that the protagonist in that film undergoes shows him that happiness is simply not available through insulating oneself against pain and loss. It also tells him that his earlier self-sufficient life, his comfortable bachelor existence as distinguished teacher, successful writer and respected public figure, could not deliver happiness, no matter how much it seemed to fulfil the desires he allowed himself to acknowledge. By lowering his defences, he opens himself to an entirely different order of reality, which has the power to transform his nature. And in so doing, he glimpses, for the first time, the possibility of true human fulfilment. But then, of course comes the pain that is inseparable from that:

*Who then devised the torment? Love.  
Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove.*<sup>24</sup>

These words, from T. S. Eliot's celebrated *Little Gidding*, constitute a groping towards a religious conception of human suffering and happiness, that is to say, the view that, beyond all rational expectation, suffering is the instrument of love, and enacts its redemptive power.

Such a view is beyond philosophical argument: it is certainly not logically demonstrable; and although in a certain way it resonates with our human experience, it is clearly not susceptible of 'empirical evidence' in any remotely scientific sense. So it is appropriate enough to call it an object of faith. This may seem to take us outside the domain of philosophy entirely, and so be an inappropriate way to end a philosophical discussion of happiness. But the claims of faith, though inherently resistant to standard epistemological frameworks, can still be susceptible of some philosophical support, in so far as we can assess how they measure up against the available secular alternatives. One such alternative is the Aristotelian ideal of *eudaimonia* referred to earlier: crudely and in summary, this is the idea that that human beings flourish when their biological and social needs are met, and when they are in the fortunate position of being able to develop their talents and capacities so as to be able to display the excellences appropriate for their kind. It is a clear and engaging account, no doubt *prima facie* suitable for 'rational animals'; but in the end I would argue that it is markedly less suitable for what Alasdair MacIntyre has aptly called '*dependent rational animals*'.<sup>25</sup> The suffering that is always a risk for such creatures, and pretty much inevitable for every mortal being who lives long enough to suffer the inexorable process of infirmity and decay, is simply bracketed off from the eudaimonistic picture of the good life. All the Aristotelian can really say about it is that it happens, it is unfortunate, but we must simply shrug our shoulders and 'call no man happy until he is dead'.

This Aristotelian stance may seem a realistic one, with a certain robust appeal; but just as Aristotle's aristocratic ethic condemns a very large number of people – women, slaves, and even those who are not very comfortably off – to exile from the land of excellence (many of his virtues, for example, are simply beyond the reach of the poor)<sup>26</sup>, so this 'bracketing off' approach to suffering seems to imply a similar kind of exile for those who are unable to maintain expected standards of health and external success. And apart from

<sup>24</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* [1942] (London: Faber, 1959), lines 207-11.

<sup>25</sup> A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Notably, *megaloprepeia* (magnificence) and *megalopsychia* (great-souledness); *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 4, Chs 2 and 3. For more on the unsavoury aspects of Aristotelian virtue theory, see J. Cottingham 'Partiality and the Virtues', in R. Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Philosophy of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 57-76.

anything else, this seems to make Aristotle's account of the good life very thin, in spiritual and psychological terms, by comparison with some of its religiously oriented rivals. The far richer conception of happiness, or 'more abundant life',<sup>27</sup> presented in the Christian worldview (of which C. S. Lewis himself was of course a powerful advocate) treats human fulfilment and human dependency as inseparable, and speaks of 'strength made perfect through weakness.'<sup>28</sup> This is not a facile Leibnizian theodicy – the glib claim that a little vinegar can make the meal as a whole more palatable.<sup>29</sup> Rather in the assertion of a kind of necessary intermingling of fulfilment and vulnerability there is a painful yet at the same time ennobling truth about the transformative power of suffering. This is, of course, at the heart of the Christian story of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, but beating a theological drum about cosmic sacrifice and atonement will carry no weight in itself unless the metaphysical pronouncements are informed by some grasp of their moral significance. One aspect of this, as emerges in the *Shadowlands* example, is that the readiness to give up self-sufficiency, and acknowledge weakness, with all the resulting openness to pain that this implies, enables a new person to emerge – a person who is no longer 'in charge', like Aristotle's *phronimos*, of planning the rational conditions for a flourishing life, but who is instead able to accept the gifts of life that are neither planned nor earned. This may seem like a 'contra-philosophical' position to take up, in contrast to the Aristotelian insistence on practical reason, deliberative excellence, and properly trained habits of virtue; but in the end, by facing the complexity and depth of our human experience, it has a good claim to be a realistic representation of the human condition, and its prospects for happiness. For happiness is subject to the law of love, and the law of love is the law of sacrifice. In the resonant words of Carl Jung, with which we may close:

Until a person ... at some time, at whatever cost to his pride, ceases to defend and assert himself, and ... can confess himself fallible and human, an impenetrable wall shuts him out from the living experience of feeling himself a man among men. Here we find the key to the great significance of ... the saying 'Give up what thou hast, and then thou wilt receive.'<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 'I have come that ye might have life, and have it more abundantly.' John 10:10.

<sup>28</sup> II Corinthians 12:9.

<sup>29</sup> 'A little acid, sharpness or bitterness is often more pleasing than sugar; shadows enhance colours; and even a dissonance in the right place gives relief to harmony. We wish to be terrified by rope-dancers on the point of falling and we wish that tragedies shall well-nigh cause us to weep. Do men relish health enough, or thank God enough for it, without having ever been sick? And is it not most often necessary that a little evil render the good more discernible, that is to say, greater?' G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Liberty of Man and the Origin of Evil* [*Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*, 1710], Part I, §12, transl. E. M. Huggard (London: Routledge, 1951) pp. 36-7. I do not mean to suggest that all the arguments Leibniz offers in the course of his theodicy are equally unsatisfactory – far from it (cf. J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 2, §3).

<sup>30</sup> C. Jung, 'Problems of Modern Psychotherapy' [1931], in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul: Essays from the 1920s and 1930s*, transl. C. F. Baynes (London: Routledge, 1961). Ch. 2, p. 40.