

Searching for Happiness¹

All human beings search for happiness – this assertion has been taken for granted at least since Aristotle wrote it down in his *Nicomachean Ethics*,² which was translated into Latin during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and commented upon by a long line of famous theologians, the first two being Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas.³ The contributions of Ancient philosophy and Christian tradition show a variety of ways in which people sought for happiness. But is not our modern way of searching for happiness very different from tradition in the sense that in former times, happiness was intimately linked to a general notion of virtue while today happiness is much more seen as in function of individual desires? In this article, a glance at some medieval authors show that at least some individual features of understanding happiness have been developed quite early in our Christian tradition. By referring to two Canadian

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² A lot of research has been conducted on the quest for happiness in antiquity, see Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford, 1992); Stephen Engstrom, ed. *Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics. Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (Cambridge, 1998); Eva Fussl, ed. *Grundfragen menschlicher Existenz. Sinn und Glück im Spiegel der antiken Philosophie* (Wien, 2007); Malte Hossefelder, *Antike Glückslehren. Kynismus und Kyrenaismus, Stoa, Epikureismus und Skepsis. Quellen in deutscher Übersetzung mit Einführung* (Stuttgart, 1996).

³ For recent theological and philosophical studies concerning happiness see Sascha Michel, ed. *Glück - ein philosophischer Streifzug* (Frankfurt a.M., 2007); Andreas Müller, "Die Suche nach Glückseligkeit. Ratgeber-Literatur in der Geschichte des Christentums," *Praktische Theologie* 45 (2010): 31-38; Johann H. Claussen, "Ein theologischer Blick auf die gegenwärtige Suche nach dem Glück," *Praktische Theologie* 45 (2010): 11-17.

philosophers this paper wants to show that behind the presumed individualistic concept of happiness in our times, a deeply rooted quest to live a personal calling can be discovered. Both authors claim that ultimately a turning back upon oneself has its meaning if it enables us to recognize that we are related, and have always been related to other human beings, to nature, and to the source of all. Seeking personal happiness that can in a qualified way be interpreted as legitimate love of oneself can thus be regarded as a necessary ground for contributions also to the betterment of the society.

The Changing Role of Individual Search for Happiness - From an “Ethics of Self-Determining Freedom” to an “Ethics of Authenticity” (Charles Taylor)

That all human beings are searching for happiness sounds very familiar to us, and we also know the sharp criticisms that are brought forward against it: those of simply ‘promoting hedonism’, and of encouraging a false hierarchy of values. We might, of course, also ask the question, whether what is offered to us as a good for making us happy truly does so. But others might already be thinking that such a description of our societies seems to be a too superficial one, and indeed I would like to draw your attention to a deeper question which is related to this observation; namely, in what way the quest for personal happiness has become a matter of ethical concern.

A first concern might be hedonism as a moral principle – and we can find long discussions about hedonistic elements in various ethical systems, and also about the question of whether pleasure can be regarded as an ethical principle.⁴

A second concern may be pluralism as a characteristic feature of our societies. Here we come closer to the ethical problem which needs to be raised. Pluralism as a general concept, and understood as a descriptive term, represents a reality in our societies. It is not only a characteristic feature, however of our contemporary times.

The background to our understanding of pluralism lies in the framework for earthly life and action that was shared by most of those who lived in preceding Christian societies:

⁴ See Elizabeth Telfer, *Happiness. An Examination of a Hedonistic and Eudaemonistic Concept of Happiness and of the Relations Between Them, with a Consideration of How Far and in What Sense Either Kind of Happiness May be Said to be the Goal of Human Life* (London et al., 1980).

human beings were pursuing not only (their) earthly aims, but also a full and final happiness which was called beatitude.⁵ Though human beings walked different paths, they were in the end trying to reach the same goal – to reach the presence of God, which we call Heaven. This final dimension of human life and action, which was then believed to be shared by all human beings, is no longer a common vision in modern European societies. It has been replaced by many different ideas about life and its ultimate goals. For a postmodernist thinker, life could not have and should not have one goal, and the ideas about the way in which happiness should be sought are manifold.

But it is not the plurality of aims which bothers the philosophers in our age, which is often classed as the “postmodernist” one, so much – thanks to Jürgen Habermas and other thinkers who have proposed ways of approaching and dealing with ethical problems in a pluralistic society.⁶ Rather philosophers raise the question of on what basis individual human subjects should take moral positions in a pluralistic society.

It was the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor⁷ who proposed that pluralism represented an ethical and political problem. What happens if people try to find orientation for their lives and for their happiness only in themselves, he asked. In his book entitled “The Ethics of Authenticity”, which was first published in 1991, under the title of “The Malaise of Modernity”, the Canadian philosopher described firstly what went wrong in our “culture of authenticity”, and then disclosed the ethical principles that underpinned and propelled it. For the moment, we will stay with the question of what he understands by a “culture of authenticity” and what he discovered to have gone wrong in cultures of this kind.

When Charles Taylor talks about a culture of authenticity, he talks about modern western societies and assertions that are characterised by a demand for authenticity on the part of their citizens. Authenticity, however, is a very broad term. The first connotations of the word that come to mind are in phrases like “the authentic teaching of the church”

⁵ This description follows the argument presented by Charles Taylor in his book *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge et al., 2003).

⁶ Habermas’ development of a theory of rational-critical communication, and John Rawls’ veil of ignorance or justice theory can be seen as responding to the task of finding philosophical answers to the challenge of ethical decisions in a pluralistic society.

⁷ For an introduction to Charles Taylor see Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Cambridge, 2004); Ingeborg Breuer, *Charles Taylor zur Einführung* (Hamburg, 2000).

or “an authentic interpretation of the Bible”. Authenticity stems from the Greek term *authentēs*, which was translated into Latin as *auctoritas*.⁸ If we try to express what Charles Taylor understands by a “culture of authenticity”, we could say that he is talking about a culture in which every person is his or her own authority with respect to his or her life and actions. While this may still be an acceptable or even a commendable thing as such, what creates difficulties is that authority over our own individual lives inevitably goes hand in hand with a corresponding loss of a common framework of belief and of ethical orientation. Taylor’s critical analysis is well known and has been developed further since it was first published, but it still can serve as a background against which the modern search for happiness needs to be defended. With regard to the ethical question of whether an individualistic search for happiness presents a threat to ethics, we can restrict ourselves to reminding the aspect of individualism which was developed next to instrumental reasoning and despotism as characteristics of our societies.

Individualism according to Taylor arises from a loss of collective meaning or moral standards, and which he relates to the loss of a more monolithic social and cultural order.⁹ What Taylor calls as soft relativism enters here; namely, the attitude grows that, since there is no common framework, all the different standpoints are equally right and therefore cannot be criticised – the result is a normative understanding of ethical pluralism and a strong individualistic approach to ethical questions. Against what he calls a soft relativism, a moral perspective which originates in the idea, caused by the originality of our natures that it is our personal feelings and choices which ought to determine the values that we choose to steer our lives, he argues that such a self-centred attitude leads to all personal feelings being regarded as insignificant, since they come to be seen as arbitrary, equally valid. What is more, they cannot be brought into a hierarchy, given that they lack an external and consequently common point of reference that would allow evaluation and judgement. Hence, he argues

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of

⁸ Klaus Kienzler-Max Seckler, “Authentizität. Systematisch-theologisch,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Sonderausgabe, ed. Walter Kasper (Freiburg i.Br., 32006), 1:1287.

⁹ Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 3: “the individual lost something important along with the larger social and cosmic horizons of action.”

solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.¹⁰

His conclusion is that there are boundaries; namely things which we have to respect in our self-determining choices.¹¹

This missing social linking together as one of the more dire consequences of a culture of authenticity is in fact Charles Taylor's main concern.¹² Ethically speaking, the described attitudes lead to an ethics of 'self-determining freedom,' which Charles Taylor describes as follows: "It is the idea that I am free when I decide for myself what concerns me, rather than being shaped by external influences...Self-determining freedom demands that I break the hold of all such external impositions, and decide for myself alone."¹³

Taylor sees this as the expression of a turning point in the contemporary culture's understanding of what it means to listen to one's inner voice: we are not listening to our inner voice in order to hear what is right or wrong, and thus act rightly – a inner movement which we know well from our tradition of saying that we listen to the voice of our conscience. The turn that Charles Taylor observes is that we now listen to our inner voice, because we think that we can be truly human beings only by being in touch with ourselves, and that, since we are inalienably distinct from others, we need to find out "what being human is for me."¹⁴ The moral idea that "I miss the point of my life" if I do not live according to what "is my way" gives rise to "the principle of originality: each of our voices has something of its own to say. Not only should I not fit my life to the

¹⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

¹¹ Ibid., 68: "Because the notion of self-determining freedom, pushed to its limit, doesn't recognize any boundaries, anything given that I *have* to respect in my exercise of self-determining choice."

¹² Ibid., 3 and 4. The "dark side" which this individualism creates "is a centring on the self which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society."

¹³ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., 26-29 (quotation).

demands of external conformity; I can't even find the model to live by outside myself. I can find it only within."¹⁵

No wonder that self-fulfilment and self-realisation, as Taylor goes on to explain, are seen as the primary goals of life and, we may add, as the best way to find personal happiness. This type of happiness obviously is not linked any longer to a virtuous life in the sense of virtues that are shared by everybody and can be regarded as constitutive of a society.

Probably we would not agree entirely with this description of our contemporary societies and the way we would need to see ourselves anymore, nor would we regard ourselves as the last few left, the "survivors" (Adorno), who think differently from the mass of others. Rather we would see the positive side to this development that was also depicted by Charles Taylor when he presented his critical account of the individualistic tendencies in our societies twenty years ago and proposed as an alternative to an 'ethics of self-determining freedom' an 'ethics of authenticity' that embraces social concerns in its proper understanding. The important difference between the two is the distinction between the *manner* and the *content* of an ethics of authenticity:

Authenticity is clearly self-referential: this has to be *my* orientation....But this doesn't mean that on another level the *content* must be self-referential: that my goals must express or fulfil *my* desires or aspirations, *as against* something that stands beyond these. I can find fulfilment in God, or a political cause, or tending the earth.¹⁶

Taylor is referring to the fact that in earlier times the framework of orientation was a culturally established law or nature, which has in our times been replaced by a belief in the priority of choice. Taylor goes on to say: "Indeed the argument above suggests that we will find genuine fulfilment only in something like this, which has significance independent of us or our desires."¹⁷ Thus, if I decide to live by an ethics of authenticity, I will take personal responsibility not only for what I do but also for the points of orientation which I choose to direct my decisions and actions.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Taylor departs from the fact that human beings are fundamentally dialogical rather than monological by nature. Only through other human beings, through language, culture and love do we receive those pivotal moments which produce our identity. Even a hermit, he argues, is in dialogue with God, while a solitary artist is in dialogue with his work and its future audience.¹⁸ What is the aim of an ethics of authenticity, then, when it respects the basically dialogical structure of human nature? Taylor describes this aim in the following way: "...authenticity points us towards a more self-responsible form of life. It allows us to live (potentially) a fuller and more differentiated life, because more fully appropriated as our own."¹⁹

Happiness Understood as Individual Perfection - On Earth and in Heaven (John Versor)²⁰

Charles Taylor's concept of an ethics of authenticity allows for individualism as manner but not as content of an ethical approach that respects the nature and relationships of human beings. While this seems to be an answer to a question that arose through very recent developments, it is interesting to see that already in the Middle Ages, that we usually conceive of as a period in which all human beings shared a common Christian world view, there were already ethical concepts that refer to individualistic concepts of happiness.²¹ One of these is presented by John

¹⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹ Ibid., 74.

²⁰ A lot of research has been conducted on the question of happiness in the thinking of Thomas Aquinas. A few examples are Stephen Wang, "Aquinas on Human Happiness and the Natural Desire for God," *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007): 322-334; Colleen McCluskey, "Happiness and Freedom in Aquinas' Theory of Action," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 9 (2000): 69-90; Denis J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good. Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas' Moral Science* (Washington, D.C., 1997); Jean M. Laporte, "Beatitudo in the Structure of Aquinas' (Summa). Is Ia 26 a Stray Question?," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 18 (2002): 143-152; Otto H. Pesch, "Das Streben nach der 'beatitudo' bei Thomas von Aquin im Kontext seiner Theologie. Historische und systematische Fragen," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 52 (2005): 427-453; Davide Venturi, "Beatitudo, bonum commune und lex beim hl. Thomas von Aquin," *Doctor Angelicus* 5 (2005): 153-164; Hermann Kleber, *Glück als Lebensziel. Untersuchungen zur Philosophie des Glücks bei Thomas von Aquin* (Münster, 1988).

²¹ For more information see Hans U. Wöhler, "Die philosophische Glückssuche im Mittelalter. Historische Streiflichter," *Scientia et religio* (2005): 335-350.

Versor²² (d. after 1482) – in French *Le Tournant* (“The Turner”) – who was a rector of the University of Paris. He is famous for being an intellectual disciple of two far more famous Dominicans, Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas.²³ John shared with his predecessors that there were two kinds of happiness that human beings were seeking: there was a supernatural happiness, which could only be gained by grace, and there was also a natural happiness, which people aimed for in this life.²⁴

Versor was convinced that human beings tried to be happy naturally through their actions and supernaturally through contemplation. If he were asked whether there was only one good which all persons were looking for, he would have answered that implicitly there was only one, but explicitly the individual aims of human beings varied greatly.²⁵ In this respect, the difference between John’s opinion and what we think today was not very large. John Versor was not a follower of Plato’s philosophy and therefore did not think that it was of any help even to imagine a common idea of the good. He thought that contemplating a general idea would not give any practical help whatsoever to a craftsman or a medical doctor. Happiness, he emphasizes, is intimately related to what human beings do or produce,²⁶ and therefore needs to vary. Nevertheless, what for

²² More information concerning John Versor see Max Heinze, “Versor, Johannes,” in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie (ADB)*, ed. Rochus von Lilienfros (Leipzig, 1895), 39: 637f; Egbert P. Bos, John Versors’ Albertism in his Commentaries on Porphyry and the Categories, in *Chemins de la Pensée Médiévale. Études offertes a Zénon Kaluza*, ed. Paul J.J.M. Bakker (Turnhout, 2002), 47-78.

²³ Some doubts on John Versor’s discipleship have been formulated lately by Pepijn Rutten who stresses that his thought was far less independent upon either of his two great predecessors than was thought so far. See Pepijn Rutten, “Secundum Processum et Mentem Versoris: John Versor and his Relation to the Schools of Thought Reconsidered,” *Vivarium* 43 (2005): 292-336.

²⁴ John Versor, *Quaestiones super libros ethicorum Aristotelis*, Cologne 1494 [reprint Frankfurt/Main: Minerva 1967], fol. 6 v: *Sciendum secundo quod duplex est felicitas. Quaedam est supernaturalis ad quam homo ex propriis principiis pervenire non potest nisi iuvetur a primo efficiente per lumen glorie aut gracie. Et quia talis felicitas transcendit humane rationis investigationem, ideo de ista non est ad propositum. Alia est felicitas naturalis quam homo ex principiis naturalibus consequi potest. Et de tali est ad propositum. De qua contingit loqui dupliciter. Quia uno modo capitur felicitas pro simplici et perfectissimo bono quod naturaliter est homini possibile. Et quod est essentialiter ipsa felicitas. Alio modo capitur pro aggregatione ex illo perfectissimo bono et omnibus aliis bonis subservientibus sive sibi subserviant ut organa vel ut instrumenta vel ut decorantia illud perfectissimum bonum. Ut sunt bona nature ipsius corporis vel bona fortune ut sunt divitie artificiales aut naturales.*

²⁵ John Versor, fol. 2, r.

²⁶ John Versor fol. 6 r: *Dubitatur secundo utrum si poneretur talis ydea ultima felicitatis hominis in ipsa consisteret. Ad hoc tamen respondetur quod non quia talis ydea non esset operatio hominis nec aliquid operatum. Sed contra hoc objicitur quia cognitio istius boni separati ad minus erit exemplum per quod*

him could not be doubted was that these aims needed to be ranked hierarchically, and that the final aim of happiness was neither wealth nor reputation nor pleasure nor even virtue as such but the perfection of each individual person, which lay in the attainment of heavenly beatitude.²⁷

John Versor's concept is very stimulating and opens a bunch of questions related to happiness and ethics: Can living a virtuous life guarantee happiness in this life or in another life? Is virtue, or is happiness, the ultimate aim of life, after all? His answer that the perfection of each individual person was the last aim and not virtue nor happiness in a narrow sense of pleasure should be kept in mind.

But there was not only a hierarchy of aims but also a clear hierarchy of the goods that were attached to this life; for example, the more general goods were to be regarded as nobler than the more narrowly personal ones.²⁸ This is the aspect which troubles Charles Taylor today. For John Versor, the noblest good could be described as one that human beings sought for itself (literally, *per se*) and not for some other purpose. This last and most perfect aim for all human beings, however, belonged neither to the sphere of ethics or politics as such. The study of God as the most perfect aim was the concern of theology. Only to the degree that belief in God influenced human actions, it did belong to the fields of ethics and politics.²⁹ Thus, the highest aim was an individual perfection that could be gained only by God's grace after death and resurrection, and the highest good that was pursued for itself was God. But what could be said about happiness and a good life on earth?

sciemus adipisci tale bonum. Ergo talis possessio boni non est utilis. Hoc autem improbat philosophus primo quia omnis ars habet inquirere illud quo necessario indiget ad suum finem. Sed nulla ars humana inquirat bonum separatum cum nihil facit ad constitutionem finis alicuius artis igitur etc. Secundo textor non adiuvatur in sui operis executionem per contemplationem talis ydee separate. Nec faber nec medicus quod exemplar debet esse conforme exemplato et operato. Sed operatum est particulare, ergo exemplar debet esse particulare. Ergo agnitio boni separati quod est universale nihil facit ad acquisitionem finis alicuius artis.

²⁷ John Versor, fol. 3 r. See also fol. 5 r.

²⁸ John Versor fol. 3 v.

²⁹ John Versor fol. 4 r: *Ad terciam dicitur quod ultimus finis hominis simpliciter et secundum se consideratus non pertinet ad politicam, cum sit summum bonum simpliciter, sed magis pertinet ad alteriorem scientiam. Tamen ultimus finis hominis simpliciter sive ultimum obiectum consideratum secundum quod comparator ad mores bene pertinet ad politicam scientiam seu moralem, et ideo de felicitate agitur in hoc libro et in politica...*

According to John Versor, happiness generally taken consisted in “living well” and “acting well.”³⁰ John explained that living well was acting according to virtue. The degrees of happiness could vary according to our improvement in the different kinds of virtue; achievement always remained imperfect, however, because it was not possible for human beings to maintain them uninterruptedly.³¹ John also thought that good human beings enjoy acting virtuously, that they feel pleasure when they do what is good.³² They can attribute their happiness to God, since they are able to do something that draws them nearer to God.³³ By acting virtuously, they can at the same time make each other happy.³⁴

What might bring with us back from our short trip to the times of the rector of the late medieval University of Paris is the idea that people do go different ways in their search for happiness, both because they are in different situations and positions, and because they need to develop the virtues which are relevant in their particular case. We can agree with John’s suggestion that human beings can bring about the happiness of others and, to a certain degree, can contribute to their own happiness by trying to base their actions more and more on the basis of their own particular capabilities and gifts. Complete happiness, however, would consist in a personal perfection that reaches far beyond the scope of a virtuous life on earth and the happiness it involves.

However, what we surely cannot just take with us is the embeddedness of all human ways of searching for happiness in a larger common order that encompasses all human beings. There is no easy or immediate way back to it – if it ever *has* existed in a perfect form. According to Taylor there might still be intuitions of belonging to a greater order within ourselves, e.g. the feeling of belonging to nature, but our technically conditioned

³⁰ John Versor fol. 4 v.

³¹ John Versor fol. 7 v: *Secunda conclusio. Felicitas est operatio secundum virtutem perfectam. Probatum quia eadem est operatio hominis et boni hominis. Sicut est eadem operatio cythariste et boni cythariste, scilicet catharisare. Sed operatio boni hominis est operatio secundum virtutem, quia virtus reddit operationem bonam...Et si sint plures virtutes hominis operatioque est secundum optimam illarum est felicitas.*

³² John Versor fol. 8 v: *Operatio virtuosa in se habet delectationem vel de ratione sua. Patet quia nullus diceret nomine istum qui non gaudere iustis operationibus. Ergo etc.*

³³ John Versor, fol. 9 v: *Ad secundam dicitur quod felicitas dicitur aliquid divinum non quia sit aliquid a deo sed quia propter excellentiam sue bonitatis facit aliquem similem deo.*

³⁴ John Versor 9 r: *Sed hoc non tollitur si felicitas ponatur inesse hominibus a deo movente mediante tamen labore humano. Ergo felicitas est a causa humana.*

culture does not help us express these kinds of intuitions.³⁵ He is suggesting that perhaps the loss of a ‘sense of belonging’, which was strengthened through a commonly shared religious world view, needs to be compensated for by a stronger, more inner sense of linkage.³⁶

This does not mean that we cannot discover common goods or some form of order in creation; however the relationship to such an order does not come automatically and necessarily, and it is not something that can be adopted from outside by the person but must be found within. The basic turn which is ethically relevant seems to be that some truths, even if they do exist independently of ourselves, need to be discovered anew and acknowledged by us individually as human beings. Only by taking the way through our own heart, may we successfully be able to recognize our place in the society in which we find ourselves; namely, in a larger community of human beings who are searching both individually and together for various goods, for happiness and many also for the large secret, which we call “God” and which we as Christians think has been revealed in history.

An interesting point that we can find in John Versor is however that searching for happiness is legitimate, that in its content it is linked to the development of virtues that correspond to one’s individual life, and that the ultimate aim does not consist in virtue as self-perfection, but in personal perfection that cannot be reached completely during one’s earthly life, but is hoped for as gift of grace after resurrection.

Personal Happiness as Unpredictable Grace, and the Ethical Decision to Contribute to the Happiness of Others (Jean Grondin)

Both the kind of inner sense of linkage as referred to by Taylor and Versor’s vision that it needs grace to reach happiness - at least in its fulfilling form - are taken up and integrated in the philosophical ethical approach of another Canadian philosopher, Jean Grondin.³⁷ He starts by proposing an ‘ethics of meaning’ which invites us to dismiss for a moment - or for even longer, if we wish - our search for personal happiness.

³⁵ Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 91.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jean Grondin (born in 1955) studied philosophy and theology in Montreal, Heidelberg and Tübingen. He is a professor for philosophy at the University of Montreal and frequently teaches in Ottawa. He is acknowledged to be a renowned expert on Hans-Georg Gadamer and the question of hermeneutics. He has also published books on Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger.

Grondin questions whether what all famous philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Kant take for granted, namely that human beings search for happiness, is really true. He explains his doubts by examining the meaning of happiness in various European languages. While in the English language and in some others, ‘luck’, a fortunate coincidence is distinguished from ‘happiness’, a wonderful feeling of well-being, the contrary is the case in the German language: ‘luck’ and ‘happiness’ is signified by the same word, “Glück.” Luck and happiness are closely related to each other, he argues.³⁸

Grondin interprets the connection between luck and happiness in the following way: “Who is happy, is at the same time lucky, namely he or she is blessed by fortune.” He thinks that “There is no recipe to bring about happiness: We receive it (often without noticing), and it enlivens us and elates us.”³⁹ He relates this feeling to a word which sounds old-fashioned in our times outside a religious context; namely to the beatitude of the blessed, who after their life on earth live in eternal happiness because they live in God’s more immediate presence. For Grondin, being happy has to do with being fortunate: “We are simply lucky if we can call ourselves happy in this world”, he concludes. He relates happiness very much to grace.⁴⁰

Grondin comes to the conclusion that we cannot produce happiness for ourselves, we can only hope for it. Therefore, he sheds some doubts on what Thomas Jefferson called one of the fundamental rights, namely the pursuit of happiness: “Is it possible”, Grondin asks, “to pursue one’s happiness?”⁴¹ His first argument is that every human being pursues slightly different goods in order to be happy; whether these are wealth, honour, lust or wisdom. How should we define happiness? We have seen the same question being raised in the fifteenth century, and where it remained equally open with respect to happiness, at least as far as our life on earth, as opposed to our life in Heaven is concerned.

Secondly he argues that nobody is able to make him- or herself permanently happy. He justifies his opinion by observing that we tend to fail to be happy just

³⁸ Jean Grondin, *Vom Sinn des Lebens* (Göttingen, 2006), 71. English quotations are translated from the original German text by Sigrid Müller.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 73.

when we explicitly aim for happiness, simply because happiness requires a pinch of unselfconsciousness.⁴² Certain moments in the life of married couples might easily come to mind in this regard; for example, when we try most hard to find happiness through our partner, he might be even less able to fulfil our desires as a consequence. On the other hand, when we do not expect anything from our partner but do what we deem is right to do, we might find ourselves distracted from our search for happiness and thus far more open towards actual feelings of unexpected happiness.

Jean Grondin then places his views of happiness in a broader perspective before drawing some general conclusions about the impossibility of producing one's own happiness. According to him, we have a gravely erroneous vision of happiness in our society; a vision which, according to him, was heavily influenced by the Calvinist interpretation of wealth as a sign of God's grace. This interpretation of Calvin's theory of predestination would seem to explain why many of us today think we ourselves are the source of our own happiness and thus can make ourselves happy; for example, through working hard and spending wisely and modestly. The Canadian philosopher explains that all the popular literature of advice that we buy and read - which tells us how to be happy in love, how to be happy by seeking physical health, how to be happy by guaranteeing success in business - build on the illusion that we can 'make it ourselves'. While he emphasises that there are good aims promoted in these guides, which should not be discarded, their basic claim remains one which is unquestionably counterproductive: If we think we can control all parts of our lives - time, happiness, health, love, friendship, and even death - we run the risk of losing what is much more important; namely, we lose touch with the existential reality of our human condition. Grondin quotes Matthew 6:27: "Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span?"⁴³

Grondin thinks that we risk losing touch with the primary sense, meaning, and purpose of our lives because we concentrate too much on issues of secondary importance. At the same time, a philosophy which really wants to speak about the meaning of our lives cannot and perhaps ought not to offer a recipe for happiness. It can only speak

⁴² Ibid., 72-75.

⁴³ Ibid., 75.

about hopes and expectations which can bolster our intellects and spirits when we need to deal with both the happy and unhappy moments of our lives: with experiences of injustice; with evil; and death. He refrains from offering recipes for finding happiness, or even searching happiness, and concludes: "Our luck or happiness in case it exists, will come to us when and if it wants."⁴⁴

The Canadian philosopher draws the conclusion that even though we cannot provide for our own happiness, we can nevertheless contribute to the happiness of others - and this, he observes, is indeed the main goal of ethics. According to Grondin, philosophy is a way of reflecting upon what gives meaning to our lives. He points out that the activity of reflecting about the meaning of our existence encourages us to gain a much stronger consciousness of all the relationships and bonds that tie and weave our lives. This philosophical exercise is difficult, provisional, and never-ending. It always accompanies our lives, fostering the aspects of meaning that we can find in their various periods and stages.⁴⁵ It is important also to Grondin that, during this exercise, we realise that human beings do not come into the world without any relationships (in the words of Charles Taylor as "punctual selves") subsequently choosing their relationships according to motives of utility. On the contrary, from the very beginning of their coming into the world, human beings are related to others, as they are to the meaning of their lives, to the Good, and we may add as theologians, to God.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Grondin sees a difference between his own way of emphasising social bonds and the way Charles Taylor emphasizes them. Taylor is inclined to think that the remedy to a wrong understanding of authenticity as constructive selfishness consists in a communitarian vision of the individual; namely, of the individual's involvement in a given culture and collective history, as well as to a political and national unit. Grondin argues that, especially in our times of globalisation, the search of individuals for meaning in their lives has become of far more pressing importance:

⁴⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 107-108.

Everything that fastens me to the meaning and which creates hope in myself is the expectation of a life full of sense, firstly for the other, to help him or her to live in a way to see that his or her life has had sense and will have sense, and finally for my own life, which discovers a sense beyond myself. This is the case because my life is never only my life, but the life of everybody who shares the fate of being mortal.⁴⁷

Since our whole life is “in practice” a preparation for our dying, Grondin establishes, from a philosophical position, the imperative: “Conduct your life as if it were to be judged”.⁴⁸

What are the criteria according to which one should live? Grondin explains them in the following way: “It is worth living for the others who expect something from us; I can fulfil their expectations and do even more than they expected from me. I can do this by making their lives less cruel, by adding justice, freedom and tenderness in their lives and adding to its tastefulness and meaning.”⁴⁹

To take care of oneself leads therefore to “taking care of the others and for the meaning in the life of the others.”⁵⁰ In short, the meaning of life consists in “doing what is good and doing what one has to do in a good way.”⁵¹ Furthermore, it is love which counts because it answers to a love and meaning which is there before we start living – it helps us to transcend our own lives, thereby giving them flavour and sense.

Grondin refers to a phrase which goes back to St. John of the Cross: “At the evening of your life one will ask you only about the love you gave. Therefore learn how to love God as he wants to be loved and step back from what you are.”⁵²

Searching Happiness by Doing What is Right in the Right Way, but Receiving Happiness by God’s Grace (John Buridan)

Grondin’s conclusions invite us to make another journey back to the Middle Ages. The importance of the individual human life was emphasised especially in the Franciscan

⁴⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 113-114.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 117.

⁵¹ Ibid., 118.

⁵² Ibid., 125.

tradition, and also in mystical traditions, during the Later Middle Ages. It has its source back further in the theology of St. Augustine (354-430). Since Augustine, the most influential theologian in the western Christendom up to and beyond the Middle Ages, an ethics based on love has been proposed as the proper expression of a Christian commitment. Again, it is a double understanding of love: the love of God and all that God has created. The difference he makes between God, on the one hand, and created things, on the other, is that God is the only good that is able to satisfy human desire. All other goods - and also other persons - are loved because of the greater good, namely God. If we relate this idea to our theme of searching for happiness, we can see that all happiness that is linked to goods which are not God can satisfy us only temporarily. Permanent rejoicing will only take place once we arrive at a more immediate union with God.

During the later Middle Ages, this was a central feature of Franciscan ethical approaches; for example, those developed by John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.⁵³ They proposed that one could call an act morally good if one acted not only according to right reason but also out of the love of God. Ethics meant, in the end, making a rational choice from the perspective of what God wants me to do. The love of God is first in order, reason being simply a means to discovering it. This ethical approach could sometimes come close to an ethics of moral obligation: The first aim in ethics was to fulfil God's will - a concept which somehow reminds us of the Kantian idea that I have the obligation to do what I recognize to be morally good, but I can only hope that my good decision and action will be at some stage rewarded by God. However, the late medieval Franciscans did not support the view that people should act under the pressure of obligation; they rather thought that the love of God moved human beings to do what they thought was according to God's will. This was clearly a theological concept of ethics.

⁵³ Studies concerning Ockham see Sigrid Müller, *Handeln in einer kontingenten Welt. Zu Begriff und Bedeutung der rechten Vernunft (recta ratio) bei Wilhelm von Ockham* (Tübingen et al., 2012); Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Structure of Ockham's Moral Theory," *Franciscan Studies* 46 (1986): 1-36; Paul Vincent Spade, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham* (Cambridge, 1999).

Can this journey back into the Middle Ages help us to understand better the precise nature of today? The example of St. Augustine⁵⁴ shows that there are good reasons for being self-centred in a good way; for example, the church further describes that listening to one's inner voice is extremely important. A dialogue with oneself can lead to an encounter with God at the centre of oneself. Charles Taylor mentioned this both to show the dialogical structure of human beings, and also to say that people are directed towards others and that they should stop concentrating too much on themselves. But according to St. Augustine, it is extremely important to take the time to listen to one's inner voice and to search for God inside oneself. As a second step only, the love which one receives from God will carry to the love of others, thereby putting into practice what has been inwardly experienced. What at first sight might look like a selfish concentration on the self, can become the source of a dedication to others.

It seems also that this movement that turns back towards oneself has gained significant importance from the point of view of ethics. What might be criticised as egoism, egocentrism, or autism can be a first stage during which individuals become aware of the fact that it is their personal task to take decisions and to be responsible for their actions. They may experience the need to think clearly about what they really want to do. The claim to be authentic also brings the challenge to take responsibility for everything a person does.

But what happens, we may ask, if people do not believe in God and, as a consequence, do not start their search for happiness from a Christian motivation to find out what God wants them to do? Or what about cases where the motivation to seek what is good because it is coterminous with the love of God simply does not play a role in a person's life?

If we asked an important writer on ethics of the fourteenth century, John Buridan, he would answer that ethics is the science which considers human beings from the perspective of their ability to act freely and their capability of achieving happiness (*homo ut felicitabilis*).⁵⁵ At the heart of the ethics as a discipline must stand the human

⁵⁴ Norbert Fischer, *Die philosophische Frage nach Gott. Ein Gang durch ihre Stationen* (Paderborn, 1995), 370-378.

⁵⁵ Johannes Buridanus, *Quaestiones super decem libros ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum* (Paris, 1513 [Reprint Minerva, 1968]), lib. 1, q. 3.

being, with the capacity of humans to act freely, and thus responsibly, and their desire to be happy. The medieval theologians and philosophers understood happiness not as a state which one can gain, but as action in the form of doing right things in the right way. Buridan would have agreed with Grondin that even those who do not believe in God still need to seek to do what is virtuous if they want to be truly human. But he would have rejected Jean Grondin's etymological analyses of happiness as being related to pure chance. John Buridan was convinced that happiness needed to come ultimately from God. Nevertheless, the way that he proposed it, was virtually the same; namely, to try to do what is right, and thereby live a virtuous life.

Grondin does not presuppose religious belief when he expounds his approach. He just recognizes that without a religious belief, the driving force of actions in our lives is the hope that my life and the life of the other human beings do have meaning. He also thinks that, in answering to this hope, human persons will engage in helping others, so that they will be able to see their lives as meaningful, and thereby attain to happiness. He believes that, looking back later, such people will be able to say that their lives were meaningful. In order to be able to reach this aim, however, we need to be prepared to listen both to ourselves and others in order to feel and taste what life is about.

One question seems to remain to us in this search to understand where happiness lies. Should one follow Grondin and give up on searching for our own happiness? Does an "ethics of meaning", as Grondin's approach was named, renounce entirely on the human search for happiness? The Christian tradition would probably not recommend us to do so. What Grondin asks of his readers is that they act as if they were to be judged at the end of their lives, not according to whether they had followed a set of externally established norms, but according to whether they had lived meaningfully; namely, whether they had tried to understand the meaning of their lives and whether they had loved as much as they could according to their capacity to love. While this involves trying to be unselfish, it does not mean that one should not love oneself or not seek happiness. But, just as in the medieval commentaries that were mentioned, happiness cannot simply be equated with pleasure, as Taylor and Grondin have likewise argued. Happiness could rather be described as knowing that what I am doing now contributes to making both my life and the lives of others more meaningful. Understood

in this deeper sense, even Grondin's vision can be reconciled with the tradition of the philosophers and theologians who say that all human beings search for happiness.

Conclusion

The contributions of Christian tradition can help us to think more clearly about the many ways in which people seek to be virtuous and search for happiness. The two Canadian philosophers have shown us that, behind the individualistic tendencies of our times, a deeply rooted quest to live a personal calling can be discovered. Both claim that ultimately a turning back upon oneself has its meaning if it enables us to recognise that we are related, and have always been related to other human beings, to nature, and to the source of all. Love of myself, together with the time to think about who I am and where I need to go; about who and what will sustain me in times of despair and trouble; time to ponder the meaning of the brief span of life that I received; and to contemplate how far my faith in God and my hope can carry and protect me; such a love of myself is a deep and necessary resource for the love and care that I wish to give to others, and to enable me to contribute to the betterment of the society in which I live. Such a life, says St. Augustin, '*sapit*'; it has flavour. It is the way to deep happiness.

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