

On Sophistry and the Definition of Happiness : A Rejoinder to Mr William Frerking

by Hugo Meynell

In a recent article in *New Blackfriars*, Mr William Frerking took me to task for some comments which I made on the famous question which Glaucon poses to Socrates in *The Republic*.¹ He said a number of wise and sensible things. But none of these had any bearing on my argument. I must first assure Mr Frerking that I do not have the strange conception of happiness which he seems to attribute to me; and then try to show that such a view of happiness is by no means implied by what I wrote in my article.

Mr Frerking expresses surprise that nowhere in my article do I offer a definition of happiness. There are two reasons for this: first, that I do not think that the term 'happiness' is susceptible of exact definition; and second, that my conception of happiness, unlike that attributable (at least on one interpretation, as we shall see) to Mr Frerking, is just the same as that which is ordinarily current. Still, misunderstanding has evidently arisen; so it may be as well for me to try to spell out roughly what I, and I believe most other people, mean by happiness. Happiness, as Aristotle rightly suggests, is a state one seeks for its own sake, and not as a means to some other state. We are likely to value friendship or reputation or physical pleasures or wealth for the way in which they conduce to happiness; but it would be very queer for someone to claim to value happiness because it got him friends, wealth and so on. Aristotle's point is brought out well by the paradoxical tang of the saying, 'What's the good of happiness? You can't buy money with it'. People have a way of comparing different periods of their own or other people's lives, saying how relatively happy or unhappy they were, and suggesting the factors which they think were contributory to this; or those which might have been expected to be so, but apparently weren't. Someone might say: 'I was hard put to it to make ends meet, the flat was dank and overrun by rats, and all my friends dropped me after the business of Euphemia. All in all, it was just about the most unhappy period of my life'. Or again: 'At last his conscience was clear, he started making real headway with his research in crystallography, and he got to know many more rich and hospitable people. Never had he been so happy'. All of us have some conception, more or less well defined, of what possible

¹*New Blackfriars*, Sept. 1973; 393-407.

states and situations in life would tend to make us happy; occasionally we have reason to reflect, like the man who had spent his aunt's legacy of thirty thousand pounds entirely on jelly-babies, that our previous judgment on the matter may have been to some extent in error. 'I had success in my work and a good reputation among my superiors; I had a considerable and widely envied influence over the minds and bodies of the younger female intelligentsia of Vladivostock; and yet somehow I failed to be happy'. In moments of ecstasy we may find happiness so intense, in communion with God, in the fellowship of those we love, or in the creation or contemplation of works of art, that we may feel, temporarily or permanently, that other occasions of happiness are quite insignificant in comparison.

The paragraph I have just devoted to an account of the nature of happiness should not mislead the reader into thinking that Mr Frerking has persuaded me that I ought to have given such an account, let alone have tried to *define* happiness, in my discussion of Glaucon's question. All that was necessary to my argument was that men are such that torture, starvation, imprisonment, betrayal or desertion by their friends, and so on, generally adversely affect their happiness. That human happiness is of this nature, I would have thought, is something that can be assumed for the purpose of ordinary discussion. Nowhere in my article did I assert, or indeed imply, that human happiness consists *only* in not undergoing such discomforts or deprivations, and in the enjoyment of sensual pleasures and the company of one's friends. Let us call following the path of moral virtue as one sees it, keeping a good conscience, and so on—the components of happiness insisted on by Mr Frerking—putative component A of happiness; and the states and activities which I was inclined to emphasise as constituent of happiness, since they were more relevant to my purpose, putative component B. My argument depended on the assumption that putative component B was one important aspect of happiness, at least for most people; Mr Frerking apparently infers from this that I think that happiness consists of nothing else.

Let us distinguish, now, between what we may call Frerking's Strong Thesis, to the effect that happiness consists in putative component A and not at all in putative component B; and Frerking's Weak Thesis, to the effect that happiness consists in both putative components A and B. Any impression that Mr Frerking has built up a good case against me can only be due, so far as I can see, to confusion between the weak thesis and the strong. The strong thesis is wholly absurd; the weak thesis, though certainly true, is wholly irrelevant to my argument. The strong thesis entails that people's happiness is never in the least impugned by their being tortured, imprisoned, starved, or deprived of their friends. I do not know how one could commit oneself to any proposition much more absurd than that. Of course it is open to anyone to define "happiness" in such a way that such things have no effect on it; just as it is open to

anyone to propound a definition of "horse" such that there is no difference between horses and cows. But arguments which turn on such artificial definitions, I think it will be generally agreed, are either deceitful or utterly trivial. The weak thesis entails only that there are other factors than imprisonment, starvation, and so on, which are liable to impugn happiness, such as a bad conscience and the conviction that one has failed in one's duty. To deny the weak thesis is almost as absurd, if possible, as to assert the strong. Mr Frerking has somehow persuaded himself that because I deny the strong thesis, I must also deny the weak. What has made him do this? I think the answer is one suggested in my original article: that people badly want to be convinced that the good are the happier for being good, the wicked the more miserable for being wicked, and that almost any attempt at an argument in support of this proposition is liable to convince them.

Aristotle does seem to be of the opinion that the wicked cannot be happy. Two questions have to be asked here—just what he meant by this, and whether his opinion was correct. Before answering these questions, it seems to me, a number of distinctions ought to be made. Some people are to a large extent subject to desires and impulses which are beyond their control; in Freudian terms, their id is strong and their ego weak. A person of this kind cannot on the whole be happy, since he is perpetually doing things which he regrets at the time he is doing them, or later, or both. Now such a person certainly lacks all the Aristotelian moral virtues, and is far from being morally good; but I do not think he is properly speaking wicked. Surely Kant² is right to make a radical distinction between wickedness and frailty; a man whose impulses are constantly getting in the way of his resolutions is morally frail, but he has to be capable of making bad resolutions, and of running his life on bad principles of action, if he is to be genuinely wicked. In fact, a measure of psychic integrity, a fairly strong ego in Freudian terms, is a necessary condition of genuine wickedness as well as of genuine goodness. Aristotle's moral virtues are largely a matter of ego-strength, of a man's immediate desires and impulses being sufficiently under his control not to interfere with his long-range intentions and purposes.

Let us say that a morally frail man as I have described him has type A moral defect, a wicked man type B moral defect. I believe that Aristotle's ethical writings are mainly concerned with type A moral defect; sure enough, to the extent that one has such a defect, at least beyond a certain point (I do not know anyone who is completely without), one cannot be happy (cf. p. 405). But a considerable measure of type B moral defect, I fear, is a necessary condition of happiness in most forms of human society. I take it that this was what Christ had in mind when he told his disciples that they would

²Cf. I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Harper Touchbooks, 1960), 24-5.

find tribulation in the world. The more free a man is of type B moral defect, the less willing he will be to conform to the unjust and oppressive structures of the social order within which he finds himself, to 'the world' in the pejorative sense of the term which is to be found in the New Testament. The ruling groups in a society are not liable to take kindly to anyone who, by word or action, draws attention to the discrepancy between the image of themselves which it suits them to put about, and the truth. Mr Frerking seems to think that they cannot really impugn the good man's happiness; but to think this, one has to have either a very rosy view of human motivation, or a conception of happiness which is very remote from the ordinary one.

Mr Frerking has set up an excellent scholarly argument designed to show, against me, that it is by no means certain that Plato intended his myths in the *Republic* and *Gorgias* to refer to an expected afterlife (395). But the attentive reader will see that this ambiguity in their interpretation, of which I was aware, strengthens rather than weakens my case. Plato wishes to state flatly neither that the good are necessarily the happier for their goodness when the present life alone is taken into account, nor that his case rests entirely on the vindication of the virtuous in the hereafter. Thus the equivocal suggestiveness of his myths exactly suits his purpose. The care and correctness of Mr Frerking's scholarship may lull the reader into failing to notice its irrelevance to the point at issue. Who would suspect of camel-swallowing someone who is so assiduous at the straining of his gnats?

When Mr Frerking comes to distinguish between self-regarding virtue and other-regarding virtue, one feels that enlightenment must be breaking in at last (403). Is he finally coming to realise the obvious if unpalatable truth that the two sorts of 'virtue', the world being what it is, often dictate quite opposite courses of action for the agent? He lets himself off the hook by the reflection, correct in itself but quite insufficient to establish his case, that happiness in one's friends is only to be found if one cultivates them for their own sake and not merely with an eye to one's selfish interest (403). The trouble is, of course, that action which is dictated by other-regarding virtue in the sense that it is aimed at the general good, is only too frequently against the interests of one's immediate group, and so is inclined to lose rather than to gain one friends. Mr Frerking has either not adverted to this possibility, or convinced himself, by failing to take account of a mountain of evidence, that it does not obtain; this enables him effectively to obliterate the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding virtue. So he easily concludes that 'in giving up acting virtuously a man is giving up acting reasonably' (403).

Mr Frerking (1) attacks as mine a conception of happiness I do not hold, and indeed regard as more or less beneath contempt; (2) outlines a view of happiness in fact more or less identical with the one I hold (this is the best part of his article, and I am grateful to him for a very useful supplement to what I was trying to say); (3) con-

cedes in a muted and somewhat fuddled manner the very point my article was trying to make; (4) withdraws his concession under a smokescreen of equivocation. I do not wish to take up any more space by going into points (3) and (4) in detail; the reader will understand what I mean if he turns to p. 404-5 of Mr Frerking's article. Here he will be astounded to learn, in effect, that a man's happiness is, indeed, somewhat affected by his being tortured; but what is *essential* to his happiness is not *really* affected. So much for the sufferings of the just man. What a concoction of intellectual and moral bromide! Mr Frerking rightly says that certain eschatological views, which he infers to be mine by the sort of reasoning I discussed earlier on, are inconsistent with Christian doctrine; he may care to reflect on the application of his own arguments to the sufferings of Christ.

I was greatly moved by Mr Frerking's final peroration, and valued much else in his article.

A Response to Mr Meynell

by William Frerking

Glaucon's question is: Is the good man, just by virtue of being good, more fortunate than the bad?

My reply was: Yes, and for the following reason: The one good the just man possesses, no matter how many other evils he suffers, and the one good the bad man lacks, no matter how many other goods he possesses, is the good of *reasonable action*—which is what virtuous action is. Now this single good is of greater value than all other goods combined. Hence even the suffering just man possesses greater good than any bad man no matter how prosperous, and is more fortunate. Why is reasonable action a greater good than all other goods combined? Because it is the *essential* element in human good, and that for three reasons: (1) It is the good which corresponds to the essence of man, and the highest element in him: his reason, or mind, or soul; (2) It is that whereby the other human goods become good for *this* man; if they are not possessed and used through reasonable action, these things, though good when considered abstractly, can be bad for a particular man; (3) It is the only element of human good whose realisation is dependent solely on a man's own action, and not also or entirely on factors beyond his control.