# Philosophic "Good" in the Context of Families and Children: What is Good for Children?

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In 1948, Richard Weaver wrote a book entitled *Ideas Have Consequences*. He pointed out that the ideas and beliefs that help to form our personal world views or paradigms—our "Weltanschauung"—directly influence our actions and, in turn, create consequences. While many of the ideas and beliefs we encounter have deep, trustworthy roots, others become widely accepted before critical examination is made of what might result if they are implemented. Unfortunately, people—and thus entire societies—incur the consequences of whatever ideas they live, regardless of whether those ideas are innocently and ignorantly assumed or are adopted after careful examination.

One of the most widely circulated ideas in recent times is that whatever a person chooses to do does not matter; any choice is as good as any other, so that choosing, for example, to co-habit rather than to marry or to pursue personal wealth and convenience rather than to rear a family is simply a matter of preference. That notion lies at the base of what is called, in the West, "political correctness." In the United States and in many Western countries, a vocal part of the population considers it improper, intolerant, mean-spirited, or even hateful to question the idea that all choices are of equal worth and should be deemed socially acceptable.

I would like to challenge the idea that all choices are equally valid. I would like to suggest that most people make decisions about life based on their ideas about what will make them happy. However, all kinds of happiness are not equal. Feeling happy because you drank too much and can forget your problems for a while is not the same as feeling happy about publishing a book after years of research. Feeling happy that your child is beautiful is not the same as feeling happy that your child survived dangerous heart surgery.

I believe that the ways people choose to seek happiness can be organized into three broad philosophies of action, which result in three different sets of consequences. When the consequences of living by these three philosophical ideas of happiness are carefully considered, some choices clearly emerge as better for children, and for families and society in general, than others. In fact, some choices are inherently destructive to personal relationships and thus have negative effects on children and civilized society.

I would like to briefly describe these three philosophies of happiness and the consequences that follow each. Adherents of political correctness will undoubtedly find some of my remarks troubling, even intolerant, according to their definition of that word. I would ask you to reflect on how what I describe makes a difference in the lives of children. I intend my remarks not as a condemnation of anyone, but as a challenge to a flawed idea. I also intend it as a message of hope—hope that resides in the recognition that ideas are themselves a matter of personal choice and that we can choose better ones than those currently in vogue. It is time to support ideas, and thus consequences, that are good for children, because what is good for children, is good for us all.

## Three Philosophies of Happiness and Their Consequences

In his introduction to the subject in the *Eudemian Ethics*, Book One, Aristotle noted the disparity among beliefs concerning the origins of happiness prevalent in his day:

> For some say that wisdom is the greatest good, others virtue, others pleasure. And some enter into dispute about the importance of those in relation to happiness, claiming that one contributes more than another to it: some hold wisdom to be a greater good than virtue, others the reverse; while others again believe pleasure a greater good than either. And again, some think that living happily is composed of all of these, some of two of them, others that it consists in one of them in particular (Woods, p. 2).

Apparently, ideas regarding the sources of happiness haven't changed much, if at all, since Aristotle's description; the same arguments abound today. Like the currents in a river, these three currents of thought about human happiness sometimes mix and mingle and sometimes remain distinct. The three currents are hedonism, individualism (my rough equivalent for what Aristotle called *eudaemonia*), and altruism.

### *Hedonism*

Hedonism represents a fairly simple and straight-forward approach: A person is "happy" if she both has what she desires, and does not have what she desires not to have. In the ancient Greek formulation of hedonism provided by Aristippus, to obtain happiness:

> One should strive for nothing else but to experience as many pleasures as possible and as intensely as possible, for pleasures differ neither in degree nor in quality. . . . No considerations should restrain one in the pursuit of pleasure, for everything other than pleasure is unimportant, and virtue is least important of all (Tatarkiewicz, p. 317).

Happiness, in this view, is insistently focused on self and personal desire. It may be characterized as a mood, a state of mind, or a way of feeling that has an upbeat or optimistic sense of one's current place in the world as well as one's continuing prospects for desire satisfaction. In a purely hedonistic paradigm, no attempt is made to differentiate among chosen preferences, as long as they produce pleasant sensations and gratify one's desires. Barrow, for example, argues in favor of the idea that Hitler may well have been happy (p. 55), that "happiness can be based on falsehood" (p. 85), and suggests that human happiness may even be equated to "the contentment of non-rational animals" (p. 26).

The only moral standards absolute hedonism recognizes are as self-focused as its view of happiness. What is considered "good" is a personal choice, is what makes me happy, gives me pleasure, assists me in avoiding pain. Any external morality considered by the hedonist typically comes as a demand from others—a demand for tolerance so as to do or have whatever I want, or a demand for justice, i.e., fairness and equitable treatment (as opposed to recognizing one's obligation to be fair, just, and honest).

Although hedonism may also be expressed in such things as enjoying a beautiful view, good company, or a good meal, they are sought by the hedonist only as part of one's larger objective of accumulating as much gratification as possible. Pure hedonism thus never escapes a focus on self, a sense of What's in it for me? or What am I getting out of this? No single object of desire is inherently more or less commendable than another, except to the person who desires it, in which case one's desire creates the perceived value in that object.



While probably no one would argue with the proposition that the pleasures of life have an appropriate place, there are inherent problems in pure hedonism as a theory of happiness. Yankelovitch, for example, pointed out that people frequently redefine their desires as "needs" as a means of convincing others (and perhaps themselves) of the importance of the things they want; yet, once desires are established as the goal, the supply of satisfying objects can never satisfy the seemingly infinite demand.

A further and related problem is that the use of a standard of happiness predicated on need/desire-fulfillment necessarily means that only a limited percentage of people can be happy—those who have the good fortune to have the resources or the power of positions that enable them to have their desires satisfied at least most of the time. Despite its hollow promise of egalitarian happiness, hedonism in fact places people into competition with one another for scarce resources and, in Hudson's words, "is complicated by the need to surpass the gratification of others" (p. 47). The hedonist cannot be satisfied with merely keeping up with the Joneses—he often must outdo them.

Another problem with the hedonistic standard of happiness has been noted by Glenn, who pointed out that the needs of children in a family should be placed ahead of those of the parents, because if each of the parents gives priority to his or her own needs, de-emphasizing duty and obligation to the spouse and marital permanence, happiness cannot be maximized.

> In the case of one specific individual, it is obvious that lessening that person's sense of duty and obligation will aid that person's quest for hedonistic goals if there is not a corresponding de-emphasizing of duty and obligation among everyone else. However, if the loosening of the bonds of duty is universal, or nearly so, beyond a certain point it will become difficult for anyone to attain his or her hedonistic goals.
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> To illustrate, according to the progressive [hedonistic] view, stability in marriage is not an end in itself, and a marriage is worth preserving only so long as it is a "good" one, as judged by hedonistic standards (p. 351).

To paraphrase, one's hedonistic satisfaction is inherently dependent on someone else either not being hedonistic or at least not hedonistically happy. Hedonistic happiness is thus in a sense parasitic, requiring either a non-hedonistic host or an unhappy person who is coerced in some way to do the happy person's bidding. This means that hedonistic happiness is inherently dependent on conditions to varying degrees outside of one's control, such as whether there is sufficient money, whether other people do what one wishes, whether everything goes as planned, or whether the weather cooperates. Virtually as a matter of definition, therefore, hedonistic happiness is transitory, temporary.

Another related problem is the truncated world view resulting from hedonism. In the hedonistic view, virtues such as compromise, tolerance, and equity or fairness, as mentioned earlier, become the only possible moral horizons, reluctant acknowledgment that there are other people in the world and that we should give them some space to try to obtain their happiness as we seek our own. Interestingly, even such a standard as this acts as a limit on individual hedonism, implying a societal recognition that somehow unfettered hedonism is problematic.

In fact, crimes forbidden by traditional law in every country of which I am aware, particularly those considered *malum in se* (inherently wrong, such as murder, theft, mayhem) as opposed to *malum prohibitum* (wrong as a matter of regulatory rule, such as a truck violating highway weight limits), are no more than extreme expressions of hedonism. Laws forbidding such behaviors are statements that we as a society cannot tolerate actions that are hurtful to other people, be it harm to another's person or property, no matter how much the criminal might have desired the outcome of his action, no matter how much "satisfaction" it may briefly have provided

him. Hedonism must be shackled, or other people get hurt. Quinn, who conducted a study of “outlaw motorcycle clubs” living by extremely hedonistic norms, found that even in outlaw groups and organized criminal activity, certain rules are necessary to restrict outright hedonism from its natural course of “ self-destructive tendencies,”since hedonistic satisfactions were temporary, progressively addictive, and led to conflict within the group.

This illustrates the final problem with the hedonistic standard of happiness: it doesn’t deliver on its promise of happiness for more than brief interludes. Rather than happiness, hedonism more often or eventually generates conflict and unhappiness. As people compete with, coerce, cajole, and condemn one another, or at least compromise with one another, in an ongoing struggle to get what they want, they often find only frustration, resentment, bitterness, stress, and anger. The momentary glimpses of satisfaction hedonism does provide effectively serve as bait, encouraging us to seek our self-interested desires more fervently, but thereby actually increasing the likelihood of frustration and unhappiness and emotional rupture in our relationships with others.

The conflict of wills that inflicts this damage, as well as the other problems associated with hedonism described above, all stem from the underlying self-focus or self-interest on which hedonism is constructed. As Durand described:

> The preoccupation with self is a trait that generates much disagreement among people. Dissension arises when the desires of one person are opposed to those of another. Each person considers his own wishes as the point of primary importance. Child or parent, young man or woman, husband or wife—they all have viewpoints arising out of self-interest. There is then a clash of ideas, or the inevitable battle of wills (p. 53).

Hedonism appears initially attractive, but acts as an emotional and relational trap.

*Individualism*

The second broad philosophical approach to happiness that influences our choices is denoted here by the term “individualism.” Like hedonism, individualistic happiness is based in fulfilling one’s desires, but contrary to hedonism, which seeks to gratify virtually any immediate desire, individualism distinguishes between proper and improper desires. It recognizes morality or “virtue” as a necessary element of a happy life—morality understood as a code of behavior that distinguishes right from wrong and stresses living rightly, honorably.

This concept is rooted in eudaemonia, a Greek word used in moral philosophy to denote the happiness promoted by the Greek masters: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle [noted previously], and others. Aristotle specifically contrasted eudaemonia with hedonism, noting that while some pleasures are unquestionably desirable for a happy life, other pleasures “of a reprehensible sort, are enough to make not existing at all preferable to being alive” (E.E., Book 1, Chapter 5, 1215b, lines 26–27; Woods, p. 5). After referring, for example, to a life lived for the appetites of food and sex, he commented:

> It is evident that, for a man who made such a choice as this for himself, it would make no difference whether he were born a beast or a man. Certainly the ox in Egypt, which they honour as the god Apis, has a greater abundance of several of such things than many sovereigns (E.E., Book 1, Chapter 5, 1215b, line 35–1216a, line 2; Woods, p. 5).

> Eudaemonia, rather, seeks the satisfaction of one’s worthwhile desires (Telfer), i.e., those desires consistent with the best or “divine” parts within us.

> Since happiness is an activity according to virtue, it is reasonable that it should be an activity according to the highest virtue; and this would be an activity of the best part of man (N.E. Book 10(7), 1177a line 12–19; Apostle and Gerson, p. 536).

Individualistic happiness is perceived, then, as deriving from having one’s appropriate or “good” desires met through the exercise of personal virtues or values such as honesty, generosity, kindness, hard work, and friendship. The individualist therefore would take a longer view than the hedonist, recognizing that some desirable things come only with great effort expended over a period of time. He would willingly sacrifice short-term pleasures and interests, invoking qualities such as self-discipline (as opposed to hedonistic idleness) to obtain worthwhile, long-term goals that are beyond the reach of pure hedonism. An individualistic view would encourage the development and use of one’s talents, physical and intellectual, both to “reach one’s full potential”and to “become a contributing member of society.” In some forms, individualistic happiness might be regarded as the product of “self-fulfillment” or being “all you can be,” in contrast to hedonism, which would assert instead that you “look out for number one.”

Individualism also differs from hedonism by building happiness in concert with others rather than overtly or covertly at their expense, although often still in a competitive manner. While the individualist sees people as separate individuals, he also sees the common human predicament, “We’re all in this together.” He understands the role of laws and rules in society, whether God-given or agreed upon by a civilized people, in enabling everyone to cooperate and moderate the effects of unrestrained self-interest. He thus refrains from some actions in order to preserve the freedom to engage in others or agrees to comply with his duty in order to claim periodic respite and fun.

Because it depends, at least in part, on the approval of the community, individualism involves the application of an external standard of morality by which a person can be measured. Compliance with such a standard is perceived as contributing to one's happiness, whether that standard is self-determined, defined by philosophy/religion, or imposed by society. Even in its less-obviously moralistic forms, individualistic happiness derives from compliance with such external standards, for it depends, at least to some degree, upon honor and recognition from others. Even happiness deriving from self-expression in a piece of art or self-fulfillment in a scholastic or employment-related accomplishment or in one's athletic prowess is still the result of an achievement recognized by others as having value and, in this respect, meets some common or public standard for measuring conduct. Thus, individualism will tend to regulate interpersonal competition to moderate it to levels at least acceptable to social norms.

According to the individualistic view, happiness is the end goal of life and should be pursued, although it cannot be chosen immediately, like an object off a shelf, as hedonistic pleasure represents the matter. Rather, happiness is acquired through making the choices that lead to it, accruing over a lifetime rather than in a pleasurable moment or a fleeting feeling or mood. Locke, for example, described five bases or secure sources of happiness: "health, reputation, knowledge, doing good, and the contemplation of an afterlife" (quoted in Barrow, p. 42). Hudson, summarizing historical eudaemonia, stated, "The requirement of virtue makes happiness a matter of character and personal responsibility" (p. 112). Others have described it in similar terms (Telfer; St. Augustine). Hudson, who has provided a broad, historical perspective of the development of cultural and philosophical conceptions of happiness over time, asserted that eudaemonia was the prevailing view of happiness for most of the past twenty-five hundred years. Tatarkiewicz summarized ancient (and eudaemonist) philosophy by claiming that there were few exceptions to the standard that "only moral and rational behavior leads to happiness" (p. 31).

Nevertheless, as an approach to happiness, individualism has its own smaller but distinct set of problems. First, one's individualistic desires, while perhaps less likely to be inconsistent among themselves, will still come into conflict with the desires of other people, if only due to logistics. The individualist may find himself wanting to pursue his goals to the neglect of some of his duties to others, or differing with family members or friends over how to divide the available time to be spent on developing everyone's talents, or disappointed that her husband does not have the same appreciation for the arts and literature that she does. Thus, even though individualism is an improvement over hedonism in its effects on personal relationships, it can still be frustrated.



Individualistic happiness still depends, albeit to a lesser degree than hedonism, on circumstances outside one's control for its fruition. Where the hedonist depends on others to satisfy her desires, the individualist would attempt to be self-reliant, depending, for example, on the virtue of personal industry. However, one's individualistic pursuits still require things not always available—sufficient time and money to develop one's talents, cooperative companions to cover duties at home while one attends classes or workouts or rehearsals, and even good health to enjoy the fruits of one's labors.

Another problem faced by individualists, especially those leaning toward the hedonistic side of the spectrum, is the apparent conflict between one's moral code and one's happiness, as introduced in the writings of Immanuel Kant. Kant, who concluded that happiness derives from the gratification or satisfaction of one's desires, apparently without regard to their inherent moral merit, recognized that life requires a social, moral obligation to other people and an external standard for evaluations of happiness. Kant separated and distinguished the "doctrine of happiness" from the "doctrine of morals" (p. 78), asserting that reason should be the arbiter between them. When one's happiness is perceived as conflicting with one's duty, one of the two must give way to the other. Happiness is "getting what I want, having my desires fulfilled," but "morality won't always let me have that." Kant attempted to deny this apparent incongruity, arguing that in such cases one should rationally forego one's own happiness and meet one's moral obligations.

However, reason and rationalism are employed as often in the defense of hedonism (e.g., Barrow; Russell; Scanzoni; Sennott and Travisano) as in defense of Kant's conclusion. One's choice of beginning assumptions would appear to have more to do with outcome than actual reasoning. An individualist might well experience a tension between personal desire (happiness) and obligation to another (moral duty), forming either a guilty hedonism or a reluctant individualism.

In a marriage, tension of this nature might manifest itself as a "seven-year itch" or nagging thoughts of "what might have been" or something along the lines of, "You used to be so much fun. What's happened to you?" The spark and sizzle of early romance might easily give way to malaise or worse, and the marriage partners would then have to decide between what would almost appear to be two evils: ending the marriage to pursue hedonistic happiness (but it's against the rules) or continuing in the doldrums of duty (but it's no fun). One might expect this sort of trap to be prevalent in a society such as ours, where hedonistic pleasures are trumpeted so loud and so long in the media, are often treated as the norm (in contrast to "the rules," followed by "stuffy, boring people"), and are usually not shown as having adverse

consequences. In the context of children, the obligations of child-raising might cause great frustration to the hedonist and lead to physical child abuse or might lead to child neglect as individualistic parents pursue self-fulfillment.

This thinking might easily lead the individualist to conclude that these two choices are all that are available, that one must ever choose between one's pleasure and one's honor, between satisfying personal desires (and feeling happy) and ascetically restricting desires (thereby delaying happiness in order to obey the rules). Morality may come to be seen as a duty, sometimes even a burden, keeping one from his chosen tasks and enjoyments. The connection between morality and happiness may therefore become obscured, with an acknowledgment that happiness does not always immediately accompany the sacrifice. While happiness may still be sought by such individualists as the result of constructive, worthwhile activities and achievements, such as writing, art, science, gardening, or recreational activities, it may also be seen either in terms of the quid pro quo—"I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine," in accordance with the moral principle of fairness—or as a reward for good behavior, for obedience, for compliance, for "not rocking the boat." For this reason, an individualist may often be expected to be the one to supply the wants and needs of a hedonistic spouse or teenage child, but might also be tempted to tire of this "duty." What is more, it is possible that one's sense of cooperation with others might easily evolve into a sense of competition with them and hence into a perception of personal striving for scarce resources.

While individualists often tend to focus on the "rules," it is with a confidence that in so doing one is "doing it right," which contributes to the orderly functioning of the larger whole and provides a source of personal satisfaction and happiness, as well. Certainly, the adhering individualist will seldom be accused of harming others for the sake of selfish gain or pleasure and will generally be considered a "solid citizen," honorable and honest and respected, a hard worker who earns her way. Nevertheless, due to the remaining underlying self-interest, it makes one at least susceptible to self-righteousness and being judgmental of others. In *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo portrays such a character in the person of Inspector Javert, who, as a matter of his "sacred duty," relentlessly pursues Jean Valjean for breaking with the rules despite Jean's genuine change from hedonism to altruism.

One final point needs to be raised concerning individualism, or more specifically morality. People exist unavoidably in personal relationships. As noted by Kellenberger and Warner, the place of morality is to preserve the quality of those relationships.

Hedonism, as an approach to happiness, attempts to ignore this basic relational aspect of human life, treating each person as independent, unaccountable, "free" in a licentious sense. In doing so, however, it does not escape human relationships—it only damages them, causing conflict and unhappiness for oneself and others. Since marriages and families are nothing if not relationships, it should be apparent that hedonism lies at the heart of the breakdown of families and leads to great social costs as governments attempt to make up for the missing (and inexpensive) parental role. The rules of conduct prescribed by individualism, in contrast, at least stabilize and civilize relationships and societies by placing limits on the excesses of hedonism. It acknowledges that we are not simply individuals free to live as we choose, regardless of the consequences to others, but what about the third approach to happiness?

*Altruism*

Altruism as a theory of happiness represents a radical departure from the foregoing discussion of hedonism and individualism, for it is an approach which is not orectic; that is, it is not based in the satisfaction of one's personal desires, whether in the form of pleasure, absence of pain, achievement, self-fulfillment, or any other form of desire gratification, however noble, honorable, and worthwhile those desires may be. In fact, altruism—as defined herein and explained below—does not involve the direct pursuit of one's own happiness at all; rather, it engenders a rich but incidental happiness that comes from being concerned with the wellbeing of others, from responding to the "call" of another's need (not his wishes, desires, or demands). Altruistic happiness stems from a willing service to others, not from the satisfaction of one's personal desires.

Altruism as described here is consistent with the Christian concept (which is also found in Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism) of being at one with one's neighbor, attained through genuine caring and loving service to him. Altruistic love is commitment to another's welfare, the forgetting of self as distinct from the other because of the perceived unity of a "common humanity," to use Monroe's phrase. Paldiel felt he had similarly captured the "essence of true altruism" in the following quotation from Johanna Eck, a German woman who had saved several Jewish women from the Nazis during World War II by hiding them in her apartment in Berlin:

> The motive for my assistance? In an individual instance, none, especially. Basically, I think like this: If one of my fellow human beings is in a position of need, and I am in a position to assist [literally "stand by him"], then that is my (solemn) duty and obligation. If I fail to provide this help, then I do not fulfill the assignment which life—or perhaps God?—requires of me. People, so it appears to me, form a great unity, and whenever they do one another injustice, they strike themselves and everyone else in the face. This is my motive (Paldiel, author's translation).

Altruistic love, then, may be seen as responding to the needs of others, perhaps living to so respond, to so serve, whenever such need presents itself, because we are all part of a whole and are responsible for one another. This is the perspective of the altruist, as identified by, among others, Paldiel; Oliner and Oliner; and Monroe.

This definition of altruism as loving, concerned service should not be confused with being servile. Its focus is on respect for the other and on genuine caring, putting the other's true needs, not his or her desires, above one's own. It involves, in a sense, the taking of another's need as one's own. Altruism may require courage and outspokenness, but never for selfish ends. It also demands the development of one's skills, talents, knowledge, and abilities, again not for one's own ends, but in order to be able to assist, to contribute. In addition, it may warrant self-maintenance, to preserve one's ability to contribute, and it may take great pleasure in participating in the worthwhile activities of life—but neither pleasure nor achievement are its primary reason for existence. Altruism recognizes and responds to the priority of one's relationships with others and finds (or perhaps realizes or discovers) a peaceful, joyful oneness with them. This opportunity would seem to present itself most regularly with one's spouse, in marriage, or most purely in the feelings a new mother experiences toward her newborn child.



What is suggested here is that altruism is actually a theory of happiness and therefore belongs on the same stage with hedonism and individualism. While several authors have written about altruism as a phenomenon worthy of notice by social science, very few have seen it as an alternative approach to happiness. In fact, the best description of altruism as a theory and source of happiness that I have encountered is contained in Count Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. In this classic novel, Tolstoy revealed in story form what appears to be his personal conclusions regarding the human search for happiness, which coincide with statements found in his diaries, such as:

> The most powerful weapon for the conquest of real happiness is to emit from oneself, like a spider, without any restraint or meditation, a whole web of love, and to catch into it whomever one encounters. . . (*Tolstoy's Diary*, age twenty-seven or about 1856, quoted in Nazaroff, p. 99).

> There are two sorts of happiness: the happiness of the virtuous and the happiness of the vain. The first stems from virtue, the second from fate. . . . Happiness based on vanity is destroyed by it; fame by slander, wealth by fraud. But happiness based on virtue cannot be destroyed by anything (Tolstoy, p.28).

Tolstoy begins *Anna Karenina* with the well-known aphorism, "Happy families are all alike; unhappy families are all unhappy in their own way." For this seemingly absurd statement, social scientists have variously dismissed him (Rosenblatt and Fischer), overruled him (Gottman), attacked him (Greene; Stacey), and speculated about him (Hudson). It has been shown, however (Loveless, 1996, 1999), that the above treatments fail to understand his meaning because they attempt to interpret it from an understanding of happiness premised in either hedonism, individualism, or a blend of both.

As he unfolds his epic story, Tolstoy makes a case for altruism as a better path to happiness than either hedonism or individualism. He does so by allowing the reader to compare and contrast the lives of several individuals who seek happiness in various ways. His characters include confirmed hedonists like Vronsky and Oblonsky, who pursue the hedonistically defined "good life" and end up defeated by their own excesses, with a sense of empty and baffled desperation. Anna herself begins altruistically but takes an increasingly self-focused path that leads through a great deal of turmoil and conflict before eventually ending in tragedy. Tolstoy also describes well-meaning individualists like Karenin, the civil servant, and Kozneyshev, the rational academic, both of whom seek to do good for the masses through their honorable (individualistic) contributions, but who miss out on rich, warm relationships due to their insistence on, respectively, reputation and honor, and rational grounding for all action. Other characters, including Madame Stahl, Varenka, and (generally) Dolly pursue an altruistic course and exude a sense of inner, peaceful, and confident happiness despite the obstacles they encounter.

Tolstoy also reveals his personal perspective in a few key statements within the novel. For instance, when Vronsky finally succeeds in convincing Anna to leave her husband and son to live with him as his mistress, Tolstoy provides this enigmatic aside:

> Vronsky . . . notwithstanding the complete fulfillment of what he had so long desired, was not entirely happy. He soon began to feel that the realization of his desires brought him no more than a grain of happiness out of the mountain of bliss he had expected. *It showed him the eternal error men make in imagining that happiness consists in the realization of their desires* [emphasis added] (Tolstoy, pp. 490–491).

In one sentence, Tolstoy has challenged the adequacy of both hedonism and individualism as theories of happiness, both of which are based on the "realization of . . . desires," calling them "eternal error," apparently to address the ubiquity of such ideas.

Tolstoy's alternative of altruistic love is perhaps best capsulized in the development of the character Levin, (Lev) Tolstoy's self-portrait or alter ego, who late in the book comes to realize he has been "living right but thinking wrong" and

that it is only necessary to love one's neighbor to find a durable happiness. He finally recognizes the source of the joy he has found with his wife, Kitty, when he perceives the difference between living orectically, "for one's belly," and living altruistically, for "loving one's neighbor."

Tolstoy's portrayal of altruistic love as the source of durable happiness resonates with several other Western writers of note in the humanities, philosophy, and social science. Victor Hugo conveys the same message in *Les Miserables* in his portrayal of the change in Jean Valjean and in Javert's incomprehension of that change. This is Goethe's message in *Faust*, the central theme of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. This theme is repeated in the sarcasm and social commentary of Dickens and Shakespeare, and is reflected in the writings of John Steinbeck and Tennessee Williams, as well as in those of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and Fyodor Dostoevsky. From many nations and time periods, authors regarded as masters of the portrayal of human life have described the same dichotomy in human relationships—living for self or living for others—that Tolstoy develops in *Anna Karenina*. He portrays only the latter as the successful approach to lasting happiness.

These writers all identify the same central concept: in our daily, most common interactions with others, we face subtle yet significant choices that are essentially moral in character. In these seemingly insignificant moments of interaction—when a baby cries, when a child asks for help, when a spouse appears burdened—we can choose hedonistically or rationally to ignore the need of another, or we can choose altruistic love. We can respond affirmatively to another's need when we feel "called upon" to do so, or we can justify living only for our own priorities. Such calls, and the unavoidable issue of right and wrong that accompanies them, are an unavoidable fact in people's lives. Choosing to heed them is the vital issue in obtaining altruistic happiness, the truly moral choice (described by Tolstoy in his novel "that understanding of good and evil which was and always will be alike for all men," p. 852). This choice is neither hedonistic nor individualistic in character. It is not based in self-interest in the classic sense at all; rather, it has to do with viewing the needs of others as our own needs and then taking action to fulfill those needs.

There are also several authors of nonfiction who have written from the perspective of such an other-centered life. Perhaps the most explicit and exhaustive theoretical discourse on the subject from a Christian point of view is Soren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. Kierkegaard's later *Attack Upon Christendom* can be summarized as a challenge to a version of Christianity—"christendom"—that had lost track of charity or love and had slipped into a religion of rules, a form of individualism rather than altruism, thus missing, in Kierkegaard's view, the very essence of true Christianity.

The Jewish philosopher Buber compared and contrasted the self-centered life with an other-centered one. In the process, he described two worlds, an "It-world" that is sick and stagnant, where "causality holds unlimited sway"and that is "no longer irrigated and fertilized by the living currents" of the "You-world." The "You-world," on the other hand, is a "world of relation" where "I and You confront each other freely in a reciprocity that is not involved in or tainted by any causality; here man finds guaranteed the freedom of his being and of being" (pp. 100–102). Buber's "It-world" is populated by people perceived as objects, things, means to one's own ends, whereas his "You-world" is filled with people to be mutually respected, joyfully interacted with, and loved. The sickness of Buber's "It-world" is perhaps reflected in part by Dreyfus' observation tracing the modern tendency toward nihilism to the common practice of theorizing about people and thereby becoming separated from them, as opposed to living in committed relation with them.

Levinas, also Jewish, simply wrote his philosophical views from the perspective of altruistic love, apparently attempting to describe what life looks like when viewed through eyes of loving obligation. His message is to be seen as much in his writing stance as from anything he actually wrote. In one of his clearer pronouncements, he declared the body of Western philosophy to be one of "war," an apparent reference to the inevitable conflict between persons that arises from pursuing self-interested desire (p. 21), as embodied in the philosophies of writers like Hobbes, cited earlier, and Jean-Paul Sartre:

> While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me. . . . Behavior must therefore be envisaged with the perspective of conflict (p. 364).

Warner focuses specifically on individual real-life cases to demonstrate the significance of the other-centered choice in the quality of the relationships we all live within as human beings. He demonstrates the vitality of love, what I have called altruism, employed in the living of daily life, removing it from the abstraction of philosophy.

When altruism is examined against the backdrop provided by hedonism and individualism, altruistic love, as an approach to happiness, appears to lack the obvious flaws of the other two approaches. First of all, where the hedonist is parasitic relative to others and the individualist attempts to be self-reliant, the altruist gratefully and genuinely acknowledges her debt to others for her personal wellbeing, then does what she can to contribute similarly to others' lives. The altruist feels another's need as if it were her own as opposed to the individualist who, if not too absorbed with his own self-development to notice the need, might respond because it is what one is "supposed to do." The hedonist

isn't concerned. ("That's his problem, not mine; I've got enough problems of my own.")

Next, as Tolstoy portrays the matter in *Anna Karenina*, the self-interest of the hedonist divides and separates people, building walls between them, including between spouses, or between parents and children. One of the most poignant and painful aspects of Tolstoy's work is the defensive mental and emotional withdrawal of Anna's young son, Seroizha, as his mother emotionally withdraws from him in her pursuit of hedonistic happiness. Individualism, looking for positive expressions of self-interest, personal growth, and ways to contribute to society, such as artistic expression or intellectual rationality, defines rules to live by, such as "balance" or "equity" or "self-discipline." Yet because it still seeks happiness from the products derived (for oneself) from such a life, it retains a sense of "me and you," rather than "us," that turns relationships into contract-like agreements where conflict is "managed" or "regulated" (Gottman; Sprey), but accepted as an inherent part of life.

Altruism, at least in theory, removes the very foundation for interpersonal conflict. Since it seeks to meet the needs of others as equal to if not in preference to one's own, seeing others as extensions of the greater human family of which one is but a part, it also nurtures, helps, and serves. In doing so, altruism builds trust and gratitude, it unifies and bonds, builds bridges instead of walls, and results in an abiding yet incidental happiness. The difference lies in the choice of what matters most—"what I want" or "what you need" (not want), my rights and demands from or my obligations to other people. When an other-centered choice is made at this level, a peaceful happiness ensues as a simple byproduct.



Another contrast between both desire-based theories and that of altruism is that in the first two, one's happiness is seen as residing in sources to some extent outside one's immediate control. This is undoubtedly why Hobbes considered power to be such an issue in *Leviathan*. The more power one possesses, the more control one can exercise in having one's desires fulfilled. Perhaps the greatest paradox in the hedonistic pursuit of happiness in particular is that while it trumpets "freedom" and self-determination, it is almost completely dependent on outside sources and external conditions for its existence.

Altruistic love is also paradoxical, but happily so (if the reader will excuse an ambiguous use of the term "happy"), for its promise is that if we will simply stop trying to obtain happiness by seeking to control it, by securing it for ourselves as a personal conquest, and turn our attention instead to loving our neighbor, we will also find a quiet and steady, yet vibrant and conflict-free happiness. Thus, altruistic happiness, though not found by looking for it directly, lies entirely within one's own control, in the sense of having the ability to choose to be motivated by other-centered altruism rather than egoism. This stands in stark contrast to seeking control over others and even in contrast to an individualistic "self-control" over one's own behavior. It is established simply by the correct choice of motivation for action, not by any given action alone. As Scrooge discovered in Dickens' well known story, "A Christmas Carol", happiness comes from giving "from a thankful heart," not from a penurious sense of greed, avariciousness, and acquisitiveness. As Jean Valjean discovered in *Les Miserables*, such commitment will often demand a great deal, and while there will be many cynical hedonists, as well as many non-comprehending individualists (like Inspector Javert), along the way, love is worth any risk because this commitment is life itself. To the genuine altruist, to fully give (in this way) is to fully live.

Finally, where hedonism shrinks one's world to the point that "I am all that matters," and where the individualist's awareness that other people also have needs and desires helps maintain a civilized society, the altruistic view acknowledges other people fully and respects them deeply. Altruists believe that one's relationships with others are part of being human—indeed, that all people are one and that the first step that all wrongness has in common is to pretend that one can act outside of responsibility to others, pretend that one's actions, no matter how small or supposedly private, have no effects on other people. Human relationships are, in effect, jeopardized and eventually brutalized by hedonism, accepted and tolerated by individualism, but are nurtured, fed, clothed, and cherished by altruism.

Those who cite "excessive altruism" or "excessive selflessness," as a pathology or fear that it results in psychological problems such as "merging" or "fusion" (e.g., Chodorow; Gerber; Marks) or a lack of sufficient individuation, do not understand altruistic love. They perceive only the apparent self-sacrifice and interpret such observations from within a paradigm or perspective of self-interest from which it indeed appears strange or incomprehensible. Altruism does not fit within those world views; those perspectives miss the joy of being fully alive to the needs of another human being.

Altruism is not a false sentimentality. It is the genuine joy of being with and for those around you, whether they have your worldview or not. Indeed, part of altruism would necessarily involve extending this kind of love toward both the hedonist and the individualist, in the hope that they too might find the kind of joy that altruism so freely offers. Rather than promising happiness directly but delivering only occasional pleasures at the hidden cost of conflict and relational damage, altruism straightforwardly puts the cost up front, allowing a tranquil and lasting happiness to flow in naturally, without compulsion, for those willing to pay the apparent price, to make the apparent sacrifice, which is, in reality, no sacrifice at all.

The above observations about altruistic love, as presented by Tolstoy and others, reach to the very depths of our humanity and our faith, calling us to examine what we believe about life. If they are right, as it appears to me that they are, our choice of beliefs on these issues is critical to the attainment of human happiness, and, in contrast to notions of political correctness, the character of our moral involvement with other people matters in very real ways.

**Making the World Safe for Children**

In recent years we have seen a shocking rise in violence, now even encompassing our children. In the United States and Great Britain, within the last several years we have experienced the horror of schoolchildren killing schoolchildren, often within the very schools to which their parents entrusted them. It is then most alarming to consider a recent study of school-age children and college students by Twenge at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. She compared overall anxiety levels of children in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s with the anxiety level of children in the 1950s and found that the average level of child anxiety had risen by almost one full standard deviation, and that the average anxiety level of children in 1993 was actually higher than that of child psychiatric patients in 1952. Twenge attributed this rise to "decreases in social connectedness and increases in environmental dangers," to what Fagan has referred to in different words as "the culture of rejection and alienation" resulting from parental divorce and the child's perception of an unwelcoming and even hostile world. Twenge's results also noted that child anxiety levels were highly correlated with high divorce and crime rates, decreasing birth rates, and isolation from extended family. Her conclusion? "Apparently children are less concerned with whether their family has enough money than whether it is threatened by violence or dissolution."

The world is a scary place to many children today, and this, I submit, is but one of the direct consequences of the increase of hedonism and individualism and the ebb of altruism in our society. The danger in political correctness is that it actually sanctions and contributes to this trend. Another factor making the world less secure for children is the ongoing high rate of divorce, which can certainly be seen as one reason for child anxiety. Yet another is the high rate of child abuse. All of these features of modern western life are examples of the types of consequences that flow from hedonism and indirectly from ideas such as that morality doesn't matter or is only a matter of personal preference.

If we really want to "Make the World Safe for Children," if we really want to make a better world for our children to inherit from us, if we really want them to be able to live happily, we need to examine our ideas—examine them deeply—and be willing to accept the responsibility to make whatever changes are necessary to assure that good consequences flow from the world our ideas create for our children.

Preliminarily, at least, it appears that the ungrounded assumptions underlying political correctness, such as the idea that all forms of happiness including hedonism are inherently equivalent and commendable, are not only baseless, but dangerous in the extreme, both to our world societies and to the children who will inherit what we leave them. It is not a matter of tolerance or intolerance; it is a matter of morality or immorality, of right and wrong, and while we must be truly tolerant and patient with all people, true tolerance does not require one to ignore essential facts governing human relationships. Accordingly, it is not intolerance that necessarily generates problems among people, it is the problems and inconsistencies inherent in the idea of happiness as desire satisfaction, and the consequences that flow from that idea, that lead to family breakdown and child abuse.

The natural family is the place where children can best be nurtured, fed, clothed, educated, and, in general, loved. We can spend mountains of tax money establishing government programs to attempt, inadequately, to replace what children lose when they are abandoned, abused, or neglected by hedonistic or individualistic parents, to whom the children are either an object of indifference or inconvenience or burden. Or we can spend that money, certainly far less money, in attempting to rectify and counter those tendencies in our societies that encourage individualism or justify hedonism and lead parents away from their very real instincts to nurture and take responsibility for their children.

For centuries, it has been the family that has assumed the task, usually willingly, of raising and training the next generation to assume its societal role. We must arrest and reverse the trend away from the familial altruism that has quietly led and fed us all, and do everything within our power to protect and preserve the family in this vital role, or we will deserve the consequences, familial and societal, that flow from other ideas.

Implicit in the view of political correctness is the idea that manifestations of hedonism are wrong only because someone made up rules and laws against them, demonstrating another belief inherent in political correctness, namely that moral issues, right and wrong, are relative, arbitrary, and merely the product of social construction and are therefore subject to reconstruction or at least remodeling, that all laws are malum prohibitum and that there is no such thing as malum in se. If this assumption were true, then there would be no harm in the idea of political correctness and moral relativism, but it is not true, and we are moving blindly onto dangerous ground by accepting the idea of political correctness without first examining its consequences.

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