Comments on Cahn's "The Happy Immoralist"

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Steven Cahn disagrees, in his essay "The Happy Immoralist," with Philippa Foot's claim that "great happiness, unlike euphoria or even great pleasure, must come from something related to what is deep in human nature, and fundamental in human life, such as affection for children and friends, the desire to work, and love of freedom and truth." The primary reason for his disagreement seems to be clear from the title of his essay. Cahn may hold that Foot is trying to provide support for morality by falsely claiming that an immoral person cannot be happy.

But even if Cahn is right that Fred, the title character of his essay, is happy, his example should not bother Foot. Imagine Ted, as Cahn envisions Fred: "Ted's life has been devoted to achieving three aims: fame, wealth, and a reputation for probity. He has no interest whatever in friends or truth." But unlike Fred, Ted is not treacherous or dishonest, so he is not immoral. How many of us would want to be like Ted? If Ted is happy, then most of us do not want to be happy in that way. We feel that this kind of happiness is not a fit goal for a person. So although Cahn may be right that Ted is happy, most would agree with John Stuart Mill that it is better to be a person who is unhappy but has, as Foot puts it, an "affection for children and friends, the desire to work, and love of freedom and truth," than a person who is happy like Ted or Fred. Thus Foot's point that having a good, if not happy, life requires being moral seems to be endorsed by Cahn.

However, if we get away from the philosophical obsession that self-interest is the primary enemy of morality, we can provide an example of a happy person, even one who has the kind of life that most of us would want to have, but who is immoral. Let us imagine that Ned is not only a happily married man who loves his children and who has many friends, but that he is also a successful scientist who loves his work and is good at it. Suppose further that he is conscientious about his work, never distorting the facts in order to get the results he expects and wants. Suppose further that he values his freedom to do the kind of research he wants to do.

Now if Ned is a moral person, not only is he happy in Foot's sense, he lives the kind of life that most of us would like to live. But unfortunately for Foot, Ned can live this kind of life and be quite immoral. He may use people who are not in his group, in experiments that are clearly immoral, not for his own benefit, but to benefit those in his group. This group can be his friends and family, or those in his ethnic group, his race, his country, or his religious group. He may be quite altruistic, but his altruism is limited, and he acts immorally toward those for whom he is not concerned. Such a person can certainly be happy in every sense of the term, including Foot's, and still be immoral. He can even have a life that, except for his being immoral, all of us would regard as a good life. Once one realizes that altruistic immorality, rather than being some sort of oddity, is the kind of immorality that causes

far more harm than self-interested immorality, there is no need to make up scenarios of happy psychopaths in order to show that a person does not need to be moral in order to be happy or to live a fulfilling life.