Should Fred Elicit Our Derision or Our Compassion?

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Philippa Foot speaks cautiously. The passage about happiness and human nature quoted by Steven Cahn in "The Happy Immoralist" is preceded by the words "it seems that," and it is followed by a series of questions. All this is intended to illustrate her central point "that there are some concepts that we do not understand well . . . but which are, unfortunately, essential to genuine discussions of the merits of different moral systems."[1]

Cahn has no such reservations. "Surely Fred is happy," he says, speaking of the title character of his essay, since Fred has achieved his three aims of fame, wealth, and good reputation, even though "he has no interest whatever in friends or truth" (meaning, I gather, his own truthfulness). This purported counterexample is perplexing in several respects. Foot's suggestion concerned happiness and human nature, but the example seems mainly to pertain to happiness and morality—as the title of Cahn's essay implies. This point aside, Cahn says little about why he is so confident that Fred is happy, and we are left to speculate about his reasons.

One consideration is obvious: Fred has three of the things people sometimes take to be important for happiness. Perhaps Cahn thinks fame, wealth, and good reputation are sufficient for happiness. It is more likely, however, that he thinks they are sufficient for Fred's happiness, even though they would not be sufficient for many others. Most people would say that friendship is essential to genuine happiness, but Cahn thinks it is not essential to Fred's happiness. Why suppose this? A subjective view of happiness would give us a reason: If you think *X*, *Y*, and *Z* are sufficient for your happiness, and you have them, then you are happy (whatever, *X*, *Y*, and *Z* may be). We know too much about self-deception concerning one's own well-being to be convinced by this, and we are not likely to agree in the face of examples where *just anything* is allowed to instantiate the variables. Cahn's example gains whatever plausibility it has by featuring some of the things that many people associate with happiness.

On the other hand, Cahn's point may not be subjectivism but the importance of diversity: Different things make different people happy. No doubt this is true, and classical theories of happiness have insufficiently recognized it. Foot's point, however, is that human nature seems to impose some limits on this diversity. Is it obvious she is wrong? Are people mistaken in thinking friendship, broadly construed, is essential to happiness? Cahn does not consider whether Fred, while sitting alone watching himself praised on his widescreen television, ever feels lonely. Is there nothing within him that suggests that value of sharing his life with someone? Are his parents and siblings of interest only because they join in the praise of him? There is room for great variation in valuable human relationships, but happiness without any friendship is another matter (even monastics typically live in communities). Human beings are enormously dependent on one another: None of us could survive

the early stages of life, and usually the latter stages, without the love and concern of others. This suggests that friendship is rather fundamental to the well-being of human beings—that we are, so to speak, hard-wired for it. We have more reason to think this than we have to think that Fred is never lonely or would never benefit from genuine friendship.

This puts in doubt the plausibility of Cahn's example. So too does his depiction of Fred as "thoroughly dishonest," while having a "reputation for probity." Why is Cahn the only one who knows the truth about Fred (who is said to be based on persons he has known)? It is more likely that Cahn is not alone and that Fred realizes this and worries he will be exposed, bringing his fame, wealth and reputation to an end—as indeed sometimes happens. It is reasonable to suppose that Fred is not only lonely, but anxious as well (contrary to Cahn's assurances). Since he has no friends, he has no one to whom to express this. But that does not mean he lives tranquilly, free from all anxiety.

Perhaps Fred's wealth, fame and reputation compensate for these concerns, and on balance he is happy. But if he were a real person, perhaps he would not be. Or maybe he manages to suppress these concerns. Do we really want to say, however, that real happiness may be achieved through such psychological contortions? What Cahn's example shows, if anything, is that happiness is a complex and perplexing matter, just as Foot suggested. It does not provide us with a convincing case of a happy immoralist.

Though Cahn apparently intends to make a metaethical point, his discussion has troublesome normative overtones. How are we to relate to Fred, on Cahn's account, if he falls within our domain as son, brother, colleague, neighbor, and the like? To some extent, it seems, with indifference. After all, he is happy and needs no friends, so there is no reason to be concerned about his well-being. But also with fear. He is treacherous and may do us harm, and there is nothing we can appeal to that would change him. But if we were involved with a real-life Fred, and we were striving to live a life of compassion and hope, surely we would have more reason to suspect he is sometimes anxious and lonely, and hence warrants our concern, than we would to treat him merely with indifference or fear. Perhaps Fred is happy in some respects, but we should be most engaged with the respects in which he is probably not.

Note

[1] Philippa Foot, "Moral Relativism," in *Moral Dilemmas and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 34.