

# Cahn on Foot on Happiness

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In his essay "The Happy Immoralist," Steven Cahn quotes fragments from two sentences from Philippa Foot's paper "Moral Relativism."<sup>1</sup> He claims that Foot says two main things about happiness. In the first she says it is an "intractable concept." In the second she seems to say that great happiness "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." Cahn immediately launches into criticism, saying that he is "not persuaded by this characterization of happiness." He cites the case of Fred, who is a "happy immoralist." Fred is motivated by desires for fame, for wealth, and for a reputation for probity. Cahn asks us to imagine that Fred achieves all of his aims and is happy. Cahn describes the example of the fictitious Fred as a "counterexample" to Foot's characterization of happiness.

## I

The reader is immediately perplexed. Clearly, the example of Fred is no counterexample to anything Foot said in the passage quoted by Cahn. There she is quoted as saying only that great happiness must come from something "related to what is deep in human nature, and fundamental in human life." Surely one could claim that the desire for wealth and fame and respect are "deep in human nature and fundamental in human life." If these things are suitably "deep" and "fundamental," then the case of Fred does not run counter to Foot's claim. Fred would just be one more example of a person who gains his happiness as a result of satisfying desires for things that are related to things that are "deep" and "fundamental."

There are other problems. Suppose (as Foot suggests) that affection for children, the desire for work, and love of freedom and truth are deep and fundamental. Then it is consistent with Foot's quoted claim that great happiness might come from anything *related to* these things. Presumably, then, it is consistent with her claim that great happiness might come from hatred of children, aversion to work, and lack of concern for truth and freedom. After all, these things are *related to* things that are deep and fundamental.

And if we were to assume that lust, or greed, or selfishness, or laziness is also deep and fundamental, then we could say that Foot's remark is consistent with the existence of immoralists even worse than Fred. Of course, her cited examples of deep and fundamental things are a bit more attractive than these examples. But they are only examples. If such things as the ones I have mentioned are also deep and fundamental, then Foot's thesis allows that great happiness could come from things related to these examples, too.

Cahn's title and some of his discussion suggest that he intends the example of Fred to be a counterexample to the claim that one cannot be happy

if one is an “immoralist.” That too would be an interesting thesis, and perhaps the example of Fred shows it to be false. But I see nothing of that thesis in the remark quoted from Foot. She does not mention immoralists in the passages cited. Foot’s remark is consistent with the claim that an immoralist can enjoy great happiness, provided that the immoralist’s happiness comes from something related to something deep and fundamental.

So far I have been trying to establish just one main point: Cahn’s example of Fred the happy immoralist does not refute the remarks attributed to Foot in the quoted passage. Indeed, it is hard to see how Cahn’s example of Fred the happy immoralist is supposed to be relevant to what Foot says in the quoted sentence. But a cautious reader might suspect that the problem is just that Cahn quoted the wrong sentence from Foot’s paper. Maybe there are other passages in which she commits herself to views that would be refuted by the existence of a happy immoralist like Fred. In order to assess this idea, we need to consider what else Foot says about happiness in her paper.

## II

Foot’s essay concerns moral relativism. Foot discusses several different characterizations of moral relativism. These are due to Stevenson (21–26), Stace (27–32), and Williams (32–34). She suggests an account of moral relativism that involves the idea that different groups of people could have interestingly divergent systems of moral values. She then compares moral relativism to a relativism about mere matters of taste, which she finds somewhat less problematic. She claims (34) that some facile arguments about moral relativism are apparently based on the idea that just about anything can count as a moral code. She rejects this idea, saying that in order to be a genuine *moral code*, a set of rules would have to be properly related to certain fundamental principles (32). Yet even this, she admits, is consistent with the existence of some residue of irresolvable difference between moral codes. Does this open the door to moral relativism?

Foot then claims that moral philosophers tend to shy away from giving detailed accounts or evaluations of the value systems of different societies (34). They just content themselves with saying that if we were to look, we would find great variation in these value systems. Foot explains this tendency by saying “there are some concepts that we do not understand well, and cannot employ competently in an argument, but which are, unfortunately, essential to genuine discussions of the merits of different moral systems” (34). She mentions the concepts involved in talk of “the value of life.” And then, in the penultimate paragraph of the essay, she briefly mentions happiness.

So this is the context in which Foot makes the remark that Cahn quoted. Her point in mentioning happiness was to illustrate a general claim: There are some important and obscure concepts that we would have to understand if we were to describe in detail the value systems of different possible societies. Happiness is such a concept.

Cahn does not quote all the things Foot says in this passage. Here is a bit more of the context in which the quoted remarks occur:

It seems 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. But what do we mean by calling some things in human nature deep, and some things in life fundamental? . . . It seems, then, that we are all at sea with some of the ideas that we are bound to employ in any real discussion of divergent moralities. . . . The practical conclusion may be that we should not at the moment try to say how far moral relativism is true or false, but should start the work farther back. (35–36; the last sentence quoted here is the final sentence of the essay)

When we consider the larger context in which Foot makes her remark about “great happiness coming from things that are deep and fundamental,” we see that she is not claiming that one cannot be happy unless one is morally good. Nor is there anything that could properly be described as a “characterization” of happiness. Instead, what we find is that Foot is claiming that she cannot give a characterization of happiness; as she sees it, happiness is an intractable concept. She says that it *seems* that happiness can only come from what is related to something deep and fundamental, but she does not even fully commit herself to this doctrine. She is trying to get us to see that we don’t know what happiness is; that while it seems to be related to things that are deep and fundamental, we also don’t know what depth and fundamentalness really are. We are “at sea” with respect to these notions.

That’s all Foot says about happiness in the paper. She does not give a characterization of happiness. She does not claim that happiness comes only from things that are deep and fundamental. She does not even claim that happiness comes only from things that are related to things that are deep and fundamental. She does not claim that an immoralist cannot be happy. She does not say what things are deep and fundamental, and she expresses doubt about the meanings of “deep” and “fundamental.” All she actually says on these topics is that happiness *seems to come from things that are related to things that are deep and fundamental*. So it appears that Cahn has attacked a doctrine that Foot did not affirm in the paper he cited.

### III

Perhaps it will be thought that the problem is not so serious: Maybe Foot did not affirm the thesis under attack in the paper from which Cahn quotes. Maybe she affirmed it elsewhere. Maybe the only real difficulty here is that Cahn failed to cite the correct paper.

I cannot say whether Foot somewhere said that an immoralist cannot be happy. I am simply not sufficiently familiar with Foot’s writings. However, I am familiar with what she says on this topic in her book *Natural Goodness*.<sup>2</sup> In that book (which was published more than twenty years after “Moral Relativism”), Foot seems to have gained a clearer conception of what she wants to say about happiness. Whereas previously she had said that it is an “intractable concept,” she now says that happiness is a “protean concept.”<sup>3</sup>

She seems to think that there are several different conceptions of happiness, or several different meanings for "happy."

She describes the case of an unfortunate individual who spends his days picking up leaves.<sup>4</sup> As a result of a lobotomy, this is about the best the poor soul is able to do. Yet he enjoys it. His doctor describes the patient as being "perfectly happy." Foot remarks, "There was nothing wrong with what the doctor said of his patient who was 'perfectly happy all day picking up leaves.'" <sup>5</sup> Clearly, then, in this book Foot recognizes a legitimate use of the term "happy" in which it correctly applies to a person who enjoys doing something that is not at all deep and fundamental, and perhaps not even related to anything deep and fundamental. If we use "happy" in this sense, it will be correct to say that happiness is merely a matter of contentment and enjoyment. Even a person who wastes his life on utterly trivial pursuits can be happy (in this sense).

In the same chapter Foot says, "And there is also a sad truth to be recognized in the saying about the wicked who flourish like the bay tree."<sup>6</sup> She describes the case of Z, a Nazi concentration camp guard, who enjoys tormenting and killing his prisoners.<sup>7</sup> Foot seems to want to say that there is a sense of "happy" in which it would be correct to say that even Z is happy. After all, he enjoys his work and is fully satisfied that he is doing something worthwhile (though, of course, he is profoundly mistaken).

It seems pretty clear that Foot thinks there is a legitimate use of the term "happy" in which it correctly applies to a wicked person who sufficiently enjoys being wicked. If my impression is right, then it seems that Foot would have no interest in denying Cahn's claim that an immoralist could be happy. Indeed, it appears that she considered an extreme version of the case in her recent book and came to the conclusion that it is possible for there to be a happy immoralist.

There is a complication. Consider the claim that *happiness is the human good*. Foot is inclined to accept this claim. But if we were to think of happiness as mere contentment, or enjoyment, or pleasure, then the claim would be implausible. So Foot wants to use the term "happiness" to refer to some special sort of happiness: The happiness that comes from the enjoyment of things that truly deserve to be enjoyed.<sup>8</sup> When the term is used in this way, it turns out that the claim that an immoralist cannot be happy is not only true, it is nearly tautological. Foot does not claim that the word "happy," as used in ordinary English, expresses this special concept of happiness. She makes clear that this is a philosophers' use of the term, but one that she finds useful for the expression of her view that happiness is the human good.

#### IV

In the end, then, it appears to me that Cahn has attacked a view that Foot did not discuss in the paper Cahn cites. In her later discussion of the topic she recognizes (and apparently accepts) virtually everything Cahn says about the possibility of happy immoralists. Additionally, Foot wants to introduce a special concept of happiness that will make it possible for her to say that there is a sense in which happiness is the human good. So far as I can tell, nothing

Cahn says casts any doubt on Foot's views concerning happiness and immorality.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical footnotes that follow are all references to pages in Philippa Foot, "Moral Relativism," in *Moral Dilemmas and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–86.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 90–91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 96–98.