The Happy Immoralist: Reply to Cahn

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Suppose that the immoralist portrayed by Steven Cahn in his essay "The Happy Immoralist"—audacious, cunning, and lucky though he is—has been duped. He imagines himself well-reputed but is in fact disdained; no one doubts his duplicity and for that he is loathed; his supposed luxuries are counterfeit, and his fame extends not much beyond his own ego. His life as he knows it, in other words, is a sham. Were he all of a sudden to figure this out, would the newly informed immoralist consider his sham life a happy one? Surely he had felt happy, but would it be a "philosophical sleight-of-hand" for him to insist that he had not, after all, found real happiness?[1]

We raise these questions in order to raise the possibility that there is a genuine distinction to be made—and a perfectly ordinary one at that—between *feeling* happy and *being* happy. Cahn's argument requires that such a distinction be untenable. He offers his immoralist as an alternative to the affectionate parents, the committed workers, and the lovers of freedom and truth whom Foot calls happy, claiming that his immoralist must be happy because he is "wholly contented, suffering no worries or anxieties." That is, he must *be* happy because he so clearly *feels* happy. But the situation imagined above renders this claim dubious. The immoralist in that situation feels happy precisely because he thinks he has he had obtained those goods he takes to be worthwhile, but if he were to discover that he hasn't really obtained those goods, he might very well reevaluate that assessment. And were he to do so, he'd be guilty of no philosophical subtleties; rather, we can imagine him reasoning, quite plainly, that he had been duped into thinking that he was happy, that he was therefore wrong in thinking that he was happy, and that happiness therefore must be grounded in something more than a mere feeling of contentment or even of euphoria.

This twist to Cahn's scenario is meant only to show that we should not take the peculiar way a person feels—whether self-satisfied, cheery, serene, or euphoric—as conclusive evidence with respect to her or his actual happiness. This is not to say that feeling happy is not generally a good indicator of happiness; it is just to say that feeling happy is not sufficient for happiness. Our case of the duped immoralist suggests that assessments of happiness depend at least on whether people actually succeed in securing those goods they take to be important. Thus, we would like to suggest that one concept inextricably tied to happiness is success: One cannot sensibly be thought happy when one fails at those things one takes to be important, nor can one be happy if one has been duped into imagining a success that isn't genuine.

Of course, Philippa Foot wants to say more: She claims that happiness requires securing not just any goods, but specific goods rooted "deep in human nature," such as friendship and meaningful work, and it is ultimately this claim that Cahn finds so unconvincing. But perhaps there is false dichotomy here. Why suppose, after all, either that happiness must be rooted

in a life devoted to a narrow range of ends established by a particular conception of human nature, as Foot claims, or that it may be rooted, and indeed flourish, in a life devoted to even the most wicked of ends, as Cahn claims?

If happiness is closely tied to success, as we've suggested, then it should be able to take root, and indeed flourish, in any life in which success is practicably likely. Now that seems to open significantly more paths to happiness than Foot allows: Happiness need not be reserved only for those of us pursuing goods deemed (rather contentiously) to be expressive of our nature as humans. But that hardly precludes the possibility that some paths (treachery, deception, and betrayal, say), and even some goods, at least when taken by themselves (fame, wealth, and reputation, say), can never truly *secure* happiness so that it might flourish. Some paths, and some goods, appear to be strategically very bad choices, and that seems to be precisely the case with Cahn's immoralist. For we have significantly limited control over fortune and reputation, especially when they are won by deception—no matter how audacious, cunning, and lucky a person may be, there are always others more audacious, more cunning, and better off with luck. Thus, insofar as the immoralist's choices inevitably introduce obstacles to his own happiness, pitting it against the happiness of whomever he sets out to deceive, there appears to be something essentially ruinous of happiness in the immoralist's life. And thus, it would simply be bad advice were someone to recommend that people pursue *his* goods down *his* path if they want to secure happiness.

It will be objected that the life Foot recommends—the life committed to loved ones, or to work or to freedom—will be just as fragile as a life committed to treachery and false reputation. For relationships are impermanent, meaningful work is often unavailable, and freedom is sometimes suppressed. But there is a difference: There is nothing essentially ruinous of happiness in the commitments Foot cites. The happiness of a dedicated parent, for instance, doesn't depend on deception or duplicity—commitments that pit the parent's happiness against the happiness of others. But there *is* something essentially ruinous of happiness in the immoralist's commitments, and so we can hardly explain his happiness by citing those commitments. It would be much like trying to explain the good health of a smoker by citing his smoking. Now that matter isn't purely statistical: It would be the same even if, following a dozen smokers, we found that half of them lived to ripe old ages. And so too with happiness: Were the world populated with lucky immoralists of the sort Cahn imagines—self-satisfied despite the shams they've made of their lives—we'd hardly declare that treachery and deceit lead to happiness and accordingly point our children down the immoralist's crooked path.

Note

[1] The idea for this alternate scenario is owed to a similar one imagined by Richard Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness," *Philosophical Review* 88, no. 2 (April 1979): 177–79.