

Preface

“Man’s mind seeks to recover its proper good . . . but, like a drunken man knows not by what path to return home.”¹

This little book is about a very large topic: human happiness. Why write about it at all? Not for a moment do I think we are ignorant about this subject—though I do think we are confused about a great deal of what we half-know about it. The purpose of this book might be described as *deconfusing* some of our inherited semi-knowledge.

If you are the sort of person who likes to cut right to the chase, you may want to skip right now to Part Two, because this preface and the first few chapters aren’t about happiness itself—they are about preliminaries like why happiness needs to be studied, how to study it, and why I’ve written this book the way I have. After all, if you start wondering about those questions later on, you can always backtrack. People like me, though, who are always asking, “Why did you conduct your investigation *that* way instead of *this* way?” will prefer not to skip anything and read straight through. It’s up to you.

A great deal of what has been written on the topic of happiness amounts to stating its necessary conditions: things the absence of which will make you *unhappy*. It seems to me that these necessary conditions are pretty obvious. The interesting thing is the *sufficient* conditions of happiness: things the presence of which will make you happy. Are there any things like that? For example, I know that if I have no friends I will be unhappy—but does having friends guarantee that I will be happy?

I am not trying to prove anything, if by proof we mean something that will convince any sane person as a matter of sheer logic. The sorts of arguments that I make are what philosophers call “probable.” In other words, I try to give good reasons for accepting my conclusions—the best reasons I know of, usually appealing to other things we already accept.

The book is succinct; some might say terse. I can treat large matters fairly quickly because a very long tradition of probable arguments lies in the background, allowing me to ride piggyback on other thinkers. The book isn’t as terse as what I consider to be the greatest of all treatments of the subject, the *Treatise on Happiness and Ultimate Purpose*, written by Thomas Aquinas in the late thirteenth century. His *Treatise*—a single section of a much longer work²—is so fast-moving and densely packed that in the original language it is only a little more than one-third the length of this one, and even so covers more ground. I couldn’t have written this little book unless I had first written a very long one, 653 pages of line-by-line commentary³ on that very short one by St. Thomas—and I would never presume to compare what I present here to the master’s treatise. But despite the great deal that I have learned from him (and my debt will be obvious to those who know his work), in this book I am speaking for myself; it is not in any way meant to substitute for his.

Although I don't think this book is difficult, it is not a "Made Easy" or "For Dummies" book either. Any author who claims to present "Four Simple Steps to Total Happiness" or "Seven Days to Change Your Life" is a liar. It would be surprising, wouldn't it, if there really were four steps to happiness, or seven, or three, that had never before been discovered in all the previous centuries of human living? I wouldn't believe anyone who made such claims. Obviously, though, millions do. Just look at the bestseller lists.

What else might you wish to know about this book before you dig in? Perhaps I should offer a little warning. While preparing it, I came across a review of a book I had consulted about the psychology of self-esteem. One of the reviewer's complaints was that the author of the book made "frequent use of the detritus of popular media." If you share the reviewer's snobbery, then my book will annoy you, because when I need to illustrate matters that cannot be easily counted and correlated, I too make use of such "detritus." The funny thing is that in his own book, the reviewer also illustrated points with pop culture references, though he labored to distinguish the way *he* used them, which he viewed as sophisticated and scientifically grown-up, with the way the other author used them, which he saw as slumming.

Ironically, the great thinkers and writers of the past didn't hesitate to use popular illustrations. For instance, to illustrate a point about his famous doctrine of the mean, Aristotle contrasts the amount of food an athletic novice needs to eat with the amount that the famous wrestler Milo of Croton needs to eat.⁴ If using Milo to illustrate is slumming, then so be it. I'm with Aristotle.

Before taking a chance on this book, you may also want to know my attitude toward statistics. I do use them, but sparingly, and with a grain of salt. The human mind is an extraordinary instrument for synthesizing diverse sorts of experiences. Though it makes mistakes,

it is able to come to conclusions that are far ahead of what the numerical tabulation of things has shown or is ever likely to show; and the notion that statistics can tell us everything we need to know is pure fantasy. Fetishizing numbers doesn't make the study of human beings more rigorous and scientific, but less. One year I was teaching my students one of the classics of American social philosophy, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which is now almost two centuries old. Tocqueville was a keen observer and a subtle student of human nature who drew innumerable connections among all sorts of things the rest of us may have half-noticed about ourselves but never paused to think about. With some of the students, though—I am glad to say only a few of them—Tocqueville's wisdom cut no ice. Having taken too strong a dose of social science pills, they demanded, "Where is his survey data?" Just because he did not provide correlations and regressions in the modern style, they refused to consider whether any of Tocqueville's observations might have been true. It astonished me: they were not even willing to make use of their own everyday experience.

If ostentatiously waved numbers sometimes impress us more than they should, the problem is usually that the writer waving them around is assuming away the answers to the hardest questions, asking only the easy ones. Rather than looking deeply into what happiness is, for example, he may take for granted without thinking about it that happiness must be a feeling and that people always know how they are feeling—so that to understand happiness all we have to do is ask people what makes them feel good and then crunch the survey numbers. But what if happiness isn't a feeling in the first place?

Statistics can be useful for finding out some things. If one can confirm statistically, for example, that children who are praised for everything they do are more likely than other children to have inflated opinions of themselves, well and good. On the other hand, maybe we don't need factor analysis or logistic regression to know

that! Some empiricists think that philosophy is merely poor sociology. I think that's backwards. With all respect to some fine sociologists whom I number among my friends, a good deal of sociology is really just bad philosophy.

So though from time to time I do mention helpful statistics—and I am truly and humbly grateful to have them—statistics are not useful except to a person who already knows *something*. It would be lunacy to demand statistical proof that we come in two sexes, that we differ from the beasts, or that we wonder about the meaning of things. My purpose is to put everyday observations about things that we already know something about into better order than we usually put them, so that the dim and disconnected outlines of what we know can become sharper.

Thus, despite the common confusion and inconsistency of what passes for common sense, I am not one of its despisers; the thing to do with common sense is purify and elevate it. If now and then this book unearths or clarifies a few things that we tend not to notice until they are called to our attention, I will count myself satisfied.

Nothing more remains to be done in this preface but a bit of housekeeping.

From time to time I have adapted and modified a sentence or a paragraph from some other book I have written, because it can be hard to find better language for something that one has striven to say well before. I am grateful to the publishers of my previous books for permission to do so. Needless to say, I hope my readers will read those other books too.⁵

I have tried not to weigh the book down with excessive notes. In cases in which my notes don't give page numbers, the reason is either that I am citing an old book available in many editions or that I am using an unpaginated electronic source. When I can, I give other pointers such as chapter numbers.

For the convenience of readers, I have preferred to use translations that are in the public domain, and for books and translations in the public domain I don't usually give publication information, though I do usually give the names of translators. Generally speaking, I give quotations in the original language only when they have passed over into proverbs that are usually quoted that way.

I think that's all. Happy reading! And I do mean *happy*.