What does it take for a cat to be happy? A full stomach, a sunny spot to rest, an occasional mouse or bird (or at least some toy) to play with—such, surely, are the main ingredients of a cat’s happiness. Clearly, it is not necessary to be a philosopher to give a sensible answer to this question. Human happiness, in contrast, seems a different matter. It is an open question whether philosophy can help to determine what a flourishing human life involves.

Taking a stand against most of mainstream contemporary philosophy, John Cottingham claims that the task of trying to specify how we can best live is ultimately a philosophical one. Cottingham resists the temptation of simply advocating a return to what he calls the “synoptic conception of philosophy”, which he attributes to philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Epicurians as well as, interestingly, to Descartes. On this conception, philosophy is meant to be a “comprehensive system of thought encompassing all aspects of human understanding” (p. 2)—and this means metaphysical, physical as well as ethical knowledge—and having as its “ultimate raison d’être” its “ability to provide an authentic blueprint for human flourishing” (p. 5). Reason is thus supposed not only to be able to say what human happiness involves, but to outline the recipe for it. According to Cottingham, the main problem with this ratiocentric approach to the good life is that we have “lost our confidence in the power of human reason”, and the ground for this is that “the very idea of a rationally planned structure for the good life begins to look like a piece of naive self-deception” (p. 27). To put it blandly, the problem is that we are often in the dark as to what we want and why we want it; thus, rational deliberation cannot get us
very far in our quest for a good life. This, we are told, is what psychoanalytic theory has taught us.

Still, despite the criticisms he mounts against ratiocentrism, Cottingham opts for an approach to human happiness which can be seen as a close descendent of this conception. Self-knowledge is taken to play a central role in our search of happiness. Given the objections which are put forth against ratiocentrism, it is no surprise that the recipe Cottingham gives is inspired by Freud, Jung and Lacan: modern psychoanalytic theory, we are told, shows the route to an understanding of desires and passions, and ultimately of ourselves, something which is claimed to be required for happiness. As Cottingham puts it: “One of the motivating reasons for this book is the belief that the resistance of professional moral philosophers to the insights of psychoanalytic theory is a serious mistake.” (p. 6) Thus, the last and longest chapter is partly devoted to a defence of psychoanalytic theory. On the basis of an illuminating analysis of the Cartesian and Leibnizian accounts of consciousness, Cottingham claims that “the modern (Freudian) notion, so far from being a radical innovation starkly at odds with earlier views, is a natural and readily intelligible extension of fairly straight-forward common-sense belief about the mind which are readily apparent in seventeenth-century […] writers”. (p. 126)

As Cottingham sees it, human happiness consists in a proper balance between reason and “the darker and recalcitrant forces of the passions which so often seem to threaten our psychic equilibrium” (p. 6). In a move which Freud would have found congenial, but which might well be deemed excessively limiting, it is sexual passion, with its characteristic resistance to rational guidance, which is accused of being the main culprit here. However, this passion is also claimed to be central to a fulfilling life.

Thus, Cottingham argues that the main problem with Plato’s ideal of a life of intellectual contemplation and detachment from the senses and the emotions is that it is
achieved at the cost "of systematically denigrating a whole range of emotional and sensory satisfactions which give colour and richness to our lives". (p. 38) Similarly, both the cultivation of apatheia advocated by the Stoics and the tranquility of mind proclaimed by the Epicurians are claimed to be guilty of "jettisoning that very emotional dimension which makes us most richly and most intensely human". (p. 60)

Cottingham recognises that Aristotle’s conception of the good life as involving the full development of our capacities allows emotions to play a more positive role. This is so at least insofar as the emotions are guided by rational thought: excellence of character does not merely consist “in the right use of reason, but in the systematic nurturing of those parts of ourselves that are ‘responsive to reason’–habits of feeling and emotion which, though not themselves strictly ‘rational’ are nonetheless capable of being brought into conformity with the perceptions of reason.” (p. 63). The problem, Cottingham argues, is that this conception is too naive: it is unable to cope with the parts of us which tend towards the pathological, such as sexual desires.

Much the same objection is made against Descartes. Both his “ethics of power and control” (p 102) as well as his later account of happiness in terms of generosity, which involves a resolute will that follows the dictates of reason, are claimed guilty of not taking into account the pitfalls of the human psyche. However, on Cottingham’s view, what makes Descartes interesting is what is taken to be an anticipation of Freud. For Descartes, sensory stimulation in early childhood results in a “fold” in our brain which disposes us to react in the same way to resembling stimuli. Note however that the claim that our emotional dispositions are at least partly set in childhood is hardly one that is only accepted in psychoanalytic circles. Thus, Damasio claims that during the process of education and socialisation, certain classes of stimuli become connected with the specific classes of somatic states that are characteristic of emotions (Descartes’ Error, New York: Avon Books, 1994, pp. 173ff). What needs to be added to get the Freudian picture are the familiar claims about repression mechanisms.
Not surprisingly, Cottingham concludes that only what he calls transformational analysis can do justice to the depth of our psyche and thus help us to achieve equilibrium. It might seem that this conclusion is too hastily reached. Indeed, one may accept that psychic equilibrium and in particular healthy emotional dispositions leading to appropriate emotions are an essential ingredient of human happiness, and that the emotional dispositions we have largely depend on our childhood experiences, without having any inclination to buy the psychoanalytic story. The question is whether psychoanalysis is an efficient means to psychic equilibrium. And this seems to be a controversial and eminently empirical matter.

This is not the place to discuss this issue. Instead, I shall consider one of the main arguments for Cottingham’s conception, namely that it yields an illuminating account of akrasia. An akratic action is one that is done in spite of the fact that the agent judges that another course of action is preferable, all things considered. According to Cottingham, “akrasia does [...] turn out to involve a certain sort of failure of knowledge” (p. 161). In the one example he gives, Cecil’s desire to start a new life with his secretary turns out to be generated by the expression of a need for the maternal love he missed as a child. Two worries arise. First, it is difficult to see how this account generalises to more humdrum cases. Is the akratic smoker’s desire really the product of some repressed (sexual) desire? What repressed desire is at play when I go to the movie though I believe I ought to finish a paper? Maybe Cottingham would reply that his account concerns only certain cases of akrasia. This may be what he has in mind when he parenthetically remarks that “there may be not one but many problems of akrasia, corresponding to its many different manifestations, so that any singly solution would almost certainly be incomplete” (p. 159). If so, only a certain, possibly restricted, class of akratic actions would involve an epistemic failure of the kind described by Cottingham.
Second, and more worryingly, it is not clear that, on this account, Cecil’s action is acratic. For it to be acratic, it would be necessary that a) he judges that all things considered it would be preferable not to start a new life with his secretary and at the same time b) he intentionally starts a new life with his secretary. This is at least what a so-called strict akratic action would involve. But on Cottingham’s view, Cecil’s action seems rather to be that of seeking the maternal love he missed as a child. Moreover, since the relevant desire is unconscious, Cecil certainly makes no judgement about the worth of such an attempt at the time of his action. Thus, it appears that the price to pay for an account of akrasia which dispels its mystery amounts to nothing less than the denial that such a phenomenon, or at least so-called strict akratic action, exists.

Still, I should say that in a time when bookstores are overflowing with all kinds of self-help manuals advocating fast-food-like recipe for personal happiness—not to speak of its common surrogates, such as power and wealth—an attempt by a philosopher to reflect on what it takes for a human being to flourish should be welcomed. The importance of the questions which are raised, the clarity of the argument and broadness of perspective makes it a must-read for anyone who is curious to know whether philosophy has anything to say about happiness.

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