

Dobko T. Happiness and Moral Autonomy of the Human Person: A Critical Reflection on Kant and von Hildebrand / Taras Dobko // Топос / Европ. гуманитар. ун-т. – Вильнюс, 2010. – № 2. – С. 108–121.

## **Happiness and Moral Autonomy of the Human Person: A Critical Reflection on Kant and von Hildebrand**

*by Taras Dobko, Ph.D.  
Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv, Ukraine*

This article seeks to analyze the relation between happiness and moral autonomy drawing upon the moral experience of the human person with special focus upon the treatment of the issue within the framework of Immanuel Kant's and Dietrich von Hildebrand's philosophy of the person. Thus our aim is to find what we can learn about the human person through the appreciation of the experience of his true happiness. In this respect, it is also a study of the human person as he discloses himself in feeling happy about himself, his life, and the world in which he lives. We take the phenomenon of happiness, with special reference to von Hildebrand's thought, as a clue which could help us better understand the important and truly personal phenomena in human life such as the human person's ordination to the objective reality, his vocation to build his life in response to and dialogue with the world of values, his task to live a meaningful and dignified life. In particular, we attempt to show that the experience of happiness, far from being heteronomous in its character and origin, is rather a distinctive experience of personal autonomy. Thus we try to substantiate our conviction that the true vision of happiness is an important tool for the real understanding and solution of certain apparently paradoxical situations related to the problem of the person's moral autonomy and moral freedom.

### ***Happiness as a philosophical issue***

If we have set for ourselves the task to review the philosophical literature on happiness, we would discover, perhaps even surprisingly, that it is not our century which may claim a leading role in contributing to it, neither in the sense of content nor of extent.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, of course, that the question of happiness and a happy life has completely disappeared from the scene as a concern for modern philosophy. Rather, it has become marginal in the philosophical discourse.

One could wonder about the validity of this observation, especially in the face of the excessive preoccupation of modern people with their happiness, so characteristic of what was called a consumption culture. One could wonder even more if one takes into account innumerable influential theories of life which teach that happiness is the main or even the only worthwhile concern in human life.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joachim Schummer sees the main problem in a certain division of labor among „Geistwissenschaften“ characteristic of the historical epochs following antiquity. The common feature of those epochs was the opinion that anything but philosophy possesses the relevant competence in questions of happiness. During the middle ages, theology enjoyed that privilege, from the Renaissance on – empirical psychology. According to Schummer, this caused a certain decrease of interest concerning the issue of happiness among philosophers and ultimately resulted in the ever increasing conviction of the impossibility of coping with the problem successfully in a properly philosophical way. Thus Schummer expresses the need for the rehabilitation of the philosophy of happiness. According to him this project basically consists in the re-thinking of ancient ideas and their implanting into a modern context. Cf. Joachim Schummer, *Glück und Ethik. Neue Ansätze zur Rehabilitierung der Glücksphilosophie*, in *Glück und Ethik*, hrsg. von Joachim Schummer (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1998).

One of the main reasons for our claim that the issue of happiness, in spite of the qualifications just mentioned, has lost its appeal for the modern ethical mind seems to lie in the modern understanding of philosophical ethics, its starting point, task and subject matter. Since Kant, modernity understands ethics primarily, if not exclusively, as a theory of *morality* which takes its starting point in the ever increasing dilemmas of human life and interpersonal relations and aspires to articulate the conditions of the moral point of view necessary for their solution. Philosophical ethics is said to be a normative discipline which inquires into the grounds of the “oughtness” of moral obligation, tries to establish an infallible awareness of what is commanded or forbidden in a particular moral context, or how one ought to act when faced with an apparently insoluble moral conflict. Such a view of ethical concern is quite understandable if one becomes aware of the challenges arising for modern people from the development of modern technologies and sciences unknown in the past.

Given this understanding of philosophical ethics, any attempt to do justice to the issue of human happiness does not promise much with respect to clarifying properly moral concerns. According to this view, morality implies adoption of those reasons and motives of action which have as little bearing on the particular interests of the acting person as possible. They are required to have universal validity, to be indiscriminate concerning any single person involved in a situation as an object or subject of moral activity. In a word, morality seems to demand impartiality. In contrast, it is hardly possible to be impartial with respect to one’s own happiness. Morality and happiness seem to suggest, if not incompatible, still divergent points of view for ethical considerations. Thus, it is only natural that in ethics so understood – i.e. as a theory of morality – that if happiness is to claim any importance at all, it would be only marginal.

Moreover, besides this structural shift of interest in ethics, there is one more, rather axiological, reason why ethical discussion in philosophy became to some extent indifferent to the issue of happiness. It could be explained by the present influence of Kant’s interpretation of the meaning and role of happiness in human life. Kant enters the scene as the most influential figure to validate this opinion on happiness in philosophical circles.

On the one hand, Kant is eager to do justice to the understanding of man as a *person*. His project extends far beyond establishing the highest principle of moral acting and encompasses treatment of the major issues of traditional ethical philosophy as well, including that of happiness. On the other hand, Kant conceives of happiness as a sub-personal reality essentially dependent on the sensible nature of the human person. His understanding of happiness seems to be the exemplary one for a thinker who attempts to do justice to the issue while proceeding from personalist understanding of man and subjectivist understanding of happiness. Kant does not rule out the reality of happiness from human practical life. He really does his best to draw as good a picture of happiness as the framework of his ethics and anthropology would allow him to do.

By ascribing happiness and concern with it to the expression of the human person’s sensual nature, Kant inevitably pushed the issue of happiness to the marginal domain of ethics and philosophy in general. To be sure, one of the most substantial reasons for that lies in his accommodation of the notion – prevalent in his time – of happiness as a subjective, either momentary or lasting, feeling deriving from the satisfaction of desires or the absence of their frustration. From this point of view, happiness appears to be an essentially empirical concept which with respect to its content defies by definition any attempt at its generalization.

Thus, firstly, happiness for Kant and his successors has almost<sup>2</sup> nothing to do with what should concern a human person who relates to the world and other persons from the depth of his or

---

<sup>2</sup> We have deliberately made here a qualification expressed with the word “almost,” since Kant indeed justifies a certain concern of the human person for his own happiness from the moral point of view. He even demands that the human person take an interest in his happiness and hope for its attainment in the future life on moral reasons as far as this should further the moral integrity of the person. Though these qualifications do not essentially modify Kant’s attitude toward happiness, they make his view more realistic and nuanced.

her personal dignity, i.e., as a reasonable and autonomous subject. In other words, neither the human person's experience of happiness nor his concern with it reveals the *personal* dimension of his being and acting.

And, secondly, since happiness is viewed as an essentially private thing, something like a *philosophy* of happiness becomes an idle and impossible affair, *contradictio in adjectum*. By its nature philosophy is an exercise of the human mind trying to capture the reality of things common to the human person's world in general terms. But if happiness is an essentially individual *factum* of our self-experience, i.e., of how one feels and how one perceives oneself to be, then philosophical thinking becomes superfluous and essentially powerless as an aid or even a road for structuring human life so that it is lived in the way which makes the person happy.

It is no surprise that all of this finally resulted in philosophy's losing underivative interest in the issue of happiness and its shift into domain of empirical and popular psychology.<sup>3</sup> In such a context one finally comes to the idea that to deal more or less systematically with happiness is a privilege of psychology in its therapeutic shape.

If this were the final word on the matter, it could only mean self-betrayal and the defeat of philosophy itself, if not its self-destruction, if only we take seriously Cicero's opinion that philosophy by its nature has as its principal task an inquiry into the conditions of a happy life.

Fortunately, successive attempts were made to restore the proper weight and place in philosophical reflection to the issue of happiness in human life. These attempts went in different directions: either in the direction of reviving the ancient idea of happiness as an *eudaimonia* and its further rethinking in a way consistent with preserving the unconditional character of moral considerations (thus avoiding the unhappy label of eudaemonism);<sup>4</sup> or, by way of analysis of the nature of happiness in its subjective dimension, discovering its spiritual identity, and unfolding its essentially personal character.

One of the most prominent thinkers who took the second root is Dietrich von Hildebrand.<sup>5</sup> He was aware of the fact that the human person's relation to the good could be manifold, depending on how much he allows this good to enter his soul, to become part of his conscious life. In his texts von Hildebrand discusses at length the level of the human person's participation in the good which is implied in his feeling happy about it. Thus he brilliantly expands on Aristotelian dictum about a person feeling happy with his doing good as being more perfect than the other person who only volitionally gives himself to the good in question. In von Hildebrand's view, feeling happiness with God, another person or any other good endowed with value establishes a unique relation with the good. This relation is quite *sui generis* and irreducible in its nature and meaning. The presence of happiness in the human heart denotes a unique kind of the human person's openness to and familiarity with the good which goes far beyond what he can achieve in his appreciation of the good in the value-response to its value. According to von Hildebrand, being happy about the good presupposes that we should open ourselves to the good receptively in the experience of being affected with its value; the good in question is to be understood, experienced and interested in not only as possessing value of its own but also as the objective good for the person; the human person should not be self-divided in his relation to the good, his response being total and complete; and, the human person has to experience a certain affinity between himself and the good in question.

It is only natural in this context to address anew the issue of the meaning of happiness in the moral life of the human person. There is widespread agreement shared both by von Hildebrand and Kant that in his moral life the human person reveals most emphatically his personal character and

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10, n. 24.

<sup>4</sup> In this regard we could mention an ingenious study of happiness exercised by a contemporary German philosopher Robert Spaemann, especially in his work *Happiness and Benevolence*, trans. by Jeremiah Alberg, S.J. (Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Das Wesen der Liebe*. Gesammelte Werke, III Band. Regensburg: Verlag Josef Habel, 1971; *Ethics*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972.

vocation. Morality is conceived as the privileged place of distinctly personal acting and living. If happiness were a specifically personal reality in human life, as von Hildebrand thinks it is, it would be only natural to expect it to be meaningfully connected with the moral existence of the human person. But this is not straightforwardly evident. Given Kant's powerful critique of eudaemonism, to claim one's own happiness as having more than merely an indirect role in morality becomes even more dubious. But on the other hand, it becomes also more challenging. We want to take up that challenge in the present text and by so doing appreciate von Hildebrand's attempt to disclose the distinctly personal nature of human happiness.

### ***Phenomenology of freedom and the notion of the moral autonomy of the human person***

Freedom is undoubtedly one of the most crucial categories both in von Hildebrand's and Kant's anthropological and moral thinking. In our context, we would like to single out one particular aspect of their analysis of human freedom, namely, its actualization in the form of the moral autonomy of the human person.

In a distinctly phenomenological manner, von Hildebrand proceeds in his thought not by arbitrary positing and constructing the concept of freedom but referring to freedom as a datum of human experience. Freedom is not something deduced, theorized, or inferred from more basic and self-justifiable aspects of human reality. It emphatically asserts itself as an immediate given when we carefully look at the practical life of the human person that finds its expression in ethical, political and legal practices. In contrast to Kant, von Hildebrand argues that freedom can be given and directly experienced in the lived experience of a particular human person and not only necessarily posited as a postulate of practical life.

The distinctive mark of von Hildebrand's phenomenology of freedom is his relentless attempt at intuitively demonstrating the essential link between the truly personal exercise of freedom and the human person's commitment to the world of objective values. Though the classical tradition describes the human person as capable of self-determination in his freedom, it comes to this idea as if deductively through its appreciation of the human person's rational nature, which enables him to relate to the truth of things and thus to present to his will an object which is good and worthy of willing. But this ability for self-determination which is freedom remains an abstract notion to those who have never experienced it. Only faced with objective values, and especially morally relevant values, that put an unconditional claim on the human person's conformity with or even submission to them, can a person come to *experience* both his vocation and his power for self-possession and self-determination. Only through its being experienced can the objective reality of freedom become a subjective and living datum for a person.

This is seen even more clearly when we approach the apparent antinomy between freedom and moral law. It was a brilliant insight of Kant that a truly personal exercise of freedom (i.e., the moral autonomy of the person) presupposes acting from obedience to moral law. Those, however, who perceive morality and moral law as mere abstractions, maintain the contrary view. For them, a person acting in obedience to moral law and binding himself by its demands by so doing necessarily annihilates his freedom. Moral law in its normative force is inevitably perceived as a threat to moral autonomy. Thus, according to this view it seems that the human person can maintain his autonomy only in opposition to moral law. But as soon as we draw together with von Hildebrand upon the evidence of moral experience,<sup>6</sup> we immediately see the opposite. It is the *experience* of moral appeal on the part of values that brings to ultimate evidence the fact that it is precisely moral law and its underivative content that makes us sharply aware of our freedom and brings it to its fullest actualization. In other words, only by being experienced can moral law get *interiorized* and become an internal (i.e. not external, not heteronomous) principle of the actualization of human freedom.

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Ethics*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972.

Before we ask about the relationship between happiness and autonomy, we have to indicate in some detail what exactly is meant by the autonomous acting of the human person. Though von Hildebrand's discussion of it is not defined by a specifically Kantian terminological apparatus and this fact can cause a misleading impression as if he leaves it out of his explicit concern, in fact, von Hildebrand deals with this issue very closely and contributes immensely to its intuitive elucidation.

Moral autonomy stands for the particular excellence of human acting which consists in the person's response to the moral relevance of the situation both freely and in accordance with human dignity. Thus moral autonomy, first of all, implies the person's acting with full understanding of the value of the object and of the moral obligation issuing from it which is based on his own insight into the moral relevance of the situation and the oughtness inherent in what is objectively good. The importance of that moral insight is difficult to overestimate. For a person who acts on limited moral insight, the demands of the objectively good appear as external impositions on his acting. Moral norms which get detached from the experience of value cannot help appearing to a human person as restrictions on his freedom and conscience. Thus moral autonomy presupposes the full, lived experience of value in its objective goodness.

Secondly, moral autonomy is a quality of the person's response to a morally relevant situation. To ground the morally autonomous acting of the person this response should be motivated by the intrinsic importance of the value itself. In Kantian terms it means that autonomous acting is acting not only according to the moral law but out of respect for it or better *because of* the moral law. For one can act *in accordance with* the moral law, and yet not *because of* the moral law. If a person, for instance, conforms to the demands of moral objectivity for some ulterior motive such as fear of punishment or the gain anticipated from such acting, his acting hits wide out of the mark as to its being autonomous. Moral autonomy entails the person's commitment to the good in itself, his self-transcendence in relation to the objectively important. Only in this sense can it claim to be fully free and not constrained by any force foreign to the meaning of the situation or moved to act in this way on the principles of prudential reasoning.

What indicates for Kant the excellence of morally autonomous acting is the person's acting in obedience to the law in a way irrespective of that feature of the law that it commands. "The will whose maxims necessarily are in harmony with the laws of autonomy is a holy will or an absolutely good will. The dependence of a will not absolutely good on the principle of autonomy (moral constraint) is *obligation*. Hence obligation cannot be applied to a holy will."<sup>7</sup> Morally autonomous acting is imbued with rationality and moral understanding. Though a person acting on the principles of moral autonomy will experience the objective oughtness of value or moral obligation, it will occur not in the mode of constraint contrary to the human person's freedom but in the mode of its being rational and in tune with human dignity and freedom. Thus Kant unfolds the interiority of the relation of "not absolutely good will" to the moral law. In the lived experience of the human person it takes the form of the constraint of the moral law. But he seems to leave the issue largely undecided concerning the positive side of this dimension, namely how fully morally autonomous acting in relation to the moral law (or the moral relevance of the situation) is reflected in the human person's lived experience. It is here where von Hildebrand has much to contribute.

Now we can ask whether Kant is right in ascribing moral heteronomy to an acting which includes a concern for one's own happiness. Or, it would be better to express it in a somewhat different way since Kant does his best to find a room for the person's concern with his happiness in the context of morality. Is Kant right when he approaches happiness and the person's interest in it as something secondary to morally autonomous acting, something merely attached to it by virtue of the necessity of the human condition in the world, as if happiness were something one could dispense with for his acting being autonomous?

---

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by H. J. Paton (Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 58.

Drawing from von Hildebrand's excellent analysis of happiness as personal reality,<sup>8</sup> we can offer some evidence for happiness being an experiential counterpart of the moral autonomy of the human person. In this experience the person's autonomy is given, sensed, and lived experientially. It could be also argued that the human person's interest in his true happiness not only does not lead to any heteronomy, but is even necessary for the person's acting autonomously. We can better understand the meaning of these statements if we consider them against the specific background of Kant's concept of moral autonomy, which among other things implies the human person's motivational independence from any objective reasons for acting.

### ***Happiness and the lived experience of moral autonomy***

Kant argues that the autonomous person obeys the moral law for no other motive than the moral law itself, and therefore not for any incentive or "material end" which lie at the basis of some interest or compulsion to conform to the demands of a moral point of view. Kant emphatically argues for the person himself being a source of moral obligation, so that his acting will be really autonomous. This person's being "a law unto himself" in Kant's terms implies not only a deep insight into the human person's freedom, namely that only he who determines himself in his will and is not determined by something else could be called genuinely free. Kant's insistence on the person's being a source of his legislation goes so far as to deny the fact of our experience that genuine self-determination and the exercise of real moral autonomy is possible only in relation to an independent objectivity of values. Kant's formalism is an expression of his distrust of the human person's capacity and the power of his will to approach a good thing according to its inner worth and goodness. His formalism is a consequence of his theory of motivation and the human being's relation to outside reality based on it. Thus Kant feels himself compelled to maintain moral autonomy at the expense of the human person's ability to be in dialogue with reality. Being motivated by anything other than obedience to the moral law, which is rooted in the rationality of the human person, is taken by Kant as a determination of the person *from outside*, contrary to his true freedom. While regarding any material motive as a danger to moral autonomy of the will, as something alien to his dignity, Kant ends in taking autonomy in too literal sense, i.e., in viewing the human person himself as a source of moral law and grounding its binding character in its universal formalizability. It is no wonder that certain authors were inclined to adopt from Kant only the idea of freedom as independence from outer motives, and radicalize it to the effect of transforming it into its opposite, namely arbitrariness. This line of thought was of course completely foreign to Kant himself.

While fully realizing what moved Kant to adopt such a view, we still, in contradistinction to him, argue that, precisely in the experience of happiness in relation to objective values, those values are given to the person as having a kind of *affinity* to the person himself and thus as not alien and foreign to his dignity. In happiness he experiences the metaphysical congeniality of his personal being and the world of values. Values no longer appear as external to his very being as person, as occurs on the lower level of moral existence. And precisely happiness, which is felt by the person through his participation in the order of values, is a token and an experiential sign of this metaphysical affinity. Though in terms of their being they could be said to be outside of the person, i.e. transcendent to his being, in terms of their meaning and nature, values are in an intimate union with him. And this union is experienced in what von Hildebrand called "being affected by values."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> To understand von Hildebrand's stance on happiness, it is particularly instructive to consult on his analysis of love as an "Überwertantwort," i.e. as a peculiar value-response that in its positive content exceeds far beyond the logic of mere doing justice to the empirical value of the beloved human person. It is happiness about one's being in mutual love with another person that perfects one's self-giving and commitment to the beloved. Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Das Wesen der Liebe*. Gesammelte Werke, III Band. Regensburg: Verlag Josef Habbel, 1971.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Ethics*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972.

Thus if helping our friend at the expense of watching a football-game upsets us, then we must confess that our friend has not yet taken an appropriate place in our soul, even though we do help him. We are witnessing here, as it were, a split between the objective and subjective order of things. Experiencing happiness or joy in this situation would be indicative of the deep concern with the fate of another person, of the fact that this person enters the depths of our personality, our “Eigenleben,” where we are distinctly ourselves and not others.<sup>10</sup> Experiencing happiness in this sense signifies the victory of goodness in our soul. It signifies the achievement of the correspondence between our interiority and the objective order of things.

Our experience of happiness in relation to the transcendent values manifests that values in their transcendent character in no way threaten our personal dignity or impose themselves on us. It evidences that in our value-responding attitude we act in accordance with our personal dignity, we stay with ourselves and are appreciated as persons. It is important to note in this regard that the experience of happiness is not just a sign of moral autonomy to which we should infer or reason in the presence of happiness but which itself remains phenomenologically absent. Nor is it a merely logical move from some “subjective” fact of our conscious life to its ontological foundation, metaphysical condition or explanation. Moral autonomy presences itself in our experience of happiness, makes itself present and manifest in and through it. In other words, the moral autonomy of the human person makes its appearance in the person’s experience of happiness in relation to objective values.<sup>11</sup>

### ***A person’s concern with happiness as a necessary condition of autonomous acting***

Thus, we can deny that happiness and our concern with it is but a marginal, superfluous, merely unnecessary attachment to our morally autonomous acting. As we have just seen, usually while discussing the characteristic cases of moral heteronomy, one refers to acting that lacks moral insight or is filled by excessive preoccupation with subjectively satisfying or merely agreeable things. But however paradoxical it may sound, there exists a danger of the person’s heteronomous relation not only to natural causality or his living for the merely agreeable, but also to *values*. We refer here to the observation that John Crosby makes in his *The Selfhood of the Human Person*.

In my view, though von Hildebrand does not address directly the issue of moral heteronomy in relation to values, his moral philosophy has necessary resources to deal with it consistently. Here we can again refer to the datum of happiness which holds a prominent place in von Hildebrand’s phenomenological account of morality.

The mere other-directedness of the human person’s will to objective values does not suffice of itself to assure moral autonomy. Until happiness is not allowed to occupy its proper place in the order of motivation of a morally valuable deed, moral heteronomy in relation to values is always possible. In contradistinction to Kant, according to whom interest in one’s own happiness for the most part spoils the purity of the person’s moral life and leads to the heteronomy of the subject of

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Das Wesen der Liebe*. Gesammelte Werke, III Band. Regensburg: Verlag Josef Habbel, 1971.

<sup>11</sup> Epicurus paid attention to the fact that the experiences of pleasure and pain indicate to a living being which events, happenings, and things are appropriate or otherwise to its nature and being. It even seems that one of the most powerful stimulus for working out one of the central parts of ancient ethics, namely its teaching as to how to combine, both consciously and skillfully, the person’s striving for pleasure with its natural function of serving the “useful,” was an awareness that the experience of happiness is meaningfully connected with the experience of goodness. In this ancient philosophical endeavor, thinkers as it were tried to transfer the spiritual regularities into the bodily sphere, where they were for some unknown reason violated and the experience of delight was cut off from the useful. Thus the experience of pleasure in its original function was conceived as the subjective appearance of what is advantageous, beneficial, useful and favorable to the embodied person. The same could be said analogously about the experience of happiness, though genuine happiness in its lived experience is not just the appearance of something favorable to the human person in his subjectivity. Happiness is indicative of goodness being internalized and made the very tissue of the human personality itself.

acting, Crosby argues that “just as the one who has knowledge of some object is present to himself in the knowing and would destroy all conscious acting, knowing included, if he were to be so absorbed in the object as to extinguish his self-presence, so in a similar way the one who gives a value-response also wills his own happiness, and he would destroy the very possibility of value-response if he were to give himself to the value in such a way as to lose all interest in his own happiness.<sup>12</sup>”

Altruism believes that the other-directedness peculiar to it gives it moral precedence over any concern with another person that is not pure and includes a self-related interest. This is false for many reasons.<sup>13</sup> First of all, following von Hildebrand<sup>14</sup>, we can state that a purely value-responding attitude is in itself indifferent to the “location” of value, whether it resides in some good outside of me or it is given as belonging to my own self. In itself value response does not discriminate between another self or my self, since its point of reference is value as such, notwithstanding where it could be found. This does not deny that value location may play an important role in accounting for the concrete appeal of a value directed to myself. Thus my own spiritual health and moral integrity appeal to my concern quite differently than that of another person. What seems to account for such a difference is a relational dimension of value which makes of it “*tua res agitur*,” my concern. Here we see that a purely value-responding attitude, in itself a sheer impossibility, would level all our moral aspirations to the mere means for realizing a certain value-content. It would void moral response of its autonomy that precisely consists in the fact that the person in its relation to reality should never be treated only as a means but also and primarily as an end. And this holds true not only in persons’ relations between each other, but in relation to reality as a whole. The inner being of a person is never just an effect of some external cause. What the person becomes in virtue of his relation to reality is always co-given in the experience of this reality. It should be taken into account by the person himself in order not to let himself become affected rather than letting this reality affect his own being, transforming it.

It is true that, in each concrete encounter with value, the human person need not be fixed exclusively on this value to respond properly to it. The human person, being directed to the whole of being, is always acting against some background, some broader perspective. It would be unreasonable if he should cut himself off from all manifold relationships in which both he and a value stand to the rest of being and concentrate only on this value. As Scheler, von Hildebrand, and Crosby note, the human person perceives each value against the background of the world of values, thus being aware of its place and rank in this world. “To be able to reflectively distance oneself from every determined finite content and to be able to relate to the whole of the „good“ is constitutive of human freedom.<sup>15</sup>” One should not lose oneself in any particular value-content by taking it to be unconditional and thus removing it from any possible comparison. This broader perspective, which guards the human person on the subjective side of his relationship to the value, is called by Robert Spaemann the perspective of “*Gelingen des ganzen Lebens*” or viewpoint of happiness.

But does not this viewpoint of one’s happiness lead to the danger of reflexive bending over oneself, which runs the risk of instrumentalizing all value-contents of one’s life and in this way

---

<sup>12</sup> John Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 200.

<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Max Scheler has convincingly shown that in many cases excessive preoccupation with others could be indicative of a certain moral deficiency and could be traced to moral failure to deal with oneself. His analysis of heteropathic emotional identification has demonstrated that mere formal directedness to another person could not as such possess a positive value. The person trapped in such style of living lives a life which is not worthy of his dignity as a person. Here directedness to others has a clearly heteronomous character. Scheler disqualifies extreme altruism as failing to act in accordance with one’s personal dignity and nature.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Das Wesen der Liebe*. Gesammelte Werke, III Band. Regensburg: Verlag Josef Habel, 1971.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence*, trans. by Jeremiah Alberg, S.J. (Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 51.



formalizing the very notion of “des gelingendes Lebens?” Here formalizing means denying the meaningfulness of the link existing between fulfilled life and its contents as happens, for example, in hedonism, which takes happiness to be the sum total of pleasurable states, no matter what their origin may be. The perspective “des gelingendes Lebens” seems to entail such self-reflection. If it is the accompanying viewpoint of all our acting, what is left of our truly intentional relation to the world? Could such an approach to reality be really autonomous and worthy of the human person? How is this antinomy to be solved and these two apparent alternatives mediated? Or are we to fall prey to losing our freedom either in losing oneself in some finite content or in the self-isolation consequent upon obsessive self-reflection?

Only genuine value enables us to avoid both alternatives and mediate them in a way conducive to our personal freedom and autonomy. “Human action is intentional, and this intentionality appears to be destroyed through the self-thematizing of the action. On the other hand, this self-thematizing appears to be unavoidable, if we want in any way to thematize the turning out well of life. This contradiction resolves itself when the object of the intentionality so stands over against agents that they remain in themselves or return to themselves in self-transcendence.<sup>16</sup>”

Thus, in tune with von Hildebrand’s insightful analysis of happiness, we do not regard the person’s interest in it as something secondary to morally autonomous acting, something merely attached to it by virtue of the necessity of the human condition in the world, as if happiness were something one could dispense with for his acting being autonomous.

### ***Happiness and self-experience of the moral integrity of the human person***

In more than one place von Hildebrand discusses the problem of the human person’s participation in values through the attainment of moral excellence. He appropriates Scheler’s thesis about moral values “riding on the back” of our moral actions and attitudes, and rightly argues about the inherent impossibility of experiencing in the intentional way one’s being endowed with moral values, i.e. in the frontal form of our consciousness. But then the question arises whether the person is given any possibility of experiencing his own moral stature. We feel that it would be somewhat out of order if the person were denied any awareness of his moral and spiritual integrity. We think it would cause confusion and diminish the moral powers of the person himself. Von Hildebrand seems to be aware of this problem and suggests that moral integrity is somehow given to the person in its effects, which manifest themselves in the life of the morally good person.<sup>17</sup> However true it may be, this does not yet do justice to the lived experience of the human person.

There is a more immediate access to one’s moral state, and this is an experience of happiness in relation to the morally relevant values. Its counterpart would be the experience of guilt, of being guilty.<sup>18</sup> This experience of happiness is not merely a consequence or effect of moral integrity. It is rather “the mediated immediacy” of the moral excellence of the human person. One does not infer moral excellence from happiness, but rather the former is *given, revealed* in the latter.

Ronald Muller raises an interesting question as to why the immediate awareness of one’s moral life is effected through the *affective* experience of happiness and not through some *cognitive* means. He sees the main reason of this in the fact that our reason is often subject to self-inflicted self-deception through half-proved theories, prejudices, and so on. Precisely in virtue of the spontaneous character of affective life, it could not be distorted in such an immediate way and is

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand, “The Modes of Participation in Values,” in *International Philosophical Quarterly* № 4, vol. 1, № 1, 1961.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Rudolf Otto, *Aufsätze zur Ethik*, hrsg. von Jack Stewart Boozer (München: Beck, 1981).

not subject to self-manipulation. Because it is to some extent withdrawn from the direct power of the person, it can become the place of *revelation* of the truth about him.<sup>19</sup>

Thus in its actual reality happiness is experienced on the *lateral* level of consciousness and thus presents itself as a spiritual *self-feeling* of the person. In this sense it is also an experience of one's own self, given from within. It is an experience indicative of personal integrity, of one's own personhood. It is the opposite of the experience of spiritual emptiness, of despair over one's own self. Happiness testifies to the victory of the personal element in the human person, which includes establishing due relation both to the outer world and to one's own self.

Thus we see that a formal correspondence of our acting with values and their demands cannot alone explain the appearance of happiness. Happiness simultaneously reflects the positively creative effect that values have on our subjectivity. We are happy since we feel that in our dialogue with the good we grow along the lines of our deepest potentialities, in accordance with our true selves and in harmony with our dignity. In other words, we grow and develop as persons.

All of this could be read off the experience of happiness. In contributing to the world of values we find ourselves contributed to and enriched as persons as well. Thus it is not exactly correct to talk about happiness as a reward of our value-responding attitude to reality, not even as a unintended reward. Happiness itself is rather a *phenomenon*, a manifestation of that real reward which remains concealed from our direct gaze for our own sake. Happiness is a peculiar kind of awareness of this reward, its guise and revelation at the same time. In this sense, happiness is also an ally for humility. It makes present in our awareness our own flourishing as a person, but it accomplishes this humbly without focusing our attention on this fact and thus without destroying it.

We clearly see that there is in fact no valid reason to maintain the opposition between happiness and morality. Moreover, happiness completes moral value-response, gives it a certain excellence of its own. Human happiness is a fully personal reality. To ignore or underestimate it would amount to a failure to do full justice to the rich reality of the human person himself, to his distinctly personal nature and the life of his incommunicable self. In his aspirations for happiness, the human person reveals himself as a person, behaves as a person, and gives himself to the good in itself as a person.

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ronald P. Muller. *A Phenomenological Study of Happiness*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Dallas, 1985; also, "Dietrich von Hildebrand, the Aristotelian-Thomistic Tradition, and the Phenomenology of Happiness." *Aletheia*, v. 5, 1992: 237-49.