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HAPPINESS

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THE GOOD LIFE

After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves—except insofar as my mind was moved by them—I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything that would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected—whether there was something that, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.

There is only one honest impulse at the bottom of puritanism, and that is the impulse to punish the man with a superior capacity for happiness.

—H.L. Mencken, 1920

I say that *I resolved at last*—for at first glance it seemed ill-advised to be willing to lose something certain for something then uncertain. I saw, of course, the advantages that honor and wealth bring, and that I would be forced to abstain from seeking them if I wished to devote myself seriously to something new and different. If by chance the greatest happiness lay in them, I saw that I should have to do without it. But if it did not lie in them, and I devoted my energies only to acquiring them, then I would equally go without it.

I wondered whether perhaps it would be possible to reach my new goal—or at least the certainty of attaining it—without changing the conduct and plan of life that I shared with other men. Often I tried this, but in vain. For most things that present themselves in life, and which, to judge from their actions, men think to be the highest good, may be reduced to these three: wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure. The mind is so distracted by these three that it cannot give the slightest thought to any other good.

For as far as sensual pleasure is concerned, the mind is so caught up in it, as if at peace in a true good, that it is quite prevented from thinking of anything else. But after the enjoyment of sensual pleasure is past, the greatest sadness follows. If this does not completely engross, it still thoroughly confuses and dulls the mind.

The mind is also distracted not a little by the pursuit of honors and wealth, particularly when the latter is sought only for its own sake, because it is assumed to be the highest good. But the mind is far more distracted by honor. For this is always assumed to be good through itself and the ultimate end toward which everything is directed.

Nor do honor and wealth have, as sensual pleasure does, repentance as a natural consequence. The more each of these is possessed, the more joy is increased, and hence the more we are spurred on to increase them. But if our hopes should chance to be frustrated, we experience the greatest sadness. And finally, honor has this great disadvantage: to pursue it, we must direct our lives according to other men's powers of understanding—fleeing what they commonly flee and seeking what they commonly seek.

Since I saw that all of these things stood in the way of my working toward this new goal—indeed were so opposed to it that one or the other must be given up—I was forced to ask what would be more useful to me. For, as I say, I seemed to be willing to lose the certain good for the uncertain one. But after I had considered the matter a little, I first found that if I devoted myself to this new plan of life and gave up the old, I would be giving up a good by its nature uncertain (as we can clearly infer from what has been said) for one uncertain not by its nature (for I was seeking a permanent good) but only in respect to its attainment.

By persistent meditation, however, I came to the conclusion that if only I could resolve wholeheartedly to change my plan of life, I would be giving up certain evils for a certain good. For I saw I was in the greatest danger, and I was forced to seek a remedy with all my strength, however uncertain it might be—like a man suffering

from a fatal illness who, foreseeing certain death unless he employs a remedy, is forced to seek it, however uncertain, with all his strength. For all his hope lies there. But all those things men ordinarily strive for not only provide no remedy to preserve our being but in fact hinder that preservation. They often cause the destruction of those who possess them, and always cause the destruction of those who are possessed by them.

There are a great many examples of people who have suffered persecution to the death on account of their wealth, or have exposed themselves to many dangers to acquire wealth that they have at last paid the penalty for their folly with their life. Nor are there fewer examples of people who, to attain or defend honor, have suffered most miserably. And there are innumerable examples of people who have hastened their death through too much sensual pleasure.

Furthermore, these evils seemed to have arisen from the fact that all happiness or unhappiness is placed in the quality of the object to which we cling with love. For strife will never arise on account of what is not loved, nor will there be sadness if it perishes, nor envy if it is possessed by another, nor fear, nor hatred—in a word, no disturbances of the mind. All these happen only in the love of things that can perish, as all the things we have just spoken of can do.

But love toward the eternal and infinite thing feeds the mind with a joy entirely exempt from sadness. This is greatly to be desired and sought with all our strength.

The acquisition of money, sensual pleasure, and esteem are only obstacles so long as they are sought for their own sakes, and not as means to other things. But if they are sought as means, then they will have a limit, and will not be obstacles at all. On the contrary, they will be of great use in attaining the end on account of which they are sought.

This, then, is the end I aim at: to acquire such a nature, and to strive that many acquire it with me. That is, it is part of my happiness to take pains that many others may understand as I understand, so that their intellect and desire agree entirely with my intellect and desire.

Before anything else, we must devise a way of healing the intellect, and purifying it, as much as we can in the beginning, so that it understands things successfully, without error and as well as possible. Everyone will now be able to see that I wish to direct all the sciences toward one end and goal, namely, that we should achieve the highest human perfection. Anything in the sciences that does not advance us toward our goal must be rejected as useless—in a word, all our activities and thoughts are to be directed to this end.

But while we pursue this end and devote ourselves to bringing the intellect back to the right path, it is necessary to live. So we are forced, before we do anything else, to assume certain rules of living as good:

I had rather be in a state of misery and envied for my supposed happiness than in a state of happiness and pitied for my supposed misery.

—Elizabeth Inchbald, 1793

(1) To speak according to the power of understanding of ordinary people and do whatever does not interfere with our attaining our purpose. We can gain a considerable advantage from this if we yield as much to their understanding as we can. Moreover, in this way, they will give a favorable hearing to the truth.

(2) To enjoy pleasures just so far as suffices for safeguarding our health.

(3) Finally, to seek money, or anything else, just so far as suffices for sustaining life and health, and conforming to those customs of the community that do not conflict with our aim.

Benedict de Spinoza, from *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Born in 1632 to Portuguese Jewish parents who had immigrated to Amsterdam, Spinoza was excommunicated by his synagogue in 1656 for holding unorthodox, "monstrous" views. This controversial work, left unfinished at the time of the philosopher's death in 1677, was proscribed in an edict issued by the states of Holland and West Friesland. A hundred years later, the German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing commented, "Why, people still talk of Spinoza as if he were a dead dog."