

Is there a 'positive right' to happiness?

An amusing citation from Margaret Thatcher reads: "The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people's money." The socialists, however, were not the only ones who would run out of other people's money. Democracies are quite capable of duplicating this feat.

The question is this: What entitles us to acquire other people's money in the first place? Do other people have any money that is not ours if we "need" it? Taxation, with or without representation, is about this issue. Who decides what we need? Who gets what is taken from us? On what grounds do they deserve it? C. S. Lewis said that no one has a right to happiness. Our Declaration only says that we have a right to pursue it. Whether we attain it is not something that falls under the perplexing language of "rights." If someone else guarantees my right to be happy, what am I? Surely not a human being, whose happiness, as Aristotle said, includes his own activity, not someone else's.

In a world of rights, no one can give anything to anybody else. Everything is owed to me if I do not already have it. If I am not happy, I am a victim of someone else's negligence. A "rights society" is litigious. If I am unhappy, it has nothing to do with me; my unhappiness is caused by someone else who has violated my rights. Unhappy people witness the violation of their rights by someone else; their unhappiness does not involve them. Their mode is not, "What can I do for others?" but, "What must they do for me to make me happy?" In his *Ethics*, Aristotle remarked that, if happiness were a gift of the gods, surely they would give it to us. No Christian can read such a line without pause. Is not the whole essence of our faith that we have no "right" either to existence itself or to a happy existence? Some things must first be given to

us, no doubt—including our very selves, which we do not cause.

Indeed, the whole essence of revelation is that we do not have a right to the eternal life that God has promised to us. We cannot achieve it by ourselves, because it is not a product of our own making or thinking. God does not violate our “rights” by not giving us either existence or happiness; creation is not an act of justice. The doctrine of grace opposes the notion that we have a right to happiness. It is not even something that we deserve or can work for. At first sight, this primacy of gift and grace seems to lessen our dignity, which surely ought to include some input on our part. Christianity says that indeed this “givenness” is the case. We are given what we have no right to receive. This givenness should make us like the Giver, should incite us to something more than our own “rights.” Happiness evidently lies beyond rights. We can only speak of a “right” to happiness with many distinctions.

What was the point of Margaret Thatcher’s quip about running out of someone else’s money? Some do demand someone else’s money. From whence does this demand arise? From those who claim that they have a right to happiness. If they do not have what others have, it is a sign, not of one’s own failure to embrace the habits and ways to produce what is needed, but of someone unjustly having what I think I need. Thus, I do not have to earn what I need. The mere fact that I do not have it is enough to suggest that someone else is preventing me from enjoying my “right” to be happy.

Much of the world is filled with what I call “gapism.” The so-called gap between the rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots, is a sign, not of the natural order in which some know more and work more, but of a dire conspiracy to deprive me of what is my right. So the purpose of “rights” is to correct the world’s “wrongs.” A divine mission flashes in the eyes of those who would presume to make us happy by giving us our “rights.” People lacking the “right” justify the takers.

So we do not have a right to be happy. The assumption that we do lies behind the utopian turmoil of our times. The attempt to guarantee our right to be happy invariably leads to economic bankruptcy and societal coercion. By misunderstanding happiness and its gift-response condition, we impose on the political order a mission it cannot fulfill. We undermine that limited temporal happiness we might achieve if we are virtuous, prudent, and sensible in this finite world.

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