

## *Happy-Go-Lucky* Revisited

forthcoming in *Film-Philosophy*

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Wittgenstein looks on enviously as Poppy enjoys life.

### I. Introduction

In a provocative recent essay Basileios Kroustallis argues that the film *Happy-Go-Lucky* provides us with a valuable philosophical thought experiment concerning the nature of happiness (Kroustallis 2012).<sup>1</sup> In particular, he takes the film to offer a defense of “whole life satisfaction” conceptions of happiness, but to also enrich our understanding of such happiness by showing us that it seems to come at the “price of eccentricity”. While I agree with his conviction that some films can supply philosophical thought experiments, and I also share the judgment that Poppy, the main character in *Happy-Go-Lucky*, is to some extent “eccentric”, I disagree with his philosophical arguments and his interpretation of the film. As will come out shortly,

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<sup>1</sup> Future references will be to page number only.

by my lights Poppy's eccentricity is mild compared to the eccentricity we find in Kroustallis's essay. While I'm not sympathetic to Kroustallis's claims, this isn't to say that I think the film is devoid of important philosophical lessons. The second half of this essay is dedicated to explicating some of the philosophical insights offered by *Happy-Go-Lucky*. In discussing these aspects of the film I'll be drawing on ideas from Ludwig Wittgenstein and William James.

## II. Film as Philosophy and the "Entertainment Objection"

Kroustallis's argument for the claim that *Happy-Go-Lucky* contains a philosophical thought experiment is not entirely straightforward, but it seems to have the following structure. He begins by claiming that the key objection to the idea that any film could serve as a thought experiment is what he labels "the entertainment objection":

Even when complex, reflective and rich in relevant philosophical details, films do not confer philosophical knowledge in their own right: they only function to subserve entertainment, and they have to be judged accordingly. (72)

He goes on to claim:

Nevertheless, the present paper sets out to answer the entertainment objection for cinematic thought experiments. It argues that a challenging philosophical claim can have its genuine source in a film if this claim arises through an equally challenging emotional detachment. It states that there are times when the character actively repels spectator engagement by means of his/her actions (and, therefore, inactivates an important source of entertainment). (74-5)

So, it appears that Kroustallis actually endorses the point behind the "entertainment objection" but intends to show that it can be avoided by focusing on a film in which at least some key component is *not* entertaining (in this case, a challenging

character provokes emotional detachment from the viewer). The implication is that philosophical work can be accomplished by such a film because the detachment it promotes allows the spectator to detect and appreciate a philosophical claim that would otherwise be unperceivable. More specifically, Kroustallis believes that it is the detachment brought on by Poppy's "eccentricity" that allows the spectator to appreciate a subjective conception of happiness as "whole life satisfaction".

Note that right from the beginning this argumentative strategy is odd. For one, neither of the authors cited by Kroustallis when he discusses the "entertainment objection" actually holds such a view. Murray Smith does not deny that films can contain thought experiments; instead he points out that the thought experiments in works of art are generally there for different reasons than those thought experiments which appear in philosophy.<sup>2</sup> On Smith's view, it is not the fact that films are *entertaining* which blocks the possibility of conferring philosophical knowledge. Rather, he holds that the inherent *ambiguity* and *particularity* in most artworks is in tension with the *clarity* and *abstraction* sought by philosophy, and he further suggests that works of philosophy tend to prioritize epistemic goals while works of art prioritize aesthetic ones. (Smith 2006: 38, 40)

The other author cited by Kroustallis, Bruce Russell, also does not endorse the idea that entertainment is incompatible with philosophical content. Instead, his primary point is that works of art rarely contain *explicit argument*, and that philosophical works are defined in part through the presence of just such argument:

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<sup>2</sup> cf. "This difference raises the suspicion that the thought experiment serves different purposes in philosophy and artistic storytelling, respectively." (Smith 2006: 35)

Film can provide the same sort of data that philosophical thought experiments provide, but because it cannot provide the explicit argumentation [...] it cannot yield justified beliefs about general conceptual propositions. (Russell 2008: 8)

Upon reflection it is not surprising that neither author endorses “the entertainment objection”, because such an objection is rather obviously off the mark. As Kroustallis himself acknowledges in his paper (prior to introducing the objection) many paradigmatic philosophical thought experiments *themselves* provide entertainment: “On the other hand, philosophical thought experiments from Descartes to Putnam do not only unveil a certain philosophical reasoning, but also entertain with their narrative and fictional structure.” (73) If there are good arguments for the claim that film cannot be works of philosophy or “do philosophy”, they will not be based on the crude notion that merely being entertaining is incompatible with delivering philosophical insight.

It should be clear at this point that Kroustallis’s argument is not off to a good start. Once we see that the “entertainment objection” is ineffective, it also becomes apparent that the relevance of Kroustallis’s assertions about the supposed detachment triggered by Poppy in *Happy-Go-Lucky* is questionable. Even if we grant his (dubious) claim about the nature of Poppy’s characterization in the film, highlighting this aspect of the film does not respond to *actual* objections offered by Smith and Russell, as it is far from obvious that such viewer detachment would somehow show a prioritizing of epistemic as opposed to aesthetic goals (Smith), or

instead manifest the presence of explicit argumentation in a narrative work (Russell).<sup>3</sup>

### III. Philosophical Accounts of Happiness and Poppy's Happiness

Though Kroustallis has not shown us good reasons for thinking that *Happy-Go-Lucky* (or any other film) can contain a philosophical thought experiment, I believe other philosophers have successfully made such a case, so for the purposes of argument let's move on and assume that the possibility of a genuinely philosophical film is coherent.<sup>4</sup> Are Kroustallis's specific claims about the philosophical content in *Happy-Go-Lucky* plausible? That is, does the film actually present us with a defense of the "whole life satisfaction" conception of happiness, and does it link such happiness to the necessity of a certain type of eccentric character as manifested by Poppy? In short, my answers are "no" and "no".

Kroustallis contrasts what he calls a subjective "whole life conception of happiness" with an objective notion of happiness he attributes to Aristotle. Along with many others, I find translating Aristotle's *eudaimonia* as "happiness" problematic, and prefer a term such as "flourishing", but putting that aside, the idea here seems to be that an "objective" notion of happiness (which requires that good things have actually happened to the person, good things which would justify the judgment that the person is genuinely happy) is contrasted with a "subjective"

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even if one somehow resuscitated the "entertainment objection", Kroustallis gives us no grounds to conclude that the experience of cinematic detachment within a film cannot itself be entertaining. Finding oneself alienated by a character is a familiar experience when engaging with great works of fiction, be they filmed or written. Both moral and epistemic distancing allows for narrative complexity and are clearly sought out by many viewers and readers. For more on moral distancing, see Smith (1999). For more on epistemic distancing, see Wilson (1986).

<sup>4</sup> See Smuts (2009) and Wartenberg (2007).

notion where happiness can be genuine just so long as the person in question believes themselves to be happy and/or feels happy.<sup>5</sup> Kroustallis believes that Poppy provides support for a subjective conception over objective conceptions because he sees her as someone who believes herself to be happy (and feels happy) despite having an objectively dismal lot in life: "...Poppy does not only face bad incidents, but is literally thrown into a world of concealed or explicit sadness" (75). As evidence of her hardship he points to the "negative attitudes" of the people around her, her physical injury from the trampoline, and her eventual harassment from Scott the driving instructor. (75-6) Apparently this is supposed to amount to sufficient misery to show that Poppy's life is not "objectively" a happy one, yet she takes herself to be happy, so a subjective conception must be correct (at least in her case).<sup>6</sup>

Where to begin? First, Kroustallis's case regarding Poppy's supposedly bleak situation is far from convincing. There is no reason given by the film to believe that Poppy herself takes happiness to simply be subjective, and there is also little reason to conclude that her life is objectively dismal. Don't take my word on this, however, take Poppy's:

Helen: I just want you to be happy, that's all.

Poppy: I am happy.

Helen: I don't think you are.

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<sup>5</sup>A useful discussion of the inherent "blurriness" of the concept of happiness can be found in Richter (2009). Though I don't have room to pursue the issue here, it is my contention that happiness is quite a blurry concept that reasonably lends itself to both "subjective" and "objective" understandings.

<sup>6</sup> Kroustallis uses surprisingly strong language when describing his thesis, claiming "[Aristotle's] support of 'objective happiness', the claim that happiness results from objective circumstances, is the one that the main character of *Happy-Go-Lucky* sets out to refute." (75) It is one thing to claim a film may contain a philosophical thought experiment; It is something else altogether to claim that a fictional character within the film herself "sets out" to refute a particular philosophical theory!

Poppy: I am. I love my life. Yeah, it can be tough at times. That's part of it, isn't it? ... I've got a great job, brilliant kids, lovely flat. I've got her to look at... I've got amazing friends. I love my freedom. I'm a lucky lady, I know that.

Poppy's remarks here show that she takes herself to be genuinely fortunate in her circumstances, and more importantly, her claims are clearly *true*: from everything we have been shown, she does seem to have an ideal job (given her nature and talents), several very close friends and family members whom she loves deeply, a decent flat in a great city, and a degree of freedom envious to many (including her sister Helen). On top of that we know that she'll go on in the course of the film to get a pretty terrific boyfriend as well.

Given this, Kroustallis's remarks (when considering this very scene) that subjective happiness is the "the essence of Poppy Cross", that Poppy is somehow unwilling "to follow an objective version of happiness", and that she instead displays an "insistence that happiness is just feeling and believing to be happy (without the need to wait for external circumstances to corroborate this estimate)" are perplexing. (76) Poppy has in fact insisted on just the *opposite* of what Kroustallis suggests: she believes her subjective feelings of happiness to be firmly grounded in objective facts about her life, and given the details of her world offered to us in the film, it appears she's quite correct in her judgment.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> All this is compatible with the admission that Poppy is typically more chipper and resilient than most of us – the point is just that her happiness is not in tension with her objective circumstances but can reasonably be seen to involve an accurate recognition of just those circumstances. She is far from the delusional but plagued Pollyanna (blind to her misfortunes) that she would need to be to support Kroustallis's claims.

So, I've argued that Poppy's life does not provide us with philosophical support for a purely subjective conception of happiness, despite Kroustallis's assertions to the contrary. This doesn't mean such a conception is false, it just means that if there are grounds to support it we won't find them by investigating either Poppy's psychology or her objective circumstances. Also, it is important to recognize that *even if it was true* that Poppy's life was nothing more than a series of unfortunate events, it would not follow that her own subjective sense of herself as happy somehow demonstrates that "situations conducive to happiness are not necessary for happiness". (75) A defender of an objective conception will simply claim that Poppy is *mistaken* about whether she is genuinely happy, as any sophisticated objective conception of happiness will presumably grant that such mistakes are possible. Accordingly, Kroustallis's argumentative strategy here appears to be doubly flawed. Even if his take on Poppy was accurate, it wouldn't supply him with the resources he needs to defend a subjective conception of happiness as sufficient.

#### IV. Poppy's Eccentricity

What of Kroustallis's claim that Poppy's characterization is such that it provokes an alienating detachment in viewers, one which suspends enjoyment and thus (somehow) opens the door to philosophical insight? Kroustallis is surely right to suggest that aspects of Poppy's character can strike viewers as off-putting. There are two problems with Kroustallis's discussion of Poppy's oddness, however. First, as mentioned earlier, he seems to think the film demonstrates that there is some



sort of strong connection between Poppy's strange ways and her capacity to have a purely subjective conception of one's own happiness:

Even though spectators may enjoy her behavior and agree with the beliefs that Poppy Cross defends, they learn that her idiosyncratic disposition is a correlated consequence of that very idea of feel good happiness. [...] Spectators learn that feel good happiness is more than merely letting your worries go: it involves a behavior that verges on eccentricity when tackling difficult issues and situations. (81)

I've already argued that it is not plausible to see Poppy as embodying a subjective conception of happiness, so obviously I don't think this line of reasoning goes through, but again we have a situation where even if Kroustallis was right about Poppy his claims would be problematic. After all, how could the fact that one eccentric (fictional) character embodies a subjective conception of happiness show us that such eccentricity is a *prerequisite* for such happiness? The closest thing Kroustallis offers to an argument here is the claim that we can see the eccentricity and subjective happiness are linked because Poppy's happiness is not "contagious" to other non-eccentric characters, but it is unclear why he thinks we should expect such crude contagion to show up in the film to begin with. (79)<sup>8</sup>

The second and more important problem with Kroustallis's remarks on Poppy's eccentricity is that he fails to recognize that for many viewers the eccentricity that *initially* seems annoying or distancing comes to be seen as justifiable and even endearing. That is also clearly by design: the director Mike Leigh says as much in the DVD commentary track, pointing out that he carefully

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<sup>8</sup> Some studies (e.g. Fowler 2009) suggest that one's happiness can be influenced (to some extent) by the happiness of those around you, but as common sense suggests and the studies also demonstrate, there are clear limits on such contagion. (If there weren't, depression would be an easy enough thing to cure by simply altering one's surroundings!) Also, Kroustallis seems to ignore the fact that Poppy's friends (especially Zoe) seem to *delight* in her company. It is not implausible to think the Poppy has made Zoe's life significantly happier than it might otherwise have been.

arranges the introduction of Poppy so that we begin the film asking ourselves “Can I really spend two hours in the company of this young lady?”<sup>9</sup> However, he just as carefully constructs the film such that the narrative unfolds in a way that provides an answer of “Yes, it turns out I can.” In other words, what Kroustallis’s discussion of the film is missing is the awareness that *Happy-Go-Lucky* is an exercise in challenging the viewer to come to see the protagonist in a different light than is initially tempting.<sup>10</sup> Someone who we might at first be inclined to dismiss as a delusional and dim-witted Pollyanna comes to be appreciated as a perceptive, compassionate, and lovable figure. Luke De Smet, in a review for *Slant* magazine, describes the journey of the viewer eloquently. After pointing out that our initial impression of Poppy is likely to be that she is “annoying” and “overly extroverted and far too nice”, he goes on to explain why such judgments are premature:

The film is a character study, but more than that, it is a film about getting to know a person. [...] We are presented less with an arc than with a careful and thoughtful unfolding of her character, bit by bit. If we are used to our character studies beginning with subjects who are tidy and put together before gradually being pulled apart by their seams, *Happy-Go-Lucky* begins with someone scattered, whom we may be quick to judge, and gradually puts her together as a whole. [...] Leigh rightly reminds us that first impressions are not everything, as Poppy is not one to shy away from the darkness of the world, as in the case of the abused boy who acts out violently in her class, or the mentally ill homeless man who tells her stories neither she nor we can understand. The reality Poppy avoids is not reality as such, but a worldview where “I’m a realist” is simple code for “I’m a cynic.” [...] As

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<sup>9</sup> Commentary track on the 2009 Miramax DVD release of *Happy-Go-Lucky*. (12:02)

<sup>10</sup> Kroustallis, on the other hand, can’t seem to get past Poppy’s penchant for bawdy humor and her “made-to-annoy multi-colored underwear” (77). Mike Leigh’s remarks about such a response to Poppy are relevant and amusing: “She gets her bicycle stolen, and she deals with that philosophically, too. Then you see her behaving in a kind of outrageous way with her girlfriends, just having been out for a night on the tiles, you know? And from there on, you see her being responsible and sensible—but funny as well. So really, she’s there to get to know. And that constituency—and there is one—that says, “I wanted to throttle her by the end of the film, I couldn’t stand her,” well, I just can’t get it, really. I don’t know where they were when all those things were happening in the film. I don’t know where their heads were. Or rather I do know where they were: Their heads were up their asses, basically.” From: <http://blogs.walkerart.org/filmvideo/2008/09/30/moments-mike-leigh-bleak/>

we get to know Poppy, we realize that she is not naïve at all but, rather, that she is simply a person who has the audacity to be emotionally mature. She *has* seen the world for what it is and she *does* have the moral wherewithal to productively deal with it... (De Smet 2012)

De Smet's response to the film, while clearly in tension with Kroustallis's reading, is in line with the descriptions we get from Leigh and others involved in making *Happy-Go-Lucky*. In interviews in support of the film, Eddie Marsan (who plays Scott), describes how he came to see Poppy as something of an enlightened figure -- a "laughing Buddha, without the weight", and Sally Hawkins talks of how much she feels she learned from Poppy regarding how to better embrace life and its challenges.<sup>11</sup> As you might have guessed, this is similar to my own response to the film. I remember telling my wife during the first (bookstore) sequence "I'm not sure how much longer I can take this!" so put off was I by Poppy's chirpy ways. When I watch the film now, however, my vision of Poppy has been transformed. She just doesn't strike me as annoying, not even in those early scenes. This seems to me to be a remarkable cinematic achievement, and the reasons for it are what I want to focus on in the remainder of this essay.

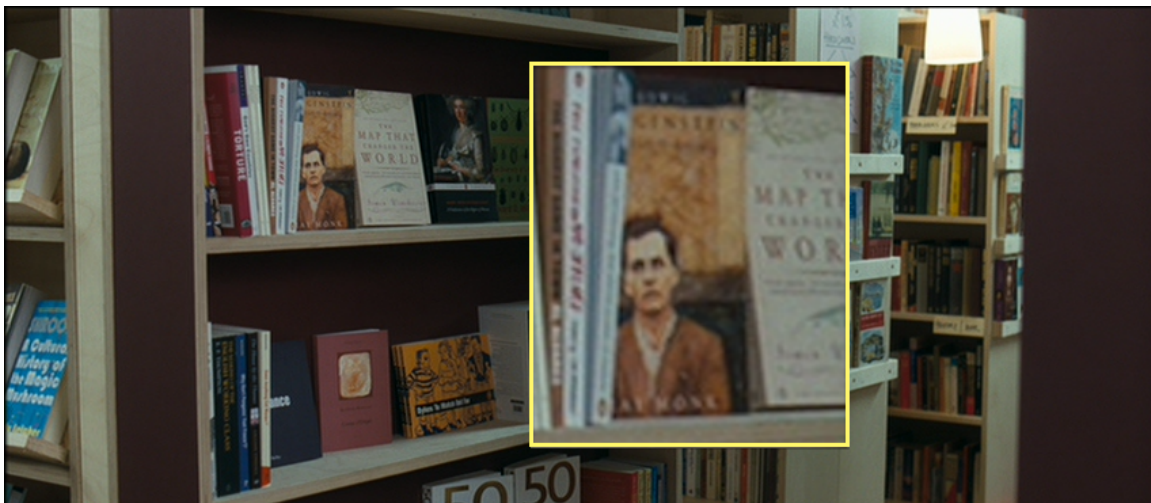
#### V. Wittgenstein and The World of the Happy

Philosophers are likely to notice a brief cameo appearance by Ludwig Wittgenstein early on in *Happy-Go-Lucky*: several shots in the bookstore have Poppy lingering in front of a copy of Ray Monk's highly-regarded biography *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. (Monk 1991). Its cover features a painting based on a photograph of

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<sup>11</sup> In the "Happy-In-Character" bonus feature of the Miramax 2009 DVD for *Happy-Go-Lucky*,

Wittgenstein looking particularly (though not uncharacteristically) dour. The film even offers a shot of just the bookshelf with Monk's biography in sharper focus.



It is not clear whether this placement is intentional; she's in a bookstore, after all, and lots of other books are bound to be present and to show up on camera. The book does seem ideally located for our discernment, however, and it is clear enough that Leigh pays attention to details, including details concerning which books show

up in his films.<sup>12</sup> Intentional or not, it is a provocative juxtaposition: Happy-go-lucky Poppy alongside Ludwig, a tormented thinker who nonetheless not only sought after happiness but who thought its achievement both terrifically important and extremely puzzling.

Notoriously, at one point in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein enigmatically asserts “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.” (Wittgenstein 1922). What did Wittgenstein mean by this? As with the other often-cryptic statements that come towards the end of that work, it is hard to say, and interpreters disagree.<sup>13</sup> One thing he pretty clearly did *not* mean is that the world of the “happy man” involves different *facts*. Rather, he seems to be suggesting that the happy person comes to see the facts of the world under a different aspect. This notion of “aspect seeing” came to play a large role in his later thought, but elements of it show up in his early writings as well. Perhaps the most famous discussion comes in the *Philosophical Investigations*, where he introduces the image of the duck-rabbit:<sup>14</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> Later in this film we see a copy of *Hideous Kinky* by Esther Freud, the placement of which Leigh remarks on in the DVD commentary. For more on Leigh's book references, see Markel (2011).

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein (1957: 194) As it happens some interpreters see the early Wittgenstein as embracing a solipsistic view that amounts to the sort of “subjective” notion of happiness Kroustallis wrongly attributes to Poppy. (Perloff 2000, Kober 2006) I'm inclined to think that even when writing the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was not as idealist or solipsistic as these interpreters claim. However, if one insists, I'm happy for readers to take my remarks in this section as a projection of insights from “later” Wittgenstein back onto an early remark.

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein (1958: § 118)

The person who sees a duck and the person who sees a rabbit are both in agreement about the facts: they both see the same bits of ink on the same white page. Where they differ is in how they interpret the facts – how the data strikes them. Importantly, both are *correct* in the sense that both are making reasonable interpretations given the data. This just happens to be a case where more than one take on the image is plausible and defensible. It does not follow that there are no *wrong* answers to the question “what is that a drawing of?” The person who sees a spider in those ink marks is not just seeing the image “under a different aspect” – they are making an *error*. (Wittgenstein is gesturing at a kind of pluralism here, not offering an endorsement of an “anything goes” relativism.)<sup>15</sup>

What has this to do with Poppy? It is not uncommon for one variety of “unhappy man”, a cynic posing as a “realist” of the sort mentioned above by De Smet, to rationalize his or her misery through a world-weary ideology according to which only the cranky appreciate the real facts of life. On this vision, others achieve happiness through an evasive delusion, and it is the rare breed of courageous loners who can pierce the veil and see the truth. Unfortunately the truth brings with it the impossibility of ever attaining the easy bliss of the ignorant, but this is something the jaded “realist” just has to come to accept as one of the many crosses he or she must bear. (As Ecclesiastes laments: “He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.”) We see something of this worldview in Scott, with his bitter and paranoid conspiracies, but you don’t have to be as damaged and immature as Scott to feel the

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<sup>15</sup> In my thoughts on these issues I’ve been influenced by Wisdom (1945) who offers an early “Wittgensteinian” treatment of something close to “aspect seeing” as applied to religious belief and aesthetic judgment.

pull of this Weltanschauung.<sup>16</sup> I'll admit I've certainly felt it, and I suspect many of you have as well. So, apparently, has Luke De Smet, who elaborates on the features of this stance perceptively:

The reflective person, we assume, must, of course, overcome the pain and misery of the world before coming to terms with life. We are allergic to those for whom happiness comes naturally, as if they are children who are inheriting a fortune they have not worked to achieve. This is why so many of us may react negatively when we encounter a character such as Poppy.

As De Smet notes, the movie unfolds to reveal Poppy challenging this sort of miserabilist perspective directly and powerfully.<sup>17</sup> While at first we see her as perhaps just another of the deluded dreamers, attentive viewers cannot deny that Poppy is actually both highly intelligent and utterly aware of the facts of the world. Her intelligence becomes manifest gradually, as we notice her discussions with Zoe over Paul Auster's *Mr. Vertigo*, or appreciate her sometimes very witty banter, or admire her facility while teaching lessons the classroom.<sup>18</sup> Her compassionate and sensitive interactions with her students, with the disoriented stranger, and with Scott show us that she's remarkably perceptive. Indeed, she seems to offer us something of an ideal model of what Iris Murdoch seemed to have in mind when she spoke of both love and justice as requiring a certain kind of "loving attention." (Murdoch 1970)<sup>19</sup> Poppy's attention is such that it is clear she is in *no way* in denial about the sufferings of the world. Nonetheless, she manages to face the world with a

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<sup>16</sup> A better representative of the worldview I'm characterizing is perhaps Mike Thewlis's character Johnny in Leigh's *Naked*.

<sup>17</sup> In an interview, Mike Leigh at one point described *Happy-Go-Lucky* as an "anti-miserabilist" film. See: [http://www.jewishjournal.com/film/article/habonim\\_spirit\\_influences\\_work\\_of\\_director\\_mike\\_leigh\\_in\\_happy\\_go\\_lucky\\_200](http://www.jewishjournal.com/film/article/habonim_spirit_influences_work_of_director_mike_leigh_in_happy_go_lucky_200)

<sup>18</sup> Leigh makes this point about the *Mr. Vertigo* reference on the DVD commentary.

<sup>19</sup> For more on Murdoch and loving attention as applied to a film, see Wolf (2014). For a more general discussion see Jollimore (2011).

brave openness and cheerfulness that we (with her aid) come to see as at least as valid (and certainly more attractive) a response to the facts of the world as the cynicism of the sophisticated depressive. Hers is a “different world” in *that* sense, and *Happy-Go-Lucky* makes her perspective so vivid and compelling it can perhaps even help some of us (in the unhappy camp) manage an aspect shift to that other – no less real – world.

#### VI. William James and The Will to Believe

I suspect my last remark has provoked incredulity in some readers (especially those of the grumpy “realist” persuasion).<sup>20</sup> Isn’t it a bit much to suppose that a film could initiate a gestalt switch as mammoth as coming to inhabit a happy world rather than an unhappy world? Well, yes, I admit this is unlikely, and in my case I can certainly only claim intermittent travels to the world of the happy, but I think *Happy-Go-Lucky* offers us insight that is valuable even if we find ourselves unable to consistently see things as Poppy does. It helps us to appreciate that, though perhaps we cannot become permanent residents in her world, it was simply a pose on our part to presume that the unhappy have a monopoly on contact with reality. At the very least this can promote a certain respect and appreciation for those like Poppy who manage to consistently embody a more uplifting form of life.

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<sup>20</sup> A different source of resistance from the unhappy might take the form of pointing to the psychological literature on “depressive realism” which suggests that depressed people really are more capable of certain types of objective judgments than those who are not depressed. While such studies are extremely interesting, they remain controversial, and the possible epistemic benefits of depression need to be considered alongside the well-documented cognitive biases that also accompany the condition. (For an overview which concludes that depressives are “sadder but they are not wiser”, see Allen 2007)



I think there is a helpful analogy here between the way in which this film can allow us to appreciate a less melancholy vision of the world as nonetheless *rational* and the discussion of faith and reason offered by William James in his classic essay “The Will to Believe”. James considers the not unfamiliar or unrelated character of a hard-nosed skeptic who is confident that his path is the rational one and who dismisses those he sees as more gullible as clearly irrational (if not also immoral). James’s response involves pointing out that our epistemic values here might seem straightforward: *seek truth and avoid error*, but a bit of reflection shows that these two goals do not always coincide and instead can come to be in tension. Which side one chooses in such cases (i.e., whether to prioritize achieving access to new truths or to prefer protecting oneself from error) is not a decision dictated by reason alone, but has its base in one’s fundamental sensibility -- what James calls our “passional nature”:

We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life. Biologically considered, our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as veracity, and he who says, “Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!” merely shows his own preponderant horror of becoming a dupe. He may be critical of many of his desires and fears, but this fear he slavishly obeys. He cannot imagine any one questioning its force. For my own part, I have also a horror of being duped but I believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world... (18-19)

The skeptic presumes that his own outlook is somehow certified by Reason in a way his opponent’s is not, but James’s point is that at base both sides are moved by sources best thought of as arational, and each can build from such sources

legitimate and reasonable world views.<sup>21</sup> Now the undupable skeptic need not be identical to the grumpy “realist” discussed earlier, but I hope the analogy and possible overlap between the two are clear enough. In both camps there are figures who too often misguidedly presume their own world view is the only one that can count as fully rational. And in both there can be a certain kind of cowardness masquerading as courage. After all, why aren’t more of us like Poppy? No doubt in large part it is because it can be quite *scary* to be so open to the world and to other people. (It is thoroughly appropriate that bold Poppy’s unhappy foil, Scott, seems almost entirely motivated by fear.) It is *frightening* to risk looking like a patsy, a fool, or a clown. Both skepticism of the sort James mocks and cynicism-posing-as-realism are *easy* in this regard.<sup>22</sup> Easy but potentially pernicious, especially when they are bundled with tendency to disparage the alternative perspective as somehow intellectually inferior.

Again, granting such points is unlikely to allow for a conversion experience for those in the more discontented and disbelieving camps – it is often unclear just how much control we have over our “passional nature”, after all. But becoming aware of the reasonableness (and sometimes even the superiority) of outlooks that previously seemed easy to dismiss is by no means a trivial or unimportant feat. That *Happy-Go-Lucky* helps viewers towards these insights makes it an especially edifying cinematic accomplishment.

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<sup>21</sup> There are of course limits as to how far one can embrace “seek truth” without becoming epistemically irresponsible, just as there at times when the goal of “avoiding error” can be taken to an unhelpful extreme. Also, one need not be as promiscuous as James in his willingness to apply this lesson to belief in God in order to appreciate his fundamental point. (Just as one can accept his larger analysis of “genuine options” without agreeing that religious belief, or some other particular example of his, involves such an option.)

<sup>22</sup> This isn’t to say they involve no real psychic costs. As with nihilism (cf. *The Big Lebowski*), they can be exhausting.

## VII. Conclusion

The capacity of *Happy-Go-Lucky* for allowing viewers to come to appreciate Poppy's perspective (and perhaps even to share that perspective) suggests yet another sense in which Wittgenstein's notion of seeing aspects is relevant to our discussion. I mentioned earlier that when I revisit the film now I am struck by how my own perspective of Poppy has undergone a transformation: she no longer strikes me as irritating. The film has succeeded in altering my vision such that a person who I couldn't help but see as obnoxious I now see as something much closer to the "laughing Buddha" described by Eddie Marsan. *Happy-Go-Lucky* has helped me undergo a certain kind of aspect shift in my own perception of that character. I take it that this sort of shift (unlike that of the duck/rabbit image) is not value neutral – it is a *good* thing that the film can enable such a shift, just as Wittgenstein viewed it as a good thing when one could come to see the world as a "happy man".

Perhaps, however, talk of good or bad perspectives is out of place here. Maybe the right conclusion to draw is that I just now see Poppy *differently*, in a way that is equally justified as my earlier understanding. Perhaps also Kroustallis has simply seen *Happy-Go-Lucky* through a different (but not inferior) aspect, one which has the same support of the facts as the rival interpretation I have presented.<sup>23</sup> While these are of course possibilities I cannot entirely foreclose, I hope the preceding discussion has made clear that the evidence in support of such suggestions is lacking. I'm confident that, in part through being introduced to

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<sup>23</sup> For a helpful discussion of the relevance of Wittgenstein's treatment of aspect seeing for film interpretation generally, see Cavell (1981).

Poppy's capacity for loving attention, I'm now able to see her with the sort of attention she deserves. On the other hand, to put things bluntly and in the terms that I employed when introducing the duck/rabbit image, I'm also confident that Kroustallis sees a spider.

*Acknowledgments: Thanks to Candice Delmas, Joseph Mai, Aaron Smuts, and Susan Watson for helpful comments.*

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