

CHAPTER 15

IDEALISTIC DISSATISFACTION

That we have not discovered sufficient guidance on what will make us happy by empiric or idealistic methods does not necessarily mean that our life has to be a disaster. These methods may provide us with some basic guidance, with general parameters within which we can subsist. Our embeddedness in our environment may present us with additional acceptable modes and choices that allow us to survive and thrive in some respects. Asking for more may seem to be unrealistic and overwrought. We are taught and we tell ourselves that we have to fit into what is available, into what is possible. Our experience assures us that the world is filled with adversities. To the extent we cannot overcome them, we have to cope with them. But we also know that we may never get what we want if we do not know what that is and if we do not pursue it. If we want to maximize our happiness within what is or can be made available, we have to follow our dreams. This is an intuition that we all appear to have. The problem seems to be that we might not know very well what to do with that insight. What we want and how to best pursue what we want may not be developed very well in our mind. While our needs and our experiences are likely to give us some ideas, their vagueness may remind us of the notion we retain from a dream. This may be the reason we identify our ideals as dreams.

Identifying our dreams of happiness and making sense of them appears to be difficult. We may not have certainty how many of our objectives are genuine. Needs mandate that we act in certain ways or ranges of ways to satisfy them. Yet our other needs and our environment provide further parameters for our activity. Our pursuits are entangled with one another and the behavior of other humans and other independent forces. This interchange may form and influence our perception, rational thoughts, emotions, and behavior. In the correlation of our needs with one another and with our environment, distinguishing the sources that shape our circumstances is often hard. Our needs shape one another. Also, we shape our environment according to our needs, and our needs and their expressions have been and continue to be shaped by our environment. What we genuinely want might easily be barred from developing or become overcast, convoluted, varied, directed, or lost in these complexities that dictate our existence. Not being familiar with what will make us happy may make us travel down a pathway that does not satisfy our needs. It is likely to prevent us from living true to ourselves. We, other persons, and circumstances may set us on a track to think and feel in ways, to conduct ourselves in man-

ners, to internalize and represent principles that are disingenuous. We take a profession, select relationships, choose surroundings, and pursue a lifestyle within the possibilities of our circumstances. Before we realize it, our life is set onto a course over which we only seem to have limited control. Once we have embarked on our path, the momentum of our trajectory does not seem to favor significant deviations even as new influences appear. Our mind seems to be set on continuing that trajectory with no or few enduring deflections. As we become familiar with the conditions that keep us on our pathway, we may become increasingly adept in complying with the demands of that trajectory. Although we might be nominally successful, we may not be able to find sufficient satisfaction. This may prompt us to conclude that we need to increase or intensify our pursuits rather than consider whether we might be going down the wrong avenue. An additional blindness may befall us if or as long as we do not technically succeed in our pursuits or only succeed after incurring significant risk or cost. The complexities of our relation with our environment and our lack of understanding ourselves may prevent us from knowing whether our unhappiness stems from the frustration of capable pursuits or whether our pursuits are inherently incapable of securing the satisfaction we seek. We may continue to struggle for purported feats of happiness without knowing whether our pursuits can bring us the happiness we desire.

The occurrences of unquestionable success that present us with inexplicable desolation may be rare because our pursuits regularly remain imperfect and offer us remaining reasons to worry. Yet we may sense that our behavior and circumstances are not in all respects what we desire, that aspects of our needs are being shortchanged, underdeveloped, forgotten, or suppressed. We may detect in a variety of ways unrealized wishes that are going un-lived. Our body may send us signals of upheaval and strain. We may feel that we are wasting our time, that our existence is without purpose. We may lack interest in matters that should be exciting and rewarding. We may feel empty, have problems concentrating, or wish time to pass. We may sense that our heart is not invested, that we are being held back. We may feel uncomfortable, alienated, subdued, or trapped. We may rather do something else, be somewhere or with someone else, or turn into someone else. What we have experienced and stand to experience may not appear enough. We may sense that there is, or wish for, something more. We may fear we might die without having found fulfillment. Our struggle with such or similar symptoms demonstrates that something in us compares our state of happiness with an ideal. However obscured, we all possess an impression of happiness in us that may contrast with our state of af-

fairs. We all carry an inherent but undefined knowledge of happiness, and we possess a dream of an existence in harmony with who we are. Even if the specifics may be elusive, we can recognize if our experiences are removed from our ideal of happiness. That ideal may be negatively defined. As long as we feel pain, we have not reached it. But we may also have strong positive indications. We may know that a higher state of happiness exists and can be achieved because we are likely to have experienced it in our childhood when our needs might have been reliably satisfied. The love of caretakers, the security of being attended, the warm feeling of effortless satisfaction let us experience happiness as a seemingly endless present without worries. These experiences joined a broader basic predisposition toward happiness. It extended to the awareness of our tangible and mental faculties. It included our senses, the gifts and possibilities of the world around us to sample and use, and an apparently unrestrained potential to experience and enjoy them. These conditions did not only convey contemporary happiness. The ease with which we experienced happiness created an innocence that imparted us with confidence that the future would be as happy or even happier because we would grow and learn. In the absence of contrary experiences, we trusted that the world was friendly and that we could create happiness for ever more with the help of our faculties and our environment. We believed that pain and its causes would not last, and we had no awareness of the limitation of our life by death or that our experiences would haunt us. Anything we imagined seemed possible. That feeling itself formed a great source of happiness for us.

Arguably, such idyllic circumstances might have been reserved only to some and maybe none of us. Our existence may have involved hardships and denial from the earliest time of sensation or soon after our arrival. We may have suffered traumatic neglect or abuse. Much of the pain and fear we may feel may have arisen from the denial of our needs and resulting poor conditions for happiness in our childhood. But we are bound to have experienced at least some incidents of satisfaction with regard to some of our needs. These occasions continue to serve us as general paradigms for what it means to be satisfied. Even if we were happy only for moments and these experiences were far from ideal, there appears to have been a time when we could be happy as a state of concentrated consciousness that filled us completely and permitted us to forget at that moment everything bad. We had this open mindset in spite of experiencing pain or understanding that it would catch up with us again. While we may look to regain particularities of happiness we felt as a child, we may also yearn for the purity of happiness we could experience then even if its occurrences were rare.

This original happiness was subsequently flawed by our discovery that circumstances differed or changed from what had formed the basis of our consciousness of happiness. Our existence was soon encumbered by experiences of repeated and lasting limitations, of struggle against deprivation as our habitual state of our being, and of difficulties to recover from frustrations. These adversities, our exertions to learn how we might surmount them, our fight against them, and the experience of not being able to overcome them subsequently came to preoccupy a large portion of our existence. Worries and fears crept into our mind that ever since seem to loom over us and overshadow and weaken every accomplishment. At times, we are reminded of our early impressions of pure happiness. We may even have occasions in which we approach our childlike enjoyment. For a moment we appear to be able to forget our struggle, its costs, and our despair of not being able to reach the happiness we seek. Yet, in the end, our grasp for unconditional bliss is immediately surrounded and subdued by memories, impressions, or anticipations of pain. We seem to have lost our ability of experiencing pure joy. We also appear to have lost our resilience, our expectation, possibly even our hope that our future will be happy. We may have rational explanations of why the purity and optimism of our original happiness could not continue. We may dismiss it as a childish illusion. We know more about the imperfections in us and the world around us. We have grown up and are hence charged to watch out for ourselves instead of being pampered. We have more complex wishes and needs. Then again, regardless of such insights, we mourn the loss of the unconditional, unbridled, simple happiness we once knew when something good happened. We grieve over our loss of confidence that whatever bad may happen can and will be overcome. We may be certain that these states will be unattainable, but we cannot help yearning for them. This may form our greatest challenge as adults.

Our childhood impressions of happiness give us powerful ideas of what happiness is. They create memories and expectations of well-being that are hard to erase from our mind. Although we may forget the specific incidents of this happiness, vestiges stay with us for our entire existence and define our ideal of happiness. What makes these fundamental experiences of happiness so particularly powerful is that they transpired for the most part without our effort, planning, or implementation. They were free of risk and cost concerns. They resulted from the caring by others, our attitude, and circumstances. They were often caused by small and inconsequential delights. We were unconditional recipients of this happiness as a gift. We did not have to earn it in a pursuit. Because the circumstances of that happiness are remote

from our contemporary and recent circumstances, they may assume a dreamlike and mythical quality and may be enhanced by our embellishment. The same circumstances that made us happy then might not keep their former joyous import if we experienced them now because we are different. Nevertheless, our recall of this original happiness sets the benchmark for what we consider as happy. It constitutes our ideal, and we cannot help striving to experience it again. The contrast with persistent difficulties in the satisfaction of our needs fills us with dissatisfaction. We might sense frustration, sadness, or anger about this unrewarded desire, that we fall short of constructing the happiness we once had or deemed possible, that we cannot live up to our memories and ambitions of happiness. Our failure to attain our ideal in spite of a commitment of all our capacities, all our studying, planning, and implementation efforts inflicts lasting pain on us. The specific causes as well as their presence and strength may be different in each of us. Impressions of this pain may occasionally strike our mind or may form a general undercurrent. Our lingering inability to soothe that pain unavoidably increases its intensity. Eventually, these signals may become too strong for us to ignore and urge us to address their causes.

If we are not sufficiently knowledgeable or equipped to remove the causes for that pain, we have impulses to find releases or absorption for it. We may focus on pursuits of needs in which we can reach satisfaction. But as these become exhausted, we understand that their fulfillment cannot effectively surmount our remaining pain, or if such deemed replacements are unavailable, we may turn our focus to manners of pursuit that can offer a respite from our pain by diverting our mind. To serve that objective, a diversion must produce its own tasks. By solving diversionary tasks, we may be able to decrease our frustrations that we projected into these diversions. Yet a resolution of a task would terminate its function. We may therefore also seek diversion in new, reiterative, or continuing challenges. Although this might add a second layer of problems and of coping requirements if we cannot resolve these tasks, that pain may be easier for us to carry. We may even welcome it to distract us from the original pain. Notwithstanding the temporary effectiveness of such distractive mechanisms, the original pain may remain unaddressed and unresolved and may keep festering. It may require increasingly strong coping mechanisms and an increasing share of our resources to hold it at bay. Both aspects may combine to render a strategy that was intended to help us cope with our pain to instead increase our pain. In some of us, the failure to resolve the underlying pain and the dissatisfaction with diversions may develop to a point at which we cannot cope any longer. We may find the discrep-

ancies between the reality we experience and our ideal of happiness unbearable. The contradictions may be so severe that we cannot continue in this mode. Our unresolved and growing pain may drive us to reorient our efforts from its suppression through diversion and to take fundamental action to change our state of affairs. Reaching such a situation might be dangerous if we cannot instantly ascertain or develop a competent strategy to improve our happiness. If we dismiss our distractions but cannot find a way to remediate our inability to find happiness effectively, we face our pain without a buffer. This immediacy and apparent inescapability may overwhelm us. It may cause us to resort to desperate self-destructive or externally destructive actions. Not knowing how we can escape our pain, we may attempt to end it without addressing its sources. Instead, we may attack our sensory and our other mental equipment, the physiological structures that allow us to register and suffer the pain. We may turn against ourselves, or we may lash out against persons and other aspects of our environment that we may falsely or overproportionally hold responsible for our pain. Even if we legitimately fight external causes, this can only cure a part of our deprivations. Many of them may only come to bear because we do not understand our needs and do not competently pursue them.

Our fear of being unable to cope with our pain in the absence of distractions may prompt us to continue distractions while we try to mend the deficiencies they cover. We may be able to establish parallel mechanisms by which we can address part of our frustration with distractions and another part through countermeasures. We may find a middle ground that permits us to live with our pain. With such an approach, fewer of us may be driven to extremes of desperation. Yet, by offering relief, such a pattern may prevent us from building our motivation and skills to comprehensively remove the causes of our unhappiness. We may be prepared to settle into such a mediocrity. If we can find or fashion pursuits that fulfill the principal functionalities of our needs, remaining discrepancies between our ideal and our reality may be manageable by distractions without further addressing their causes. We may continue to suffer and become skilled at managing moderate forms of pain while keeping our existence on a stable and familiar track. We may successfully avoid examining our lack of happiness and its causes more closely. We may regard this compromised but relatively stable existence as an accomplishment that takes us as far as our circumstances allow. Although we might be open to and hope for improvements, we may keep our lingering disappointments subdued. But we might also reject any idea of betterment to avoid having to acknowledge a seemingly unfulfillable desire that causes us pain.

The reluctance we sense in dealing with the source of our pain more fundamentally is only superficially attributable to our fear of the technical burdens of trials or the availability of competent diversions. The pain inflicted by technical burdens may soon be matched and exceeded by the pain of failing to solve the dissatisfaction of our needs. Further, diversions cannot offer a permanent solution. Their very purpose is to accommodate the source of our pain, to make it more bearable. At best, they can merely subdue or modulate our dissatisfaction. Our willingness to suffer that pain instead of resolving the underlying pain has deeper roots. It is based on our ignorance of what our needs are or what will satisfy them and our resistance and deemed inability to find out. We may also doubt whether we can obtain and successfully apply the means required to make us happy. We may resent being drawn into trials and uncertain pursuits, particularly if they constitute a radical departure from our familiar ways. We may be exhausted from trying or afraid to be hurt by false hope. As long as our circumstances are bearable, we may try to hold on to them. We may be accustomed to them and reluctant to jeopardize their relative benefits and security. We may feel uneasy about replacing our faulty but familiar situation with a promise of more happiness. We may fear that we have followed our path too far to be able to change or that we might fail in our departure and incur more pain. We may be concerned that we will unearth deportment that makes us ashamed, disappointed, or angry with ourselves or that may cause such reactions toward others or toward us in others. We may refuse to admit that a portion of our chances to experience happiness has irreversibly been lost. We may dread the judgment by others and possible recriminations connected to change. We may want to forget the pain of the experiences that shaped our limitations. We may be afraid of failing again, of encountering helplessness, embarrassment, and frustration. We may suffer from the apprehension that the pain we may incur in attempting to address our pain may be worse than the pain we would feel from not addressing it.

As a result of these fears, we may seek safety and stop short of covering the complete distance of our desire. The threat of additional pain if we should try to address the pain of certain unfulfilled wishes creates a counterbalance that can motivate us to turn away from the fulfillment of our needs. As a result, we may try to settle into a condition where our fear of examining our needs and following our wishes more intensely keeps our pain of disconnection from our ideal of happiness at bay. Depending on the intensity of desire and fear with regard to each of our needs, a point may be reached for each need where our desires and fears hold each other in a stalemate. These stalemates

may be embattled in the beginning. Still, in time, we may not struggle much with our positions anymore and learn to live with them. Much of our behavior induced by these standoffs may become habitual and automatic. Habitual impasses may be adjusted and boundaries may be occasionally moved by incidents that increase or decrease our desires or the fears that are holding us back. Yet, to protect us from the pain of ongoing struggles, we may be able to create a state that causes the disengagement of our desires and fears and provides us with stability most of the time. The boundaries between our fears and desires may therefore not be delineated too well. Rather than constituting distinct lines, they may resemble danger zones into which we dare not venture or dare not venture too far. As long as we do not push the fulfillment of our needs past the neutral zone and invade the area of our fears, we may perceive that there are no internal boundaries for the pursuit of our needs. We may be able to conceal our fears because our activities may remain within an area where they are not being activated. But the unrelenting force of our needs is bound to push against these boundaries and protections. If we experience dissatisfaction in excess of what can be diverted, our needs will eventually encounter our fears.

Where our fears are confronted by our needs, they may disguise their resentments by references to purportedly rational reasons. They may suggest that our wishes are not in our interest, that they damage our chances for happiness. Moreover, we may pretend to find advantages in what we do not dare to change. We might tell ourselves that our situation is sufficient, that we can be satisfied with where we are. We might induce the belief in us that we are doing exactly what we want to do, that we are exactly where we want to be. Even if we do not pretend to like our circumstances, we may talk ourselves into sticking with the choices we made. We may try to make reticence and intransigence our virtue. We may persuade ourselves that our circumstances are unchangeable. We may resign to the idea that we will have to cope with them to get by, that they are part of how the world works, that we need to adjust to reality. We may tell ourselves that we are not going to run from the responsibilities we have incurred, that we remain true to our principles or our obligations. We may try to find solace in the notion that we are sacrificing our happiness for a greater cause, for somebody else's happiness, and that this compensates for our loss. We may talk ourselves into the notion that we did make the right decision and that any doubts must be invalid, must be signs of temptation or temporary weakness. We may determine that our doubts are not real, that we experience lapses in judgment or bouts of temporary depression, or that our unease is caused by superficial disturbances.

Many of the pretenses fueled by our fear and lack of knowledge are linked to diversion strategies. This combination may result in an underdeveloped will to succeed. It may prevent us from acting upon the pain of unfulfilled or underfulfilled needs. We may resign to an existence permeated by an undercurrent of unease, an often nameless sense of loss, pain, and frustration. We may hope that happiness will find us someday. We may soldier on and try to keep our deeper-seated misgivings to ourselves. We may try to console ourselves by thinking that it could be worse. We may be glad to escape the deeper questions we cannot seem to answer and the deeper challenges of our needs we cannot seem to overcome. Still, in spite of all our attempts to convince and soothe ourselves, continuing the impasse between our fears and the pain of dissatisfaction about unrewarded desires necessarily translates into less than blissful conditions. It renders us prone to manipulation by those who can profit from our lack of confidence, fear, and weakness for subterfuges and diversions. At best, it produces an existence of quiet and uneventful denial and suffering. The parameters we set for ourselves or permit others to set for us combine and interweave with the factual circumstances of our existence that place restraints on how much happiness we can achieve. We may accept external limits for similar reasons and under similar subterfuges as those we apply to our internal boundaries. We may fear the pain and upheaval that revealing and attacking these external boundaries might bring.

The subjective and objective parameters in which we operate to fulfill our needs may leave us in a situation that is neither greatly happy nor greatly unhappy. Much of our existence may take its position in a purgatory of getting by. In this state, we may even build resolve, investigate, plan, and prepare to take charge, yet merely to hesitate and stall. We may expend vastly more time in this purgatory of happiness than in the pursuit of our dreams. Our experiences of happiness may appear like islands of brightness that are endangered to be swallowed by a sea of darkness. These impressions may incentivize us to adhere to these islands and to avoid venturing too far from them. Some of us manage to live in this condition without ever addressing the causes of our dissatisfaction. But such an existence where we keep the signals of our dissatisfied wishes under control comes at a price. We face a lifetime of investing resources to keep our dissatisfaction limited and to control the fallout of our coping efforts. There is no victory in enduring such containment efforts. However small the discrepancy between our reality and our unanswered needs might be, maintaining it results in a steady drain on our strength and in dissatisfaction. Because our wishes will not subside, we have to dedicate a portion of our efforts to

keeping us from trying to reach them and addressing our pain over that fact. These efforts are wasted. They are missing in endeavors that could bring us happiness. Beyond that, they create an existence that is tarnished by fear and haunted by unfulfilled wishes, regret for lost opportunities, and wondering what could have been. We cannot escape bitterness over times spent in suspension of our wishes and under the influence of our fears. We cannot avoid the impression that we have not been living up to our potential. The continuing standoff between our desires and fears causes unrequited desires to transform into pain. Although that pain is canceled by our fears in terms of motivation, it combines with our fears to form an encumbrance on our happiness.

If we are to overcome the established stalemates in which our defense mechanisms stand pitted against improvements of our happiness, we must take countermeasures. It would appear that if we could reconnect with sensations of our original happiness and contrast these feelings with the present condition of our happiness, we might derive sufficient motivation to regain what we have lost. Recalling the tenets of our original happiness might permit us to recapture a basic orientation of what matters to us and might assist us in building clear objectives for our wishes. Yet, even if this approach can develop our readiness to improve our happiness and deliver some insights regarding the roots of our needs, it may be inadequate to develop a full insight into what will make us happy. The unencumbered happiness we felt then appears impossible now. The naive impressions of potential, of boundless opportunity and resources, of an everlasting present, and of a benevolent world have been replaced by mounting contrary experiences. We are now on our own. What once came about without our effort or only with little prompting now appears impossible or to generally require our assiduous planning, engagement, and the marshaling of resources that are relatively difficult to obtain. With these challenges, an improved ability to understand our limitations and our chances to fulfill our needs has set in. Our personal capacities have dramatically improved. That should help us substantially in devising strategies to obtain happiness. However, we and our ambitions have changed not only in terms of awareness and technical responsiveness. In the course of our development, our needs have become more complicated. We did not understand the full scope of our needs then. They have expanded and transformed in many respects. Some were only present as beginnings or potentials, and all have become more articulated. These complications indicate that identifying what will render us happy is not a matter of focusing back but that we have to find our current ideas of happiness. The next section investigates such a new approach.