

## Honorable Mention

Thinking about Eudaimonia with Kids

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### *Abstract*

Fifth-graders are shown to be capable of conducting a fruitful discussion on what it would be like to be perfectly happy. In fact their discussion responds well to concerns that Socrates expresses in Plato's dialogue, *Gorgias*. Taking part with children in discussions like the ones reported on here may liberate us adults from a purely "deficit conception of childhood." It may also encourage us to foster a climate of respect for our children that will help them respect themselves and further develop their capacity to reflect for themselves on the great question of how to lead a life.

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Many philosophers have tried to tell us what happiness is. But no philosopher has come up with an account that everyone accepts. Yet, in a certain way, we all know well enough what happiness is. As Aristotle explains in Book I of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, happiness (*eudaimonia*) is that of which the following two things are true: (1) almost everyone wants it (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.4), and (2) no one wants it simply for the sake of something else, but all of us want it for its own sake. (1.7) One way to put the second point is this: It would be absurd to ask *why* we want to be happy. We can ask, sensibly, "Is being happy the most important thing in life?" but not, at least not sensibly, "Why would anyone want to be happy?"

Let's consider the second point for a moment. Suppose you tell me that you want to buy a new pair of shoes. I may sensibly ask you why you want to buy a new pair of shoes, since you already have several. You might tell me that you are tired of the old ones and you now want shoes that are more fashionable. I could then ask you why it is important to you to have fashionable shoes. You might say that you want to look good at work, or at a party. But if, somewhere along the line, you answer that you just want a new pair of shoes to make you happy, it would be absurd or nonsensical for me to ask, "And why do you want to be happy?"

These two characteristics of happiness -- that virtually everyone wants it and that is absurd or nonsensical to ask *why* one wants it -- provide what we can call a "formal" characterization" of what happiness is. But they do not really give us any help in trying to give a *material* characterization of happiness – *what it is like to be happy* – let alone an account of why it might be important to satisfy our desire for happiness, as opposed, say, to doing our duty, or promoting the happiness of others. About all those matters philosophers have been, and still are, in disagreement. .

Precisely because happiness is something virtually everyone wants and something we want for its own sake, not merely instrumentally, it is important for us to reflect on what happiness really is, both to order our lives better and to come to a better understanding of what is important in life. One thing we need to think about is the relation between pleasures of various kinds and happiness itself, as well as as the relation between happiness and success in life. To fail to reflect on these matters is leave ourselves without adequate long-term goals and with unintegrated, and possibly conflicting and frustrating, short-term goals.

You might think that reflecting on the nature and importance of happiness is indeed important for adults, and especially for college students, but inappropriate even for high school students, let alone for younger children. One reason for thinking this would be that, before college age, students do not have the cognitive capacity to think well about the nature or importance of happiness. You might think this because you have been reading some developmental psychology, which makes no place for the capacity to do philosophy until very late adolescence. Or you might think this because you don't remember thinking any very philosophical thoughts until you took your first philosophy class in college. I want to convince you that children, even young children, are capable of reflecting well on the nature and importance of happiness by giving you some examples of 5<sup>th</sup>-graders doing just that.

In the dialogue, *Gorgias*, Plato has Socrates compare the various desires and appetites we have to jars – in fact, to *empty* jars, or at least to *somewhat* empty jars, in the case of those appetites and desires that have not been satisfied, and to *full* jars in the case of those that have been satisfied. The self-controlled person, Socrates suggests to his conversation partner, Callicles, has full jars, whereas the undisciplined person has leaky jars, which constantly need filling up. Socrates thinks that the person with full jars, being a contented person, is the happier one, whereas Callicles disagrees. “The one who has filled himself up has no pleasure anymore,” Callicles says (494a). By contrast, according to him, the person who has lots of appetites that constantly need to be satisfied will be the happy person.

Socrates decides to put the “leaky-jar” thesis of Callicles to the test. “Tell me,” he says, “whether a man who has an itch and scratches it and can scratch it to his heart’s

content, can be happy.” (*Gorgias* 494c) Socrates’s idea seems to be that scratching an itch is like trying to fill a leaky jar. Scratching the itch will not make the itch go away. Instead, the itch will go on itching. Thus, even if one gains pleasure from the scratching, scratching does nothing to relieve the itching, and so does not amount to true happiness.

Callicles is, quite appropriately, disgusted by Socrates’s example. It is a deliberately vulgar example. But Socrates won’t let Callicles change the subject. Under pressure from Socrates to answer the question, Callicles finally agrees that a person who takes great pleasure in scratching himself, and scratches himself to his heart’s content, will be perfectly happy.

Callicles could have point out that, according to what he had previously agreed to, to be perfectly happy one would have to have many different empty jars, or at least many partly empty jars, that is, many different unsatisfied desires. But he doesn’t make that move. Instead, he lets Socrates make him think about the case in which someone is so preoccupied with the pleasure of scratching that, at that time anyway, he doesn’t want anything else besides that pleasure of enjoying the scratching. Reluctantly Callicles agrees that such a person would, in fact, be happy.

I have sometimes read out that passage in Plato to young children and used it to start a philosophical discussion with them about happiness. But the passage also inspired me to write this story:

### **Perfect Happiness**

“What happened in school today, Tony?” asked Tony’s mother as she served him his helping of spaghetti and meatballs. The Allen family was seated around the dinner table for their evening meal.

“Actually, there was something kind of cool,” replied Tony. “This new kid in the class, I think his name is Roy, he cracked everybody up by something he said.”

“What did he say?” asked Tony’s sister, Heather..

“Well, you see,” explained Tony, “our teacher, Ms. Hernandez, was talking about this story in which some kid said that she wanted to be totally happy. Ms. Hernandez asked us if we could think of a time when we were perfectly happy.”

“That’s an interesting question,” put in Tony’s father.

“Yeah, well, what this kid, Roy, said was that if he had an insect bite on his seat, you know, on his rear end, and it itched like crazy and he could scratch it as hard as he wanted to, he would be perfectly happy.”

“That’s pretty gross,” said Heather, making an ugly face.

“Yeah, it was pretty gross all right,” Tony agreed, “but it cracked everybody up. Kids laughed so loud you couldn’t hear Ms. Hernandez trying to get us to shut up.”

“That was a disgusting thing to say,” said Tony’s mother disapprovingly.

“Yeah,” agreed Heather, “it was a yucky thing to say, but, you know, it’s right! If scratching a very itchy insect bite gives you so much pleasure that , at that moment, you don’t want anything else, then you’re perfectly happy.”

“I wouldn’t call that perfect happiness,” protested Tony.

“Why not?” insisted Heather; “perfect happiness is just enjoying something, it doesn’t matter what it is – scratching an insect bite, stuffing yourself

with chocolate cake, whatever – enjoying it so much that you don't at that time want anything else. Do you have some other explanation of what perfect happiness is?"

Tony decided to change the subject. He wished he hadn't told his family about what Roy had said in school. He didn't think Heather was right about what perfect happiness is, but he didn't know how to prove she was wrong. She was always winning arguments. He hated that.

Still, Tony was puzzled about what happiness is, and especially about what perfect happiness is. Is it just enjoying something so much that the thought of everything else is blanked out? Somehow that didn't seem right to him. But what could he say about total happiness that he could defend against Heather?

Several years ago I discussed this story with a class of about twenty 5th-graders in Osaka, Japan. Very early on in the discussion the Japanese children homed in on the limitation of satisfying only a single desire, namely, the desire to scratch an insect bite on one's bum.. Yoshimoto put his worry about that limitation this way: "No matter how much pleasure I am getting from scratching the insect bite, I should have more desires than just this one." Callicles, in Plato's dialogue, could also have made that point, although he does not do so. As I have already noted, Callicles portrays the fully happy person as having many desires and having the never-ending pleasure of continuing to satisfy them all.

Another child in that class, Karini, raised the issue of the duration of the pleasure. In my story it is important that, *at the moment*, Tony doesn't want anything else. Karini

refused to accept the idea that one could be perfectly happy at a single moment.

"Happiness," she said, "must last a long time to be perfect."

Another child added a humorous note. "If scratching an insect bite is complete happiness," she said, "what happens when you have many insect bites? How will you even know which insect bite to scratch?" We all laughed at that question. However, although the question was humorous, it does raise an important point. Even if I am perfectly content to scratch the bite I have started with, I might get even more pleasure by scratching another one instead. How could I ever know whether the pleasure that I considered perfect happiness might have been outshone by another pleasure, if only I had chosen another bite to scratch instead of the one I chose?

What those Japanese children seemed to care most about, however, was having a variety of things to make one happy. One child put the point this way: "Scratching an insect bite and enjoying it so much that, at the moment, you don't want anything else, is only one petal of the flower of happiness."

I have also used this story to initiate a discussion with a 5th-grade class in an elementary school near my home in Massachusetts. Very early on in that discussion Juliane made clear how limited Tony's conception of happiness really is. According to him, as she put it, "Total happiness is just enjoying what you are doing right now and not thinking of all the other things that you want." Juliane's comment is highly significant. It calls to our attention an important assumption that gives Tony's conception of happiness whatever plausibility it has. We can call that conception "Present-Moment Hedonism." Present-Moment Hedonism would be the idea that the only pleasures that count for me are the pleasures that I am having at the moment. Of course, I may right now take

pleasure in something I expect to enjoy in the future. But that anticipated future enjoyment counts for me only if it now gives me pleasure.

On the assumption of Present-Moment Hedonism, it is quite plausible to conclude that, if I am now enjoying something in such a way that, at the moment, I don't want anything else, I am totally happy. Juliane's comment should remind us that there may be many things we want that are far from our thoughts right now. But if those other things we want are put out of our mind by some simple pleasure we are now enjoying, we should not conclude, according to her, that this simple contentment amounts to perfect happiness.

Andrew agreed with Julianne. He chimed in with this example: "You could be playing with something at your desk," he said as he himself played at his desk with his pencil, "and not paying attention to anything else." He then added in disbelief, "And [you think] that would be perfect happiness?" The implication of his tone of voice was that such a supposition was quite implausible. The broader implication was that Present-Moment Hedonism must be rejected.

Rejecting Present-Moment Hedonism should make us think twice about zonking ourselves out on drugs or alcohol. I didn't actually discuss drugs or alcohol with those kids that day. But I like to think that I encouraged them to reflect on the seductive appeal of obliterating pleasures and how such pleasures may distort our sense of what is really important to us.

Matt tried a different approach. He also wanted to focus on much more than a pleasure of the present moment. But what he required for total happiness was some major achievement in one's life. His idea was that the satisfaction of having achieved some



major goal in life would give one happiness for a lifetime. His own choice for a major achievement was to become a football star, in fact, to become, as he put it, "the very best wide receiver ever."

Nathan agreed with Matt. "Even after you retire," he said, "you could have the satisfaction of knowing that you were the very best." But Marissa was not convinced that one major accomplishment in life would guarantee total happiness. "You can get bored doing what you do best," she insisted.

Kristle was also skeptical about Matt's claim. But the grounds for her skepticism were different from Marissa's. "You can't be happy forever," she said; "sad things will happen." Here again, these children touched on a theme philosophers have pursued since ancient times. Plato thought that an ideally good person would be invulnerable to misfortune. Goodness, and with it, happiness, he thought, are a condition of one's *psyche*, or inner self. According to Plato, if one has achieved an ideally good state of one's *psyche*, not even torture will be a threat to one's happiness.

The achievement Plato was talking about was, of course, quite different from the accomplishment Matt had in mind. Matt thought that excellence at football, what we might call "football virtue," would be an achievement that would guarantee happiness for a lifetime. Plato thought that the needed achievement was virtue or excellence of soul, or inner self. Yet, structurally, Matt's and Plato's suggestions were similar.

Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, thought that even the most virtuous of us is vulnerable to the vicissitudes of fortune. Mary, another pupil in that class expressed an Aristotelian caution. "Something bad can always happen," she warned, "something not in your control."

The conclusion that most of the kids in that class came to was not just that Tony had the wrong conception of what perfect happiness is. Rather, in their view it would be a mistake to aim for perfect happiness. They considered perfect happiness an unattainable goal. "You can be overall happy," they agreed, "but not perfectly happy."

Does it matter whether children have the stimulus and opportunity to have discussions of what happiness, perhaps even perfect happiness, is? I think it does. One important goal of education should be to help young people to become competent, informed, thoughtful, and responsible human beings. To achieve that goal it is necessary to reflect on what it would be for one to be a fully flourishing human being. It is obvious that, for many people, the attraction of drug or alcohol-induced euphoria is irresistible. But a little philosophical reflection should help us all see that such euphoria cannot be perfect happiness. Perhaps it is not even one petal of the flower of happiness. To live a happy life we need to think about what it would actually be to live such a life.

If the relationship we adults have to our children is focused solely on those competencies that we can be assumed to have and our children can be assumed to lack, then it will be no surprise if our attitude to our children is completely paternalistic. We will picture our children according to what I call the "deficit conception of childhood." If, however, we make space for discussions with them on issues that they can help us think about freshly-- discussions with them in which we, too, have something to learn, if only because we are forced to examine assumptions we have not articulated for ourselves -- we will thereby foster a climate of respect otherwise missing from adult interactions with children. By respecting their questions and comments we will be helping them to respect themselves.

To learn to hear what our children have to say about important questions in life and to engage with them in genuinely philosophical discussions is to get beyond a merely deficit conception of childhood. It is also one of the very best ways I know to give them, and to give our relationships with them, an open future.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The material in this paper is adapted from two forthcoming articles, “Getting Beyond the Deficit Conception of Childhood: Thinking Philosophically with Children,” to appear in *Philosophy in Schools*, edited by Michael Hand and Carrie Winstanley, to be published by Continuum Press, and “Philosophy and Developmental Psychology: Getting Beyond the Deficit Conception of Childhood,” to appear in the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, edited by Harvey Siegel and to be published by Oxford University Press.