Truth and a Good Life

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Abstract
A discussion of how and whether judgment regarding the happiness, flourishing or well-being of a life is appropriately influenced by false belief or ignorance on matters central to that life. That is, is it so that what we don't know does not, or cannot hurt us? How much does it matter if the false belief was owing to betrayal or deception by others who mattered deeply to the now dead person? Further, is truthfulness about such betrayal something a friend of a dying person may eschew or is it itself a kind of betrayal?

'Count no man happy until he is dead.' From Aristotle, quoting Solon, one of the wise men of ancient Athens, and agreeing with him.

Even death may be too soon if Solon and Aristotle are right that happiness is not a state of mind, not something that belongs in a list with a burst of elation, a pang of sorrow, a twinge of pain, a bout of giddiness. It also is not a longer term feeling of well-being such as alcohol, marijuana, and other substances, as well as falling in love can induce.

A life would not be happy because pleasant states of mind outnumbered unpleasant ones. Pleasant states of mind can be had through mere planning and anticipation. Think of how enjoyable it can be to plan your first trip to Europe. Such states of mind can, in their distinctive way, be illusory; upon engaging in the anticipated activity, frustration, disappointment, boredom prevail. A life could be one in which less time was spent feeling frustrated, disappointed and bored than was spent in pleasant anticipation. Or a life could be full of pleasant memories, the delights of nostalgia occupying most of your time in the confines of a dungeon, the new tyrant having ended your regime of ruling and living luxuriously.

Aristotle's word that we translate as 'happy' was 'eudaemon', and Greek thinkers had a lot to say about eudaemonia. Many recent writers prefer to translate the word as 'flourishing' or 'well-being'. Others stick with 'happiness' and ask us to notice the meaning of 'happy' in 'happy outcome' or 'happy ending' or in a phrase such as 'these happy isles' spoken of Great Britain when in its glory days. That meaning is to be kept in mind when thinking about what living a good life is supposed to be.

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Some infelicity of 'happy' is also indicated by this: When we imagine a human life entirely free of fear, of sorrow, of grief, free of regret, shame or remorse, devoid of distress or suffering, are we not imagining a shallow life? I don't mean that it is good for suffering to thrive, to see to it that poverty, sickness and hunger bring depth to the lives of the lesser orders, as a recent Australian Commission of Audit appears to propose. To such a proposal, Simone Weil's words are apt: 'In the social realm it is our duty to eliminate as much suffering as we can; there will always be enough left over for the elect'.

Aristotle and Plato both held that a necessary condition of living a flourishing life, of eudaemonia, was that it had to be a just life. Plato's idea of being just was achieving harmony of the soul, which is, roughly speaking, being decent, getting your act together and having your priorities right. We needn't mind talk of the soul so long as it does not mean a substance embodied or entrenched within each of us but capable of independent existence, a la Descartes. Simone Weil is helpful here too. She speaks of the soul's needs in terms of harm that can be done to a human being without injury to the body. But she does not mean that you cannot also harm the soul via harming the body. Weil did not hold, as Plato did, that the harmony of the soul was invulnerable. Plato apparently endorsed Socrates' incredible assertion that a good man cannot be harmed, since the only real harm is to be made a worse man and that would require deharmonising the soul. Weil accuses Plato of being out to lunch on the issue. Given how Weil admires, nay, adores, Plato, her dissent on this issue is all the more telling.

Plato and Aristotle, despite their agreement about the necessity of virtue for eudaemonia, disagreed about the sufficiency of it. Aristotle thought eudaemonia was vulnerable to the vicissitudes of fortune, even though he agreed with Plato that virtue was indestructible, a fixed and unchanging disposition, he called it. No matter how good a person you might be, the world could still crap on you. Plato knew perfectly well that the world could crap on the just man, but he thought it could do him no real harm. The crap could not blight or diminish the excellence of a just man. The harmony of the soul persists no matter how discordant the surroundings. Plato also suggests, perhaps because he hoped, that in the long run the unjust would get their come-uppance. He speaks of the bad dreams of the bad man. The 20th Century was blessed with a man who held Plato's view. A principle of Groucho Marxism is a pithy expression of Plato's hope: 'Time wounds all heels'. We know it is a fallacy to deduce what ought to be from what is. Groucho indulges in the

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converse fallacy, deducing from what ought to be that, eventually at least, it will be. He derives 'is' from 'ought'. Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant agree with Groucho Marxism, but locate the comeuppance in the afterlife, where the good will be entertained by the spectacle of the agonies of the wicked in the pits of hell. Aquinas allows the blessed ones to enjoy the spectacle without distress or pity, perhaps the supreme endorsement of Schadenfreude in our civilization. Kant only says the good are entitled to expect the wicked to suffer in the afterlife, as consolation for the blatantly apparent fact of the wicked flourishing in this life.

So far I have wanted to bring out how reflection on living well, being happy, flourishing, leads to some idea of judging or evaluating the life of a person. 'Count no man happy until he is dead' suggests that such an evaluation is not a subjective matter; the person whose life is evaluated is not the only one to make such an evaluation. It is even possible for the person whose life is under consideration to get it wrong, to be in error. A good deal needs to be said about the source of such errors, how much it is a matter of illusion or delusion, of self-deception, of willful avoidance of knowledge, victimization by deceit, or, especially I reckon, the acceptance by oppressed individuals or groups as truths about themselves what are really lies or prejudices imposed on them by dominant individuals or groups.

The main thing Aristotle and Solon had in mind was the possibility of events occurring after someone's life is over that bear on judgment to be made about the life. Central concerns and ambitions in someone's life may be well be on track at death, but then suffer derailment. It may be as clear cut as an earthquake killing a man's family at his graveside. Surely, in such a case, we can pity that man, perhaps with the words: 'The poor sonofabitch'. Some may react differently, saying 'Well, he doesn't know and won't find out, lucky man.' If we disagree here we are having a genuine evaluative disagreements, not merely a difference of preference or taste. Even I would say, ethical disagreement. Though perhaps it is more like an aesthetic disagreement. Or perhaps a disagreement that hints at interesting links between the ethical and the aesthetic. I don't care exactly what sort of disagreement it is. It is not, no matter how you think of it, that one of us is making sense, the other failing to. It is also unsettled, and unsettling, whether either of us is mistaken.

I want to focus on one strand of what we find here. I want to focus on beliefs of great importance to a person, beliefs central to his or her grip on who he or she is and what his or her life is about. How much does it matter if such beliefs are false? A way to filter out the relevant beliefs from others, many of which are sure to be false, is to ask

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whether and to what extent, a person would be devastated by finding out the truth. By devastation I mean what can lead people to think of their lives no longer making sense, no longer seeming worthwhile, drained of meaning. I shall also consider the question of the extent to which, if at all, we should disabuse others of such false beliefs if we are placed to do so. What it is to be so placed is itself of interest. Whose business is it? Surely not just that of anybody who knows the relevant truth. That will also involve the issue of how important truth, as truthfulness, is. That is a nice topic in its own right, though I don't think anybody anymore holds the medieval Christian view.

So there are two questions. First, can ignorance insulate a person from harm, exempt his or her life from being an object of pity? Is it right to say that what you don't know doesn't hurt you, even if it is something that had you known it, would have devastated you? Second, what is right if you are placed in a position to inform someone of what will devastate him and refraining from doing so will be a refusal of truthfulness on your part? Reflection here is not about the nature of truth or about the silly idea that there is no such thing as truth. I am taking truth for granted and asking about how much and why it can matter.

In his drama *The Wild Duck,* Henrik Ibsen provides an instance where we readily judge that it would have been better to leave others with false beliefs, beliefs about the relations a man's wife had to a powerful benefactor of theirs, before and perhaps during their marriage. A child's paternity is rendered uncertain by revelations an old friend of the husband is determined to make. The friend is zealous about openness and honesty in marriage. It is all a disaster; the daughter, 14 years old, an attractive and loving child, kills herself out of an induced need to prove she loves her father via a sacrifice of something precious to her. The zealous friend has suggested that she kill a cherished wild duck that is kept in the attic. The girl applies the advice, but not to the duck, shooting herself in the way she is told to shoot the duck, one bullet in just the right spot on her breast.

In this play, one cannot say that the man and his family were flourishing; they were not doing very well and he is as asinine in his way as his zealous friend is in his. There is no doubt that, as one of the likeable characters in the play, a Dr. Relling, says, it would have been better to leave them as they were. Relling thinks that it is generally better to leave people with their lies; he speaks of helping people to construct or hold on to lies that enable them carry on.

Still we do have here a case of truth being devastating, or received as devastating by the self-dramatizing father. A feature of the play is that

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the main victim of the destructive force of truth is the child, who is not mired in false belief. She is devoted to her father, or the man who may not be, but may be, her father. But he cruelly rejects her when he learns he may not be her father. The mother is uncertain and, 15 years having passed with her as a caring and dutiful wife and mother, she cannot see why it matters. Few are those who would not stand with her.

I do not think that we can say of Hjalmer, the father, anything like 'poor fellow', something more like 'silly clod' comes to mind. He is not really a victim of deceit, though it is true that his wife was not completely open with him. The only character to be pitied is the child. With Hjalmer, we are, or I am, disposed to deplore his agonies over not being a biological father when he has been quite a good father to the child and she a devoted and charming child. Anyway, we do not have here a case of a life's worth or happiness blighted by illusion or delusion. Hjalmer's discovery of the truth about his benefactor and his wife and his doubt about his paternity do not blight a good life; a somewhat shabby life has removed from it its brightest patch, the attractive, lively and devoted daughter, Hedvig.

We certainly get a case here for saying 'What they don't know is not hurting them'. And for saying that Hjalmer with his false belief, which was somewhat the product of avoidance of evidence, would have been better off, lived a happier life, without the intrusion of his friend's zealousness, Dr. Relling's therapy of letting people live with their falsehoods, with their lies as he puts is, is vindicated.

I now have to resort to my own, perhaps perverse, aptitude for fiction for further cases. There are two.

Here is one scenario: George, a successful salesman, is on his deathbed at the relatively early age of 60. His wife Mabel and best friend, Fred, are at his side, each holding one of George's hands. George is dying in a glow of warm conviction and remembrance of the loyalty of these two, the most important people in his life. Tender farewells are exchanged and George expires. Fred and Mabel look across to each lustfully, shovel George to the floor, and proceed to bonking in the deathbed, Fred's corpse sprawled in the centre of the room. We learn from their talk that, whenever possible – and George was, after all, a traveling salesman – they have indulged in orgiastic delights, for 30 years.

The words that come to mind as I envisage the scene and attend to the crumpled body on the floor those I have used earlier: 'The poor sonofabitch'. If George is not an appropriate object of pity, I do not understand what pity is. But as I said earlier, if you are inclined to

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withhold pity in the light of the thought that George never knew of the duplicity of Mabel and Fred, and was generally pleased with his work and life, then we are having some kind of disagreement. I agree with Thomas Nagel who says that it is hard to see how it can be that knowing something could be devastating and yet be harmless if unknown.

Maybe our disagreement belongs to ethics somewhat indirectly. If you think no harm has been done because Fred and Mabel succeeded in hiding their disloyalty, mustn't you think that they were not acting wrongly or badly. A strict utilitarian must, I think, hold that since their disloyalty did not, in fact, cause George to suffer, Fred and Mabel did no wrong. Maybe their haste in having at it in the deathbed is a kind of disrespect for the dead, but their pleasure might easily outweigh that, if such things can be weighed against each other. Strict utilitarianism has anyway to stretch to deplore disrespect for the dead.

Here is my second story: Giovanni is dying. He is a prosperous and respected Sicilian winegrower. His prosperity and enjoyment of life was much helped by his two sons. They emigrated to New York many years ago. Giovanni worked hard when the boys were young to get them educated and gain admission to Harvard, where they both studied law and joined large corporations in NYC. The sons visited Sicily frequently and invested in their father's winery, which prospered. Giovanni took in his friend and neighbour, Luigi, as a partner, absorbing Luigi's smaller, adjacent winery. The partners have been fortunate to avoid the imprecations of the Mafia, and their winery has flourished as has their friendship.

The sons and their families are expected soon for a final visit, Luigi having telephoned with the sad news some weeks ago. Giovanni is so fragile that his doctor forbids him a telephone on his sickbed. Luigi has assured him that he will take any calls and contact the sons if they do not arrive as expected. They do not, and Luigi pursues the matter. What he learns is appalling. The sons, while indeed having studied at Harvard, were enticed into being lawyers for the Mafia, eventually into occasional assassinations of public officials and businessmen who were threats to Mafia operations. One of their inducements to getting entangled with the Mafia was assurance that their father's business in Sicily would never be touched.

Luigi uncovers all this along with the devastating news that the sons, awaiting trial, will almost certainly be sentenced to death in the electric chair. Giovanni knows that Luigi has looked into the tardiness of the sons and when Luigi next visits the sickbed – about to be a deathbed – Giovanni asks him what is happening, why are the sons

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not here to bid farewell to their father? It is, after all, their great success in America and their generosity to him and their own flourishing lives that have done so much to make his own life worthwhile, especially given how much he worked and sacrificed early in his life to set them on a hopeful path.

Luigi is aware of all this and aware that another thing in Giovanni's life, and his own, has been their friendship and trusting partnership. No joy or sorrow, no elation or frustration, no satisfaction or disappointment, no problem or plight or crisis was ever anything but shared or communicated between them. Luigi knows it will devastate Giovanni to learn about his sons, especially their impending executions. But Giovanni has asked him what is happening. Luigi has no doubt that if Giovanni realizes or finds out that he is being lied to by Luigi, that will itself have further devastating effect. He has to decide whether or not to lie to his dying friend.

I have no good idea as to how to finish the story. One thing I am sure of, though, is that, whether Giovanni learns the truth or not, I could not say that he had a good or a happy or a flourishing life. The prospering of his winery was, unbeknownst to him, fostered by crime. He is as proper an object of pity as was George in my earlier tale. As for Luigi, well, I would not like to be in his shoes. I do not see how he can avoid doing something he will find it hard to live with.

I have given cases where it makes sense to pity a person and to evaluate a life more or less negatively, in spite of the person involved being ignorant of or deceived about the relevant facts. So it can be that a life fails to be a happy one, a flourishing life, despite the likelihood that the one who lives the life would think of it as a good life. But can I generalize? Can I maintain that for any life, the falsehood, illusoriness or even delusiveness of deeply important beliefs, despite the falsehood never being revealed, is a blight on that life, a basis for pitying the person mired in falsehood.

If generalization is legitimate, then any of us who are atheists seem to be required to take pity on, say, the life of Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach was a very devout Christian who regarded his genius as god-given and his outpouring of music as devoted to and inspired by God. Mozart too spoke of his duty to exercise his gift to the utmost in the vocation God has chosen for him.

An acquaintance, an eminent scientist, unhesitatingly said we should pity Bach and Mozart and thought their lives diminished by their religious beliefs. But others have suggested that in cases like Bach and Mozart, their astounding creativity might well have depended on their faith and might dry up if faith were lost. One

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friend said that, if, as is most unlikely, though possible, that inducing religious belief in a person would unleash great works of art, he would probably be willing to foster the illusion if he could. A further problem is that it must be uncertain whether disabusing someone religious of their faith will devastate them or liberate them. At the very least, genuine religious belief, which must be among the important, identity constituting beliefs presents a problem I have not yet worked my way through. The problem is that many of the things religious people say, even though, grammatically, they are apparent claims to truth, are interpretable as expressive of things atheists need not dispute. Even so, a crunch eventually comes if you stick to it – and your religious interlocutor will stick to it with you – a crunch where something has to be said as a claim to truth but which turns out to be unintelligible, nonsense, or false. That is why the early Christian, Tertullian, came out with: 'I believe because it is absurd' as well as 'I must though it is impossible.' Tertullian was attacking Marcion who had said that the incarnation was impossible, that crucifixion was an illusion. Marcion had several arguments, one was that incarnation required God to undergo change and, since God's properties are eternal, this is absurd. Tertullian helped to do in Marcion, but Tertullian himself eventually was also declared a heretic.

So absurdity, not mere falsehood, gets into the picture with religion. Maybe there is truth in the idea that without religion, human beings, or anyway some of them, would be unspeakably horrible. Of course, plenty of religious people are unspeakably horrible. Mary McCarthy's remarked: 'Only those who are already very good can afford to become religious; with all the others, it makes them worse.'

I conclude using a fantasy, introduced into philosophy by the late Robert Nozick. Nozick postulated the Experience Machine. It works this way: I am offered the prospect of having my brain removed and placed in a vat, connected to a computer which can manipulate my brain so that all will seem to me in all respects as it would if I really were doing and undergoing whatever can be done and undergone. I can make as many requests as I like about what I will do and undergo once envatting has taken place. And I am assured that I will be oblivious of the proposal having been made and of my decision to accept. I can have a flawless simulacrum of the life I would like most to lead from now on, or it can start earlier so that my decision to study philosophy and my accumulated intellectual muddles can be excised in favour of a more useful past education. I can have an MBA instead of a philosophy degree. I can include as much as I

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like in the way of fine wining and dining, glorious lovemaking, political, business, academic or artistic success, etc., etc. The program will see to it that I do not become diseased from my sybaritic new life style.

Offered this prospect and trusting the science, what reasons might there be to refuse? Well, I know here and now that it will all be unreal, a marvelously coherent hallucination, virtual reality in spades. I might reject the offer just because of that, which would mean that truth and contact with reality mean a lot to me. For I will not know then, will not even suspect, what I know here and now, that it will not be real life.

A different reason for refusal might be that I should, for my friends and loved ones, have vanished from the earth and let them all down. The scientists might meet this worry by assuring me that all those I care about and who care about me will be told that I have died in a plane crash, where no bodies have been recovered. So what they don't know won't hurt them, though they will be affected, they may even grieve a little. I will have seriously deceived them and they will live out their lives in false belief about me and their relationship to me. In a way, I shall be betraying them. They shall have been betrayed, but never know.

If I recognize this as a reason for rejecting the offer, I shall be firmly showing that I do not accept the idea that what they don't know won't hurt them.

My forthcoming illusion will be so grand that simulacra of my friends and my relations to them can be included. So again, while I know now, as I ponder my decision, that my future will be an illusion, I won't know then. I know now that I will be letting down my friends but there will none of that once they get to work with vat and brain.

This thought experiment is fantastical, a device for provoking thought about whether and how much truth matters. I used it in ethics and metaphysics classes for years. Shows of hands indicated, as one would expect, divided opinions. A colleague of mine, years before the idea of the experience machine got abroad, once asked, while lecturing on Descartes's dream and demon if any of her students would prefer dreaming to being awake. One said he would and, asked why, answered 'You meet a better class of people in your dreams'. That student, if serious, would likely have taken up the offer to become a brain in a vat.

I won't bother to take up the obvious skeptical ploy, which asks how we can possibly know that we aren't right now brains in vats.

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It may help a little with that to be confident that you would not have accepted the offer.

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