

## The Elusiveness of Happiness in the Modern World

**Słowa kluczowe:** culture, happiness, human nature, science, teleology

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre/The falcon cannot hear the falconer/Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”. These are the first four lines of W.B. Yeats’ disturbing, but brief, poem, *The Second Coming*, written nearly 100 years ago. It is prescient, if not prophetic, about happenings in the twentieth century. But do his worrisome words only illumine the last century? No, it would seem they also point to our own anxious time. The seams of Western Civilization are still under considerable stress. We worry they will burst, with more “anarchy . . . loosed upon the world”. Anyone who lacks such concern seems not to be paying attention. A people haunted by such worry and anxiety cannot be happy. If the teaching of the ancients is true — that civilization emer-

ged as a means to pursue happiness — it is a mockery of the human condition that contemporary civilization seems more in service of unhappiness than happiness.

Whence this state of affairs? What has happened to unmoor happiness from civilized life? The answer, of course, is a long story, which I will not inflict on you today. But I can provide something of a synopsis that puts in perspective why happiness for modern people is challenging and elusive. My synopsis asks us to heed the words *Ideas have Consequences*, words which happen to be the title of Richard Weaver’s classic book on politics and history. In this book, Weaver catalogues and comments on a plurality of changes that have disturbed culture over the past four hundred years. Except to certain members of the intelligentsia in Renaissance times, these changes were

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hardly perceptible. And yet they have proven to be profound and transformative for Western Civilization. To know why we are where we are culturally, we have to know where we came from. To retrace the journey, one has to record how certain ideologues in the Renaissance made fashionable certain ideas which have disordered modern culture's grasp of the human condition and of nature itself.

One way to express this is that there was culturally a seismic shift. This shift came about as thinkers abandoned a teleological vision of nature and the human condition and replaced it with a materialist, mechanistic one. This shift came about, on the one hand, by members of the intelligentsia engaging in theoretical debates about the natures of things. By the seventeenth century, the dominant attitude was that natures (formal causes) and purposes (final causes) were not necessary for science. Ockham's razor could and ought to remove them. Science is made more efficient and convincing without them. Thinkers like Bacon and Hobbes sought to kick forms and purposes into the dustbin of history. Since traditional religion, metaphysics and ethics depended on teleology, culture was put in crisis. Purpose requires intelligence. If there is immanent purposiveness in nature, it occurs because a divine intelligence governs nature. This must be if things which lack cognition nonetheless behave in specifically regular and purposive ways, as Aquinas argued in his Fifth Way. Natural things are programmed, so to speak, by God to actualize their potentials. This is true of everything in nature, including

human life. But once mechanism replaced teleology as the dominant cultural paradigm among the intellectuals, profound social disturbances rumbled through society. The theoretical championing of materialist-mechanism led to profound practical consequences. The theoretical shift called into question whether there were grounds any longer to believe that the universe contained purpose or meaning. The practical effect was a loss of happiness. How can one find happiness in a world which, if not Godless, has rendered God irrelevant? Matter in motion alone suffice to explain nature, so the mechanists (like Bacon, Hobbes, Newton, and Hume) declared. Thus, the shift from a kind of sacramental vision of the world, according to which God's presence consists in his governance of things, to a description of the world as something like an arrangement of pointless component parts, transformed culture. This shift is still remotely responsible for modern culture's derangement about the human person, morality, and the meaning of life.

But I'd like to address at this point whether we should accept this state of affairs. Why should we accept the narration that Renaissance intellectuals somehow proved that the mechanistic-materialist worldview (also called the Baconian or Newtonian worldview) should replace classical teleology? It turns out that the triumph of mechanism-materialism is really propaganda. A brief history can make this clear. Again, why am I reporting this history? Because ideas have consequences. If certain ideas are false, or merely half-truths, and yet if

those same ideas have transformed and disordered culture, it is a great benefit to civilization to address those ideas and reveal how they are correlated with falsehood and fallacy. In so doing, we can restore teleology which restores human happiness and meaning.

The mechanistic-materialist worldview is the elephant in the room compromising happiness in today's culture. It is ignored and not spoken about because academicians for centuries have succeeded in making it presumptive. But, of course, it is not presumptive. In Renaissance and early modern times, certain intellectuals succeeded in convincing the purveyors of science, philosophy, and educational culture that the mechanistic-materialist worldview had somehow refuted teleology. Hence, there has been a presumptive animus against Aristotle for generations. But when one examines this history, one discovers that it is long on voluble indoctrination and short on convincing argumentation. These modernists have not refuted teleology through science. Science is not possible without teleology. They have succeeded by dominating the educational establishment and stipulating that teleology is obsolete. "What is often regarded as a 'discovery' arrived at via empirical scientific inquiry was in fact a stipulation concerning the nature of scientific method, a limitation, more or less by fiat, of what would be allowed to *count* as 'scientific.'"<sup>1</sup> Much of scientific education and the philosophy of science relies on a question-begging narration. Their narration has been successful for several reasons.

(1) The founders of Renaissance and Enlightenment science were able to show that the materialist-mechanistic worldview could simplify science by making it quantificational. Once it denuded the universe of natures, purposes, and even qualities, then the universe could be mathematicized.

(2) This mathematicization of nature generated stunning technological success, which the intelligentsia pointed to as evidence for the truth of their worldview.

(3) They fortified their worldview by exposing errors in some of the experimental claims of Aristotle, failing to realize that his philosophy does not stand or fall on his empirical successes or errors. Aristotelian philosophy is primarily an ontology, indifferent to and unaffected by changes in experimental or hypothetical science. Aristotelian science (an *epistēmē* of ontology) is not dependent on hypothetical method.

(4) As mechanistic-materialism took hold of the culture, it encouraged a reorientation of education away from the pursuit of wisdom toward improving material conditions for human life. Whereas the ancients looked upon education as a pursuit of wisdom, the modernists transformed it into a pursuit of "human utility and power," as Bacon put it, a substitution of the "mechanical arts" for classical wisdom, an advancement of technology so we could become "masters and possessors of nature," as Descartes expressed it<sup>2</sup>. Looking at the drama retrospectively, Edward Feser has summed it up neatly:

<sup>1</sup> E. Feser, *Aquinas*, Oneworld Publications, London, U.K 2013, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

"If the new science of the moderns has "succeeded," then, it might be argued that this is in large part because they stacked the deck in their own favor. Having redefined „success" as the achievement of dramatic technological progress and in general the manipulation of nature to achieve human ends, they essentially won a game the Scholastics were not trying to play in the first place"<sup>3</sup>.

Enlightenment thinkers, like Hobbes, Hume, and Rousseau, recognized that the new science could be an engine to deconstruct Western Civilization. After all, the established political order was supported by Aristotelian-Scholasticism, given its vision of the universe as hierarchical, from God to matter, and given its conviction that essences and purposes constituted the natures of things. "This order was . . . highly conservative and decidedly 'otherworldly' in its orientation, and thus out of sync with the project of improving life in the here and now. Any replacement of the Aristotelian scheme, such as the new mechanistic-cum-mathematical conception of nature afforded, thus had definite political as well as practical advantages"<sup>4</sup>.

While this modernist worldview has had profound sociological impact, it is nonetheless fallacious to infer from their sociological success that they succeeded in refuting old Aristotle and the teleological worldview associated with him.

Three things can be said to highlight this fallacy.

(a) While it is true that the ancients and scholastics emphasized examining the ontological foundations of things, they were not averse to quantificational methods; the moderns relied on some of their achievements and advanced them.

(b) The ancients and scholastics would protest that culture has paid a price for delimiting knowledge to the quantificational and the experimental. There is an old Japanese saying that to a hammer everything looks like a nail. If one sets up science on the bedrock that there are no formal or final causes, it comes as no surprise that you will not discover any. But this is more of a preemptive strike than proof that there are not forms and purposes. "To pretend that this does not follow is simply to let one's method dictate what counts as reality, rather than letting reality determine one's method"<sup>5</sup>. After all, the refusal to remove one's red spectacles does not prove that everything is really red<sup>6</sup>.

Today, culture warriors are needed to influence the philosophy of science and show what a compelling case can be made for the restoration of teleology. This case is already happening, as scientists and philosophers are having to admit that science itself is inconceivable without natures and purposes. For example, try explaining DNA without the language of purpose<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The Austrian scientist Max Delbruck once wrote that the Nobel Prize should be awarded posthumously to Aristotle for the discovery of the principle implied in DNA. See Feser, p. 47.

## Conclusion

Why have I said all of this? What is the moral of the story? And what does it have to do with human happiness? The answer is straightforward: If culture is a necessary condition for happiness, and if culture has been influenced by a worldview that so redefines human nature as to eliminate meaning and purpose, it should not surprise us that culture manifests a loss of happiness. Since ideas have consequences, those of us who care about the health and well-being of culture, and the preservation of civilization associated with it, must not ignore this epic shift in philosophical perspec-

tive. Philosophers of culture must remember it. They must exercise the will to address and contest it. Once academicians escape the presumptive mechanistic culture and allow classical metaphysics to have a peer voice in the debate about philosophy and science, teleology can be restored. This restoration can fortify educators to resist the deconstruction of Western Civilization and enable them to recover a sound philosophy of the human person. Along with all of this, culture can refresh its grasp of human happiness.

## The Elusiveness of Happiness in the Modern World (Abstract)

Since Renaissance times, there has been a fashion, largely driven by Baconian science, that explaining the universe need not suppose the existence of formal and final causes. Because ideas have consequences, this elimination of forms and purposes affects society's conception of happiness. It is hard to see how human

life can be meaningful if there is no human nature and life is purposeless. Philosophers can help restore cultural health by challenging mechanism, by showing how its assumptions are not defensible and by showing how it has damaged our pursuit of happiness.

## Nieuchwytność szczęścia we współczesnym świecie (Streszczenie)

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura, szczęście, ludzka natura, nauka, teleologia

W czasach Renesansu zaistniała moda, w dużej mierze napędzana przez naukę Bacona, że objaśnianie wszechświata nie wymaga odwoływania się do formalnych i ostatecznych przyczyn. Ponieważ idee mają konsekwencje, to eliminacja form i celów wpływa na społeczną koncepcję szczęścia. Trudno dostrzec, jak ludzkie życie może mieć sens, jeśli nie ma cze-

goś takiego jak natura ludzka, a życie jest bezcelowe. Filozofowie mogą pomóc przywrócić zdrowie kulturowe, rzucając wyzwanie mechanizmowi, pokazując, w jaki sposób jego założenia są nie do obronienia oraz pokazując, w jaki sposób zniszczył on nasze dążenie do szczęścia.

## Bibliografia:

1. Feser E., *Aquinas*, Oneworld Publications, London 2013.