

*A paper presented at  
the Yale Center for Faith and Culture consultation on Happiness and Human Flourishing,  
sponsored by the McDonald Agape Foundation*



Happiness as an actual state of being is chimerical, evanescent, suspect. At the same time, as an idea or an ideal it is very potent indeed. In this it resembles other great abstractions, for example, love, justice, truth and holiness. A significant part of the world's recorded thought treats of the questions that surround concepts like these. It was love that burned the towers of Ilium. A fierce, cold, cosmic justice tormented Thebes and overrode the merely human justice Oedipus set out to restore. No account of truth or holiness has ever been conclusive. This fact by itself should be taken as important information about the mind and the world it inhabits.

The last century or two have given an odd turn to the subject of happiness. I was educated to believe that we in the modern West were afflicted with an unhappiness particular to our moment yet more irreversible than the Fall. We were told we had disabused ourselves of belief in God, and that the notion that human life had meaning had fallen with the collapse of religious belief. There was nothing inevitable about any of this, but it was a potent narrative and it laid out a progression, in fact a curriculum, from Galileo and the Enlightenment to Darwin and Freud, which seemed to bring us inevitably to our modern condition, a state of malaise and anomie. It is impossible to know how many people actually believed this or believe it now, but it was and is authoritative because it was and is decidedly *comme il faut*. It seems strange that melancholy should have attended our discovery of our true place and nature, and that over the centuries mere illusion should have been so enthralling to so many of the greatest minds. This new world view has raised a multitude of questions it has never acknowledged. It has put aside the history of thought, ensnared as this history is in metaphysics. And it has excluded the testimonies of individual experience by a sort of cultural fiat: the modern state of knowledge entails the modern state of mind. Dissent must be rejected as cowardice or obscurantism. Yet happiness is implicitly defined in the naming of losses and absences that yield unhappiness—the loss of faith, the loss of a sheltering ignorance that had allowed humankind to believe in its singular significance. So “modern thought” has inspired nostalgia and hostility to learning in certain quarters while rewarding its adherents with ennui and with a much abbreviated syllabus of things to be known and pondered. Weariness with the elusiveness of the subjects that have engrossed religious and philosophic thought has led to neglect of the fact that this elusiveness itself is full of implication.

In the older literature happiness is often treated as the goal and reward of a life well lived. Montaigne considers the ancient maxim that no one should be called happy until after his death, and concludes that “since this mortal happiness of ours depends on the calm and contentment of a noble mind, on the resolution and assurance of a well-ordered soul, it should never be attributed to a man until we see him perform the last act of his

drama, which will certainly be the most difficult.” So it seems we may be wholly mistaken in the matter of our own happiness until it is put to this final test. There are any number of stories of deathbed reappraisals, of lives seen in an alarmingly starker light as their end approaches. But what is the name for that pre-terminal state that must look and feel more like happiness than like any other thing? Is not the illusion of calm and contentment a kind of happiness in its own right?

One’s own experience and testimony cannot be wholly misguided or irrelevant, since, as Montaigne understands it and as we moderns do as well, happiness is a subjective state, if it is anything at all. It is entirely possible, as William Blake says, to make a heaven in hell’s despair and a hell in heaven’s despit, especially the latter of the two, if one may judge by the often-observed difference between the apparent and the actual “happiness” of some who enjoy, so to speak, beauty, success, loving families and so on. Or of the prosperous West, so prone to lament its condition. This is by no means to minimize the actual misery that can attend apparent misery. In fact, given the history of the world, it might be easier to get a grasp of the subject if one were to assume the reality of unhappiness and then to ponder exceptions and alleviations. This is not intended as pessimism. It is meant only to do justice to the fact that human beings in a vast majority of times and places have suffered affliction and loss at levels that seem to have staggered the human imagination even when such suffering was commonplace. Their humanity seems never to have hardened itself against the loss of friends or children or homeland, or to have learned indifference to the enormities of warfare. The lives of generations not so remote from ours often seem unbearable.

Yet those generations have variously found means to sustain in some form the idea of happiness. Guibert of Nogent, writing about his life in 12th century monasteries, typically describes deaths as the work of demons, though death and its agonies must have been rather familiar to him. It is as if Guibert could not naturalize the fearful aspects of life as he knew or understood them to the world itself, and intended a very oblique rescue of belief in the basic goodness of the world by means of a form of dualism (though God’s justice is behind it all). He makes life’s evils radically alien, however familiar they might seem. In his telling, demons perch at bedsides and troop through cloisters, the epitomized presence of every peril that besets body and soul. Even in the ways they are seen and heard—one is reported to have been barefoot, with straws stuck between his toes—there are few special effects. They simply abet ordinary affliction. That said, Guibert scarcely mentions the world’s goodness, except as he takes satisfaction in God’s peremptory vengeance. When he does, for example, thank God for the blessings of his youth, they include, exclusively, six years with a tutor whose “hailstorm of slaps and blows poured down on [him] almost every day as he tried to force [him] to learn what he couldn’t teach” and an adored mother who abandoned him. If he says all this without irony, then he is providing grounds for the argument that happiness has everything to do with expectations, which in the 12th century may well have been modest, and with the effects of retrospection, which place the matter beyond dispute. Whatever else might be said of Guibert’s youth, it

did indeed make a monk of him, and for this he was grateful. Here I have used the word “happiness” as Guibert might use it, as if it were synonymous with blessing or good fortune, though neither of these actually aligns itself reliably with a subjective experience of happiness, as his case proves.

When these words were synonyms, when “hap” meant fortune or luck, to be happy might well have meant to enjoy reasonable health and comfort and to have been so placed in life as to have some chance of seeing certain of one’s children live to adulthood. “Property” is commonly numbered in place of happiness among essential human rights, as in *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. Its relationship with happiness in this sense is clear when bare material sufficiency was not to be assumed and when the ownership of property was denied by law to religious dissenters and others, and was always “alienable” by persons of higher rank.

Jefferson gave America the phrase “the pursuit of happiness” to describe a right which is both God-given and inalienable but which nevertheless eludes definition. This elusiveness or capaciousness was surely intentional. The phrase can include but need not be limited to the attaining of material well-being. On balance Jefferson’s reticence is very much to be preferred to any more prescriptive language, even though he has left open the possibility that he is describing a sort of *ignis fatuus*, a hope that glimmers ahead of us and is never attained. John Locke makes an emphatic association of “the pursuit of true happiness” with liberty in his understanding of it, as a higher self-restraint.

As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness; so the care of ourselves, that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our liberty. The stronger ties we have to an unalterable pursuit of happiness in general, which is our greatest good, and which as such our desires always follow, the more are we free from any necessary determination of our will to any particular action, and from a necessary compliance with our desire . . . we are, by necessity of preferring and pursuing true happiness as our greatest good, obliged to suspend the satisfaction of our desires in particular cases.

Both Locke and Jefferson can be understood as writing in a much older philosophic tradition that saw the pursuit of happiness as the worthiest human activity, one which opened on the question of the meaning of human life, a pursuit that rewards itself. This is consistent with Jefferson’s asserting that essential rights are a divine endowment. Whatever his own state of religious belief, he could hardly have found language that would clothe these rights in a greater dignity. Certainly there is happiness to be had in so high a regard for human beings as such, and in the belief that the capacity for this most exalted pursuit is a universal endowment. However, the fact that the phrase is so seldom taken to have this meaning may indicate that the generality of people are not philosophic enough in their interests to seek out happiness through the disciplines of reflection.

Then again, if Jefferson was, so to speak, in conversation with *The Theory of Moral*

*Sentiments*, the book for which Adam Smith was best known in his lifetime and which, unlike *The Wealth of Nations*, was published before the American Revolution, it is interesting to note that in it Smith does not suggest that happiness is in its nature the object of “pursuit,” philosophic or worldly. Smith describes happiness as the norm of experience and pain or misery as a deviation from it. He says, “Take the whole earth at an average, for one man who suffers pain or misery, you will find twenty in prosperity and joy, or at least in tolerable circumstances. No reason, surely, can be assigned why we should rather weep with the one than rejoice with the twenty.” Elsewhere he says, “What can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience? . . . This situation, however, may very well be called the natural and ordinary state of mankind . . . But though little can be added to this state, much may be taken from it. Though between this condition and the highest pitch of human prosperity the interval is but a trifle; between it and the lowest depth of misery the distance is immense and prodigious. Adversity, on this account, necessarily depresses the mind of the sufferer much more below its natural state, than prosperity can elevate him above it.” Certainly people do seem happy enough, in general, and not much happier if or when they prosper. If appearances are to be trusted, which, in general, they are not. Jefferson himself was always in debt, and he trembled at the thought that God is just. But he gave every impression of taking substantial pleasure in life and saying his *nunc dimittis* with reasonable serenity.

There is an undeniable charm in Smith’s assuming that a clear conscience is enjoyed by the run of humankind. But this definition of happiness makes it clear that Jefferson meant something very different by the word. While Smith argues eloquently and passionately that people as individuals have a right to be secure in their happiness, Jefferson does not assume that individuals are, by their own definition, happy in the first place, or that they ever would be, the word “pursuit” offering no assurances. There are ironies on both sides—Jefferson was, notoriously, a slaveholder, and Smith’s Britain dominated the world slave trade, though this most lucrative enterprise will not figure importantly in his analyses of the British economy. Neither Smith nor Jefferson would have had to look far to find masses of people who were neither happy in Smith’s sense of the word nor able to act by their lights to secure happiness in Jefferson’s sense of it. It is interesting that Smith bothered to excuse the muted response that might be expected among his readers to a hypothetical disaster in China when he could have broached the much more interesting question of their indifference to the actual and ongoing disaster in Africa and the colonies, which was the consequence of what he calls “the unfortunate law of slavery,” a manmade calamity they might have found some practical means to alleviate. Ah, well. Selective indifference may in fact be a more important component of happiness in the generality of cases than even Smith himself takes it to be. Needless to say, we must assume that we are equally guilty of it. It is without doubt an Angel of Light under whose wings frightful customs have flourished, always and everywhere.

For Smith, and no doubt for Jefferson also, happiness is both a subjective state and an objective condition. Objectively speaking, freedom from debt can only be the effect of

having achieved equilibrium relative to an economy of some kind. One who is not in debt is probably not destitute. In 18th century Britain the Poor Laws and the poor houses made poverty and debt profoundly humiliating and commonplace as well, a fact which makes Smith's apparently simple and inclusive definition irritating, on reflection, not least because, as he says elsewhere, creditors tend to treat the impoverished wealthy with a fair degree of solicitude. As for the poor, for whom debt could mean imprisonment and forced labor for an indefinite term and the same for one's children, the absence of debt might well seem a very substantial kind of happiness no matter what deprivations were required to achieve it. This is a variant on the phenomenon of happiness arising out of misery and low expectations.

In any case, the American cultural heritage, mingled thing that it is, has put the word "happiness" in brackets, italics, neon. There are those who feel that they have a right to the experience, however indefinable, and that the civilization has failed them if it has not made them happy. Then again, in this they may only be too much like the world at large. A more common manifestation of the injured sense of the right to happiness is nostalgia, present circumstance found wanting when weighed against the happiness of life as it was lived in a real or imagined past. Happiness can be a profoundly dangerous standard to bring to bear on experience because in any present form it is easily made to seem paltry or artificial or illusory, over against happiness in an ideal form. When it is assumed to have been achievable within an earlier social order, generally one in which there is thought to have been homogeneity of ethnicity or of belief, happiness is something of which the *soi disant* unhappy--whole populations are eligible to join--can feel defrauded. Life is depleted or perverted or rendered inauthentic in the degree that some imagined ideal is not realized, and hell breaks loose. Civilizations are very inclined to tear themselves apart in order to be rid of populations and influences that they are persuaded have corrupted them and destroyed their authenticity, the happiness natural to them. These fevers are raging now, and not only in America. Sharia law encroaches! The government is in the hands of traitors! The white race is dying out! Intellectuals are being recognized again as the insidious presence they are! And so on.

Alasdair MacIntyre, whom some call a philosopher, is a contemporary exponent of this world view. He says of us moderns, "We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have--very largely, if not entirely--lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality." And he concludes, "[I]f the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time." The solution is the usual one, the restoration (locally, for the time being) of "forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us." Assumptions like these, which deny to uncongenial thought any modicum of respect, hardly seem compatible with civility or with intellectual or moral life. But these good things hover like a vision before those who reject

the given world with its falsehood and error. It is in the nature of the case that no evidence can be adduced to prove that an authentic happiness has ever been attained by those who proceed on these assumptions. There is, however, associated with them, an impressive history of misery and loss. And yet happiness thus imagined retains its power to enchant.

Let us say, then, that humanity has as an ideal state of being a condition no one can really define or isolate. It is the reward of meagre respite, the “Pippa Passes” joy that comes with one free day in a brutal year. Its absence taunts the wealthy and leisured, at least in a fair number of cases. It visits toddlers nestled in their mother’s arms, and, presumably, drug lords lounging on their yachts. Societies that try to institutionalize it sometimes turn brutal and sometimes simply drift away from their old intentions, though these were to achieve what is, in theory, the one great dream of humankind. There is no sense to be made of all this, in the terms in which we allow ourselves to consider it.

And this is reason enough to look for a larger synthesis, to borrow a phrase from Henry Adams. There is a problem with the word *synthesis*, since it seems to imply the possibility of a conceptual system large enough to embrace and order the strangeness of human experience, including all that we seem to know objectively and as subjective experience. It does have the merit, however, of implying an order behind everything that appears anomalous to our understanding, and this allows us to say that the givens of experience are, equally and indifferently, in the nature of things, the starkest paradox as surely as the neatest syllogism.

Theology, because it is anchored in pre-modern thought, not only accommodates anomaly but is devoted to its exploration. Why should irreconcilable things be equally true? How can we be precious and yet so appallingly mortal? Why our predisposition to evil when we feel so strongly predisposed to good? Why were the lives of the patriarchs, those bearers of God’s intention for the world, so bitter and sad? Why the suffering of the chosen people? These anomalies, or paradoxes, prepare for the one that crowns them all. Why the God Man? Tertullian’s *Credo quia absurdum* might be understood to mean that the paradox of Christ as God and Man is an ultimate expression of the sense, and revelation of the fact, that creation is too large to be contained in the tight fist of reason. The insight yielded by the consideration of biblical narrative, which is always full of the tension of anomaly--the Eternal acting in time, for example--is a better anticipation of our best understanding of physical reality than the rationalism of early modern science has given us. Reason, after all, generally proceeds by excluding anomaly, despite the tendency of observation to affirm it again and again.

The monk Guibert reasons to the conclusion that demonic forces are at work in particular events, thus erasing anomaly. Three female strangers are the demons of fever who are overheard choosing to feed on a fat man rather than a thin one. Then a portly monk dies of fever. “From this it can be surmised that these kinds of illnesses are

administered by demons, in accordance with the judgment of God” (103). No need to deal with the character of the monk. That great paradox, the suffering of the innocent, is put aside, since suffering itself is sufficient proof that it is deserved. To conjure demons might seem to us not reasonable at all, since we have for the most part supplanted them with the brute force of natural selection, which is notoriously inclined to determine merit on other terms than God’s, or with the reptilian brain, or a physiology still answering to the demands of the Pleistocene. Both Guibert and, let us say, Richard Dawkins propose a theory of everything, so far as their interests extend, which admittedly is not far. There are no loose ends, or there would be none if their thinking were given the general application they take to be potential in it.

This is not, however, the way of theology. To the question, whether Christ was a man, and whether he was mortal or immortal during the three days of his death, Peter Lombard replies, “To them we answer that, although he was a dead man, yet God was man in death; and he was neither mortal, nor immortal, yet truly a man. For those kinds of quibbles have their place in the case of creatures, but the mystery of faith is free from philosophical arguments. Hence Ambrose: ‘Put aside your arguments, where faith is required. Let dialectic be silent, even in her own schools. We believe fishermen, not dialecticians’” (93).

Putting aside my Protestant be-that-as-it-may response to questions of this kind, here an anomaly has been found in the narrative of death and resurrection, a lack of terms to describe an inconceivable state of things, and Lombard dismisses the query as inappropriate to its subject. Then he reasserts the paradox that prompted the query: “And so we say that in Christ’s death God was truly man, and yet the man was dead; and this man was neither mortal, nor immortal, because he was united to the severed soul and flesh.” If a vision of truth or reality is accepted in its entirety, in this case that Christ was both God and man, the integrity of the vision depends on the integrity of its elements without reference to pre-existing or external standards of reasonableness. If the universe began with something resembling an explosion, its expansion should not be accelerating. But it is. If a photon is split its two halves ought not to be subject to the same changes simultaneously no matter how great the distance between them. But they are. A neutron ought not to be able to be in any number of places at once. But it can. If reason were to comb out all the paradoxes and anomalies of modern physics there would be nothing left of it. Still, reason as it was practiced when Samuel Johnson could refute Berkeley’s subjectivism by kicking a stone, remains authoritative, and never speaks with greater confidence than when it debunks religion.

But philosophy, so long as it retained something of the character of religious thought, also remained open to paradox. It could still accept reality as “given,” that is, as having a source outside itself, therefore not needing to be accounted for as strictly autogenous. Traditional autogenic accounts, for example strict Darwinism, are based on a narrow attention to this world and assume that an adequate, even exhaustive, description of

reality, in effect a closed explanatory system, can be arrived at on the basis of an account of the emergence of life on this planet. How life arose happens to be a question central to religious/secular controversies within the civilizations that created modern science, and therefore in some quarters the most influential theory concerning it has been generalized inappropriately. The earth and its conditions, so far as they have been known or assumed, have been taken as normative--and not the universe of which the earth is an extremely exceptional part.

Whatever the merits of the case for there being an anthropocentricity reflected in the fact that the many conditions for our existence are indeed satisfied, this argument does make the valuable point that our being is intricately involved with cosmic circumstance, the deaths of stars and so on. Earth is far too small a sample of being, physically and temporally, to support generalization. It cannot yield a sufficient account of itself because it far too clearly participates in ways we do not know in a reality we do not understand. Presumably time in some sense pervades the universe, gravity in some sense shapes it, and causality in some sense governs it. Science cannot describe time, gravity or causality, though they are as essential to our most quotidian affairs as they are to the drift of constellations. This is only to say that theology, which is radically open to its truth as given, therefore to paradox and contradiction, is a better model for thought than the received habits of self-described reason. On these grounds the elusiveness, and the power, of an idea like happiness, and its reality despite the lack of any fixed and unambiguous instance of it, can all be granted.

It may seem as though this argument has taken a long leap just at this point. This is true because the old positivist scruples against metaphysics and against subjectivity are so entrenched that acknowledging anything essentially human seems like a throwback to merely primitive thinking. We have excluded ourselves from our understanding of reality even as we have become a more and more overwhelming factor in the condition and fate of the planet, that same small environment the positivists have insisted upon as the only test of meaning. Only consider what has been done in order to secure the happiness of human societies--by Fascists, Stalinists, Maoists, by theocrats and eugenicists. Every tyranny that has bothered to produce an apologia has found its very self essential to procuring the happiness of the greatest number. Every anthropology is a search for happiness as found in the wild. Most psychology seems to be a search for unhappiness, the object being to light the way to happiness, or to some reasonable approximation of it. Clearly old eudaimonism is important as it ever was, though embarrassed now by concepts traditionally associated with it, like virtue and excellence. (I do not wish to imply that people at large lack virtue and excellence, however defined, only that positivist exclusions have banished such concepts from learned and specialist language). When an idea has the power happiness has demonstrated throughout history, it has undeniable effective reality.

The phrase "effective reality" may sound like a redundancy. By it I mean that ideas can have impact comparable to forces that are real in the strictest conventional sense,

for example drought or plague. There are a great many negative instances of this effective power. If Ba'al and Tanit did indeed demand the deaths of Carthaginian children over centuries of time, they had a profound impact on that civilization, emotionally and perhaps demographically as well, since the sacrificial children seem to have been male and aristocratic. What this ritual meant in terms of the Punic strain of human psychology heaven knows. Without question western history was shaped by the belief that these rituals were indeed carried out. Carthage itself, a semitic-language culture with roots in Tyre that flourished in the biblical era, active and powerful in the Mediterranean and up the Atlantic coast to Europe, provider of tin to the Bronze Age, great Rome's dangerous rival, was obliterated once in fact and again in memory, in large part on the pretext or the fact of aversion to the cult of Ba'al and Tanit. Though there is now something approaching a consensus that the Punic tophets were indeed places of child sacrifice, the argument can be made that funeral rites were held in them for children who had already died. In either case, granting their nonexistence as existence is normally reckoned, these immortals, the gods of Carthage, shaped history profoundly. This is to say, human beings conjure with reality, for weal and woe, through myth or polemic, simply by believing whatever they believe, whether about the cosmos or about one another.

Belief in happiness also figures in myth and polemic. Therefore the fact of its having its important life among human beings even in the absence of secure definition, so far from excluding it from an objective model of reality, argues for its inclusion. According to John Locke, "He would be thought void of common sense who asked on the one side, or on the other side went to give a reason why 'it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be.'" But these categories, being and not being, are far too simple. Happiness is a case in point, one of many.

So also are concepts like virtue and excellence. In the modern period, how these arise and what they amount to are questions that have been left to psychology and anthropology. Modern thought--using the term to mean the thought of a brilliant period deeply marked by excesses and eccentricities, like every period before it--may prove to have had no more striking feature than its systematic translation of the language that has traditionally acknowledged human experience into terms that preclude its acknowledgment. Because they do not 'exist' in the way of tangible and measurable things, they can be reduced to epiphenomena. The ontological status of epiphenomena would seem to be of interest--how things are to be arrayed on a scale of real and less real, when no definition of reality is offered. Or why manifest behaviors, for example that old nuisance altruism, are lesser facts than their inferred origins in primal self-interest. But the answer to every question, we are told, is survival and procreation. These are carried on, by whatever means, among all life forms and therefore characterize none of them, ourselves no more than the rest. Among the dimorphic, potential mates of every stripe find courage or gentleness or evidence of skill to be very much in their interest on these two points, which are all that matters to them, too. That this very tidy model of essential reality does not feel true only demonstrates how thoroughly we deceive ourselves and are deceived, if one is to

believe its exponents.

Emily Dickinson says, “The abdication of belief makes the behavior small.” Similarly, the attempt to fold humankind into a reality defined as if humanity were not an effective, indeed a central, presence, is an evasion of human responsibility. It is also a crucial misrepresentation of the nature of reality, one impoverished by the loss of the insight that over centuries has come through the meticulous scrutiny of subjective experience. This is what the positivist rejection of metaphysics actually amounts to, a radically narrower conception of all that is, rationalized as a purging of subjectivity. As if such a thing were possible.

Among the realizations lost in this translation of all reality into positivist terms is recognition of the phenomenon of complexity. Subjectivity is the integration by consciousness of the givens of experience into a tentative but workable coherency, granting distortions, elaborations, blindnesses and so on, which tend to be magnified when they are not acknowledged. If there is a locus of human seriousness, it is to be found in the attempt to do justice to these givens. In the privacy of our thoughts most of us truly do not wish to be wrong or crazy. Complexity is the material consciousness works from, its problem in the positive sense of the word. Insofar as it retains its character as complexity—that is, insofar as it resists ready assimilation to preexisting coherency—it is the world making a true report of itself. So objectivity can be seen as radically experiential and prior to the accommodations that align experience with common sense. Such accommodation is what positivist “objectivity” generally amounts to. Our understanding of this question is special to the circumstance in which a particular solution, the supposed exclusion of subjectivity, was arrived at.

Adam Smith attributes an especially pure objectivity to what he calls “the man within.” In a famous passage in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he describes the basic indifference one of his hearers might feel in the event of an earthquake that swallowed China, and the correction away from indifference that intervenes when that person might himself be, passively or actively, the agent of harm to anyone. He says of the hypothetical earthquake, “The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren.” Then he asks, “To prevent, therefore, this paltry misfortune to himself, would a man of humanity be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them? Human nature startles with horror at the thought, and the world, in its greatest depravity and corruption, never produced such a villain as could be capable of entertaining it. But what makes this difference?” He answers his question this way:

It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature

has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. It is a stronger power, a more forcible motive, which exerts itself upon such occasions. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration. It is from him only that we learn the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves, and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator.

Smith allows himself paradox. He says, "It is not the love of our neighbour, it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of those divine virtues. It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place upon such occasions; the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur and dignity and superiority of our own characters.

That an appropriate humility can have its basis in what must be called pride has the ring of truth. That it is in no way demeaned or cast into doubt on these grounds, that Smith's Watchmaker can contrive by any means to make the world work as it should is an instance of the latitude allowed to premodern thought by the assumption that the givens of the world are in fact God given.

To understand one's place in terms of one's littleness would be an extraordinary feat of objectivity, though an objectivity with its origins at the very source of inwardness, according to Smith. The model of human nature that is usual in modern thought represents the inmost self as primitive and intent solely on the satisfaction of its own needs, and the outward and civilized self as a concession to the pressures and demands of life in society, necessary and at the same time unnatural, since this socialization moots or blunts the most urgent instincts.

What is Adam Smith describing? His man within the breast is a very gentlemanly person who learns these norms of behavior from society, from a sense of how an impartial observer might view the actions of the individual whose breast he inhabits. And yet he is more or less immune to the pressures of society when they are themselves unworthy of him. The rise in Smith's language in this passage suggests that he is urging the beauty of this conception of the self as much as he is inviting recognition of an actual experience of the self. He was no doubt aware that Locke had described the self in utterly different terms, with an impressive catalogue of enormities to document the point that human beings cannot be said to have any trace of an innate predisposition toward virtue or morality.

It is possible to acknowledge the strength of both arguments, though they are thoroughly incompatible with each other. But Smith's primary point is precisely that incompatible things can be true at the same time, that indifference to others' suffering coexists with genuine repugnance at the thought of being oneself the cause of harm. It is necessary to stipulate that this is true in degrees, and in the best cases, but there is still something to the description he makes of the workings of reason, principle and conscience in such matters.

Locke had lived through a period of terrible warfare within Britain, the Civil War history so often forgets to mention, and his family were on the losing side. It is true that Smith and his readers were consenting to grand-scale barbarity whenever they stirred sugar into their tea, but this was consistent with the theory and practice of colonialism, and was therefore a conditioned indifference of the kind induced by custom. In the Puritan revolution and its aftermath all the conventions of society were bloodily overridden. So Locke had another view than Smith's of the potency of the constraints that normally limit or channel depredation. Neither writer had a higher obligation than to make a faithful report of his own experience and reflection, and no one can appeal to an authority that would invalidate either report. There is no conclusion to be drawn except that reality is utterly vast and complex, and that human understanding of humanity itself is inevitably based on fragments and moments that are essentially accidental and circumstantial, no matter how brilliantly they are observed.

Contemporary science is fascinated with the idea of creating a "theory of everything," a synthesis that would fully reconcile established theory about the universe at the level of physics. The attempt might well be premature, the definition of "everything," even for these purposes, crucially incomplete. Still, the idea of an ultimate order has always haunted human thought. And so long as philosophy had a religious habit of mind, so long as it assumed an Author of being, it had its synthesis as a first premiss. Locke describes "the boundless invariable oceans of duration and expansion, which comprehend in them all finite beings, and in their full extent belong only to the Deity. And therefore" he says, "we are not to wonder that we comprehend them not, and do so often find our thoughts at a loss, either abstractly in themselves, or as any way attributed to the first incomprehensible Being." Since the scale and nature of existence are beyond human reckoning there is no need to force coherency on the elements of observed reality, no need to reconcile them to one another. Anomaly simply implies that the synthesis is immeasurably capacious, limited only by God's will and intention, which are unsearchable.

Therefore, contrary to conventional wisdom on the subject, thought for which God was a given was capable of an extraordinary degree of objectivity. This assumption is central to Locke's method in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

[T]he coherence and continuity of the parts of matter; the production of sensation in us of colours and sounds, &c., by impulse and motion; nay, the original rules and communication of motion being such, wherein we can discover no natural connexion with any ideas we have, we cannot but ascribe them to the arbitrary will and good pleasure of the Wise Architect . . . The things that, as far as our observation reaches, we constantly find to proceed regularly, we may conclude do act by a law set them; but yet by a law we know not: whereby, though causes work steadily, and effects constantly flow from them, yet their connexions and dependencies being not discoverable in our ideas, we can have but an experimental knowledge of them. From all which it is easy to perceive what a darkness we are involved in, how little it is of Being, and the things that are, that we are capable to know. And therefore we shall do no injury to our knowledge, when we modestly think with ourselves, that we are so far from being able to comprehend the whole nature of the universe, and all the things contained in it . . . Several effects come every day within the notice of our senses, of which we have so far sensitive knowledge: but the causes, manner, and certainty of their production, for the two foregoing reasons, we must be content to be very ignorant of.

His exploration of the mind is again and again a statement of its limits--"There is not so contemptible a plant or animal, that does not confound the most enlarged understanding. Though the familiar use of things about us take off our wonder, yet it cures not our ignorance."

The lawfulness of the physical world is still unexplained, essentially undescribed, as is consciousness. We have vastly enlarged our awareness of the darkness we are involved in, with the consequence that we have a vastly diminished sense of the share we have in its Being, qualitative as well as quantitative. At such scales knowledge and ignorance seem to be one thing. Both forbid extrapolation.

In any case, Locke's strategy of unknowing, an honorable tradition in theology, makes him a participant in inquiry so radical that his questions are the questions that challenge physics in the 21st century. The genius of his method lies in its openness, its reliance on "experimental knowledge" to provide us with the understanding of which we are capable. The givens of the world can be arbitrary because there is an Arbiter. That is, they can be anomalous in terms of our expectations, and co-exist with data that appear to be at odds with them, for example the contradictions or disproportions in moral experience described by Adam Smith, or the simultaneity without apparent causal relation of sensation and idea described by John Locke. Attention to the givens of experience in their integrity, with as few preconceptions as possible, is a good definition of objectivity. Science and philosophy can proceed on assumptions like these, that there is an ultimate synthesis that is theoretically describable though forever beyond our grasp. The roots of this method in theology, still so clear in Locke and Smith, do not compromise its usefulness. Being is a very real mystery, and the farthest thing from chaos. This is the very foundation of human understanding.

Positivism in combination with fundamentalist Darwinism has represented reality as if it were composed entirely of those features of experience available to 19th century science, wholly dependent on data and their like selectively derived from this small and wildly atypical planet. It is itself an arbitrary construction, a tacit geocentrism that claims to reject anthropocentrism, though the triumphal tone of it all is embarrassingly human. Deeper questions about the nature of being have been put out of consideration because they are unanswerable, therefore “metaphysical,” despite their being of great and fruitful interest to contemporary physicists. The positivist universe is in fact composed of just those parts of experience that are relevant to a particular metaphysics, a particular theory of being in which everything distinctively human is epiphenomenal, mere protective coloration for something else, this something else being, of course, survival or procreation. The plausibility of this world view has seemed unanswerable because it is constructed out of commonplace materials and because it functions as the world can be thought of as functioning, once its terms are granted.

Actual science, the science that truly queries the universe and produces insights that overturn its own assumptions, proceeds as if reality exceeds our grasp as utterly as Locke says it does, and that finally there is an order in it sufficiently available to the human mind to allow meaningful access to its workings, as Locke says also. What would be added to this cosmos if the Deity were again granted his place as its Creator and Arbiter? Very simply, Humankind.

Everything we know has passed through the lens of human consciousness. All sorts of means have been devised to correct for this, but the fact remains. Insofar as the workings of consciousness are not taken into account, the errors of subjectivity are concealed from us, and they assume greater importance. It is true for this reason and very many others that the mind is profoundly interesting. It is, paradoxically, our greatest problem and our greatest resource. It is also, so far as we know, the only witness to creation, and we are the only beings competent to name it *cosmos*, beauty. The interactions of the human mind with what can be known are thrilling. The space-atoms and time-atoms of Moses Maimonides sound very like quanta. Little humanity was correct in seeing itself as properly the object of its own reverence, precisely in the fact of the privileged access its consciousness has given it to the vastnesses of existence, which were assumed to exceed its grasp utterly and at the same time to be addressed to its perception and understanding. This great contest, rewarded again and again by new insight, presupposes an affinity between the mind and the universe which should endorse respect for the wholeness of the mind, including its passions, doubts and intuitions, and for the wholeness of experience, including paradox and anomaly. We have been told that we are native to the earth. It is true in a profounder sense that we are native to the universe, to creation, and what we are reveals its deepest nature. This is the central assertion of faith. Uniquely it asserts a space large enough to allow for the givenness of everything we can know and all the astonishing, imponderable unknown, a space large enough to intrigue and enchant the human mind forever, with its own inexhaustible mystery not least. This is

happiness of the highest order.