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English 1000H

10 April 2011

Misfortune: Creating Opportunity, or Impeding Happiness?

According to Aristotle, there are many requirements for being happy. Although we can still be happy without personal blessings and external prosperity by acting nobly in accordance with some virtue, good fortune dictates whether we will experience complete happiness. Happiness is something which he refers to as “the good” that we all strive to achieve. “The good of man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue...” (Aristotle 700) Despite these requirements for happiness, Aristotle states in “The Aim of Man” that all of us can achieve happiness through noble acts in accordance with virtue. Virtue can be described as a quality in an action that one determines worthwhile based on rational principle. Although our lives are subject to the ebb and flow of misfortune, Aristotle states that the wise man will “...at all times and in preference to everything else...be engaged in virtuous action and contemplation, and he will bear the changes of fortune as nobly and in every respect as decorously as possible...” (Aristotle 706) Aristotle clearly sees misfortune as an obstruction to happiness, and although the wise man can certainly be happy despite it, he is still worse off because of it. Nietzsche would see this as a very one-sided approach to misfortune. Nietzsche’s spiritualization of hostility as described in “Morality as Anti-Nature” is an example of his general viewpoint of misfortune as an opportunity instead of an inhibitor for happiness. It is in the times of need, when we lack blessings of wealth, kinship, beauty, and material, that we are able to

develop new things and find solutions to our own previously unrecognizable problems. Despite Aristotle's belief that misfortunes are things to be endured with dignity, Nietzsche's viewpoint implies that hardship can be spiritualized and used to one's personal advantage by providing the opportunity for creative innovation, self-preservation and personal growth, which in turn fosters happiness.

Aristotle would assert that having enemies is an example of a hardship that undermines happiness. It may result in loneliness, fierce competition, or internal struggle. It creates war and conflict, and is the opposite of peace, which most of us believe would make us happy. However, when one starts to examine the value of having enemies, one may find that there is much happiness and fulfillment that could not have been appreciated if our enemies had not existed. Nietzsche believes strongly in what he calls the spiritualization of hostility. "It consists in a profound appreciation of the value of having enemies: in short, it means acting and thinking in the opposite way from that which has been the rule." (Nietzsche 718) Most of us fail to recognize and appreciate our adversaries for the opportunities they present because we one-sidedly focus on how they immediately affect us, and so did Aristotle. Our internal and external enemies provide opportunities that peace of mind and peace in our world could not. The consequences Nietzsche presents in the event of our enemies' demise include a lack of support for new creation and the deterioration of social and political systems. Although Nietzsche's spiritualization of hostility speaks of appreciating our enemies, in a broader sense it describes his general outlook on misfortune and opposition. The consequences he describes holds true for any kind of calamity. However, his depiction is not just a warning, it is an attack on the high pedestal upon which society places peace. He says,

“Nothing has become more alien to us than that desideratum of former times, ‘peace of soul,’ ... there is nothing we envy less than the moralistic cow and the fat happiness of good conscience.” (Nietzsche 719) In contrast, along with glorifying nobility and dignity in tough situations, Aristotle states that the goal of the wise man, although he will not be completely happy, is to maintain a sort of calmness, or peace of soul, throughout misfortunes. “They will crush and maim happiness, in that they bring pain and thereby hinder many of our natural activities. Yet true nobility shines out even here, if a multitude of great misfortunes be borne with calmness- not, to be sure, with calmness of insensibility, but nobility and greatness of soul.” (Aristotle 706) This is the kind of nonsense that Nietzsche disdains. For it is in misfortune that we find the opportunities to act nobly and to create, to find solutions, to harness our negative passions and turn them into something beneficial for society. We can spiritualize misfortune by accepting and appreciating these opportunities. The trials of our life should be celebrated because it is in these difficult times that we can experience the happiness of fulfillment from triumphing over affliction.

The lack of wealth and external goods is an affliction that Aristotle believes undermines happiness: “Nevertheless, happiness plainly requires external goods as well; for it is impossible, or at least not easy, to act nobly without proper equipment.” (Aristotle 703) But although poverty or lack of resources can be devastating, it does not have to be an inhibitor to happiness. Being without material can lead to innovations that will influence the happiness of both those involved in its creation and those who are affected for years to come. Also, in many cases acting nobly in accordance with virtue does not require physical means. There are many religious followers, for instance, who

spend their lives teaching others the principles they believe to be life changing. To them, this action is based upon rational principle, and the lack of equipment would not necessarily prohibit them from being happy because they are doing what they consider righteous. More importantly, the lack of proper equipment can lead the creative mind or desperate person to innovation. War is the perfect example of a dire situation, where there is a constant lack of comfort, technology, and necessary supplies. In this case, the enemy creates an unparalleled kind of competition for technology that could mean life or death. The soldiers involved can seize the opportunity to act according to virtue and, despite the chaos going on around them, discover true happiness in defending their country. In such a catastrophic circumstance, there is often a scarcity of material, which prompts some of the greatest, most influential innovations to come to life. Inventions such as jet airplanes, transistors, artificial limbs, and GPS are developments of war arising from the few who recognized opportunity in a time of calamity. They created something beneficial through noble action, thus spreading happiness to those involved in the war and many more in the future. In contemplating the role that misfortune plays in happiness, Aristotle speaks of how calamity can befall a man even after death. "For many hold that both good and evil may in a certain sense befall a dead man...-e.g. honors and disgraces, and the prosperity or misfortune of his children and the rest of his descendants." (Aristotle 705) With creation man can influence the happiness of his descendents through his own action according to virtue. Invention, or the idea for creation, is less often discovered through chance and good fortune than it is derived from those circumstances where there is a lack of it.

At times, opposition may not only be an opportunity to take noble action but may be a necessity for self-preservation. Nietzsche uses politics to show how the enemy can be a powerful, valuable asset. “Almost every party understands how it is in the interest of its own self-preservation that the opposition should not lose all strength; the same is true of power politics.” (Nietzsche 719) Our country’s two main political parties are constantly battling against each other to pass laws, place candidates in positions of power, and to persuade the American people to support their ideas. At times, there is no greater adversary for a Republican than a Democrat and vice versa. However, these two parties are so crucial to our system of government that if one were to disappear, we would face political, social, and economic destruction. Our government, along with many other organizations, depends upon conflict to generate the opportunity for a variety of ideas to be presented. People criticize the government for its warring radical parties, and many are negatively affected by their inability to agree on issues. However, a diversity of ideas, which comes from the misfortune of conflict, is what provides the best opportunities for the innovative creation of laws. The more opposing parties debate each other’s viewpoints and attack each other on television, and the more people fight and experience conflict in our country, the more opportunity there is for rebuttal and societal advancement. Nietzsche uses the example of *The Reich* in his argument, and although the comparison between such a dictatorial regime and our government seems ludicrous, both political systems would fail without the conflict that comes from opposition, or the misfortune that comes from having an enemy. The very purpose of government is to form laws and give organization to the chaos caused by misfortune, and also to provide a defense against enemies. If there were no enemies, we probably wouldn’t have allies

either, which we trade with, work with, and use as vital support. In the case of the United States, there have been times when having an enemy has given us an opportunity to undermine support for terrorism and spread democracy. Although many Americans believe the war in Iraq was a mistake, in the midst of war democracy has begun to spread to an area previously ruled by a brutal dictator who supported terrorism. In this way our country was able to take advantage of the opportunity to act nobly as a result of what some would say is one of the greatest misfortunes.

Just as conflict can bring benefit to our country, misfortune and internal conflict present individuals with an opportunity to discover solutions and grow through noble actions. “Our attitude to the ‘internal enemy’ is no different: here too we have spiritualized hostility; here too we have come to appreciate its value. The price of fruitfulness is to be rich in internal opposition...” (Nietzsche 719) The opportunities for personal growth are only recognized by those willing to learn something in the midst of tragedy and personal conflict. Improving oneself is a form of noble action, and thus leads to happiness. Personal triumph may call us to help others take noble action in this way as well. Aristotle speaks of several misfortunes which prohibit us from experiencing complete happiness, “...for the man who is repulsive in appearance, or ill-born, or solitary and childless does not meet the requirements of a happy man, and still less does one who has worthless children and friends, or who has lost good ones by death.” (Aristotle 703) However, personal misfortunes such as death, loneliness, and even unattractiveness provide opportunities for a person to grow and desire to take noble action. The first time someone experiences death is often a pivotal, meaningful, point in their lives. When they come to understand death, they may realize the importance of

striving to live life to its fullest, and as a consequence may better their relationships, their actions, and may take more advantage of every other opportunity. As a consequence of death, these people make changes in their life, are more likely to act nobly with each and every future opportunity as a consequence, and are thus happier. On the other hand, there are others who, as Aristotle suggests, would bear through the pain of loss and keep striving to take noble action despite the vacancy in their lives. These people, however, would fail to recognize their fullest potential and would not see the problems that keep them from truly living each day. Loneliness is another example of misfortune which we often blame on ourselves. However, it is because of this tendency that it provides the most opportunity for personal growth towards nobler action. In times of loneliness, we are forced to face and live with ourselves. Those who are unattractive are more immediately faced with this challenge. The self-realization of things we want to improve about our self may lead to severe depression in some, but likely only those who simply try to live with it, or bear it with dignity. Loneliness and isolation can be a great opportunity to improve oneself without the interfering comments of others so that one may desire to act more nobly, thus becoming a happier person. It may also allow us to find solutions to those things that hinder friendship and help to develop ourselves relationally as well. An unattractive person has the opportunity to discover themselves in a different, unique way from the attractive person. The qualities in the attractive person that often go ignored have a greater opportunity to be developed in the unattractive person. These qualities, or personality traits, would likely lead to nobler action. Any situation in which we feel helpless and afflicted provides opportunity for personal growth and triumph, which may also lead to the growth of nobler action in ourselves and others.

Through capitalizing on the opportunities for creation, self-preservation, and personal improvement, we can become the “Nietzschan superman” and achieve the spiritualization of misfortune. Chaos, disaster, tragedy, and horror are all necessary blessings because they create the opportunity for us to live nobly and achieve and appreciate happiness. By simply bearing through the pain and hardship in this life, we do ourselves a disfavor. Every misfortune creates opportunity for nobler action. Every need creates the opportunity for creation, every conflict creates the opportunity for advancement, and every personal affliction creates the opportunity for growth. We are dependant upon these opportunities for a happy and fulfilling life. Aristotle believes that the person who acts each and every day with noble action in accordance with virtue over a *complete life* will be happy and blessed. “For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one fine day; and similarly one day or brief period of happiness does not make a man happy and blessed.” (Aristotle 701) However, Nietzsche shows us a way to be blessed and happy *throughout* life. The contrast between the two is the difference between quiet suffering and activism, fatalism and Amor fati (love of fate), resignation and hope. It is those who make opportunities out of misfortune that are the creative innovators, the “survivors”, the personally mature individuals who’s noble actions generates a level of happiness that is seldom achieved by those who bear the burden of misfortune instead of seeing the opportunity in it.

Works Cited

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