Classic Problem of Happiness: Critical Analysis

Introduction

This subject raises a rather classic problem on happiness: that of knowing what place we should / can give it in our lives. Happiness is on the one hand a legitimate and even universal end. We cannot blame anyone for living to be happy, that is, for seeking to achieve happiness, and we can even give this affirmation a universal scope: yes, we all live universally to be happy, so true is it that the definition of happiness is sufficiently relative to each person that we can say that all men want to be happy, whatever the way it is.

But at the same time, happiness is an uncertain end. Living to be happy also means seeking happiness at all costs, living only for that. But can we sacrifice everything for happiness in this way? Is happiness the one and only end of our existence? There are indeed other goals that man, as a reasonable being, can pursue and which can go against their individual happiness: virtue, knowledge, citizenship, freedom..... Thus happiness is indeed the only end of our existence, to the detriment of all others, where our humanity is also at stake?

Several plans were of course possible to deal with this subject, so here is a proposal based on a few ideas.

1) Happiness is a universal end

At first, we could develop the idea that we live well to be happy and that this affirmation has a universal scope. This is because of the definition of happiness. If it is a state of total and lasting satisfaction, it can be achieved in different ways depending on the individual. Happiness is therefore relative, individual. Therefore, everyone will, in their own way, continue this one in their existence. Happiness can thus be considered as a universal end, as Aristotle explains in Nicomachean Ethics, for example, by defining happiness as the supreme end: everything we do or pursue (money, honours, love...), we do it to be happy and happiness is the only end in itself of existence (we want to be happy to be happy and not for anything else).

It is therefore legitimate to seek happiness and this is also one aspect of the problem. Do we live to be happy? It also means: is it the meaning of our existence in the world? In this respect, the pursuit of happiness is in accordance with our nature to be sensitive, which implies that we seek to do everything in our power to be happy. Happiness is in fact a function of what we can do, obtain and our freedom as a capacity for action, as a power. Here we could refer, for example, to the remarks made by Callicles in Plato's Gorgias.

So happiness is a universal and legitimate end of our lives. We all live to be happy. However, as a state of total and lasting satisfaction, happiness seems difficult if not impossible to achieve. So can we live only to be happy? Doesn't our existence have any meaning other than in a sensitive, individual and uncertain happiness?

2) Happiness cannot be the only end of our existence

We could therefore follow in this second track on the idea that happiness cannot be the only end of our existence. We can approach the question from a moral point of view by arguing that our duty, which often goes against our happiness, is nevertheless necessary for the realization of our reasonable humanity: we must therefore know how to renounce happiness if the duty requires it. We could rely on Kant, Fondements de la métaphysique des moeurs or Mill, L'Utilitarisme. Happiness as the end in itself of our lives is also problematic as an individual end. To seek happiness at all costs, is it not also to be ready to sacrifice the happiness of others to obtain our own happiness? The question also arises as to the extent to which we should not care about others before our individual happiness. This is Hegel's description of the great man who is, he tells us, not happy because his existence has a meaning that goes beyond this simple concern. Thus, happiness acts as a form of illusion and what we sacrifice if we seek it at all costs risks distorting us by leading us to renounce aspects essential to our humanity. See for example the criticism of enlightened despotism in Diderot's Letter to Helvetius, since precisely the happiness provided by the enlightened despot to men acts as a seduction that transforms them into cattle.

We must therefore be wary of happiness, either because it is only an impossible illusion to achieve, or because it acts as a sleeping pill that leads us to renounce what is essential to our human nature. However, as we have also seen, we are not only reasonable beings but also sentient beings for whom happiness is essential. Can't then seek happiness without giving up what defines us?

3) Living to be happy is not incompatible with the rest of our duties

In this third track we could develop the idea that living to be happy is not necessarily incompatible with the rest of our duties, and even that the search for happiness only makes sense in the respect of them. If happiness is defined as a state of total satisfaction in which we are perfectly ourselves, this state can only be achieved anyway in respect of what we are as being sensitive and reasonable. We cannot be happy by giving up what constitutes us. Thus, in the Second Speech, Rousseau explains how the social contract must make it possible to recover man's natural happiness and harmony, that is, how, by doing his duty as a citizen, man regains a happiness that can no longer be purely individual in any case. In the same way, for example in Kant, happiness can be pursued as a secondary end, that is, as a means to access virtue.

Thus, living to be happy does not necessarily mean embarking on a frenetic race to satisfy all our desires, but rather finding the balance that will allow us to reach a lasting state of absence of disorder, as proposed by epicurean ethics for example.

Conclusion

We live well to be happy. This does not mean that we can sacrifice everything for our personal satisfaction. Happiness is certainly a legitimate end of existence, but can only be achieved if we build it without renouncing the essential features of our reasonable humanity. We live this way to be happy in the sense that happiness is the end from which we build our existence to reach it, without sacrificing everything to it blindly.