Knowledge and Happiness: Augustine's and Descartes' Ideas

The pursuit of happiness has often been tied to thoughtful contemplation. However, thoughtful contemplation is hard to define. Published in 1959 and given as a memorial address for German Composer Conradin Kreutzer, Martin Heidegger's Discourse on Thinking introduces the difference between meditative thinking and calculative thinking. Meditative thinking is contemplative thinking, which makes humans unique. Calculative thinking is goal-oriented thinking and focuses on producing a result without thinking about why. Philosophers use meditative thinking to discover answers to many questions, such as how to find happiness. Both Augustine and Descartes use meditative thinking to determine that contemplating and finding God is what will lead people to the highest form of happiness one can achieve on earth. Augustine believed that one must understand something as a whole in order to see its true value. He also explained that climbing the intellectual ladder strips away limitations, allowing a person to become deeper in reality. Descartes, in order to find a solid foundation, doubted everything he had ever believed and ultimately proved God exists because He gives a solid foundation for knowledge and a purpose for life. They come to these conclusions after much time spent in meditative thinking. Without asking why or how people achieve true happiness, neither could have come to the conclusions that they did. Using calculative thinking limits a person's ability to think deeply, or, as Heidegger said, "we are far too easily thought-less" (Heidegger 45), indicating that thoughtlessness is becoming more common. Meditative thinking opens the mind and allows people to understand why they are acting as they are, whereas calculative thinking only helps in achieving a goal without understanding the purpose.

Meditative versus calculative thinking, according to Heidegger, is a dangerous schism. He explains that with technological advances, calculative thinking is becoming more commonly used. This type of thinking has grown in popularity because technology provides easier ways to achieve goals, and Heidegger warns "... the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking" (56). With easier access to communication and production, people drift into thoughtlessness as tasks become easier to complete, such as online shopping and factory workers being replaced with machines. This is dangerous, however, because "calculative thinking is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is" (46). Calculative thinking does not lead a person to ask why one is doing what one is, as it only provides a plan of action to achieve a goal. Calculative thinking provides an answer to the question of how to complete a task, but it does not ask why one is doing this. It removes a person's depth, something that meditative thinking adds. Unlike calculative thinking, "Meditative thinking demands of us that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all" (53). Meditative thinking requires that people think deeply about their surroundings and actions in order to determine why their course of action is necessary. Further, meditative thinking separates human beings from all other lifeforms. As calculative thinking becomes more utilized, meditative thinking becomes secondary, and "therefore, the issue is the saving of man's essential nature" and "keeping meditative thinking alive" (56). Meditative thinking is essential to existing a human being, and with the rise of calculative thinking, Heidegger explains that man is losing part of that essential being.

Augustine used both meditative and calculative thinking in his life in his work Confessions, and he only found happiness after using meditative thinking to find what gives life meaning. Augustine spent many years using calculative thinking to be successful in the world, yet he felt unfulfilled. In his early life, he studied in order to have a distinguished reputation in his line of work. While this gave him reputation and benefits, he found himself deeply unhappy. Augustine explained that his ambition refused to let him pursue any other goal, saying, “In all our strivings such as those efforts that were then worrying me, the goads of ambition impelled me to drag the burden of my unhappiness with me, and in dragging it to make it even worse; yet we had no goal other than to reach a carefree cheerfulness” (Augustine 97). Yet as he started using meditative thinking to contemplate God and find the truth, he led to happiness. In using meditative thinking, he was able to turn away from the earthly pleasures he had been pursuing, and while studying God’s word, “At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all the anxiety flooded into my heart” (153). By using meditative thinking, Augustine was able to determine what would bring him true peace, and in doing so, he left the profession that was making him miserable. Meditative thinking led him to accept this transformation and find happiness through knowledge of God.

Descartes’ relationship with meditative and calculative thinking led him to doubt everything he knew. Believing all he had previously believed to be false, Descartes decided to use meditative thinking to find what was true. He took the opinions of his youth as truth because he used calculative thinking and did not question those opinions. At the time of writing his Meditations on the First Philosophy, he stated: “I will stay on this course until I know something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain” (Descartes 63), explaining that he will contemplate everything he believed until he could determine the validity of it. One such way was by disregarding his senses and determining that there is something about wax in its essence that makes it wax, regardless of the form it takes. This contemplation came from meditative thinking, and by using this course of thought, he asked why his life had meaning and what gave it meaning. By the end of his meditations, Descartes determined, “For just as we believe by faith that the greatest felicity of the next life consists solely in this contemplation of divine majesty…” (81), explaining that the greatest happiness in the next life will be contemplation of the supreme being. Following this, he concluded that “...we too now experience that from the same contemplation, although it is much less perfect, the greatest pleasure of which we are capable in this life can be perceived” (81). Through meditative thinking, Descartes determined that the highest form of happiness comes from knowledge and contemplation of the supreme being.

Augustine shows that a person can be pursuing knowledge for his or her entire life, but if it is not the right kind of knowledge, it will not lead to happiness. Augustine ultimately proves that the heart is restless until it rests with God, and the only way to find God is through meditative thinking. From his youth, Augustine wanted to acquire knowledge, but “This was the society in which at a vulnerable age I was to study the textbooks on eloquence” (Augustine 38). He was not pursuing knowledge that led him to question, but instead, it taught him how to convince and deceive others. Once he recognized that this would not fulfill him, he began testing out different religions. He began with the Manichaeans, but they did not have the answers he was searching for. Faustus, the leader, did not try to answer Augustine’s questions because he knew he could not. Augustine was unsatisfied, but “decided to be content for the time being unless perhaps something preferable should come to light” (80). Falling back into calculative thinking, he decided that he would remain with the Manichaeans simply because there was not a better option. He could not stop himself from desiring answers to what gave life meaning, however, so

he eventually entertained the ideas of the Academics, who used skepticism. Although they did not give him answers, they helped Augustine see the Manichaeans would never fulfill his desire for knowledge. Augustine next explored Neoplatonism, which he said helped lead him back to himself. This was still unfulfilling, however, because “Those pages do not contain the face of this devotion, tears of confession, your sacrifice, a troubled spirit, a contrite and humble spirit...” (131). The Neoplatonist texts did not explain God. By this point, Augustine was deep into meditative thinking and needed to find answers to what gave him purpose. Augustine ended his religious journey by becoming a Christian, which led him to find answers in the word of God. Upon truly understanding the word of God, Augustine gains knowledge “And I cried out loud when I acknowledged inwardly what I read in external words” (162). He finally found answers that satisfied the questions he had been asking. Augustine only found peace and happiness after meditative thinking led to God. Augustine tells God, however, “You pierced my heart with the arrow of your love, and we carried your words transfixing my innermost being” (156), showing that meditative thinking about God led him to peace, and ultimately, happiness.

Augustine and Descartes show that meditative thinking is essential to being a human being, yet Heidegger shows that society is currently being drawn toward calculative thinking. This turn toward calculative thinking is a turn toward thoughtlessness. Calculative thinking is goal-oriented thinking, where the outcome is the focus. It does not require people to understand why they are doing what they are doing. According to Heidegger, this is a turn away from what makes us human beings: meditative thinking. Meditative thinking is what allows people to understand their actions. This type of thinking leads to happiness, as demonstrated by Augustine and Descartes. Both used meditative thinking to find happiness. In both cases, this led them to religion. They both determined that contemplation of a supreme being leads to the highest happiness a person can feel. They come to this conclusion, however, after using calculative thinking and being dissatisfied with their lives. Often in today’s society, people are dissatisfied and turn to social media to give them temporary happiness. Crafting an idealized life by posting only happy moments allows individuals to experience temporary joy. By using calculative thinking, people can determine what posts will make them seem like the best version of themselves. This happiness, however, is temporary, which is why people turn back to social media for more validation. Upon the use of meditative thinking, however, people have the chance to find things that will bring them true happiness. This requires a turn away from calculative thinking, a factor that has become deeply ingrained in today’s society. If meditative thinking is, what makes humans special, then it is within all of us, making this transition back not impossible, just difficult.