

Inklings Forever

Volume 4 A Collection of Essays Presented at the
Fourth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S.
Lewis & Friends

Article 4

3-2004

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Recommended Citation

Finck, Tracey (2004) "C.S. Lewis's Idea of Happiness," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 4 , Article 4.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol4/iss1/4

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IV

A Collection of Essays Presented at
The Fourth

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2004
Upland, Indiana

C.S. Lewis's Idea of Happiness

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In the movie *Shadowlands*,¹ there is a scene showing C.S. (Jack) Lewis and his wife, Joy, on a belated honeymoon adventure, looking for a certain valley out in the English countryside. Jack says that he's happy.

Joy asks, "What kind of happy?"—teasing him because he so predictably analyzes every concept into categories.

Jack's answer in the movie is, "Just happy. I don't want to be anywhere else."

When we are experiencing happiness, we don't want to step out of it to analyze it. But happily for us, C.S. Lewis's life was not one continuous stream of ecstatic happiness; he had time to write objectively on the subject for the benefit of you and me. I find his theory of happiness laid out most straightforwardly in "The Weight of Glory," and its significance illustrated most vividly in *The Great Divorce*, both of which we will look at shortly.

But let's start by taking a closer look at the happy honeymooner: Jack didn't want to be anywhere else. He wanted what he had. We can take from this a broad definition: Happiness is the experience of having what you want or wanting what you have.

I realize that there are many other ways to define happiness. People like to debate, for example, about whether happiness is obtained directly or indirectly, and whether it's a thing in itself or merely an aspect of other things. But I hope you will bear with me and, for the sake of argument, try on this definition to see if it makes sense as a framework for Lewis's comments on the subject.

If we agree that, in general, happiness is the experience of wanting what we have or having what we want, it is easy to see how Lewis could distinguish categories. There can be as many different kinds of happiness as there are objects of desire.

Lewis believed that some things are better to desire than others, and he ranked them in a hierarchy. The more solid² the object you desire, the more profound your happiness (if you get it) or your unhappiness (if you don't).

The significance of the hierarchy is that reality often forces a choice. In the preface to *The Great Divorce*, Lewis explains that he wrote the book as a rebuttal to the popular notion that "reality never presents us with an absolutely unavoidable 'either/or.'"

The truth is, he says, that "you cannot take all luggage with you on all journeys; on one journey even your right hand and your right eye may be among the things you have to leave behind."³ A right hand and a right eye are very good things. I'm happy to have mine. But Lewis invokes the authority of Christ here⁴ to tell me that this happiness is nothing compared with the happiness I'll have if I'm willing to let them go in exchange for a better reward: Desire the best reward if you want the best happiness.

Reading C.S. Lewis has taught me that this choice pervades daily life. All day long I make choices between good things of varying caliber. My capacity to bear the weight of this responsibility grows as I willingly bear it. I become capable of choosing more solid happiness—even of desiring more solid happiness—step by step, choice by choice.

In "The Weight of Glory," Lewis introduces us to an "ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."⁵ The child wants what he has and is happy. (What kind of happy? Mud-pie happy.) He doesn't believe there is something better to want, a better happiness to be had. There's nothing wrong with delighting in making mud pies; in fact, if all that life offers you is mud, the best choice you have is to make mud pies with gusto. The point is to realize that something better may present itself, in which case you are wise to leave the mud behind.

Sometimes an object of our desire is taken from us. Imagine if the child's uncle, instead of asking him whether he wanted to come to the seaside, forcibly took him there. The child is suddenly deprived of his familiar slum and delivered to the beach. He has no choice about his situation. But as to happiness, the choice is still his. This choice Lewis articulates beautifully through the voice of the Green Lady in *Perelandra*, the second book of his science fiction trilogy. The Lady lives in an unfallen world and is the epitome of happiness; in fact, prior to this scene in the book, the possibility of unhappiness never occurred to her. Here she is speaking to Ransom, the visitor from the fallen planet (earth):

"What you have made me see," answered the Lady, "is as plain as the sky, but I never saw it before. Yet it has happened every day. One

goes into the forest to pick food and already the thought of one fruit rather than another has grown up in one's mind. Then, it may be, one finds a different fruit and not the fruit one thought of. One joy was expected and another is given. But this I had never noticed before—that the very moment of the finding there is in the mind a kind of thrusting back, or setting aside. The picture of the fruit you have not found is still, for a moment, before you. And if you wished . . . you could keep it there. You could send your soul after the good you had expected, instead of turning it to the good you had got. You could refuse the real good; you could make the real fruit taste insipid by thinking of the other.”⁶

Unhappiness—the experience of wanting an unavailable good or of not wanting the available good—is an all-too-real possibility. The only way to avoid it is to exercise one's free will, redirecting the mind to want the new good, the available good, or the best from among the available goods.

This is how Jack's mother must have lived. He says, in his spiritual autobiography *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, that his mother's side of the family “had the talent for happiness in a high degree—went straight for it as experienced travelers go for the best seat in a train.”⁷ Happiness isn't generally considered a talent; many people see it as an arbitrary wind that blows on some people and not others, for no apparent reason, and leaves as unpredictably as it arrives. Not so, says Lewis. We can develop the talent for it. In fact, it is a two-fold skill, as we have been discussing: one aspect is to want what we have; the second is to learn the true value of all good things so we can choose wisely when options present themselves.

Some Christians develop the second skill but not the first. They have fearfully concluded that the only way to be prepared for eternal happiness is *not* to indulge in any lower form of happiness. Earthly happiness is seen as sinful—and desire, since it is the force that draws us to various kinds of happiness or pleasure—is seen as dangerous. These Christians, along with the Buddhists, have set about to eliminate desire itself. Desire is evil because if we don't get what we desire, we experience unhappiness. If we do get what we desire, we may get in trouble. Or we may not die to self. And how can we be sure that we aren't desiring something that is not intended for us, in which case we would be coveting?

Lewis, in response, defends desire:

The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to

take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire. If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises or reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. . . . We are far too easily pleased.⁸

In *The Great Divorce*, the lizard of lust is “killed” and transformed into a stallion of desire that carries its owner to the mountains. “Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering whispering thing compared with that richness and energy of desire which will arise when lust has been killed.”⁹ Desire is not the enemy; it is the transportation. If we can train it not to be distracted, it will carry us to the best reward: glory.

Glory is indeed the highest object of desire and the source of ultimate happiness. But here's the practical problem: “glory” is a bit vague and abstract. It's difficult to want it. We haven't tasted it, or we have had a taste but haven't learned to savor it. Our taste hasn't developed, as my dad used to say about us kids when he and mom were eating something gourmet and we opted for hot dogs.

The good news is that our tastes can be developed. Lewis says our situation is similar to that a schoolboy studying Greek grammar. An enjoyment of Greek poetry is the proper reward, but at the beginning, the boy can't even imagine that reward, so it doesn't motivate him. He starts by working for a lower, temporary reward, like good grades or the approval of his teacher.

Gradually, enjoyment creeps in upon the mere drudgery. . . . It is just insofar as he approaches the reward that he becomes able to desire it for its own sake; indeed, the power of so desiring it is itself a preliminary reward.

The Christian, in relation to heaven, is in much the same position as the schoolboy. Those who have attained everlasting life in the vision of God doubtless know very well that it is no mere bribe, but the very consummation of their earthly discipleship; but we . . . cannot even begin to know it at all except by

continuing to obey and finding the first reward of our obedience in our increasing power to desire the ultimate reward.¹⁰

Lewis's theory of happiness is that we develop the capacity to desire and to savor glory by desiring and savoring the "practice" rewards of earth. But we must remember they are only for practice and will lose their value as soon as the more solid reward appears. My fifteen-year-old daughter can't wait to get her driver's permit. That will be a great reward for her; she'll no doubt savor it. But if, when the time came for her solid driver's license, she should refuse it because she couldn't bear to give up the permit that had given her such happiness, she would miss the much greater happiness and freedom of being able to drive without adult supervision. The nature of the permit is that it is temporary. It is for training purposes only. So with all earthly joys. They are temporary, for training purposes only. When a student driver passes her driving test, she gives up the permit but retains the ability to drive. The new good, the license, allows her to exercise that capacity more broadly and freely. When the time comes to give up a particular thing that taught us happiness, we will not only retain the capacity to receive happiness; we will find broader and greater use for it.

Jack and Joy Lewis had a happy marriage. The fact that Joy had cancer forced them to remember that it was temporary. This tragedy alerted them to their own happiness. The honeymoon adventure scene in *Shadowlands* portrays them talking about the fact that their togetherness can't last long. Joy says that's what intensifies their ability to savor it: "The pain then is part of the happiness now."

What can we say, then, about earthy happiness? I think Jack and Joy Lewis would beseech us to learn the relative value of it. Enjoy it, yet be prepared to trade it in a heartbeat for a pearl of greater price, a happiness of greater solidity.

Notes

- ¹ *Shadowlands*. Videocassette. Savoy Pictures, 1993.
- ² Solid in the sense of eternal and significant—as Lewis uses the concept in *The Great Divorce*.
- ³ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 9.
- ⁴ Matthew 18:9.
- ⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 26.
- ⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 68-69.
- ⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), 3.
- ⁸ Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 25-26.

⁹ Lewis, *Great Divorce*, 104-105.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 27.

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