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Oscar Martinez

Oscar Martinez

Hunter College

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Adaptability in
The Pursuit of Happiness

The Pursuit of Happiness during Covid-19

College education is such an uplifting and yet challenging enterprise that pushes me to find myself anew every semester. The call to further a promising profession becomes, over the semesters at school, not just the fulfillment of a dreamy vocation but also a shaping of intellect and character. This slow but steady maturing of both intellect and character grows to be surprisingly joyful as it is so deeply felt in the heart. I once thought that College would just be about completing assignments and grabbing that diploma upon graduation, but I soon found out that it was not so. I was introduced to many thinkers and accounts of knowledge but out of the bunch, there are two philosophers whose thought my personal journey resonates with most. One of them is Aristotle, an Ancient Greek philosopher, who linked ‘happiness’ with a lifetime of virtue, with forming character. The second is 19th century German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, who is the closest in thought to Oriental metaphysics and lifestyle, but critics labeled as “the pessimist” for his advocacy of a life of renunciation; he claimed that happiness consists of a shift of cognition rather than pleasure-seeking fulfillment. The virtue of happiness meets self-reflection in my life journey, and particularly in times of distress —such as the Covid-19 global pandemic; for good things are born when bad happens.

The Covid-19 lockdown in mid- March 2020 was the beginning of a new ‘normal’. It initially took me some time to accept and make sense of it all, and yet waking up gradually to it over the months that followed was rather a blessing. In today’s divided political environment in America I first thought back then: “Well, people are now going to listen to science at last.” But

that turned out to be a wish cut too short, for our nation did not come together to fight the common enemy. In the early stages of the NY lockdown, my mind was sharply focus on finishing a successful semester while abruptly having to adapt to remote learning that spring session. However, the first Covid-19 related death of someone close to me came on Easter Sunday: a good friend and neighbor next door. That news was a wake-up call that the lethal virus was not something that could affect others far away like an event only known through the media or news but something that could strike anybody that near to me anytime. The virus was now next door. Not long after, I received news that someone *nearer* to me than my next-door neighbor, my aunt who lives in Chicago, succumbed to Covid-19. Two weeks later, friends of friends did too, the husband of my beloved neighbor next door included. In the midst of so much existential uncertainty and insecurity I wondered, wherefrom and how could my family and I derive a glimpse of happiness and joy?

Humans were on the retreat, home-bound, but not everything was gloomy though; the self-healing forces of nature due to reduced human-related carbon dioxide and, thus, reduced global pollution enabled non-human living beings to thrive and freely ran closer to urban areas. Nevertheless, the social distancing measure to combat the ugliness of nature was psychologically harming us all psychologically, but each one in a distinct way. No doubt death is the great equalizer, and yet each of us will face and go through it differently. Once the spring semester ended, I decided not to sign up for the summer session at Hunter college because I felt the need to connect body-mind within and to reach out to others a bit more genuinely. Life felt at the moment like the way Schopenhauer portrays it in *The World as Will and Representation* as, “ an intolerable burden ... [that] swings back and forth like a pendulum between pain and boredom” (338). The necessary social isolation due to quarantine and the existential anxiety due to an

invisible threat made living feel like an unthinkable choice never conceived before , an option between pain and boredom. I have been warned of Schopenhauer's pessimism, and if I ever dreamed of becoming a monk, then destiny has given me a chance out of the side effects of self-isolation. The happiness that I would experience before the pandemic came mostly from socializing. But I had to find a different source for it now. That is the kind of happiness that Schopenhauer redefines as a life that is not limited to pleasure-seeking activities, for that would be affected by the swings of the pendulum: boredom and pain. Instead, happiness relies on a shift of cognition.

The last book we were assigned to read for a class back in the spring of 2020 was Schopenhauer's *On the Basis of Morality*. Reading it was timely, because it addressed what I was feeling. It speaks of the noble-minded character who observes the world as closer to a unified single phenomenon; rather than dwell solely on discreet objects and distinct people all around, it dwells on similarities and commonalities. However, the self-centered person cannot help himself/herself from solely seeing a sharply differentiated world of objects and people. In his/her chaotic mind of various inputs, in which objects and people serve as a sole means to achieve his/her own ends, he/she cannot act otherwise than chaotically. Thus, Schopenhauer argues that morality is dependent on the ways of cognition (248-251). Definitely, self-isolation made the input from the outside world far less, and moral sentiments grew more empathetically for my neighbors at risk. Non-differentiation in cognition was also, more or less, a natural outcome of self-isolation; I was not and am sometimes still not able to tell weekends from weekdays and have to ask myself every morning upon waking up what day of the week it was. If a monk feels this way, then all this pandemic experience was like taking vows of refuge upon being admitted to a long-silent retreat and "voluntarily" not knowing when it ends.

This past summer 2020, my focus was mostly on physical health and family but in ways never experienced before. Unless one is hooked up in social media and gets exhausted by it, distractions were far less than ever, and so my mind was more occupied in the most immediate. The most immediate turned out to be my body and family. In a sense, this new immediacy looks like a self-centeredness, and exactly the opposite of what Schopenhauer argues for, but it only appears to be so. It instead feels like a very grounding, intimate, and deep experience. Suddenly, I see myself choosing better food sources and engaging in physical exercise as the body becomes more relevant and more a direct platform to act on. And this is not just by the looks in the mirror but the way the body is felt. Suddenly, health and fitness are paramount over appearances. The members of my family seem to also be undergoing the same process though each one uniquely. Moreover, every dinner time was a meeting of heads and hearts or a sharing of thoughts and feelings over shared meals. Our conversations lengthened and deepened. Dinner becomes my family's ritual of socialization and, in spite of a few heated exchanges here and there, becomes one of the most rewarding experiences this past summer. Happiness is met anew in a relationship with what is nearest and most immediate to me but that I took for granted at times-- my body and my family.

When summer neared its end, and the NY governor gradually yet very slowly opened up the city, I felt ready and excited to resume college life, but was a bit disappointed that classes were still held online and that I had had to stay home. I am not noncompliant with studying and working online at home, but 24/7 remote learning was a new skill to master that challenged my patience and intelligence. If adaptability is a form of intelligence, then I needed to catch up fast. Though social distance, which felt like social deprivation, was less by September, the near future was still unclear – and a sense of uncertainty was no less. NYC's natural herd immunity to

Covid-19 was still not picking enough, and my pursuit for real happiness felt challenged once more.

I have always perceived myself to be a process-oriented person who lived in the moment, focused on one thing at a time, and went day by day. But I needed to have a goal, or small goals, something to aim at beyond just finishing up the semester at school. If I ever felt myself to be a goal-oriented kind this was the moment to acknowledge that I had that too, and it felt so more than ever. I was introduced to Aristotle two semesters ago, and he has something to say about happiness and virtue in connection to learning a new skill: cultivating habit and setting goals. His *Nicomachean Ethics* left a very good impression on me that I decided to read it again just a week before the fall semester kicked in. Of all the literature I have come across through the semesters at school, there is honestly none that I have put into practice as much as I did Aristotle's teaching on happiness and virtue.

For Aristotle, everything in the natural world aims at some good—that is, some end or fullness of reality that it is meant to be according to its nature (935). The aim at goodness for the human is a kind of 'happiness' that fits the human. (1102). This is a most fundamental assumption in his ethics. And what fits the human is 'virtue'—something that starts as habit or repetition and grows into a natural disposition. So, If I could make myself a bit happier in school and life in general by habitually attending to the basics, then this "Aristotelian golden rule" would come very handy. Additionally, Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of virtue, the intellectual and the moral; in other words, "the former owes its growth to teaching while the latter to practice and time" (951-953). College education affords me this double maturing, of intellect and character, and more so do during times of crisis like Covid-19; it is an endeavor that is met anew

every time. Adaption to the new normal is a form of intelligence that is not necessarily taught but learned through habit.

If something good is born out the bad, then this is it. The obvious of every day experience heightened to a level that only involuntary restrictions, such as a lockdown, could offer. Genuine happiness is not that far away even during this Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, some of us, if not all of us, will come out of this novel experience of social distancing and adaptation to the new normal with a few scars. Yet, something is gained; it is a new perspective on how to address our goals and lives in ways we have not seen before the pandemic. I have learned not to take for granted the nearest and most immediate to me and, thus, make the most of time for caring and paying attention to both. I only wonder now what else is there that will challenge me next. I believe I have some moral tools that, as simple as they are, still prove useful. Once social contact, study and work routines resume in a post-Covid-19 reality, surely we will see each other anew, and perhaps changed by a new perspective on addressing life. If not a happily virtuous life, then something else, that is surely no less positive.

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