

On Wisdom (c.1690)

In his definition of wisdom as the science of happiness, Leibniz's intellectual influence on the concept of natural law adopted by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Federal Constitution is evident. The Founding Fathers did not adopt John Locke's code words of "life, liberty, and property," but rather the Leibnizian concept of the "pursuit of happiness." The following essay makes clear how Leibniz's concept of happiness is clearly distinguished from the hedonistic concept advanced by the "British empiricism" championed by both Smith and Locke.

On Wisdom

*translated by Anita Gallagher
in Fidelio Vol III, No. 2, Summer 1994*

Wisdom is nothing other than the science of happiness, that is to say it teaches us to attain happiness.

Happiness is the state of a constant joy. Whoever is happy, does not indeed feel his joy at all moments, for he rests sometimes from his reflection, and also commonly turns his thoughts toward seemly concerns. It is however enough, that he is in a state to experience joy as often as he wants to think about it, and that in the meantime, a joyfulness arises out of it in his being and his actions.

Joy in the present does not make one happy, if there is no permanence in it; and one is on the contrary unhappy, who for the sake of a brief joy falls into a long sadness.

Joy is a pleasure, which the soul feels in itself. The pleasure is the feeling of a perfection or an excellence, be it in us or in something other; for the perfection of another thing is also pleasant, as understanding, bravery, and

especially, the beauty of other persons; also, as well, of an animal; yes, even of a lifeless creature, a painting, or a work of art.

For the image of such perfection in others, impressed upon us, makes it such that also something of it is planted and awakened in us, so that there is no doubt that whoever associates much with excellent persons and objects, becomes also more excellent.

And although at times the perfections of others displease us; as, for example, the mind or the bravery of an enemy, the beauty of a paramour, or the brightness of another's virtue which eclipses or shames us, this does not occur from the perfection itself, but rather because of the circumstance through which the inconvenience arises for us, and thereupon, the sweetness of the first perception of another's perfection is cancelled and spoiled through the result and the bitterness of the reflection.

One does not always observe wherein the perfection of pleasant things rests, or to what kind of perfection they serve within us, yet in the meantime, it is perceived by our emotions, although not by our mind. One says in general: There is something, I know not what, that pleases me in the thing, which one calls sympathy. But those who search for the causes of things, more often find the foundation for this, and understand, that something lies under it which, although unperceived by us, yet truly proves useful.

Music gives a beautiful example of this. All that sounds, has a sound or movement going to and fro in itself, as one sees in strings, and thus what sounds, produces invisible pulsations; when such are now not unperceived, but rather go in order, and coincide with a certain change, they are pleasant, as one also otherwise observes a certain change of long and short syllables, and a coincidence of rhyming between the verses, which, as it were, contains in itself a silent music, and if they fall right, are pleasant even without vocal music. Beats on the drum, the time and the cadence in dances, and otherwise similar movements in conformity with measure and rule, have their pleasantness from the order, for all order proves of use to the mind. And a proportionate, although invisible, order is found also in the artfully created beats or movements of shaking or vibrating strings, pipes or bells, yes, the air itself, which is brought through these into proportionate movement, which also,

moreover, produces in us a harmonizing echo by means of hearing, toward which our vital spirits are stirred. On this account, music is so apt to move our minds, although, in general, such a chief purpose is not sufficiently observed nor sought.

And it is not to doubt, that also in the feeling, the taste, and the smell, sweetness resides in a certain, although invisible, order and perfection, or even aptness, which nature has placed therein to arouse us and the animals to that which is otherwise necessary, so that the correct use of all pleasant objects really proves profitable to us, even though, through misuse and excess elsewhere, a far greater damage can more often develop therefrom.

I call all elevation of being perfection, for as sickness, as it were, is a degradation and a decline from health, thus is perfection something which soars above health; but even health itself lies in the middle and on the scales, and lays the ground for perfection.

Now just as sickness originates from a damaged action, such as the intelligent medical mind well observes, thus perfection shows itself on the contrary to work with power, since all being consists in a certain power; and the greater the power, the higher and freer is the being.

Moreover, in respect to all power, the greater it is, the more the many is found thereby to be from one, and in one, in that the One governs many outside of itself, and represents them in itself. Now, the Oneness in the Many is nothing other than harmony, and because one agrees more closely with this one than with that one, thus the order, from which all beauty comes, flows from it, and beauty awakens love.

Hence one sees now, how happiness, pleasure, love, perfection, being, power, freedom, harmony, order, and beauty are connected to each other, which is seen correctly by few.

Now when the soul feels in itself a great harmony, order, freedom, power or perfection, and hence feels pleasure therefrom, such produces a joy, so as is evident from all these and the above explanations.

Such joy is constant and cannot deceive, nor cause a future sadness, if it arises from knowledge and is accompanied by a light, out of which arises in the Will an inclination toward the Good, which is Virtue.

If, however, pleasure and joy are directed such that they indeed bring pleasure to the senses, but not to the mind, so can they just as easily lead to unhappiness as to happiness, just as a good-tasting meal can be unhealthy.

And thus must the sensuous desires be employed according to the rules of reason, like a meal, medicine, or invigoration. But the pleasure, such as the soul experiences in itself, in conformity with reason, is such a present joy, that it can even preserve our joy for the future.

From this it follows, that nothing serves happiness more than the illumination of the mind and the exercise of the Will to act at all times according to Reason, and to seek such illumination especially in the knowledge of things, which can bring our Mind always further to a higher light, while from this springs a perpetual progress in Wisdom and Virtue, also, consequently in Perfection and Joy, the profit of which also remains with the soul after this life

Such joy, which man can at all times create for himself, when his mind is well-constituted, consists in the perception of a pleasure in himself, and in his mental powers, when one feels in himself a strong inclination and readiness for Goodness and Truth; especially by means of thorough intelligence, which a more illuminated Mind presents to us, so that we experience the main source, the course, and final purpose of all things, and the unbelievable excellence of the highest Nature which comprises all things in itself, and thereby are elevated above the unknowing, just as if we could see terrestrial objects here under our feet from the stars. Then at last we learn entirely from this, that we have cause to take the highest joy, concerning all that has already happened and is yet to happen, but that we seek, nevertheless, to direct as much as is in our power what has not yet happened for the best. For that is one of the eternal laws of nature, that we shall enjoy the perfection of things and the pleasure which arises from it according to the measure of our knowledge, good will, and intended contribution.

Now when a high ranking person attains this, such that even in the midst of all wealth and honor, he still finds his great pleasure in the workings of his Understanding and his Virtue, I hold him doubly noble. On his own account, because of this his happiness and true joy, but for others, because it is completely certain, that this person can and will share his light and virtue with many others because of his power and reputation, since such sharing will reflect back upon himself and can give new light to those who have the same common purpose of helping each other in the search for Truth, the Knowledge of Nature, the augmentation of human powers and the promotion of the common good.

Thus the noble happiness of high ranking and thereby illuminated persons is apparent, because they can do as much for their happiness, as if they had a thousand hands and a thousand lives; yes, as if they lived a thousand times as long as they do. For so much is our life to be valued as a true life, as one does good in it. Who now does much good in a short time is equal to him who lives a thousand times longer; this occurs with those who can cause thousands and thousands of hands to work with them, through which in few years more Good can happen to their highest glory and enjoyment, than many hundreds of years could otherwise bring.

The beauty of nature is so great, and the contemplation of it has such a sweetness, also the light and good impulse, which arise therefrom, have such glorious benefits already in this life, that whoever has tasted them, holds a low opinion of all other delights by comparison. But if we add that the soul does not pass away, but that each perfection in it endures and must bear fruit, so one sees for the first time rightly, how true happiness, which arises thus out of wisdom and virtue, is totally effusive and unmeasurable beyond everything, that one could possibly imagine about it.