On Public Happiness

I

Living in the midst of such an abundance of industry, art, luxury, and wealth, not a day goes by during which we do not deplore human miseries. Oppressed by our suffering, we find the weight of our existence hard to bear—whereas there probably is not a single naked savage in the woods, his skin torn by branches, each meal earned at the cost of sweat and blood, who is not satisfied with his lot and glad to be alive. He enjoys each day with as much pleasure as if the same ordeals were not laying in wait for him on the next. Our largest woes stem from the trouble we have taken to overcome the small ones.

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Let us begin by clarifying some of the terms. The strongest government is not always the best. Power is only a means toward an end, and this end is the happiness of the people. But the meaning of the word "happiness" is even harder to define when it relates to entire populations than when it relates to individuals; the diversity of opinions on this matter comes of discrepancies between the various political systems. We must try to establish a hypothetical idea of a happy people and deduce our rules from this model.

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You ask, Gentlemen, what have been the happiest people in history.
I lack the learning to answer this question with facts but I will try to establish the firm principles according to which such an answer could be given. If I succeed in this, I can hope to have responded to your request and not to have strayed too far from your aim.

Where are we to find a happy man, if such a thing exists? Who can tell? Happiness is not the same as pleasure; it is not a temporary affection of the soul but a permanent, inner feeling which can only be understood by the person who experiences it. It follows that no one can decide whether or not someone other than himself is happy nor consequently determine reliable signs by which the happiness of individuals can be ascertained. The same is not true of political communities. Their goods and their sufferings are entirely visible and manifest, their inner feelings public. Vulgar minds may misjudge these matters, but is there anything in the world they do not misjudge? For an eye that can see, political societies are what they seem to be; one can evaluate their state of mind and soul without uncertainty.

Human misery is caused by the contradictions that arise between our condition and our desires, our duties and our inclinations, between nature and political institutions, between the individual and the citizen in us. If man could be united with himself, he would be as happy as he can be. Hand him over completely to the state or leave him entirely to his own devices—but if you divide his loyalties, you tear him apart. And don't imagine that the state can be happy if all its members are in distress. This abstraction that you call public happiness is in itself a fiction, a chimera: if no one has
a feeling of well-being, public happiness does not exist. No family can flourish if its children don't prosper.

Try to make men consistent with their own being. Try to make them be what they want to appear to be, and appear to be what they are. You will have put the law of society in their hearts and made them social by nature, citizens by their own desire. They will be one, they will be virtuous and happy, and their well-being will also be that of the Republic. Since they are nothing without the state, they will exist for the state alone; the republic will own all they have and will be all they are. You will have added the power of the will to the power of coercion, the goods and property of individuals to the treasury of the state. When it will contain everything, the law of society will be all it can be. Pointing to its children, the family will say: it is in them that I flourish. In any other system, the state will always contain something that does not belong to it, such as, for instance, the will of its constituents. And who can ignore the impact of this will on the conduct of public affairs? When everyone pursues his own gratification there can be no happiness for the state.

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and let us never forget that the public good must be the good of all at least in some respect or otherwise it is an empty word.

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The state of mind of a people is less the result of the absolute state of being of its members than of the relationships that exist between them.
In order to have a clear idea of how a people can be happy, let us begin by considering the condition of those who aren't. By trying to determine what they are lacking we will be able to determine what the happy one cannot do without.

...public happiness, it would not even suffice to count the votes and the well-being of the various nations. It depends on many factors and cannot be as easily evaluated as in the case of individuals. The problem is how to distinguish, among so many apparent and possibly misleading signs of public happiness, the truly characteristic signs by which it becomes manifest.

In order to establish clearly the meaning of the proposition under dispute, I should be able to determine exactly what, in any given state, its true prosperity consists of and what are the most infallible indications allowing one to conclude that a nation is happy and flourishing. The question would almost be resolved by the definition, but since this definition depends on a multitude of particular propositions which can only be established by a continued discussion, I am obliged for the present to start out from a very general idea which no reasonable man can, in my opinion, contest.

I say therefore that the happiest nation is the nation that can most easily dispense with all others and that the most flourishing
nation is the one others can least dispense with.

If I had collectively deduced the concept of political happiness from the particular happiness of every citizen that constitutes it I might have said something my readers could more easily understand. But, aside from the fact that no conclusions could have been drawn from metaphysical notions which depend on the intelligence, the mood and the disposition of every individual, I would also have given a very inaccurate definition. A state could very well be constituted in a manner guaranteed to make it flourish and prosper forever, yet its citizens, concerned only with their individual views, might not be at all satisfied with it. When Likurgus propounded his laws he had to face the mutterings and even the attacks of the Lacedonians; he was obliged to have recourse to deceit and to go into exile in order to preserve an institution which made them the most illustrious and respected nation that ever lived on earth. Did not the Romans constantly complain of a government that made them the masters of the world and, even nowadays, is the best governed nation not the one that complains the most? No government in the world can compel the citizens to live in happiness; the best it can do is to give them an opportunity to do so if they are rational beings. Such happiness will never be that of the masses.

Political government should not mold itself on the situation that best suits the wishes and the dreams of each individual. If it is to be effective, it has to follow more general rules. In any system of government, wise leadership can influence public conduct by education and by custom and it can direct the wishes of individual citizens to such an extent that they will be more satisfied with the government
under which they live than with any other, regardless of whether it be better or worse. For although people will always complain, they might complain even more if they were put in a different situation. It is therefore not by the awareness a citizen has of his happiness nor consequently by this happiness itself that the prosperity of a state can be determined.

It could be said that the political condition most conducive to the well-being of particular individuals is that of not being dependent on any other nation for their happiness. In order to enjoy the highest possible felicity, all that is left for them to do is to promulgate wise laws for their mutual benefit, something they could not do nearly as well if they had to have recourse to strangers. After that, other nations may well turn out to need the assistance of the state that can dispense with theirs, perhaps the happiest circumstance conceivable to man.

It could also have said that the happiest nation is the one that has the most money, or the most trade or the most flourishing arts. Everyone could agree with this—yet, if these definitions are correct, then the one I have given must be their necessary consequence. For if money makes the rich happy, it is not so much by its direct possession but because it enables them to satisfy whatever needs or wishes they may have without having to depend on anyone, and also because it allows them to command and to dominate those who don't have this possibility. And these are precisely the ideas by means of which I have characterized a happy and flourishing nation.

With regard to trade and the arts, since their function is to augment wealth by the circulation of the money needed to purchase
either of them, they are still included in my definition—assuming, of course, that this definition is correct.

After having established that my definition includes all others and that, consequently, it is the most general definition possible, it remains to be shown that it is also the most accurate, the best suited to our conception of happiness and prosperity.

We have two kinds of needs. First, the physical needs that pertain to our survival, then those that pertain to our convenience, our pleasure and our wealth; they are generally referred to as luxury. Luxury needs become literal needs when we have grown so accustomed to them that our constitution has grown dependent on them by force of habit. A lady from the city who, in the middle of the summer, would suddenly be exposed in the countryside to two hours of full sunshine without the shelter of a parasol would be certainly burnt or become mortally ill—whereas a peasant woman in the same circumstances would suffer no discomfort. A city dweller could not conceive of going to the country without a horse, despite the fact that his farmer makes daily travels the same road on foot. But a nobleman accustomed to the comfort of a coach-in-four would be quite put out if he had to make the same trip on horseback. Thus everything, even poison, can become a physical need by force of habit, as opium is a need for the Turks or arsenic for the Chinese.

But when one has oneself a people to govern, should one write books instructing monarchs in the art of making their people happy? Kings, learn to instruct by example!
Do the same things but for better reasons. You have to watch over the safety of your subjects and to defend them and their possessions against violence and oppression; but this is only half your task. You even have to make them happy. This is the measure of a king's perfection.