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ARTICLE

The Quest for Happiness: Medieval Perspectives for Our Future: Philosophical and Literary-Historical Investigations

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ABSTRACT

Human life makes sense only if the individual can achieve a certain degree of happiness. In order to address this topic in an insightful and effective way, this paper turns to a selection of medieval literary narratives where the focus specifically rests on happiness that an individual might achieve when the circumstances and the ideals are right. As human beings, happiness does not simply come into our lives, at least not for adults. Instead, much intellectual education is required to gain the ability to distinguish between self-created meaning and relevance and alien control and enslavement as expressed in fake happiness. Hence, this paper intends to outline some preliminary thoughts and present literary and philosophical material from the Middle Ages where the issue of happiness has already been examined and discussed from various perspectives, inviting us to revisit them for our learning experience today and tomorrow. Since ancient times, philosophers have investigated the true meaning of happiness, offering the results of their experiences and insights. In order to reinvigorate the discourse on happiness, this paper draws from late antique philosophy, medieval verse narratives, and German literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including a modern-day movie. The quest for happiness has been ubiquitous, and it continues to matter for us universally across all cultures. The Humanities by themselves might not bring about happiness, but they certainly offer important perspectives toward the meaning of human life, individuality, the sense of community, communication, and compassion, all of which pave the way toward happiness.

Keywords: Happiness; Medieval Literature; Boethius; Marie de France; Wolfram von Eschenbach; Johann Peter Hebel; Hermann Hesse; Doris Dörrie

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1. Introduction

Theoretical Reflections

Ultimately, all human existence finds its meaning in the realization of some form or degree of happiness. Philosophers, poets, artists, and scholars from throughout time have addressed that search for happiness, but each generation needs to revisit this issue once again because happiness is a rather amorphous concept and could mean something different for each individual and each social group or community. However, there are universal concepts and ideas concerning happiness, whether we think of the notions by Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, by Friedrich Nietzsche or Martin Heidegger, Christ or Mohammed, Gautama Buddha or Adi Shankara. To study happiness, we can pursue many different approaches, investigate countless narratives, images, or musical compositions, and yet might not be satisfied with any of the many ultimate suggestions. However we pursue this topic, it is fundamentally evident that it assumes a central role in people's lives throughout time and thus assumes a critical role in all Humanities-focused studies. The quest for happiness could be identified as the essential essence of life, the pilot light for each individual, such as the pilgrim Dante in the *Divina Comedia* (ca. 1320). As much as we need to study nature, mechanics, philosophy, mathematics, or medicine, when we do not gain happiness thereby, then our efforts will remain futile since they address only our material needs. Hence, turning to the Humanities and the study of texts, poetry, songs, images, and other narratives, we find ourselves on a much more relevant track to establish meaning and relevance in our existence.

However, considering the current situation in our world, we face many difficulties determining the meaning of happiness in light of countless wars, a growing crime rate in many countries, the environmental crisis, health epidemics, economic challenges, and political conflicts all over the globe. Post-capitalism everywhere conveys a false sense of happiness, encouraging us to go shopping and identifying this experience as our true purpose here in this life. Material luxury, for instance, easily turns out to be a deception because it lulls our true sense of what matters ultimately for the individual here in this life. All these goods mean, however, nothing but alienation, reification, and loss of our identity, submitting us under a purely monetary system. Where and what is true happiness, and how could we describe it effectively? How do we determine what makes us really happy and avoid or deconstruct fake pretenses of happiness? Can we hope to be successful in our quest if ethical and moral norms and ideals are lacking or absent? Would it be possible to achieve happiness when we are so badly divorced from nature, as is often the case in the twenty-first century?

Anyone approaching the topic of happiness faces the danger of being almost forced to consider all and every aspect in human culture because happiness could be seen through many different lenses, whether material, visual, narrative, musical, philosophical, or spiritual. Similarly, addressing topics such as love, death, God, or nature carries the risk of getting us lost in a universe of materials, texts, images, or ideas that are relevant in that context. But happiness, discussed at least since the time of Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*; cf. Kraut 2022[1]), constitutes the central point in human existence throughout time. We cannot live without at least a glimmer of hope that we might achieve a certain degree of happiness, whether in our personal relationships, in our work, in our living conditions, in our desire to enjoy food and shelter, or whether in our faith and spirituality. Undoubtedly, love easily proves to be the most salient emotion in the global efforts to find happiness (cf., for instance, Haidt 2006[2]; Ho 2014[3] ; Ng 2022[4]), but it often escapes our pragmatic and theoretical grasp, as Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde* (ca. 1210) confirms so intriguingly. The dream of the erotic utopia is bound to come to an end earlier than expected, and many times, as the poet emphasizes in his prologue, only those who can sustain pain and sorrow as the prime condition of erotic happiness will face a real chance here in life.

The absence of happiness could lead to depression and even suicide. A beggar can be happier than a billionaire, a downtrodden peasant can be happier than the mightiest politician or ruler on earth. Gender or race have nothing to do with happiness superficially considered, but once equality and mutual respect are established, we can hope for individual and communal happiness to bloom at least within a social context free of racism or sexism. If we can find and live out our sexual orientation, then there might be hope for happiness in very personal terms. People experience happiness in many different ways, and the degree of true happiness has been measured around the globe now for a number of years

(for 2024, see https://worldhappiness.report/). All this simply points to the supreme importance of happiness, however defined, within every human's earthly existence.

For my theoretical framework, I will also embark on a brief discussion of the philosophical reflections by the late antique Boethius in his *De consolatione philosophiae* (ca. 524) because he formulated already in clear and logical terms how the human individual easily becomes a victim of fortune and hence of self-deception, whereas true happiness rests far beyond the wheel of fortune. Yet, I'll begin with a discussion of some of the *lais* by Marie de France (ca. 1190) and of the famous grail romance by Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival* (ca. 1205) as illustrations of pathways toward happiness.

It would be illusionary to assume that medieval people were simply happier than we are today, but they certainly lived in a more cosmic, if not harmonious world with clear reference points, which allowed them to establish for themselves a life determined by happiness. More important, though, considering many medieval narratives in various European languages, including Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350), Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400), or Heinrich Kaufringer's verse narratives (ca. 1400), we can discuss this phenomenon through a highly productive filter because only the best or most meaningful texts from that time period were entrusted to the valuable parchment. In addition, the quest for happiness was not simply limited by secular or religious concepts; instead, in many literary examples, the poets explicitly suggest that only a wide open, highly inclusive, tolerant, empathetic, and loving attitude would set the stage to reach that goal. This perspective goes against the grain of many popular opinions about the Middle Ages, but a closer examination of relevant texts helps us to grasp some of the most valuable insights developed already then as significant springboards for our own spiritual and philosophical reflections.

As a working definition, I want to identify true happiness as the unique experience when the individual recognizes his/her being as in synchronicity with the universe, feeling a deep sense of harmony between him/herself and the material AND spiritual dimension. I want to abstain from a religious approach to happiness, but we would really have to acknowledge that only a merging of the material with the spiritual dimension can constitute the necessary basis for happiness. In very simple terms, when an individual feels needed, has a meaningful role to play within society, and perhaps also experiences love from another person, then happiness is not far away. When harmony is present, happiness is close by.

2. Happiness in Medieval Literature

In the literary discourse from the Middle Ages, we can regularly observe a specific quest for happiness, even though that term was then not commonly used. Instead, as we can easily recognize, the quest for higher ideals, whether religious or ethical, made up one of the highest ideals in pre-modern narratives, whether we think of Chrétien de Troyes, Gottfried von Strassburg, Dante Alighieri, Petrarch, the anonymous poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or Christine de Pizan. By the end of the fifteenth century, however, a paradigm change set in, and we have not yet, so it seems, replaced it. Satirical authors (Erasmus of Rotterdam, Sebastian Brant), imitators of courtly romances (Sir Thomas Malory), religious fanatics and reformers (Martin Luther), and political commentators (Thomas More) assumed a much more negative worldview and regarded the individual as greatly in need of correction, instruction, and assistance. Little wonder that William Shakespeare, for example, primarily focused on comedies and tragedies, making us laugh or cry, but it seems difficult to identify elements of true happiness in his many plays. Those actually achieve their goal as literary works because happiness is absent, problems have emerged, conflicts trouble society, and vices dominate the virtues.

3. First: Happiness in Three Exceptional Modern Cases: Hebel, Hesse, and Dörrie

Let us begin, to set the stage for our actual critical analysis, with two German narratives from the early nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, both sort of deeply anchored in medieval literature, and also turn to a cinematographic attempt to explore the notion of happiness. Traditional ideas of happiness as associated with wealth and power have not proven to be valid, as beautifully illustrated by a simple calendar story composed by the German Johann Peter Hebel (1760–1826), "Kannitverstan" (1809; for a digital text version, see http://hausen.pcom.de/jphebel/geschichten/kannitverstan.htm). The protagonist is a rather naïve and ignorant

journeyman from Germany who spends time in Amsterdam without understanding a word of Dutch. When he inquires who the owner of a stately palace in the city might be, he gets the rude and curt answer, "Kannitverstan," which he mistakes as the actual name. It means, of course, nothing else but 'I cannot understand you.' When he then comes across a splendid ship in the harbor and asks the same question, the answer is also the same, and hence the misunderstanding as well. But then he meets a funeral procession and wants to learn the name of the deceased, which is once again "Kannitverstan," and this from a man at the end of the procession who does not care about the dead man and only calculates his gains at the stock exchange if the price for cotton might go up.

The young German thus realizes that wealth and power have very little impact on happiness because death always appears at the end of one's life, whereas happiness proves to be an experience each and every one could have if s/he is intelligent enough to enjoy what s/he owns or has at any specific moment. In his case, he finally enjoys happiness because despite his poverty he has decent accommodation in Amsterdam and gets enough to eat to satisfy his hunger. But for him, the new-found happiness is not limited by the material conditions in his life. Instead, he only needs to think of the dead man for whom all the wealth was useless to dismiss his own feelings of envy and self-pity over his poverty (Badewien, ed., 2011 [5]; Küpper 2017 [6]).

To gain deeper insights, we could also consider the famous short story "Knulp" (1915) by Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) where the vagabond protagonist roams the countryside and various towns and villages, regularly helping other people to realize or achieve a little happiness until he contracts pneumonia and dies from it, basically as a social failure but as a happy person (for a good summary, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knulp). In the last section, God welcomes this strange soul and confirms, "You have done foolish things and been mocked in my name; I myself was mocked in you and loved in you. After all, you are my child and my brother and a part of me, and you have tasted nothing and suffered nothing that I did not experience with you" (Hesse 1988; for a general introduction to his life and works, see Böttger 1973 [7]; or the contributions to Cornils, ed., 2009 [8]). This post-Romantic vision presented here has certainly appealed to modern audiences, but it is mostly no longer accepted as a pragmatic avenue to achieve individual happiness in the current world.

Or, by contrast, we could argue that Hesse was actually successful in recovering a sense of happiness we normally find in medieval times only, especially if we think of the founder of the Franciscan Order, St. Francis of Assisi who specifically emphasized the need to embrace self-imposed poverty as the critical avenue toward spiritual happiness (Pansters 2012 [9]; cf. the contributions to Contreras-Vejar, Jen, and Turner, ed., 2019 [10]). If we widened our perspective, we would easily discover how much Buddhistic or Hindu teachings, or those of many indigenous cultures, parallel the notions of individual self-fulfillment as formulated by Hebel and then Hesse.

Not by accident do modern authors or moviemakers at times transport their protagonists to the Far East because of a deep sense that the Western world has lost the direct connection to those powers that might grant happiness to the individual. This is hilariously illustrated by the German movie "Enlightenment Guaranteed," directed by Doris Dörrie and released in 1999, dealing with two men's attempt to find happiness in their adult life (cf. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0177749/; see also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightenment_Guaranteed). The two protagonists attempt to find spiritual enlightenment and hence their own selves once again in a Japanese Buddhist temple, but at first, they lose everything, have to suffer badly in the urban jungle of Tokyo, then they make the way to their destination, but they have to work hard to live up to the monastic expectations. Nevertheless, in the end, contrary to their daily concerns and worries back home in Germany, there is a kind of waking up in them, and they return to their previous lives, indeed much happier than ever before (Gössmann, ed., 2011 [11]; Kreuzer, ed., 2022 [12]).

4. Happiness in the Middle Ages: A Religious Perspective

Aside from these three more recent literary and cinematic examples, the modern discourse seems to be far removed from the original quest for happiness, maybe because we live today under such terrifying and challenging conditions. Before I turn to the truly centrally important premodern philosophical approach to the issue at stake here, let

us first consider one of the most popular religious narratives in which the protagonist, as unlearned, uneducated, and helpless he might be within the context of a Cistercian monastery, ultimately experiences the highest possible happiness (Ziolkowski 2022[13]; Classen 2024[14]). For modern readers, this miracle account might create a lot of irritation because the protagonist contradicts so egregiously our expectations of a true literary hero or protagonist. The anonymous poet presents a simple-minded street artist, an acrobat, who is weary of his unsteady lifestyle and aims for the peacefulness, tranquility, and restfulness of a monastery where he could try with all his energies to reach out to the Virgin Mary and gain her fondness for him.

This Old French tale was created sometime in the early thirteenth century, was soon adapted as an exemplum for preachers to use in a sermon, and then it disappeared from view until it was rediscovered in 1873. Soon thereafter, *The Juggler of Notre Dame*, also known as *Our Lady's Tumbler*, quickly gained popular appeal and was then even translated, edited, adapted for film, theater, radio, and modern literary narratives. However, only recently has the text received the fully scholarly attention that it truly deserves, whereas the public, especially younger readers, so it seems has mostly dismissed it, for instance, as too 'Catholic' in its appearance, content, and tone. After all, it presents a rather traditional miracle story involving the Virgin Mary and the simple tumbler. However, the latter is graced with being identified as a saint because, as witnessed by the abbot and another monk, once the tumbler had collapsed on the floor of the crypt, she and a throng of angels had appeared and acknowledged his pious service to her with gratitude. The tumbler himself does not know anything about it, but he learns from the abbot what has happened to him and why he should feel happy.

The issue here is that the tumbler (juggler) has decided to leave the world and join a monastic community where he hopes to turn all of his energies to the devotion of the Mother of God. However, the poor man is completely uneducated and cannot participate in any of the liturgical rituals, or the Mass, and so he feels terrified that he might be thrown out very soon once he would have been exposed in his ignorance. But this man is a true believer, and a person fully committed to reach out to the Virgin Mary irrespective of what it might take for him. He understands that the church is not the right place for him, although all other monks are most busily attending to their tasks, praying, reading Mass, and performing the liturgy there. They follow the rules, they are obedient, and carry out the required rituals, but none of them has ever such an encounter with the Mother of God, they are only part of a performative community, and hence do not fully experience happiness, as satisfied they might be as monks.

The tumbler exercises so much in front of the altar in the crypta that he is at the end fully exhausted and collapses. Hence, he does not witness what really happens to him; only the abbot and the other monk are able to partake in that miracle. The abbot realizes that this tumbler is truly a saint, and instead of removing him from the monastery, he begs him to pray for all the monks and himself. The outcome is plain and simple, the tumbler experiences complete happiness, although he soon after contracts a sickness and dies.

The poet, however, underscores specifically what makes this uneducated man so happy. He wants to worship the Virgin Mary, and yet he cannot do it in the way as it is officially prescribed by the monastic rules. In his desperation, however, he finds an alternative which allows him to resort to his own abilities, and through this new focus, he turns his back to the formalistic requirements and realizes his own ideals, that is, he manages to live out his very own potentials in the quest for spiritual rewards. In this approach, then, the tumbler proves to be much more authentic than all the monks because they follow external rules; he, by contrast, follows his own inner self and can thus turn all his attention, desires, and intentions to the one and only goal he has at that point in his life, to worship the Mother of God.

Amazingly, if we translate the messages contained in this deeply religious narrative properly, we discover that the anonymous poet had clearly in mind to outline how any individual could find him/herself and hence also inner happiness. This is possible, as the story of the tumbler indicates, through the personal commitment, passion, and dedication to the highest goal in his existence. He achieves that goal not because he submits under external rules, but by living out his self by being completely dedicated to the service of the Virgin. Thus, the tumbler is the one who truly experiences happiness and can experience a short but true life, as the vision confirms. Translated into modern terms, he does what he knows he loves and can do best, and thereby he achieves deep satisfaction because the Virgin Mary rewards

him through her appearance, as the abbot tells him.

5. Happiness in Secular Medieval Literature: Marie de France

Despite the general opinion that medieval literature was primarily written by male poets, the Anglo-Norman Marie de France (ca. 1160–1200) proves that there were major exceptions. She is famous today for her courtly verse narratives, her *lais*, and her didactic fables (*Fables*), apart from her religious poem about a cave in Ireland where one could peer into Purgatory (*Espurgatoire seint Partiz*) (for a good edition and translation, see Waters 2018 [15]; for recent studies, see Burgess 1987 [16]; Bloch 2003 [17]; Classen 2003 [18]; Whalen, ed., 2011 [19]; Kinoshita and McCracken 2012 [20]). In all her *lais*, the focus rests on the question of how an individual can achieve happiness in love. The protagonists are either struggling to find the right partner or are in a bad relationship. Arranged marriages make the realization of happiness rather difficult, though not impossible. For instance, in "Les deus amanz," a father tries to control and 'possess' his young daughter as a replacement for his recently deceased wife (196–209). To avoid that any other man could gain her hand, he imposes the challenge that any man who might dream of this opportunity would have to carry the princess up a steep mountain without any rest ("Si que ne se reposereit," 38), a task that no one can accomplish, just as the father had intended. His own happiness is more important for him than that of his daughter, which certainly has catastrophic consequences.

However, one day, a young squire wins her love, but she refuses to elope with him because she is aware of her social responsibilities and cannot afford to dishonor her father and her country. But she has an aunt working as an expert medical doctor (or pharmacist) in Salerno near Naples who knows how to concoct a potion that would provide him with the necessary strength (steroid?). She wants to marry him, so she orchestrates the entire setting to achieve the goal set by her father. She goes so far as to fast for days and then to wear barely any clothing to make herself easier to carry her up the mountain. Tragically, however, at that point, the squire decides to try to meet the challenge all by himself, entering into direct competition with the king and demonstrating a surprising show of masculinity (Cf. Classen 2024 [21]). Repeatedly, the princess urges him to take the potion, a kind of steroid, but he struggles on, palpitating, perspiring, but ultimately reaching the peak. Yet, once there, he collapses and dies on the spot. The young woman thus falls down as well, and then also dies out of grief. In that process, the viol with the potion crashes on the ground sprinkling the potion everywhere so flowers sprout widely. Metaphorically speaking, hence, nature experiences complete happiness, whereas the two protagonists become victims of his selfishness and overwhelming desire to prove himself in public.

In "Eliduc," a highly problematic and challenging *lai*, personal happiness is also at stake involving a married couple and an outside princess who falls in love with him while he is providing her father, the king of Exeter, crucial military service. Eliduc responds in kind, but he is still married and not really unhappy with his wife back home. Nevertheless, he takes the princess with him back home without knowing how to handle the virtually impossible situation there. While crossing the Channel, a storm threatens their ship, and one of the sailors calls out to Eliduc that the potential shipwreck would be God's punishment of his illicit relationship with that princess. In a furious response, Eliduc kills the sailor and takes over the helm of the ship, successfully steering it to the safe harbor. However, the princess, having learned of the fact that her lover is still married, had fainted, and Eliduc, deeply distraught, takes the 'corpse' and places it on an altar in a chapel where a hermit had only recently passed away. She does not wake up while he constantly comes to visit the chapel and to pray for her recovery.

Eventually, his wife discovers the princess and thus the reason for her husband's deep sorrow. With the help of a magical petal retrieved from a mysterious weasel, she manages to awaken the young woman from her coma, then she decides to withdraw from the marriage and to enter monastic life so that Eliduc, whom she greatly respects (loves?), can enjoy his happiness with the princess (Classen 2015 [22]). Indeed, that happens, and all sides appear to be very content with the new situation.

Eliduc and his new wife live happily together, and in their old age, they both turn religious as well, the younger woman joining the older woman's convent, while Eliduc enters his own monastery. Despite their physical distance, however, the three exchange letters and thus experience a new degree of spiritual happiness, perhaps best described as

friendship across the gender lines (Mustakallio and Krötzl, ed., 2009[23]; Classen 2024[24]). Once the passion of erotic love has faded, a deeper expression of personal relationship emerges, which hence created a new form of happiness in ethical and philosophical terms.

Marie was realistic enough to acknowledge that many times the efforts by marriage partners or lovers to establish a happy union were almost doomed from the beginning. Evilness, deception, betrayal, lying, or simply external circumstances made all hope for happiness moot. In "Eliduc," the seneschal's lady fails because she wants to get rid of her husband and to marry the king, which results in both their deaths. In "Bisclavret," the lady just cannot cope with the idea that her husband turns into a werewolf for three days per week, so she attempts to eliminate him from human society, for which she later has to pay a severe price. In "Milun," the female protagonist first has to marry and live with her old husband, although she has had a lover, and had a son with him. In "Le Fresne," disaster would have almost struck if not the young woman had used her brocade blanket for her lover's marriage bed. Her mother recognizes it and thus her own daughter, which then increases the latter's social status considerably so that she is worthy enough in social terms to marry the prince. In "Guigemar," the lovers find each other at the end because they are the only ones capable of unraveling knots, a beautiful literary motif to describe what love truly does to the individual and how it secretly bonds the two partners firmly together.

Happiness is constantly at risk and can easily slip through the lovers' fingers. Only when they are allowed by God or destiny to live up to their ethical principles and thereby to solve crucial riddles, as we also observe in the highly popular *Apollonius of Tyre* (originally composed in the second or third century, copied, translated, and re-edited throughout times well into the seventeenth century), does happiness have a realistic chance (Archibald 1991[25]). In short, happiness is not simply a privilege, but the end goal of much hard labor throughout life. Many times, Marie de France warns, however, about the danger of excessive passions that blur the protagonists' perception of themselves and their social conditions. As much as Marie projects images of personal happiness, in many of her narratives sorrow dominates as a result of blind ambitions, fears, and ignorance. Nevertheless, happiness can also be achieved if the individuals pursue their goals with patience, energy, and great endeavor, such as in "Guigemar" and "Milun." Both in "Equitan" and "Bisclavret," the dream world collapses because of human failures and shortcomings. Happiness was, already then, an often rather elusive goal, but certainly a goal of the highest value, either to achieve love or to aim for God's graces.

6. Wolfram von Eschenbach

When we consider Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1205), we are in a good position to specify this phenomenon more concretely and within a wider social-historical context (Edwards, trans., 2006[26]). In this Grail romance, the experience of love is relevant, of course, but the protagonist's true goal is not marriage, not the accomplishment of a courtly adventure, but to reach the Grail court and to redeem the suffering king, Anfortas. The latter had committed a transgression in matters of love, but the details only concern us insofar as the Grail world is described as a utopian space where sorrow has replaced joyfulness. Everyone waits for the successor to the old king, but only a member of the Grail family is predestined to achieve that goal. Parzival's friend Gawan, for instance, never has the chance to find the Grail castle, although he is also identified as an ideal character who accomplishes much in his own realm, overcoming sorrow and pain, liberating women from a magical castle, righting many wrongs in society (for the most comprehensive introduction and interpretation, see Bumke 2004[27]).

Parzival, however, cannot simply accomplish his task because he has to grow up first and deal with many shortcomings that are partly his own fault, but partly the results of outdated and old teachings inadequate for the new situation at the Grail castle. In fact, when he has the one opportunity to visit the ailing king, he does not ask the one long expected question about the cause of his suffering, which thus destroys all hope for the recovery of the Grail kingdom. Before that, he had been instructed by the elderly knight Gurnemanz de Graharz to keep quiet in noble society and to wait until he would be asked a question out of politeness: "You must not ask many questions. Nor should you hold back from considered counter-speech, meeting a man's questioning head-on if he wants to sound you out with words" (Book III, ch. 171,

p. 73; for the critical edition, see Wolfram 1998 [28]). But in this scene at Munsalvaesche (the Grail castle), this is not the case; instead, the entire Grail community demonstrates its sorrow and lamentations; the king honors young Parzival with a highly valuable sword as a gift of utmost worth; and when the Grail itself appears, the entire company breaks out in wailing and crying. There would have been many reasons and opportunities for Parzival to turn to the king and simply ask him what he might suffer from.

Due to his wrong reaction, withholding his verbal empathy, both the Grail kingdom and the rest of the world collapse in spiritual and ethical terms. Violence, deception, and aggression rule, and this despite Parzival's and also Gawan's best efforts to help society to recover its traditional values. However, in the course of time, both knights manage to achieve a breakthrough in many different ways, and this then sets the stage for Parzival to receive the permission by the Grail itself – certainly a mythical power above all human society, though not simply equitable with God – to return to Munsalvaesche and finally to ask that the one simple and long awaited question: "Uncle, what troubles you?" (Book XVI, ch. 795, p. 331).

The poet's brilliance shines through here in a unique fashion. One small verbal utterance, and this by itself heals Anfortas, catapults Parzival to the throne of the Grail kingdom, and solves the sorrows in the world because the ideals of human society have been re-established. Ultimately, of course, it is not simply this one sentence, but the radical transformation of the traditional concept of social interaction, by now finally determined by communication, commitment, compassion, and a new community guided by spiritual and material happiness (Classen 2025 [29] , irrespective of the vast body of Wolfram research, this perspective does not seem to have been fully recognized yet; cf., e.g., the contributions to Hasty, ed., 1999 [30]; Strohschneider, ed., 2009 [31]; but, for a contrast, see Classen 2002 [32]).

After a long time of suffering, both the Grail kingdom and Parzival, both King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table suddenly experience the desperately awaited resolution of the hidden conflicts, and through Parzival's question, that is, his communicative turn toward suffering Anfortas, happiness returns to the world. This has then wider implications because Parzival's half-brother, Feirefiz, who is also half white and half black – Parzival's father had fallen in love with the black Queen Belacane and had married her, impregnating her with their child – joins Parzival and soon realizes that he, as a non-Christian, cannot see the Grail and hence cannot marry the Grail maiden, Repanse de Schoye. But he does not hesitate to get baptized, which means rather little to him and actually then turns out to be nothing but a formal procedure, so he can win Repanse's hand in marriage and move with her back to his Oriental kingdom where he or rather his later son, the famous Prester John, embarks on global conversions to Christianity.

Even though Wolfram does not address 'happiness' in explicit terms, he concludes his highly complex and profound romance with a strong message about the truth of the narrative account that allows us to understand what truly matters in life and how we can thus achieve the critical goal of our existence:

> From Provence into German lands the true tidings have been sent to us, and this adventure's end's limit. No more will I speak of it now, I, Wolfram von Eschenbach – only what the master said before .... If any man's life ends in such a way that God is not robbed of his soul because of the body's guilt, and he yet can retain, with honour, this world's favour, that is a useful labour (Book XVI, ch. 827, pp. 346–347)

Following Parzival's long journey, parallel to that by his friend Gawan, the reader/listener is invited to study the many hurdles an individual has to overcome in this life to learn the true messages and lessons provided by the divine powers. As much as the protagonist tends to fail in many different situations, the nobility of his heart allows him to pursue the ultimate goal of the hero who is predestined to redeem both the Grail kingdom and hence the world of King Arthur. The outcome of Parzival's endless struggles on his trails through life proves to be self-fulfillment, personal and communal happiness, and the grace granted by God through the Grail, bestowed upon the new king (Classen 2021 [33]).

To deepen our understanding of this mysterious message, we could expand on this topic and combine for our analysis Wolfram's *Parzival* with Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia.* After all, the pilgrim Dante, having been guided through *Inferno* and then *Purgatorio*, is granted access to

Paradiso, drawn up there through Beatrice's love for him, a deeply spiritual experience. Parzival is also driven by love for his wife Condwiramurs, but she joins him again only after he has accomplished his goal, saving the Grail kingdom from its dangerous decline, if not collapse. In essence, we thus recognize that only those who understand the goal of their trails through life, whether they achieve them or not, are empowered to approximate happiness in spiritual terms. Frustration, disappointments, and sorrow are, of course, the constant companions to people's lives throughout their existence, but when there is a true goal, as is the case with Parzival and Dante, then happiness can be potentially achieved.

7. The Philosophical Framework of Happiness in the Middle Ages

Implicitly, we can be certain, most, if not all medieval poets, philosophers, and theologians were thoroughly schooled in the teachings of the late antique politician, diplomat, thinker, and author Boethius, murdered in Pavia upon trumped-up charges of state treason in ca. 524. Shortly before his death, he composed the treatise *De consolatione philosophiae* in which the author engages with the allegorical figure of Philosophy about the reasons why he feels so unhappy, so badly mistreated, and so ignorant about the true meaning of happiness ([34] Gibson, ed. 1981;[35] Glei, Kaminski, and Lebsanft, ed., 2010;[36] Kaylor and Philip Edward Phillips, ed., 2016;[37] for a solid translation, see Relihan, trans., 2001). It is not a religious treatise; instead, Boethius presents a dialogue determined by logic and rationality between the suffering individual and Philosophy as an allegorical figure. In the course of their exchange, the true purpose of the text emerges, which is to uncover the true passageway toward happiness. But to achieve that goal, Philosophy has to teach Boethius first to understand the meaning of Fortune, to recognize the falsity of the material objects and conditions that seemingly provide happiness, and to learn what true happiness actually means.

As Philosophy realizes quickly, Boethius has lost the sense of what it really means to be human, so she has to unravel many errors and confusions in his mind about what constitutes true and real life, that is, ultimately, happiness. That experience rests outside of the realm of Fortune, which tries with all its might to make the individual dependent on money, power, fame, or material goods. At closer analysis, however, Fortune turns out to be nothing but deception, so only when misfortune strikes does the individual face a real chance to learn the truth about his/her life. For instance, only in the case of misfortune, does one realize who belongs to one's real friends and who does not. All the material objects that superficially promise happiness are nothing but instruments to make us rely on or to become subject to contingency, whereas true happiness rests outside of contingency beyond the material conditions. Briefly put, only when an individual would be able to enjoy self-sufficiency, would s/he be able to move beyond Fortune and hence contingency. Of course, only the divine, or the supreme Good, or God, would be able to achieve that degree of happiness because He is the ultimate creator of all things and hence independent from those. No human being would be able ever to hope for a similar experience, which actually would create a status of divinity, and yet, as Philosophy teaches Boethius, the desire to achieve that goal already can bring the individual closer to true happiness.

Indeed, the individual would have a chance, first to learn about Fortune, or contingency, then to try to move away from its false promises, and finally to strive for the union with the supreme good. The latter would probably never be possible since we are, plainly put, people and hence bound to our own material existence. Nevertheless, the strife for this supreme good would already represent the first major step away from Fortune and the fake notions of happiness. Even though complete self-sufficiency could not be achieved any anyone, the desire itself to free oneself from the dependency on worldly happiness would facilitate the discovery of true happiness.

Naturally, Boethius, after having understood the major lessons, still expresses deep frustration because his own suffering in prison and his imminent execution or murder cannot be prevented thereby. In his desperation, he hence begs Philosophy to explain why there are so many evil people who enjoy so much success in this life. She knows well how to respond, identifying these evil people with plants that deliberately grow in dry, cold, and shadowy places and thus create their own decline and ultimately death. Even though evil continues to exist here in this world, Philosophy comforts Boethius with the promise that only those who comprehend the nature of true happiness would be able to move

beyond the domain of Fortune and would thus be empowered to embark on the pursuit of their own self-sufficiency. In other words, happiness can be achieved if one learns to break through one's own blindness and recognize the differences between false and true values in our lives. Philosophy points out that all existing beings are determined by a natural desire to thrive, to live out the potentials, and to succeed in what nature has given to everything and everyone (Book III, Prose 11, pp. 81–83). Poignantly, she defines goodness, and hence happiness, as follows: "all things seek the Good; or you may in fact define the Good this way, as that which is desired by all things" (p. 82).

Boethius then also enters into a discussion about goodness versus evilness, defining the latter as being essentially nothing because it strives against its own natural desire (Book IV, Prose 1, p. 92). This means for us that we can describe happiness ultimately as the status of being in harmony with one's own self and drive, energy and concept, whereas unhappiness would be the energy that divorces the individual from his/her own self and returns it to the contingency of Fortune. Philosophy finally offers the comprehensive statement with which I want to conclude this brief paper:

> we have shown that happiness is the Good itself; the Good in the very thing for the sake of which all actions are undertaken; therefore it is the Good itself that has been placed before human actions as if it were their common reward. And yet, this reward cannot be separated from good people ... and for this reason its proper rewards do not abandon righteous conduct. (Book IV, Prose 3, p. 100).

8. Conclusion

Boethius has, of course, already said it all. But let us reflect one more time on what the evidence assembled here has yielded. Oddly, the post-modern world seems to be further removed from happiness than ever before although we still can identify some authors (Hebel, Hesse) and moviemakers (Dörrie) who endeavored to provide their audiences with hopeful perspectives. In the Middle Ages, the ideals of virtues and happiness dominated centrally, alongside with a strong sense of religion. Dante's *Divina Commedia* might well serve as the best literary expression for the desire for salvation. Happiness was commonly associated with the experience of love, as fleeting as that might have been. Whereas courtly love poetry normally highlighted the aspect of unrequited love, Marie de France argued strongly for a changed perspective predicated on a happy love relationship in marriage. Irrationality, toxic masculinity, envy, and jealousy threatened already then the effort to achieve true happiness.

Considering Wolfram von Eschenbach's Grail romance, *Parzival*, we encountered a different strategy to reach for happiness, more philosophical and political at the same time. Although the protagonist enjoys the highest respect in the Arthurian world, his real goal consists of redeeming the Grail universe. Despite many shortcomings and mistakes in his youth, he is finally allowed to return to Munsalvaesche and ask the required question. Thereby he re-established the foundations of human communication and community, which thus healed the sick King Anfortas and allowed Parzival to assume the Grail throne. Through his action and ritual, he could return happiness to the world.

In light of the religious Old French prose narrative, *The Juggler of Notre Dame*, we could discover the religious approach to happiness, here made possible by absolute devotion to one's own ideals even at the risk of sacrificing oneself. While the juggler did not witness the miracle of the Virgin Mary wo comes to refresh him, his acrobatic performance had made possible her appearance because she wanted to demonstrate her gratitude for his utmost service. Finally, Boethius's rational ruminations served as the philosophical framework for the entire discourse on happiness throughout the Middle Ages and far beyond, perhaps even until today.

It would be far from me to claim that we in the twenty-first century cannot be happy, also in the sense as outlined by Boethius. However, in light of our circumstances today, the ideal of happiness seems to become ever more evanescent or at least challenging. Hence, turning our attention to the relevant discourse in the Middle Ages, there might be hope for a very valuable and effective teaching lesson on true happiness. We as human beings strive and falter all the time, but there is no doubt that we all want to be happy. The difficulty consists of defining happiness, but the examples presented here, including those from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (only few really available), clearly signal that the quest for happiness is an ongoing process. By turning to medieval literature and philosophy, there is

valid and trustworthy promise of finding deep insights into lived experiences concerning true happiness with respect to secular and religious love, social responsibility and identity, and personal fulfillment and meaning. Undoubtedly, the great philosophers and theologians such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, but then also modern thinkers such as Martin Heidegger or Roland Barthes would need to be consulted here in much greater depth. After all, the topic of happiness has occupied virtually all philosophers, poets, artists, and composers throughout time. This paper simply illustrates the true extent to which we, in our modern quest for happiness, can learn about the proper paths and ideals toward that goal when we consult medieval sources.

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