

COMMUNITY NOTES

Are We Having Fun Yet? A Debater's Guide to Happiness

*Gary Gillespie
Northwest College*

Former students tell me that taking part in intercollegiate debate competitions was one of the most enjoyable experiences in their college career. The fun of partisan role playing, the intellectual challenge, the personal growth and the friendships among teammates and students from other schools, make the time and energy worthwhile. Debating is enjoyable because it fulfills some of our deepest needs. In his book on ethics, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle teaches that the greatest source of happiness for human beings is using our reasoning ability to contemplate the truth. Aristotle observes that happiness is the result of wise choices, self discipline and living out our highest potential as rational creatures. He believed that if only people could be taught to seek truth, they will act ethically. Aristotle lists four levels of happiness to explain human motivation. How your ultimate happiness relates to being active in debate is worth considering.

Happiness Levels One, Two, And Three

The lowest level of happiness is Eros or physical pleasure—sex, drugs and rock and roll. It is "eat, drink and be merry." A person on this level seeks to maximize pleasure and to minimize pain. It is hard to imagine a desirable life without pleasure. But physical pleasure can only satisfy us to a limited degree. It cannot fulfill us ultimately. Eventually the pleasure seeker is let down with the realization that there must be more to life.

One of the marks of maturity is learning to endure the pain of delayed gratification—or putting off immediate desires and trivial pleasures in order to achieve a greater satisfaction. Few of us admire those who are habitually out of shape, seem unable to set goals and spend most of their time watching TV and snacking. People given over to infantile Eros sometimes end up as alcoholics or addicted to sex or drugs. Competitive debate does not offer much for the person on this level—unless you are in it for the parties and drinking (which some European teams at the Worlds Championships seem to openly admit). The harsh realization that a life of ease, entertainment and pleasure is not happiness is known as crisis number one.

People disappointed with pleasure turn to the next level in Aristotle's scheme. Happiness level two is seeking identity through personal achievement and self fulfillment. Achieving a difficult goal is better than experiencing physical pleasure. When we strive to achieve some kind of merit and succeed, we feel happy. People on this level are driven to excel at what is important to them—earning high grades, getting elected to a prestigious office, having popular friends or winning trophies and awards. These people take pride in doing a job well and often desire to be in positions of authority over others. Career advancement and future wealth are priorities. Happiness at this level is basically the ego-high. It is proving that you are the best. Competitive debate can meet the needs of people on this level. Being on a winning team and bringing home numerous debate trophies is thrilling. But, like pleasure seeking, there are limits to ego-gratification.

The problem with basing identity on winning is revealed in a simple question—what happens when you lose? You work harder than ever researching for a debate tournament and fail to break into finals. You spend weeks campaigning for student body president and the other candidate wins. Having no other basis for happiness, when excessively competitive people lose they are emotionally devastated. Unless this kind of person learns to grow from defeat, they turn into bitter, personally deficient individuals like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* or Mr. Burns in *The Simpsons*.

I know that the sting of defeat is painful. But, what is surprising is that the thrill of victory is so short-lived. For one thing, after winning comes the fear of losing next time. And there is always a next time. Sometimes you may win a contest, but for some reason do not feel as happy as you imagined. Lottery winners often report that sudden wealth, while giving a certain level of ease and enjoyment, did not bring lasting happiness and actually made their lives less happy. You can probably make a long list of musicians and movie stars who achieved fantastic fame and wealth and yet were so empty that they committed suicide or over dosed on drugs. Some of the world's greatest artists, writers and musicians have made this dark discovery: achievement, success and riches are not reliable sources of happiness.

The third level of happiness is devoting yourself to the good of others. Happiness is gained through love relationships, friendships or by contributing to social causes. Lovers place the other person's well being ahead of their own. Knowing that you make the other person happy brings a lasting happiness to you. This is why most of us either desire to someday establish a solid marriage and family life or consider our husband or wife to be the greatest source of happiness. People near the end of their lives report that the camaraderie they enjoyed in college sports teams or with fellow soldiers

in military units provided a source of joy through out their lives. At my father-in-law's 80th birthday party, W.W.II navy buddies and UCLA football teammates were guests— friendships cultivated nearly sixty years before. In the same way, students committed to their college debate team also experience the bonding of life long friendship.

The satisfaction that comes from serving others is advanced when you use your debate skills to help organizations that are promoting social change. Most social movements in history were lead or heavily influenced by college aged people. Martin Luther King, who was trained in speech making and debate at Morehouse College, was only 26 when he led the Montgomery, Alabama boycott ending that city's segregated public transportation. Many of America's business, civic and political leaders were debaters, including Lee Iacocca, Malcolm X, Barbara Jordan, George McGovern Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and John Kennedy. United Nation's President Kofi Annan debated while studying as a foreign student at Macalester College in Minnesota.

At the beginning of the 21st century, humanity is crying out for ways to resolve conflict nonviolently. Terrorism, the spread of nuclear and biological bombs, and the emergence of tribalism fostering the renewal of ethnic, religious and racial warfare seem to be problems without answers. We have come to the point where, as John Kennedy said, "Unless mankind does away with war, war will do away with mankind." It will take more than dialogue and reasoning for love to win out between opposing groups and cultures. But by applying the same methods of rational analysis that debaters learn to master, it is possible to understand and empathize with different cultural perspectives and to use this knowledge to avoid violence. The nonviolent warrior, Gandhi, who lead India to independence without resorting to blood shed, taught how words and symbolic protests can defeat an enemy. When asked how he succeeded, he said that he relied on the weapons of Love and Truth. "Against these nothing can prevail," he said. Like Gandhi, students interested in promoting peace will need to master the art of verbal war.

Just as India did eighty years ago, the rest of the developing world is now rushing to create democratic republics. Never before has rational debate been so important as a means to solve problems and make policy. Through out formerly closed communist and totalitarian societies, new leaders are learning how to peacefully argue, defeat erroneous ideologies and build consensus. The success of democratic freedom, as well as international peace, depend on creative applications of debate principles. Perhaps some former college debater will lead the way?

Quest For The Higher Level

Putting our faith in causes that promote the common good creates a danger we must guard against. Bonding with a group is very satisfying because it fulfills our need for self identification. But investing our sense of who we are in an organization may also create what is called "groupthink"--an unquestioning allegiance to the reference group. Just as a person newly fallen in love might idealize the loved one, so group identification distorts our thinking, blinding us to ideas unfavorable to the group's vision. This is why one test of evidence is whether or not the source of the information is bias or has a hidden motive or distorting interest. No human being is without bias because we all identify with groups. However, there are many example of individuals who have the courage stand up against groupthink and speaks in opposition to cultural bias. Rational awareness of potential bias is the antidote. We should always watch out for the trap of believing what we want to believe.

But even when we restrain our biases, finding happiness in loving and serving others is inadequate. Here we reach the third and final crisis in the quest for happiness. No matter how sincere your faith and devotion, people and institutions will let you down. Eventually we discover that people and causes are flawed. Perhaps we discover that mismanagement and political infighting is making our social action group ineffective. Maybe the leader of our environmental action organization commits scandal or we realize is using their position to make money. Friends and lovers have been known to abandon and reject. Spouses file for divorce or have affairs. Even when friends and lovers remain faithful, they are mortal and die.

When our idealism and faith in others is shattered, we experience crisis number three-which might be summed up in the saying, "life's a bitch, then you die." Whole philosophical movements have been devoted to human despair and absurdity. Some believe that the meaning of life is that life is meaningless. However, as author and literary scholar C.S. Lewis says, if reality actually were meaningless, we should never have been able to come to that conclusion. The fish do not complain that the sea is wet. Crisis is a sign that another level exists. Just as boredom with pleasure leads to achievement; and the emptiness of pride leads to love; so the despair of love lost leads to truth—the human mind's highest aspiration.

Truth is when the images and ideas in our mind correspond to the way things actually are in reality. Some truth is easy to attain, such as knowledge of things that can be measured or counted. Other truth is more difficult to discover, such as knowledge about the meaning of life or morality, questions of philosophy and religion. But even these difficult

questions are still subject to the rational standards of analysis. Although we can rarely gain absolute certainty, reason permits us to gain a high probability that we understand certain truths. Debating skills help us in this search for reality. We learn to gather and evaluate information and come to reasonable conclusions about the nature of things and proposals for the future. Debate principles teach us to think critically--or carefully--so that our conclusions are sound and trustworthy.

Because Aristotle believed that contemplating ultimate truth with our reason fulfills what it means to be human, he argued that the happiest of all people is the philosopher—one who is in love with wisdom. This uniquely human quest is the fourth and final level of happiness. Animals may be able to experience pleasure, achieve status in group hierarchies and bond with others of their kind. At times they seem to act for the common good in defending young or warning of predators. Animals may have sophisticated communication systems. But only humans are lovers of wisdom—able to apprehend the meaning of life. Through poetry, music, literature and art we appreciate beauty. Philosophy and religion give insight into justice, virtue and human dignity. Science makes discoveries that improve the physical quality of life—doubling our lifespan in the last one hundred years through advancements in medicine and agriculture. The search for truth is the point of higher education and your experience with rational debate will help guide your learning odyssey.

There is no crisis on the fourth level. Truth does not disappoint us because it is transcendent. Truth always goes beyond human institutions and systems of thought. When we know the truth we are fulfilled. When we discover that we are wrong on a certain point of view, we move closer to the truth. The truth is an inexhaustible resource filled with potential new discoveries, making a life devoted to its pursuit an exhilarating adventure. When our minds are open, we can never run out of new things to learn. But, our search for truth is more than an intellectual exercise. Wisdom is more than a matter of the mind. We need both head and heart knowledge--both the verbal meaning of comprehension and the non-verbal meaning of application so that the information we study has an impact on our life style. We should always be asking "how can I apply this truth to my life?"

How do we live out our understanding of truth? One practical method for connecting head and heart knowledge is through goal setting. By manipulating symbols in the mind, humans are able to "time bind" or think about the past and the future. This analytical skill permits us to evaluate our past, size up the present and to imagine a better reality for the future. There are three steps in goal setting. First take stock of your problems and needs by listing all the causes and harms that you can think of. Then imagine what the

ideal solution would look like and use these ideals to write down a goal statement of what you would like to see changed. Finally, set a series of measurable steps that you will need to take in order to achieve the goal and review these steps daily.

Psychologists say that the happiest people are usually those who rationally consider how to take control of their lives by working on achieving goals. Perhaps your goal is to lose weight and get into shape; to improve your grade point average; to achieve a high score on the graduate records exam; or to be admitted to famous graduate school. But, you may also consider going to a higher level of happiness and set goals for how you will help others—such as spending more time with family members or volunteering for a community group. Your debate team at the start of the season may set group and individual goals. One of my students set as a personal goal to break into finals at every tournament. In order to reach the goal, he decided to make reading current events and political philosophy a priority. I vividly remember him reporting at the end of the year, "I wrote that down as my goal and it happened!" When dreams become real, when our behaviors change because of rational planning and practical discipline, we experience a sense of joy and awe that makes life meaningful.

Appreciating What Is Intrinsicly Good

Finally, ultimate truth is that which we seek for its own good and not for some other purpose. There is a distinction between intrinsic and instrumental good. We seek happiness instrumentally when we do something in order to gain something else that is desirable: working to obtain money to buy consumer products: taking a class to earn credit for a degree; debating to win trophies. But some things are intrinsically good in themselves and are not used for some other purpose or utility. Consider beauty, justice, friendship and human rights—these qualities and values are enjoyed for themselves. Each individual human life is intrinsically good and is the reason why humans should be treated with dignity.

To take what is intrinsically good and misuse it to gratify our pleasure or pride is to act unethically. An example would be distorting evidence—making up facts or misquoting an authority—in order to win a debate. The intrinsic truth of the evidence is devalued and made an instrument to advance the debater's pride. At some debate tournaments the topic for each round is given to judges about fifteen minutes before it is announced to debaters. The coach who sneaks the topic to his or her students before the others receive it in order to give them an early start in preparation is also devaluing the intrinsic good. Placing pride above fairness, the coach exchanges a possible ego high for the satisfaction of educating students in a

more professional manner.

One extreme example of a person unable to rise above happiness level two occurred in Alabama in the early 1980's when a Samford University debate coach murdered one of his students. The student, his star debater, had threatened to drop out just before a crucial tournament, ruining the program's chances for success. The professor is now serving a life prison term. Obviously, most pride-driven individuals do not become homicidal. But, the blame for history's worst crimes can be traced to individuals in authority with a serious ego problem—ordering mayhem to aggrandize personal power or advance a twisted agenda. Psychologist Scott M. Peck defines evil as a person's refusal to recognize any authority above his or her own ego gratification. Historical examples abound: the massacres ordered by Ugandan dictator Idi Amin; the killing fields of Pol Pot; the mass murder of Kurds by Saddam Hussein. Contrast these horrors with the actions of humanity's heroes—the self sacrifice and dedication of Martin Luther King, Jr.; the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi; the charity of Mother Teresa. These exemplars of human dignity all had one thing in common—they realized that no amount of worldly success or status fulfills a person's ultimate potential. They were motivated by a higher purpose.

In his book *Identity and the Life Cycle*, developmental psychologist Erik Erikson observes that humans seek higher levels of fulfillment as they mature. A variation of his model illustrates how the four levels of happiness correspond to life stages:

Truth	Elder
Love	Adult
Pride	Teen
Pleasure	Infant

Contemporary moral philosopher Martin Buber builds on Aristotle's analysis when he explains human ethical motivation as the result of three kinds of relationships. I - it, I - thou, and I - Thou. The I - it relationship is when the self treats other people as things that can be used as means to an end. Criminals and racists usually have difficulty seeing that their victims are fellow human beings. But even normal people stuck on happiness level one and two may be guilty of treating others as objects for pleasure or instruments of pride. The second relationship is I -thou. Here is when you experience another human being as something mysterious and wonderful. This corresponds with the love and service of happiness level three. We know that it is worth dealing with conflict with our friends and accepting the hard work of service to a cause or profession because of the happiness that we gain. The final relationship is what Buber calls the I -Thou

(with a capital T), or the human encounter with the transcendent truth of God. For religious believers like Buber, Truth is a Person and the I - Thou relationship is the ultimate source of lasting happiness.

Key terms that cluster around Buber's relationships and the levels of happiness can be illustrated as follows:

Happiness Source	Relationship	Key Terms
Truth	I - Thou	reason, human rights, intrinsic values, ethics, scientific discovery, faith, God
Love	I - thou	group identification, teamwork, professionalism, romantic relationship, friendship, duty, common good
Pride	I - it	ego high, prestige, fame, wealth, power, status, achievement
Pleasure	I - it	immediate gratification, self acceptance, comfort, security, recreation, entertainment

Concluding Thought Experiment

2,600 years ago a group of people living on a peninsula jutting out in the Mediterranean ocean conceived of a bright idea. Instead of submitting to tyrants or dictators, they would be ruled by persuasion and mutual consent. Public speaking became the tool to govern their nascent democracy. Each year at festivals in Delphi, crowds gathered in marble amphitheaters to listen to the philosophers engage in public debates offered in honor of the god Apollo. When Plato founded his famous university, the Academy in 387 BC, debating among students was a primary teaching tool. Each night students were assigned to deliver after dinner speeches on study topics. Aristotle made public speaking a major part of the curriculum at his rival university, the Lyceum, founded in 338 BC. Debates were no doubt held between the Academy and the Lyceum.

Ever since the golden age of ancient Greece, college students have entered the arena of academic debate to match wits and battle with ideas. Today at our own intellectual Olympics, we enjoy a speaking game designed to teach one of the most important lessons of civilization—how to transform

what is worst in humanity into what is best--how to substitute symbols for aggression; dialogue for violence; reason for force. Let the games be guided by the highest motivations so that we may maximize our very best potential.

Point of information: what is your level of happiness?

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