

The Unhappy Lives of Three Men, and What We Can Learn From Them

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All of us want to be happy, but we try to achieve that goal in vastly different ways. Some people find satisfaction in academic excellence, others accumulate wealth, and yet others simply dine and wine and hope it will be enough. There is, perhaps, no single way to achieve happiness, but we can at least learn from the mistakes of the others and avoid the many pitfalls along as we strive to be happy. In this essay, we will examine three unhappy men and their choices in life: Alcibiades the playboy, Cain the murderer, and a merchant known as the Master. Hopefully, their mistakes can become our guide.

Alcibiades, as portrayed in the *Symposium*, is a man famous for his beauty. He is most certainly confident in his physical assets and the power they allow him to wield over people. At the beginning of the scene, he is shown to be very drunk as he forces his way into Agathon's house uninvited. He claims that he is there to crown Agathon as the "cleverest and handsomest man in Athens" with "a garland from his own head" (*Symposium* 213a). Alcibiades seems to be taking much pride in his intelligence and physical attractiveness, thinking himself worthy of "passing on the crown".

Despite his vanity, Alcibiades is anything but a fool. By his own admission, he does indeed understand and even accept Socrates' teachings to a certain degree (215e–216a). However, his reluctance to change his way of life with the new understanding inspired by Socrates, and the inner turmoil caused by these conflicting beliefs compels him to avoid Socrates in order to continue in his pleasure-seeking ways (216b). He also clearly appreciates the importance of knowledge, and displays the ability to look past physical appearance as he actively pursues Socrates despite his unflattering looks (216e–217c). Despite that, he erroneously believes that he could offer physical pleasure in return for wisdom from Socrates (217a), as is shown by his repeated attempts to seduce Socrates.

Being supremely confident in his physical beauty, he is deeply hurt when all his advances are rebuffed (219c). Instead of asking for the reasons behind Socrates' refusal and attempting to improve himself, he becomes bitter and resentful. He is too blinded by his own pride and personal values to understand that Socrates places mental beauty before physical beauty, and that the only way to gain the teacher's love is to present himself as an equal in terms of virtue and morality. Nevertheless, he remains admiring of Socrates' self control (219d).

Physical beauty can bring most people aesthetic as well as carnal pleasure, but cannot last forever; any love based on physical appearance alone must fade with time (183de). Alcibiades may be able to attract lovers easily but he cannot make them stay since pleasure alone cannot bring true happiness. When his lovers see that Alcibiades has nothing else to offer, they will invariably drift off in search of someone better. Similarly, Alcibiades himself cannot be truly happy, because he places pleasure at such a paramount position that he knows no other way to gain happiness. In the end, he will

not know true happiness. His reluctance to change his ways also reflects his insecurities: that without his public life, he will have nothing. Those who love him will also be hurt because he seems unable to contribute anything other than physical pleasure to a relationship. Those who seek love with him based on virtue and goodness will be sorely disappointed.

The second person is Cain, who was a farmer (Gen. 4.2), and so naturally offered his produce to God. However, while his brother sacrificed only the fattest firstborn lamb in his herd (Gen. 4.4), Cain did not choose his best crops as an offering to God, but rather took ‘some’ in an arbitrary fashion (Gen. 4.3). His perfunctory attempt to honor his God also indicated that he saw the act of offering as a duty rather than an expression of love and gratitude towards his God. As a result of this attitude, his offering was rejected (Gen. 4.5), and the blessing he sought from God was not granted.

Even though God told him explicitly that he had done wrong, and warned him not to succumb to sin (Gen. 4.7), Cain did not attempt to change for the better. Instead, he became angry (Gen. 4.5) and envious towards his brother. He was given a second chance to gain the acceptance of his God, yet he did not take this opportunity to reflect on his actions and improve himself.

Cain did not simply murder his brother in a fit of jealous rage, but rather planned the whole process carefully. He lured Abel to the fields before killing him (Gen. 4.8–9), and then proceeded to lie to God about his brother’s whereabouts. In doing so, he betrayed the trust of his brother, who willingly followed him to the fields, never suspecting that the elder brother would seek to harm him. He also ignorantly believed that he could hide the truth from God. God gave him the chance to confess but Cain simply grew defensive and angry, retorting that he was not his brother’s keeper (Gen. 4.9).

Just as his parents had failed to do so before him, Cain did not repent nor beg for forgiveness, which further illustrates the weaknesses of human beings. He was punished severely for his sins and spent the rest of his life cast out from God's presence (Gen. 4.12–14). The acceptance that he so desperately sought was lost to him forever. His actions tore his family apart: with Abel dead and his being cast out, Adam and Eve lost both sons to a single, brutal act. His descendants were also cursed to live without God due to their forefather's sins.

Cain was seeking God's acceptance in his own twisted way, however he was not willing, or was unaware of the price he needed to pay for this. When he saw his brother honored and praised, he could have asked Abel for advice in pleasing his God, or he could even have asked God directly. Unfortunately, he did neither, choosing instead to be fixated on the perceived injustice done to him by God. He desired an honor he did not deserve: he wanted to be blessed as his younger brother was, but he did not stop to think how he could earn this blessing.

The third person is the Master from the "The Wealth of Nations", who is the owner of stock and the employer of workmen. He pays the laborer wages in return for his service. His one true goal is to maximize his own profit, mostly through minimizing the wages paid to the workmen. His quest in accumulating as much wealth as possible is aided by his friends in the government, and the laws which they set up to prevent workers from uniting against the master. He also secretly works with other masters to further lower the wages (Smith 455–456).

Despite his wealth, the Master has no true friends. The friendship he shares with government officials is based on mutual benefit, and will crumble

as soon as either party loses its usefulness; he maintains an unsteady truce with the fellow masters and competitors only when they need to unite against the workers (Smith 456); and the constant struggle between his workers and him eliminates any chance of civility, let alone friendship.

He has great influence over the livelihood of the men in his employ as the money he pays them sustains them and their families. A single decision to reduce their wages can cause the workmen great difficulties, and yet the master does not hesitate to make such decisions. He profits from other people's helplessness and dependence on him (Smith 456). Instead of fulfilling his responsibility to the less fortunate in society, he abuses his power over them.

His wealth can indeed provide him with a comfortable life and some semblance of happiness, but this happiness is not permanent because materialistic desires can never be completely satisfied nor can wealth last forever. An unwise investment, war, or even natural disasters could destroy all he has worked for. However, since he has devoted his entire life to his wealth, he is left with nothing when that is taken away from him. He cannot even appeal to others to help him out of benevolence alone, because he himself has never shown them kindness.

The three men discussed above are all rather unhappy people, not because of their lack of ability or worldly possessions, but their ignorance to the real meaning of happiness. They have chosen to focus on the wrong things in life, foolishly hoping that this will satisfy them and make them happy. In truth, they are only setting themselves up for greater unhappiness.

Alcibiades seeks happiness in carnal and physical pleasures; Cain destroys his whole life seeking a blessing he does not deserve; the Master tries to find happiness in money and material possessions. All these will

either fade or be taken away easily. As a result, none of them can achieve lasting happiness.

Aristotle believes that the only way to be happy is through virtuous activity of the soul throughout our lifetime, such that we can fulfill our function as a human being (*Nicomachean Ethics* I 7, 1098a16–21). We should do things for the right reasons, not for utility, pleasure or self-gain, but for the sake of good. When acting, we should not think of what we hope to gain from the action, but whether the action itself is worth doing.

Perhaps the most practical example in our daily life would be doing volunteer work. When joining a campaign, we should not think of how it would look on our CV, or how it would benefit our social relationships, but do it for the sake of doing good alone. We should think only of how we may help those in need, and selflessly do what needs to be done. We should also spread the word, such that others can also participate in doing good deeds.

Doing good is not limited to volunteer work only because there are no specified timeslots or minimum hours for good deeds. There are many other ways we can do good in our daily lives—we can help an old lady who is struggling with her shopping bags; gently guide a blind person across a busy road, or help a lost child look for his parents—the choices are endless, and though these kind acts may seem trivial, they are important to the ones receiving them. Aristotle makes a good point that true happiness lies in the realization of our potential as a rational and social being (IX 9, 1169b 18–20), and good deeds demonstrate not only our ability to act in accordance with reason, but also our care for others.

Understandably, some may find it difficult to take the first step in helping others, so perhaps the key is to start with those close to us: our friends and family. In order to be truly happy, we need to share what we have with those

close to us, so building and maintaining relationships is essential.

Alcibiades has had numerous relationships, but failed to maintain them; Cain has destroyed his own family in a fit of jealousy; and every single “friendship” the Master has is based on mutual benefit. These three men have nobody with whom they can share what they own, and in return, no one share anything with them.

In order to avoid making the same mistake, we should also base our relationships on goodness. When seeking friends and even lovers, we should place mental beauty above physical beauty (*Symposium* 210c). In turn, we should also ensure that we are equals to them in terms of virtue such that we are worthy of their love. It is only through mutual admiration of inner goodness can a relationship last.

From the experience of these three men, we can perhaps see if we are making the same mistakes in our lives, and hopefully change our ways before it is too late.

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Teacher's comment:

Thanks to Priscilla's clever choice we read the texts from a different perspective. Instead of the omnipotent God or the celebrated lover of wisdom, the author chooses to write on Cain and Alcibiades, and gives inspiring analyses of why they are unhappy. The story of the master can be read as an anonymous protest against Smith's (over)emphasis on the mechanism of wealth accumulation. In fact the reasons of their unhappiness correspond more or less to the choices which Aristotle gives as possible understandings of happiness in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, physical pleasure, honour and wealth. Priscilla concludes the analyses with her reflections on Aristotle's concept of happiness. Human beings are social animals endowed with reason, and our happiness consists in the realization of our rational potentials in living together with others. This idea of happiness is worthy of further reflection. (Ho Wai Ming)