

1 Introduction

Though some are happy, many are not. Even among those who would describe themselves as happy, there are many who only imagine they are, or remember that they once were, or expect they someday will be. In many places, this unhappiness results from external circumstances. These are circumstances having to do with the large part physical well-being plays in securing happiness, and therefore with the vicissitudes of physical health, or circumstances having to do with the absence of adequate protections from physical and emotional violence and abuse. Yet, even where matters of personal health and security are not at issue, happiness often seems something to hope for or dimly recall rather than experience in the here and now.

On one level at least, it is reasonable to say that those who remain unhappy, even though healthy enough and secure enough, must make themselves unhappy. The older notion that unhappiness must express a state of oppression by others cannot be applied here; something else is needed. When we impose unhappiness on ourselves, we are engaged in a pursuit of unhappiness, as we are in a different sense when we seek to make others unhappy. When we impose unhappiness on ourselves, we must believe that there is something worse than being unhappy, something that being unhappy allows us to avoid, or at least moderate. What might

2 The Living Dead and the End of Hope

this be? There are a number of possibilities, but I suspect they all involve four interconnected ideas: the idea that being unhappy is better than being unworthy of happiness, the idea that making ourselves unhappy in the present is better than giving up the prospect of happiness in the future, the idea that refusing happiness is better than having it taken from us, and the idea that the pleasure to be derived from making others unhappy can substitute for happiness. The theme of this book is that to avoid something worse than unhappiness, we engage in the pursuit of unhappiness for ourselves, and the pursuit of our own unhappiness in others.



Whatever the external environment, a substantial measure of unhappiness will remain as part of the human condition, not as something we impose on ourselves, but as our share in man's fate. To experience this unhappiness is part of what it means to be alive. There is, however, another unhappiness, and this is the one with which I am concerned here. This is not the unhappiness that makes us human, the experience of which is part of living, but the unhappiness that deprives us of the experience of living, that closes off our connection to our own vitality, or, in Donald Winnicott's language, our "true selves." Not only is this an excess of unhappiness, it is an unhappiness of a different kind, one that carries a dramatically different meaning. It is the unhappiness of those who seek death as a way of life.

While in most respects this book is, as its title suggests, a study of the darker side of human experience, my intent is

not to leave the reader with nothing to hold out against the prospect of a living death. On the contrary, my point is that life has much to offer once we stop allowing death to shape its meaning and direct its course. In this respect, I consider this a hopeful essay. It is my intent that the reader might find in the end of hope the beginning of life.

