



## HAPPINESS FOR SALE

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*Alain*

“It is not difficult to be unhappy or discontented,” wrote the philosopher Émile Chartier.

“All you have to do is sit down, like a prince waiting to be amused,” he continues. “This attitude of lying in wait and weighing happiness as if it were a commodity casts the gray shadow of boredom over everything.”

Chartier was a French philosopher who died in 1951 at the age of eighty-three. He spent his entire professional career teaching philosophy in secondary schools. Though his star has dimmed over the years, while he was alive, he was considered by the French as the most important philosopher since René Descartes. His pupils included Raymond Aron, Simone de Beauvoir, Georges Canguilhem, André Maurois, Maurice Schuman, and Simone Weil. He has also been called the greatest teacher of their generation.

“The key to [Chartier’s] teaching,” writes John Hellman in *Simone Weil* (1982), “was his determination to instill critical habits of mind in his students.” “He believed,” continues Hellman, “that students did not truly ‘acquire’ ideas until they had digested them and re-expressed them in their own words.” Rather than in-class exams, he thus preferred to assign “‘topos,’ or take-home essay examinations, to his students which forced them to formulate their own (not ‘correct’) answers to knotty questions.”

To be sure, Chartier’s pedagogical prowess was as legendary as some of his pupils. Still, the work of his closest contemporary, Henri Bergson, is much more highly regarded today than that of Chartier. Part of the reason is the ephemeral nature of the majority of his writing. That is, while he published numerous books on philosophical topics, he was best known in France through the thousands of articles he published in various daily newspapers. Beginning in 1903, he started to publish these philosophical articles under the pseudonym “Alain,” a name he took from the fifteenth-century Norman poet, Alain Chartier.

At first Alain’s articles were longer weekly columns and then in 1906 they became daily short articles. The shorter articles were published as a daily column entitled *Propos d’un Normand*. From 1906 until the start of the Great War in 1914, Alain wrote a two page article every evening. Then, after the war—which he fought in as a soldier even though he was exempt from service and could have served as an officer—he resumed the practice of writing *propos*. All said and done, Alain produced nearly 5,000 of these little articles.

Turning philosophy into literature or journalism can be difficult for philosophers. Writing for a philosophical audience is very different than writing for a literary or general one. Certain assumptions that are made when writing for a philosophical audience cannot be made for a general audience. As such, the list of philosophers of note who successfully wrote for a general audience is a short one.

Alain was able to bridge this gap through the technique he used to write his little articles. Every evening he would sit down with two sheets of paper in front of him. He then started to write his *propos* knowing that its last line would be at the bottom of the second page. He also committed himself to making no corrections, erasures, or changes. This allowed him to meet his publication deadline (all pieces were published the next day) and write only that which was directly relevant to the topic of the *propos*. The result were thousands of 50 to 60 line aphoristic compositions.

In 1928, ninety-three of Alain’s *propos* dealing with theme of happiness (*bonheur*) were published as *Propos sur le bonheur*, which became a best-selling book. The lines above are from the penultimate *propos* in this collection entitled “The Obligation to be Happy.” It is dated March 16, 1923, and was entitled as to leave no doubt as to his position on happiness. It was a position steeped in practical wisdom tempered with an endless bounty of cheerfulness and cheeky irony. Alain encouraged people to not complain or burden others with their problems. Rather, even when the chips are down, he encouraged his readers to present a happy face. For Alain, those who *choose* to be happy will be the recipients of great rewards.

As someone who experienced first-hand the horrors of the Great War and regarded war itself to be an absolute evil, Alain believed observance of his practical wisdom about happiness might have resulted in avoiding this epic catastrophe. “For it is my opinion that all these cadavers, all these ruins and wild expenditures and precautionary offensives,” wrote Alain, are the work of men who have never managed to be happy and who cannot abide those who *try to be*.” The last words here are emphasized to point out that happiness is something that we need to continuously work at by vowing to ourselves that we will be happy and by teaching happiness to others including our students and children.

Alain’s aphoristic approach to happiness is perfect for a world that needs help in recovering from a great catastrophe. There is no grand philosophical position on happiness other than practical wisdom such as monitoring your moods and getting plenty of exercise. Eventually, this type of happiness or well-being journalism became commonplace in newspapers through regular features on relationship advice (e.g. “Dear Abby”), health and beauty tips, self-remedies, and recreational guides.

My favorite though in this mix is the daily horoscope, which is the ultimate happiness tool: “The stars show the kind of day you’ll have!”

Thus, the most visible remainder of Alain’s philosophical contribution is the happiness journalism that is still a feature of many daily newspapers.

— Di Leo continued on page 31

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