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Who Am I: And If So, How Many
A Philosophical Journey

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Draft Translation

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Madrid

**The Cosmos of the Mind**

How does my brain function?

What is the most complicated thing in the world? A difficult question, but for science the answer is clear: the human brain! Granted, its external appearance in not very spectacular. At barely three pounds, it has the form of a swollen walnut and the
consistency of a soft-boiled egg. But hidden within is certainly the most complicated mechanism in the universe. Some 100,000,000,000 (one hundred billion) nerve cells are sparking there with up to 500,000,000,000,000 (half a quadrillion) connections. About as many, according to a common comparison, as the number of leaves in the Amazon rain forest.

Up until 120 years ago the inner life of the brain was for the most part unknown. Whoever wrote or speculated about the brain before then was simply shining a flashlight into the night sky. It is thus all the more astounding that the first person who truly described the overall processes of the brain and decoded its fundamental mechanisms is today virtually unknown. In any objective compilation of the most significant researchers and theorists of the 20th century, the name Santiago Ramón y Cajal should certainly be found. But, in fact, there is not even a biography of the man in the German language.

Cajal was born in 1852 in Petilla de Aragón in the Spanish province of Navarra. He was eight years younger than Nietzsche, and about the time of his birth and early childhood Darwin was working on his *Origin of Species* in Down, near London. That Cajal would also have something to do with biology could not be foreseen, as even very early in his life he expressed wishes to become an artist. When he was young man, in order to study the human body he helped his father, a surgeon in the anatomy department of Saragossa Hospital, did up bones out of a former cemetery. The great Darwin had once broken off his medical studies because human dissection was repulsive to him. In contrast, Cajal brimmed with enthusiasm when he set to work studying bodies. He earned a medical degree at the age of twenty-one. Because he was especially fascinated by cadavers and skeletons, he went into the army. In 1874 and 1875 he took part in an expedition to Cuba, contracting malaria and tuberculosis there. After his return he became an assistant physician at the Medical Clinic of the University of Saragossa. In 1877 he received his doctorate at the Complutense University in Madrid. As a professor for descriptive and general anatomy at the University of Valencia, he repeatedly encountered the fascination of the brain. Why had no one thus far dealt well and truly with the human brain in any detailed way? What had up until then been investigated was the basic anatomical organization of the brain’s regions. Cajal came up
with an ambitious plan: he wanted to understand the occurrences in the brain and also to found a new area of science, which he would call *rational psychology*. Piece by piece he observed the cellular material of the human brain under the microscope, illustrating everything he saw. In 1887, he received the position of Professor for Histology and Pathology at the University of Barcelona. In 1892, he joined the Complutense University in Madrid, Spain's largest and most renowned university, where eight years later he became the director of the National Institute of Hygiene and the *Laboratorio de Investigaciones Biológicas*. [...]  

Paris  
**Rousseau's Error**  
*Do we need other people?*  

At a broadcast station where I sometimes work, there is a porter, a haggard older woman infamous for her truculent unfriendliness. She is doubtlessly a very lonely person. Instead of being sociable and helpful, she angers most everyone around her with her snappish manner. Whenever she sees my young son Oskar, however, she is suddenly transformed. Eyes sparkling and face beaming, she showers Oskar with caresses. It doesn't seem to matter to her at all that her enthusiasm for my son is by no means reciprocated. When we walk out the door, she remains behind in bliss. I don't know anything about the private life of this woman, but she certainly can't have very many good friends. In spite of her occupation, she is probably quite isolated. Not a pleasant situation, one could say; instead, a rather a depressing state of affairs. The only one who occurs to me who would disagree with this is the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.  

He was a strange man. Born in 1712 in Geneva, Rousseau first worked as an engraver's apprentice. After only a short time he ran off and began his wanderings. He wanted to become a musician, but he wasn't able to learn an instrument. The only thing that came from this wish was an odd, new notational system that no one was interested in. He traveled aimlessly, living mostly off of women: as crazy as he seemed, with his dark
curls and big brown eyes he was a good looker. Yet Rousseau never remained for long in one place. While in Paris he became acquainted with the leaders of the Enlightenment, but he didn’t make himself especially well liked.

On an October day in 1749, Rousseau, then thirty-seven, experienced a change in his life so dramatic that later he would glorify the day as one of a truly illuminating event. The “illumination” happened on a highway. The vagrant music critic was traveling from Paris to the castle of Vincennes, southeast of Paris. The castle was at that time a state prison housing some very famous inmates, including Count Mirabeau, the Marquis de Sade, and Diderot, the philosopher of the Enlightenment. Rousseau wanted to visit Diderot, since he had been writing short articles for Diderot’s famous Encyclopédie. On the way to Vincennes, he came upon a copy of the influential Paris newspaper Mercure de France. In this he read of an essay contest sponsored by the Academy of Dijon. There was a question to be answered: “Has the restoration of the Sciences and Arts contributed to the purification of Morals, or to their corruption?” Rousseau described his reaction to this later in a letter containing lofty language and his sense of mission. Modesty and restraint were not his strong points:

“Then the question from the Academy of Dijon came to me, and provided me with the impetus for my first writing. If anything was like a sudden inspiration, so were the motions that now were occurring inside of me. All at once I felt myself dazzled by a thousand sparkling lights; crowds of vivid ideas thronged my mind with a force and confusion that threw me into indescribable agitation. I feel my head whirling in a giddiness, as if I am intoxicated. A violent palpitation oppresses me; I can no longer breathe, and I sink down under one of the trees by the road. For a half an hour I am in such a condition of excitement that when I rise I see the front of my waistcoat all wet with tears. Oh Lord, if ever I could have written a quarter of what I saw and felt under that tree, with what clarity I should have brought out all the contradictions of our social system! With what simplicity I should have demonstrated that man is by nature good, and that only our institutions have made him bad.” […]

Boston
The Man on the Bridge
Is morality inborn?

Let us place ourselves in the following situation. A railway car is racing out of control directly toward five railroad workers. You are standing at the track switch, watching the railroad car speeding on its way. If you turn the switch to the right, you can at the last second save the lives of the five workers. There is a catch, however: if the car goes to the right, it will run over another railroad worker – but only one. What would you do?

But wait! Before you answer, you need to ponder another situation. Again we have an out-of-control railway car, and again it is racing toward five workers. This time, however, you are not at the switch but up on a bridge over the tracks. You are looking for something that you can throw down on the tracks to stop the car. The only thing you can find is a large man standing next to you on the bridge. All you need to do is to give the man a good push from behind. His heavy body would stop the railway car, and the five workers below would be saved. Would you do this?

More than 300,000 people thus far have been faced with these questions, posed by the psychologist Marc Hauser of Harvard University. He put his test on the Internet and allowed people to decide online what they would do about the out-of-control railway car. But he has asked not only Internet users. He posed his question in the United States and in China. He even gave the test to nomads. He asked children and adults, atheists and believers, women and men, blue-collar workers and academics. The surprising result was that the answers were almost always the same – regardless of religion, age, sex, education, and origin.

What were the answers? Question 1: Nearly everyone would turn the switch. The death of one man would be worth saving the lives of five. Question 2: Only every sixth person would shove the large man off the bridge in order to save the lives of the five men. The majority of those asked would not do it.

Is that not a strange result? Whether I turn the switch or shove the man from the bridge, the outcome in both cases is the same: one man dies, and five are saved. There is no difference in the number of killed and not killed. And yet it does seem as if there is something different. Whether I take the death of a man into account and whether I
actively kill a man are very obviously not the same. Psychologically it makes a great
difference whether I am actively or passively responsible for the death. In the one case I
have the feeling of being a murderer, even when I am saving the lives of others. In the
other case it is more a feeling of playing fate. Between an active act and a passive one
lie worlds. And significantly, the laws of nearly all countries very precisely distinguish
between willful and refrained actions. […]

Vanuatu

**The Islands of the Blessed**

What Is a Happy Life?

The happiest people in the world have no paved roads. Neither do they have any natural
mineral resources to speak of. They have no army. They are farmers and fishers, or
work in restaurants and hotels. They understand each other rather poorly: their country
has the highest thickness of languages worldwide; of some 200,000 people, there are
more than 100 languages. The life expectancy is rather low, these happiest people
reaching an age of only 63 on average. “The people here are happy because they are
satisfied with little,” explains a journalist from the local newspaper. “Life revolves around
the community, around the family, around what one can do for others. It is a place where
one doesn’t need to worry very much about things.” People are afraid only of hurricanes
and earthquakes.

According to the “Happy Planet Index,” which the New Economics Foundation published
in summer 2006, Vanuatu is the happiest country in the world. Vanua-what? Yes, there
really is such a country, a rather obscure island nation in the South Pacific, possibly still
known by the older of us from school atlases as the New Hebrides. The survey asked
about the expectations of life, about general, overall satisfaction, and about the
relationship people have to their environment. According to these criteria, the optimal
conditions for tending our species would be a life on a volcanic island with about 17
people per square kilometer; a mild climate with lots of sun and luxuriant vegetation; a
spiritual mix of nature religions, Catholics, Anglicans, and Adventists; modest but honest
working conditions, with many people self-employed; and a parliamentary democracy with a strong premier, a weak president, and the British legal system. Yet the initiators of the study, including the environmental organization Friends of the Earth, did not want to know all this in such detail. Their actual goal was to discover the extent humans need to encroach into nature and disturb the environment in order to create conditions that will restore them to happiness. And, with the winner here being Vanuatu, the answer is: rather little!

In comparison with these volcanic islands, how pathetic is the happiness factor of the rich nations of the industrialized world, those nations of progress, with high life expectancies and the most expansive opportunities for mass consumption, leisure time, and entertainment. The Federal Republic of Germany is only in 81st place, yet at least is the fourth-happiest country of Europe, behind Italy, Austria, and Luxembourg. The highly praised Scandinavian countries – Denmark (112), Norway (115), Sweden (119), and Finland (123) – are all in the bottom half. Things are much happier in China, Mongolia, and Jamaica. Somewhat miserable is the perceived quality of life in the “land of the free and the home of the brave” United States (150), as well as in the oil-rich Kuwait (159) and Qatar (166) – nations in which the native citizenry is freed from the need for gainful employment by the social services of the federal government. Lower still are the dim taillights of all 178 countries: Russia, Ukraine, Congo, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe.

Let’s not think about the fact that the days of happy Vanuatu are numbered: global warming and its attendant rise in ocean levels will simply wash away this Atlantis in the coming years. Rather let us ask what we could actually learn from the happy people in the South Seas. The first thing is simple, clear, and even foreseen by the initiators of the study: money, consumption, power, and the expectation of a long life do not bring happiness. This is an interesting message, particularly at a time when income in wide classes of the population even in the rich countries of the West is not rising. It is exactly for this reason, it can be assumed, that savvy institutions such as the New Economics Foundation are investigating just how much happiness money can bring, and whether the criteria of income and possessions are able to be used to measure the happiness and success of a society. In this regard, *happiness economics* is a promising new research area, and its findings are quite notable. For example, the happiness
economists discovered through a survey that the real income and living standard in the United States has doubled since the 1950s. In contrast, according to researchers the number of happy people did not proportionately increase, instead remaining almost constant over the past fifty years. The detailed reckoning of another study came to the conclusion that happiness no longer rises proportionally with income higher than a pro capita $20,000. A fundamental explanation for this lack of happiness growth is that though acquiring possessions can (in the short-term) increase happiness, possessing cannot (as is addressed in the chapter “Robinson’s Used Oil”). As soon as certain requirements are fulfilled, more requirements replace them as one quickly takes for granted what one has. Wealth is a very relative term. You are just as rich as you feel, and as a rule the standard is determined by what people are in your cultural environment. A welfare recipient in Germany will never feel rich, even though in Calcutta he or she would be a Croesus.

The strange thing about these findings is that they have scarcely any effect on our lives. The dream of financial independence is still one of the most widespread dreams in the industrialized world. This is why we toil and struggle, and is where we invest a large part of our time, even though most of us never really get so far as to be truly “independent.” Money and prestige are at the highest rank of our personal value system, even above family and friends. This is all the more astounding since the value scale of the happiness economists is exactly the reverse. According to this scale, there is nothing that provides happiness more than the relationships to other people – to family, to spouse or partner, to children and to friends. The next most important things are the feeling of doing something useful and, depending on circumstances, health and freedom. If we are to trust this scale, then most people in the rich Western world are living falsely with their money values. They are systematically making the wrong decisions and striving towards a security they will probably never truly achieve. Sacrificing their freedom and self-determination for a higher income, they buy things they don’t need in order to impress people they don’t like with money they don’t have.

The problem with this accounting is that not only our mentality but also our whole social system is substantially built on this material orientation. Back in the 1950s the writer Heinrich Böll came up with a clever parable about this, “The Anecdote Concerning the
Lowering of Productivity.” In a harbor somewhere in the Mediterranean, a poor fisherman is dozing lazily in the midday sun. A tourist speaks to him and tries to convince him to go fishing. “Why?” the fisherman wants to know. “To earn more money,” responds the tourist, who quickly calculates for the fisherman how much more fishing he must do in order to become wealthy. “What for?” the fisherman would like to know. “In order to be so rich that you can lean back and relax in the sun,” explains the tourist. “But that’s just what I can do now,” says the fisherman, who then continues with his nap.

I think about this story because I had to deal with it during high school. This little story was in our German textbook, and my young German teacher has great difficulties with it. Most of my classmates quickly agreed with the moral of the story, and accordingly allowed their enthusiasm for schoolwork to fade. My teacher was still searching for the reason this completely non-motivational little story could be pedagogically meaningful and thus part of the course. She defended the tourist and tried to convince us that more money would mean better health insurance and retirement for the fisherman. Yet the text was written by Heinrich Böll, after all, and not by some national insurance company. Did Böll truly want to make a plea for safeguarding life in a middle-class way and avoiding any unnecessary risks?

So much is certain: the happiness economists would overall be more pleased with the fisherman than with my teacher and her needs for security. For them, the divorce and unemployment rates of a country provide more information regarding the well being of a land than, for example, the gross national product. Instead of measuring the contentment of a people or the success of a government by the gross national product, what is much more needed is a “national contentment index.” The British economist Richard Layard, of the London School of Economics and Political Science, is especially engaged with this idea. For Layard it is certain that there is more in life that brings happiness than just having everything. Those who strive for more and more wealth and status (in comparison with others’ wealth and status) show signs of true addictive behavior. Material striving generates a permanent state of dissatisfaction, in which enduring happiness cannot develop.

The growth aspired to by the industrial nations does not result in happier people. Quite the contrary: for this growth people pay the high price of less happiness. Even when
today we have more to eat, own larger cars, and can vacation in the Maldives – our psychological condition does not improve with our buying power, as much as we would like to live in such delusion. For Layard, here is only one logical consequence: since people’s anxiety concerning loss is greater than is the happiness they experience in obtaining things, the policies of the industrial nations need to be rethought. Full employment and social tranquility are more important than the growth rate of the gross national product. The message here is happiness for all instead of economic growth.

Whether Layard’s claims are realistic can be debated, but we won’t do that here. The morals in any case are unequivocal. It is not wealth and money, not even age, sex, appearance, intelligence, or education, that are decisive in producing happiness. More important are sexuality, children, friends, food, and sports. Most important are social relationships. According to the World Values Survey, one of the most comprehensive and wide-ranging statistical documents about socio-cultural, moralistic, religious, and political values, a divorce has about as negative an effect on well-being as the loss of two-thirds of one’s income. Interestingly, the report also shows that the hope for happiness contributes decisively to the feeling of happiness itself. Scarcely anyone lives without a very personal idea of what it is to be happy or without a personal longing for happiness. The dream of happiness accompanies us – even if it is only an image of what we are missing, of what is painful to us, or of what we need.

Quite aside from all happiness statistics, happiness is a very personal affair. I must find my happiness is a widespread phrase. According to the German-Jewish philosopher Ludwig Marcuse in his 1948 *Philosophie des Glücks* [Philosophy of Happiness], “My happiness is the moment of deepest harmony with myself.” But it is all a bit problematic with this harmony. For if it is true that there is no “I” but only (eight different?) ego states, what does harmony mean in this case? Who is in harmony with whom? And is the state of happiness somehow more “substantial” than my other states? Am I, when I am happy, in fact closer to myself?

At this point, it is time once again to look to brain research and to remember a couple of old friends: serotonin and dopamine (from the chapters “Mr. Spock Loves” and “A Very Normal Improbability”). That happiness has something to do with body chemistry is not a foreign concept to anyone who has lain out in the sun to relax. The sun’s rays lift the
spirits; in neurobiological terms, they stimulate the release of serotonin. It is then no wonder that there are many more smiling faces on Vanuatu than here in Germany. Temperature determines temperament. What brain research knows about the mechanisms that produce happiness is often extremely abbreviated. While experiencing positive feelings the left half of the brain is active; with negative feelings the right half becomes active. This is a bit reminiscent of the crude brain charts from the early 19th century. But in fact is has to do with a not very simple interplay of emotions and consciousness and of the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. The explanations concerning such substances as caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, and cocaine are simple. They all raise the output of the stimulant transmitter dopamine and sometimes of serotonin and so create a short-lived pleasurable excitement and contentedness. But there is thus far no explanation for complicated and long-lasting states of happiness. Even by comparatively very simple joys of the pleasure of a good meal, appearance, smell, and taste each play a role, and even the ambience of the meal, the expectations, the feelings of anticipation, and so on, contribute significantly to the experience of happiness.

The fascinating thing behind most situations of happiness – while flirting or having sex, while eating, while traveling, at times even while engaging in sports – is the interplay between expectation and fulfillment. Most neurochemical happiness theories end at this point, before things actually get started. Indulging in chocolate creates happiness by releasing serotonin. Even its odor stimulates the body to produce antibodies; just pleasant smells boost the production of serotonin. Yet increased amounts of chocolate, the controlled administration of drugs, and the constant fragrance of flowers generally do not to produce these effects. We need to search further – for the expectations. A jogger sometimes experiences a psychological rush, the “runner’s high,” from endorphins released by extended running. But a runner can experience quite another kind of happiness when he or she breaks a personal record or wins a race. This “more” results not from the natural reaction of the body while running; it comes about by way of the prefrontal cortex, since only it knows what the record is. The focused success “rewards” the runner, making him or her happy. An expectation has been fulfilled or even surpassed.
It is then no surprise that the primary interest of brain researchers today is the question of what the elaborate pathway is on which feelings and consciousness interact with each other – since feelings of happiness are more than just simple emotions. The fact that laughing brightens up gloomy patients (there now exists such a thing as laugh therapy) cannot be explained by simple reflexes. Studies show that merely thinking about a bad experience can result in a weakening of the immune system. If the investigator elicits good memories in the test person, the mood immediately improves and immunity is strengthened.

Feelings of happiness are very complicated. They can represent extremely positive emotions, great joy, enthusiasm, delight and enchantment. They are bound up with heightened sensibility, with awakened, sharpened, and opened senses. Added to this are the benefits of consciousness: a positive point of view of things and the environment, and positive perception and memory. When falling in love or feeling successful, everything suddenly appears in a good light. Abstract ideas of harmony, unison, intensity, oneness, freedom, and meaning merge with this impression. Self-satisfaction promptly increases and a feeling of self-worth grows, sometimes in dizzying proportions. People in the state of happiness are noticeable by their outgoing manner; they are friendly, impulsive, spontaneous, flexible, and productive. They see themselves capable of moving mountains.

Yet this intoxicating harmony is known not to last – and that is possibly a good thing. Too much serotonin can make one indifferent. Too large a dose of dopamine can lead to obsession, delusions of grandeur, and insanity. After a short time the receptors in the brain dull themselves against the chemical agents, and the magic fades. The strain of artificially extending such temporary states ends in fiasco: in drug addiction, in foolish illusions of love, in the terror of a permanent addiction to success.

No one is capable of living in constant absolute harmony with oneself. To be perpetually taken up in the moment, to allow everything, including time, to become blurred, to e nowhere except in the here and now – these are pretty ideas from Far Eastern philosophy. Psychologically, they are excessive demands. From a neurochemical perspective, they transform exceptional states into the norm. Expansive feelings of
happiness are the “islands of the blessed” in the ocean of our lives. Yet such states are certainly no universal recipe for a successful life: they are unrealistic expectations. Long-term happiness can be attained only when the expectations remain realistic. If happy and unhappy states are basically “homemade,” then it is mostly a question of one’s relationship with oneself. Only this can explain the fact that people in difficult life situations can be happier than people in privileged situations. To be “in concordance with oneself,” as Ludwig Marcuse wished for himself, thus means to be in harmony with one’s own expectations – and also in harmony with others’ expectations about which I have expectations. Therefore, as Niklas Luhmann put it, with the “expectations of expectations.”

In the mid-1980s, when I was doing my civilian community service, I meet a social worker who had a motto that continually irked me. His goal – and, as far as I understood it, the best goal for everyone – was to free himself from expectations. Heaven forbid! What a grossly exaggerated expectation! Of all the expectations in life I have yet been able to imagine, this is indeed the biggest and the most improbable – for the reason that it is impossible to avoid expectations. The question is not how we can eliminate them, but how we can tailor them to ourselves. Another morsel of wisdom is that we should set our expectations as low as possible in order not to be disappointed. It is indeed possible to see it that way, but it is not exactly a very attractive idea. Having low expectations reveals two things: a rather large fear of life, and an evident difficulty in dealing with disappointments. Would it perhaps not be better to learn to come to terms with disappointments more easily? Because mostly not very much at all happens to those who expect very little.

The middle-class morality of small expectations can nevertheless be assured the support of many great philosophers. Happiness and a lust for life belong only seldom to their preferred topics. Some of them have gone as far as to attach meaning to “contentment” – as a constantly minimalized stage of happiness. Immanuel Kant could serve here as an example. The only realistic happiness for him lies in fulfilling his moral responsibilities – a somewhat clumsy and fearful attempt at simply cross-circuiting duty with happiness. How refreshingly, in contrast, has the singer Edith Pilaf separated the two again: “To live morally is to live in such a way that you have no fun in life.”
Discovering an ideal of a happy life in the dull second half of Kant's own life would not be something that exactly suggests itself easily.

Happiness and contentment are not identical. And one should beware of simply reformulating the striving for pleasure into a strategy for avoiding suffering. Both of these are a part of life, of course, and everybody has a particular focus point along this spectrum. It is probably not very hard to divide our fellow humans, our acquaintances and friends, into “pleasure strivers” and “pain avoiders.” These two orientations are certainly determined very strongly by upbringing and temperament. A categorical priority of pain avoidance over pleasure striving, a priority to which many religions and philosophers subscribe, is not justifiable, however. And the vaunted “contentment,” with all its advantages, is more an attitude of older people, a life’s wisdom hardly to be made palatable for younger souls.

At any rate, this is how a renowned psychologist and happiness researcher by the name of Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia sees it. For him, there is some truth in all of it: happiness as “a matter of individual enjoyment”; as “a matter of wishes that one has,” as “the attainment of particular things from a list of worthwhile goals.” True happiness is made up of all these. It derives from the pleasant life, that is, from pleasure; from the good life, the engagement and the fulfillment of personal aspirations; and from the meaningful life, the attainment of particular things from a list of worthwhile goals. This sounds fine and plausible. The question remains, however: how does one obtain such a life? Is the way clear for me for the most part to create my own happiness? And if so, how should I do this?