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## Joy within tranquility: Amazonian Urarina styles of happiness

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SPECIAL ISSUE

## Joy within tranquility

### Amazonian Urarina styles of happiness

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Enjoyment in life among Amazonian Urarina is examined through the lens of two contrastive concepts of happiness. The first, “tranquility,” is a relatively long-term, relational condition implying emotional spontaneity and a flexible, freely chosen work routine that allows for a merging of action and awareness. It epitomizes a broader concern with the development of an individual “style of life,” where attitudes, manners, and actions come into alignment. The second concept, “joy,” is a fleeting state of excitement and anticipation, epitomized by the prospect of sharing a meal. While the two concepts imply a distinction between the sensuous and the moral, or pleasure and the good life—loosely analogous to the classic distinction between *hedonia* and *eudaimonia*—it is argued that the experience of joy in its purest form effectively crystallizes and intensifies many of the ingredients that make up tranquility, thus resolving the tension by suggesting the possibility of harmony between sensory enjoyment and virtuous living.

Keywords: tranquility, happiness, style of life, individuality, nonalienated labor, Amazonia

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I'm living peacefully now. Nothing happens. . . . We're all living peacefully because I have my sons to whom nothing happens because I'm with my husband. Even when he's drunk, he doesn't do anything to me, that's why I'm peaceful. . . . I'm living contentedly. He works properly, this man, I prepare my manioc beer for him, and he invites his neighbors, I also invite my female companions. So I'm working peacefully.

Rosa held my gaze as she answered my questions about her new life as a married woman. She went on to emphasize how difficult it was when her husband traveled far away, leaving her alone with the children, but how she would wait patiently for him until his return. She told me how her husband's peaceful life now contrasted dramatically with the ongoing problems he had with his previous wife. The term



she used over and over again, *raotojoein*, meaning loosely “being calm” or “being tranquil,” is one I often heard used by my Urarina companions when speaking about fond memories of times past, but also when invoking the ideal style of life they sought to bring about for themselves and their loved ones, and was closely linked to ideas of satisfying forms of work. As one man put it succinctly when I inquired about his hopes and dreams for the future: “I hope to live peacefully.” A straightforward aim, I thought at the time, if somewhat unexciting. Only much later did I realize just how sophisticated was this ideal of tranquility, and how it brought into alignment a constellation of ideas ranging from truth and right to sensory pleasure, freedom from anxiety, moral conduct, and the opportunity to pursue one’s own good in one’s own way.

The Urarina, a group of around four thousand hunter-horticulturalists who inhabit the Chambira river and its tributaries in the Peruvian Amazon, are not alone in their preoccupation with “the good life.” Anthropologists of Amazonia have routinely been invoking this and related concepts since well before the recent surge of interest in Western popular discourse—largely, I think, because it is so clearly a central concern of native Amazonian peoples themselves. Philippe Descola (1996), in his meticulous study of the Jivaroan economy and its embeddedness within the social and cosmological order, was able to show how it was the distinctive Jivaroan conception of “the good life,” with its emphasis on marital harmony, the provision of ample home-made manioc beer and the like, that effectively prevented the intensification of agriculture where ecological conditions would otherwise have allowed for it, thus keeping production in a condition of homeostasis. Descola’s argument ran directly counter to the materialist and ecological determinist theses of the time, which emphasized the so-called “limiting factors” of soil quality, protein scarcity, and so on, while in some ways anticipating the belated “discovery” by some Western economists that maximizing happiness may be a more worthwhile goal than increasing material wealth, and that the two do not always coincide. In a different vein, Joanna Overing (e.g., 1989) pioneered the study of what she termed the “art of living” or the “aesthetics of everyday life,” showing how the Western distinction between ethics and aesthetics is irrelevant in a world where people strive for beauty in their social relations with others. In various ways, concepts of “the good life” or “living well” have since pervaded a large number of anthropological accounts of Amazonian sociality (e.g., Overing and Passes 2000a; Belaunde 2001), which often emphasize the ways in which Amazonian social life focuses on emotional comfort and the maintenance of good or harmonious interpersonal relationships, some of which may even extend beyond the human sphere to embrace nonhumans in an expansive social order. This is not to say, however, that violence, hostility, conflict, and danger are absent from Amazonian life; on the contrary, they are ever-present, and indeed they comprise the sociocosmic backdrop against which the ideals of peaceable everyday sociality must inevitably be understood (Overing and Passes 2000b: 6–7). Moreover, as Fernando Santos Granero (2000) has argued, though peaceful conviviality is more than an unrealizable ideal, its achievement in practice is nevertheless constantly undermined, precisely because it entails such strong feelings of love, trust, and generosity: any rupture in such relations quickly generates equally intense negative emotions, such as anger, hatred, or shame, which end up driving people apart.



Despite this long-standing interest in the conditions of the good life, or the “criteria of good living,” to use Descola’s expression, there has been relatively little exploration of what it actually feels like to lead a good or virtuous life, or how this correlates with happiness as a positive affective state: the relationship, we might say, between morality and pleasure. While Amazonians clearly enjoy and hold in very high esteem the sensory pleasures associated with food, sex, and meaningful, sociable work, among other things, exactly how short-term, apparently subjective forms of enjoyment relate to broader conceptions of the good (e.g., Robbins 2013), and longer-term goals or aspirations in life, remains an open question. It has been suggested that ideals of happiness and wellbeing may be closely linked to health and productivity (Izquierdo 2009), as well as social relations and success in common subsistence activities (Reyes-Garcia and Tsimane’ Amazonian Panel Study [TAPS] 2012). According to one study, among the Bolivian Tsimane (ibid.), the most frequently mentioned reason for happiness was, significantly, “nothing bad happened.” Yet, despite widespread recognition among scholars of the general importance of “peacefulness” or “tranquility” in everyday sociality, precisely what this means, in moral or affective terms, has scarcely been investigated.

According to Durkheim, for whom the relationship between the moral and the sensuous was in many ways a key concern, socialization entailed an emancipation from sensory pleasures through the acquisition of a shared moral sensitivity, comprising common rules of conduct directed at a higher end which he equated to the good. Such a conception, which Durkheim drew from Kant, thus seeks sharply to distinguish morality from happiness (or pleasure) and provide a firm grounding for the former. The framing of morality in terms of the obligations incumbent upon people, however, appears ill suited to the Amazonian context, where rule following is not a salient feature of moral life, and where scholars have found greater mileage in approaches drawn from virtue ethics, which emphasize the cultivation of moral character rather than doing one’s duty or bringing about good consequences. On the other hand, Durkheim also acknowledged a possible connection between the sensuous and the moral in his notion of collective effervescence, as a kind of exaltation that reaffirms social bonds and imbues shared moral values with powerful affective meanings, thereby enhancing their salience in everyday life. Such a conception suggests that certain moral dispositions or sensibilities may be reinforced precisely in liminal, transitory moments of shared jubilation; and indeed later scholars—most notably Victor Turner (e.g., 1969)—have shown that liminal or liminoid moments may play a crucial role in orienting people to others.

In engaging with these issues, we are soon confronted with a great rift that has run through Western thinking about happiness from ancient times to the present day. Much work in the recent “economics of happiness” movement follows a broadly utilitarian approach whose purest form may be found in Jeremy Bentham’s assertion that maximizing the sum total of happiness in society should be everyone’s goal, and the explicit aim of governmental policy. In this view, happiness is conceived as a positive affective state, or simply “feeling good,” and often associated with a subjective sense of satisfaction with life. An alternative approach follows Aristotle’s conception of happiness as a life of virtue, emphasizing ideas of purpose and self-actualization, while stressing that the goals of life are diverse and not always dependent on subjective experience (see, e.g., Ryan and Deci 2001; Tomer

2011; Henderson and Knight 2012: 196). Adherents of the latter approach point out that the conception of happiness as a subjective feeling is a recent development, and that the ancient philosophers who saw happiness as the goal of life were talking about a far broader conception of human flourishing, one which has a certain objective content to it and involves a strong moral or evaluative component. This ongoing debate is sometimes referred to as the tension between hedonic and eudaimonic approaches, and while some have attempted to reconcile these by suggesting that a life rich in both kinds of pursuits is associated with the greatest degree of wellbeing (e.g., Huta and Ryan 2010), the relationship between these two forms of happiness remains unclear, not least in terms of how they might actually interact in practice in a given social context.

In this article, I suggest that Urarina manage two distinct but related concepts of happiness that loosely (though not entirely) map onto this division between hedonism and eudaimonia. Both are ultimately social and relational ideals, attributes of groups rather than individuals, as it were, though one corresponds to short-term, momentary pleasure, and the other to a more enduring sense of a life well lived, rich with meaning and purpose, and centering on a quite distinctive and multifaceted concept of tranquility. I argue that they are not contradictory, but come into alignment in interesting ways; in particular, I suggest, the short-term concept resembles a total social fact, one which condenses the meaning of the long-term, more objective concept of living well, in all its complexity, into an enjoyable subjective experience. Central to both forms of happiness are a particular form of non-alienated labor in which people are free to extend their capacities in satisfying ways, and a sense of harmony or correspondence between people's attitudes, beliefs, and actions, one that endows them with a sense of individuality while contributing to a distinctive and intrinsically enjoyable "style of life."

### The virtues of tranquility

The Urarina pursue a generally subsistence lifestyle of hunting, fishing, small-scale horticulture, and gathering wild forest fruits and other produce, interspersed with occasional bouts of extractive activity for passing fluvial traders under the system of *habilitación*, in which goods are advanced on credit in order to incite people to work. They mostly live in small, scattered settlements of around ten or twenty houses, each relatively autonomous both economically and politically. Although few Urarina today would readily be described as Christian, either by outsiders or by themselves, it is quite possible that Christianity—as imparted by Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for instance—has nevertheless shaped present-day moral values, as it may have done elsewhere in the region (see, e.g., Fausto 2007). Over the course of a couple of years spent living with them, I came to appreciate that Urarina people maintain a certain conviction that despite life's many hardships and struggles, their own way of life is the best one possible. They are especially scornful of urban life, where "you can't do anything unless you have money," though they also disparage the ways of their indigenous neighbors, who, they admit, are stronger and richer, but also, they insist, morally inferior. Though they sometimes lament the fact that many of the neighboring



Candoshi have entered wage labor or become so-called “professionals,” few Urarina, when given the opportunity, were themselves willing to enter wage labor for more than a few days at a time, valuing their flexibility and freedom more than increased income or the ideal of “progress.” People would often remark that they want to, or should, “replace [their] forefathers”: that is, live their lives in broad accordance with the same general values and aspirations as previous generations.

In seeking to characterize these values and aspirations, a good place to start is the ubiquitous Urarina term *raotojoein*, which, as noted above, means loosely “being calm” or (as I prefer) “tranquility.” Its prevalence in everyday conversation would be difficult to overestimate: someone asked how a recent trip into the forest went, for example, or how a patient recovering from illness was faring, could well be expected to answer, simply, “tranquilly.” To begin with, it is clear that *raotojoein* implies freedom from danger and distress. As such, we are immediately reminded of superficially similar ideas in ancient Greek and Buddhist philosophy, most notably the concept of *ataraxia*, or tranquility, promoted as the goal of life, or *telos*, in both Pyrrhonism and Epicureanism (e.g., Warren 2002). Tranquility in this context may be glossed as freedom from disturbance, or absence of trouble, and for the Skeptics in particular arises from a suspension of judgment concerning the nature or essence of things. Unlike the ancient Greek *ataraxia*, however, the Urarina ideal of tranquility should not be taken to imply an attitude of equanimity, mental composure, or emotional stability in the face of external fluctuations or adverse circumstances (e.g., Striker 1990). Nor does it equate to an absence of passion. For Urarina, as for perhaps most other native Amazonians, certain legitimate forms of violence, especially violent revenge against enemies, may be an important part of the good life, or at least may imbue life with a sense of purpose even as it disrupts the hard-won state of tranquility. On the other hand, it is in many ways the perennial threat of violence, the sense that danger lurks around every corner, that renders its absence so valuable. As Peter Gow (2000) has observed, his initial sense that daily life among the Piro was rather boring gradually gave way to an appreciation of the fact that this apparent boredom was experienced not as a lack, but as a positive achievement—a goal, in fact, of social life. “Doing nothing” was not only essentially an invitation to sociality, it was also necessarily a state carved out against a background of inevitable suffering and helplessness, in a cosmos pervaded by the constant threat of violence in which myriad hostile agents, human and nonhuman, always threaten to disrupt the calm surface of life, bringing illness or misfortune, or worse.

It is very common when among Urarina people to hear someone say, “nothing happened” as a form of praise, to mean that everything went well. In Rosa’s account, with which this article began, she repeatedly emphasized that “nothing happened” to express her satisfaction with her husband and with married life in general. Yet this apparent lack of events certainly does not imply boredom. So far as I can tell, the Urarina have no term for boredom, and while it is perfectly possible that the experience of boredom is not unknown to them (especially in the city, as I discuss further below), I think they would be more likely to describe such a feeling as a kind of “sadness,” arising from a temporary lack of people with whom to socialize. This indeed is what people would say—“it’s sad”—when large numbers of people left the village for a few days to extract timber for sale. When surrounded

by one's kin, with ample opportunities for productive labor, it seems more or less impossible to be bored.

Examining more closely the Urarina term for tranquility, *raotojoeein*, would seem to imply a much greater semantic density than obtains in its English equivalent. The stem *rao* or *rau* is found in a number of possible cognates, all associated in one way or another with Urarina conceptions of the good. These include words for calm (*raoti*), peace (*raotono*), taste (*raotono*), right or law (*rauhi*), an honorable person (*raunacaena*), to be straight (*rauhicha*), truth (*rauhijidi*), to make happy (*rausiaeca*), to heal (*rautaa*), and to like or enjoy (*rautatoha*). There are echoes here of the Cofán ideal of *opa*, which Michael Cepek (2008) has suggested denotes the paradigmatic Cofán conception of the desirable. *Opa* is used equally to refer to a “satisfying” existence, a “happy” community, and a “good” person, while also (and perhaps above all) referring to a certain quality of collective calmness, and freedom from fear. In the words of one of Cepek's informants: “*Opatssi* means living without being timid or nervous. It means that you'll be happy” (ibid.: 341). In my case, the Urarina word *rautoha*, or “delicious”—which would seem to be part of the same semantic matrix—was in fact the very first Urarina word I ever learned, quite simply because it was the first word my hosts took it upon themselves to teach me, immediately after we shared our first meal. The singular importance of this moment will become clearer below, as we see precisely how the sociable enjoyment of food is integrated into the wider constellation of values that make life rich and worth living.

Beyond the numerous semantic connections to morally worthy conditions and qualities, tranquility is associated with a range of other conditions necessary for living well, free of fear and stress, including good food and an abundance of game animals; good weather, especially sunshine, implying plenty of time remaining until the inevitable apocalypse; harmonious sociality, full of wit and good humor while avoiding heated emotions; and ample opportunities for the free and peaceful exercise of one's skills in carrying out productive chores, especially tasks dedicated toward the satisfaction of the needs or desires of others, such that competence and concentrated exertion become an expression of control and self-mastery. Urarina conceptions of the good life are broader than any straightforward concept of happiness would imply, and it is the former rather than the latter that they typically seem to strive for. Shamanic knowledge and power, for example, are extremely highly valued and widely sought after, but can only be obtained through stringent forms of discipline and self-denial, and often lead to a life full of suspicion and magical violence. There is a widespread sense in which “suffering” is seen as essential for obtaining certain benefits, including especially bodily skills or forms of knowledge (see also High 2010: 758). Ultimately, perhaps we should say that happiness acquires meaning in relation to suffering, but that both may nevertheless figure as valued components of a more overarching conception of a purposeful life (see also the introduction to this collection).

In a similar vein, it is also important to note that Urarina do not live tranquil lives all the time, free from anxiety and fear. On the contrary, their lives are all too often pervaded by hostility and envy, tension and resentment, and ongoing attempts to ward off dangers from all sides. In some cases, tranquility is willfully disrupted through the active pursuit of conflict or danger, the production of enmity, or engagement with a hostile exterior, which may also figure as an important and



socially productive dynamic of Amazonian life (see, e.g., Overing 1981; Viveiros de Castro 2001: 37–8). Tranquility is an ideal, a goal, achieved for periods of time, but never permanent, and it cannot be taken for granted. It is, importantly, not a natural state, but a collective achievement of people working well together: an immaterial product of people's labor. It is conducive, in turn, to meaningful involvement in work and love, allowing these to come to the fore of daily experience, giving rise to lasting satisfaction and a sense of purpose. Achieving a state of tranquility opens up new horizons for action and is the condition of possibility of a life of meaning in which one is free to develop one's capacities and to exercise virtues such as generosity, self-control, and respect for others.

### The mastery of work

In contemplating our own ideal working lives, leisure time often seems to emerge as a central preoccupation. In his classic paper on “the original affluent society,” Marshall Sahlins (1968) claimed that hunter-gatherer societies had achieved an easy form of material wellbeing because their needs were few and easily met by just a few hours of work per day. Descola (1996) and others have pursued similar arguments in an Amazonian context on the basis of meticulous measurements of time spent by both sexes in work as opposed to “leisure” activities. This kind of study arguably reflects a certain concern in the West with increasing leisure time—a laudable goal, by all means, but one that can regrettably come to substitute for that of improving or transforming the work experience itself. It seems to me that Amazonians do not rigidly distinguish between work and free time, nor do they see leisure as the more enjoyable of the two. What better accounts for their “affluence,” if that is the right term, is the pleasure and satisfaction they find in their work, arising largely from the ways in which work itself is organized. As Overing has written apropos of the Venezuelan Piaroa, “The affluent community . . . was the one that could take into account on a daily level both flexibility in schedules of work and individual preferences for the specific tasks themselves . . . affluence was a matter of achieving personal comfort in work, and not of productive accumulation” (1989: 166).

Many basic work activities, such as gardening or gathering wild forest produce, are carried out in pairs or small groups. As the composition of these groups differs according to the task, specific social relationships can be activated or nurtured through the choice of activity. Moreover, insofar as Amazonian sociality routinely stretches beyond humankind to implicate a range of nonhuman animals, plants, or spirits, successful engagement in many subsistence tasks can require management of these relationships in some form or another (e.g., through the performance of ritualized songs or chants). Given how interpersonal relationships are consistently singled out as the most important factor in subjective wellbeing, we should perhaps not underestimate the importance of engaging with the living landscape intersubjectively, rather than as objective resources awaiting exploitation (Miles-Watson 2010). Such intersubjective relations with nonhumans are of course often highly unstable, and may be downright anxiety inducing, as noted above, further casting into relief the ideal of tranquility. When managed successfully, however, they may

contribute to the sociability of productive life and perhaps even to that sense of immersion in a mesh of immanent mental processes that Gregory Bateson (1972) associates with the idea of grace.

Another reason why people mostly enjoy their work seems to be that opportunities for action remain more or less equal to people's capabilities, allowing them to become immersed in their tasks, exercising their skills in a concentrated but relaxing way. An activity such as extracting timber, for instance, contains within it a universe of technical operations—clearing, felling, cutting, rolling, tying, floating—each of which requires the mastery of a specific set of technical operations, thus offering considerable experiential diversity even within a “single” chore. This opportunity for the exercise of practical mastery is a key reason why the vast majority of Urarina find city life highly unsatisfactory, even downright frustrating. After one prolonged period of idleness in the city, during which time he had done little but sit around in the old church in Iquitos where all Urarina are welcome to stay for free as long as they please, one man said to me, “I just can't stand it anymore here. I want to go back to my work. In the city you can't be tranquil.” Though it is not always achieved, people strive for a kind of rhythm while they work, such that even hard labor—sometimes described as “suffering”—can still ultimately be experienced as satisfying. “Working in the field, you really suffer . . . but we live well,” as one person put it.

This merging of action and awareness within daily activities resembles what psychologists have described as the experience of flow: “People become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing” (Csikszentmihályi 1992: 53). There is a sense of total concentration and focus, combined with relaxation and a sense of involvement or absorption in the task at hand. It is not the sense of *being* in control that people enjoy, but the sense of *exercising* control in difficult situations (ibid.: 61). The freedom to act on the need to create opens up possibilities of self-realization, and directs desires toward externalization through creation rather than the acquisition of goods. As Hegel and Marx recognized, such creative work allows persons to know one another by externalizing themselves in an existence oriented toward others.

For this reason, I think, the prototype of “real work” is not wage labor. Thus when I once stopped briefly in an Urarina community and asked after the schoolteacher, who was a friend of mine, I was told simply, “He's at his work.” My interlocutor clearly did not mean the school, which was deserted, despite it being a weekday. Instead, the implication was that he was out fishing or tending his garden, engaged in productive labor in order to meet the immediate needs of his loved ones. In engaging in such work, people typically have a wide range of tasks from which they are free to choose at will, and this “pluriactivity” (Gasché and Vela Mendoza 2012) is central to one's ability to live well. People do what they feel like doing on any particular day, do it with whom they wish to socialize, and (with the partial exception of schoolteachers) rarely engage in the same activity for more than a couple of days running—which is of course one reason why anything resembling long-term wage labor is steadfastly avoided by the majority. In Marxian terms, people manage to avoid any form of alienation from their labor or its products.

Even short-term paid work is only temporarily attractive: when an oil company once began drilling in the area, for example, the company representative announced



that there was work available and that people should turn up at the site each morning, ready to go. For a short while, the company was inundated each day by a sea of willing workers. But the numbers very quickly dwindled to a small trickle, and their performance on the job grew increasingly erratic. One day, I overheard the company representative exclaim in frustration to a colleague, “I can’t go on! I just can’t work with these people!” In a similar vein, when Urarina today enter temporarily into apparently hierarchical relationships with labor bosses, or *patrones*, they manage to do so largely on their own terms and always for limited periods of time. Indeed, while the system of *habilitación* is sometimes seen as exploitative, both by Urarina and by other outside observers, its intermittent nature allows it to fit in well with the flexible and varied schedules that most people prefer.

### Individuality and style

That there is something resembling a consensus among Urarina on the basic requirements of living well should not be taken to imply a homogeneity of values, or that there is little or no significant individual variation in life choices or goals. For some people, the desire for continuity with the ancestors exists alongside (or is even superseded by) a parallel desire for “progress,” to “be civilized,” to move away from the ancestors to the extent that the latter lived in what by some standards now appears as a state of savagery, ignorance, and violence. Such people commonly extol the virtues of so-called “civilized” life in sedentary, orderly villages fashioned in accordance with the model of the Native Community set forth by the Peruvian government, complete with elected officials, a primary school, football field, communal first aid kit, and the like. Maintaining a community of this sort requires ongoing “collaboration” from its inhabitants, in various ways, and this pressure can give rise to tensions, usually when those desiring progress seek to impose their vision on others by inducing them to contribute to common community projects.

On the whole, however, differences in values do not give rise to conflicts, because of the pervasive emphasis on individual autonomy. People would rarely if ever dream of telling someone else what to do. Hence the general refusal to “read” or appear to know what is going on in the mind of another—an insistence on mental opacity that appears to reflect people’s sensitivity to impinging on others’ self-determination (see Stasch 2008). The Urarina are not moralists who seek to impose a single view on all, and within the context of an overarching emphasis on tranquility, they recognize that good lives may take many different forms—at least up to a point—because lives are made good by the possession of many different goods. These can be combined in many different ways, and perhaps even ranked in different orders of importance, depending on people’s character and their social context, but because these can differ greatly, there cannot be a single blueprint of how one should live. It is perhaps less a matter of what is done than *how* something is done that leads to enjoyment in life: what Irving Goldman (1963), writing of the Amazonian Cubeo, has referred to as their “style of life.” According to Goldman, each social relationship for the Cubeo demanded a specific atmosphere of feelings, sentiments, and emotions: “Nothing of consequence can result from an act divorced from its proper mood” (*ibid.*: 253). Manufacture itself was a pleasurable

recreation, and when the exertion of some particularly strenuous task—such as housebuilding—broke “the spell of good feeling,” it was exchanged for another (ibid.: 66). Economic expansion or material advantage was of far less interest than emotional comfort or ease and personal autonomy. In the successful creation of a Cubeo community, Goldman suggested, its members had achieved a “spontaneity of correspondence between emotion and action” (ibid.: 285, see also Overing 1989).

The concept of a style of life is useful in describing how people derive enjoyment. Though the concept of style is most commonly understood as an aesthetic judgment, it can be used to characterize the moral aspect of some lives, as emerges from distinctive ways of acting. As the philosopher John Kekes points out, a good life is made enjoyable by pleasure derived from certain kinds of activities: from “actions done in the right way, from our rightful being, from the possession of a manner that confers merit, and from being the right manner of man. The enjoyments these ingredients of a good life provide are the result of one’s style of life, from *how* something is done, not what is done” (2008: 22). Styles of life reflect one’s attitude to life in general and to one’s own life in particular. Even though the Urarina may easily appear to an outside observer to be quite homogeneous in many ways, with relatively little variation in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, there is in fact—as everywhere—considerable scope for individual variation in attitudes and values, within the broader spectrum of possibilities recognized as valuable or legitimate in a particular cultural context. Some men I knew, for example, would seek out a quiet, modest existence at some distance from other households, characterized by heightened levels of self-sufficiency and relatively free of material possessions; others would thrive on being at the center of social and political life in the most densely populated villages. Such life choices are equally good, and seen as such, provided that they accurately reflect what people most deeply care about, and that those leading such lives are in control, rather than at the mercy of necessity and contingency. If so, they exhibit a form of mastery of life that is both virtuous and inherently enjoyable.

Not all Urarina, it should be said, enjoy the privilege of a successful or enjoyable style of life. For example, one man I knew was virtually obsessed with his own political career, and with winning the countless minor feuds in which he constantly found himself embroiled wherever he went. He pursued victory by seeking to expand his power and influence, and for a while was convinced this would come with greater official (governmental) recognition as a citizen and legitimate authority in the community. Yet he was continually frustrated in these endeavors by his inability to negotiate the complex bureaucracy required by the Peruvian state to obtain even the simplest form of identity documents, such as a birth certificate. He did not seem to particularly enjoy his existence, on the whole, because his style of life comprised attitudes that were in some sense unrealistic, together with patterns of action that were not particularly successful, with the result that he was unable to live on his own terms. As another of my collaborators once expressed it: “Wherever he goes, he just can’t live tranquilly.”

Styles of life make corresponding actions characteristically and identifiably the actions of particular individuals. People do what they do cheerfully, confidently, wholeheartedly, and so on; as Kekes (2008) puts it, it is as if their characteristic actions bear their personal stamp. Independence; wit and good humor; exuberance



and wholeheartedness; the pursuit of knowledge; creativity; political achievement; compassion for others: all these and more may feature more or less prominently in Urarina people's attitudes to life, informing their sensibilities, motivating their most important activities, eliciting their deepest emotions, providing a standard of judgment for evaluating what is good or bad and better or worse in their lives. To the extent that people's attitudes, beliefs, and emotions are consistent with each other, and consistently reflected in their actions, no matter what those actions may be, they have a style of life that reduces the extent to which they are at the mercy of necessity or contingency, and thus allows for an enjoyable feeling of control or mastery, similar to that derived from valued forms of labor.

Free from fear and anxiety, in good health, people are thus encouraged to pursue their own conception of the good in their own way. This is a central component of Amazonian individualism, where self-determination is highly valued, but remains resolutely social at the same time, and, far from coming into conflict with the needs of a wider social group, often directly supports them. If the mastery of work allows for a feeling of autonomy and control, the practice of these techniques is nevertheless always aimed at satisfying the needs and desires of others, at improving their wellbeing. Thus, men master the art of hunting so that their wives and children can eat meat; women master the art of weaving so that their husbands and children can sleep well at night; and so on. Total self-sufficiency is never the aim; instead, balancing autonomy and desirable forms of dependency is always a central concern and a source of deep satisfaction.

Tranquility (*raotojoein*), then, as an enduring (though not permanent) attribute of a group of intimates, usually close kin, would seem to be the outcome or product of certain kinds of action in the world, or work conducted in the right kind of way. As an achieved state of being that enriches lives and makes them valuable, it might usefully be construed in terms of Urarina conceptions of the common good. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009) point out, the notion of the commons refers to such environmental resources as land and water, but equally (and, in the modern West, increasingly) to the results of human labor and creativity, in the form of ideas, languages, knowledge, codes, affects, and so on. Refusing any rigid distinction between the "natural" and "artificial" commons, these authors argue that under what they term biopolitical production, what is ultimately produced is not simply objects for subjects, but subjects for objects, or forms of subjectivity itself: the object of production, in other words, is a subject defined by a social relationship or a form of life. Tranquility, I suggest, might be considered as precisely such a form of life. Such a construal does not imply homogeneity, nor is it at odds with the emphasis on individuality as revealed through a style of life. As Hardt and Negri make clear, far from negating difference, the common brings with it an affirmation of singularities.

### The returned hunter

I now want to turn from these long-term senses of tranquility, as part of the commons and an aspect of people's lives as a whole, to a more short-term sense of "feeling good." To refer to this latter state, Urarina may use the expression *rachojoiha*,

“to be happy,” which can refer to any scenario of momentary joy: As one man told me once: “When my son Jorge was born, I was so happy (*rachojoiano*). Before that I only had daughters. But you know, sometimes fathers want to have sons, to accompany them and help them with their work. And son-in-law isn’t the same.” Another man said: “I’m happy when my family arrives, when my son comes to visit, and sleep in the house, and stays here a while.” Other moments of joy would include the baptism of a child, or drunken dancing at a party (or, better still, both at once: “Baptizing a child makes people dance with enthusiasm!”). We may note that such moments, pregnant with possibility, imply a state of arousal or excitement, and are also best shared with others, or held in common, in which the positive affect is not easily reducible to individual experience. Yet when I began asking a range of different people to give me an example of a time in their own lives when they felt “happy,” I was curious to find that many independently offered, by way of example, the moment of seeing someone returning to the community having just slain a large game animal, knowing that they would soon all eat together. In fact, for many people, this apparently straightforward scenario seemed to epitomize or exemplify the Urarina conception of happiness. As such, I wish to spend a moment exploring it further, elucidating its components.

To begin with, it is noteworthy that the experience singled out as happy is not the straightforward gratification of the senses through the process of eating, or even the sight of one’s children taking pleasure in this way. It is instead an *anticipation* of that moment, while it still exists in the future as something to look forward to. The reasons for this, I think, will soon become apparent. Secondly, given the enjoyment that comes from practical mastery in general and from hunting in particular, it is of interest that no one, not even men who were accomplished hunters, gave as an example of happiness their own returning to the village with an animal. There can be no doubt that hunting is considered great fun, and I have seen little among Urarina to compare with the adrenalin and excitement that comes from spotting and pursuing potential prey. Similarly, though they always make efforts to appear low key and implacable, and would never dream of boasting, returning hunters must feel a real surge of pride at their success and the happiness they bring to others. But active excitement, the rush of blood and the frenzy of pursuit—like immediate sensory gratification—did not seem to encapsulate real happiness as well or as fully as the more passive but morally loaded state of anticipation of a pleasurable moment shared with others in which need is alleviated.

The importance of food—or, more specifically, the importance of satisfying people’s desires for food—has been demonstrated by Gow (1991) to be central to the functioning of the subsistence economy. Piro people find the sight of a child eating earth, and thus satisfying its own desires, to be intensely disturbing. Yet there is a broader context to the scene of the returned hunter, in the sense that Urarina believe that game animals were placed on the earth by the divine Creator (*Cana Coaauñera*), for their nourishment. Animals are divine gifts that manifest the Creator’s concern for humankind, and His pity for those in His care: proof of His active, caring presence. While a scarcity of game is a sign that all is not well—that humans have been forsaken or the apocalypse is near—finding and killing an animal conversely implies that the Creator is looking kindly upon His children, who live “under His watchful eye” (*notaracae*), as people sometimes put it. At these



times, not only those humans who will eat feel happy: I often heard it said that pet birds, for example, know in advance when a hunter will return to the village, knowledge they communicate to their human owners by “dancing” and “jumping for joy,” throwing dry grass up into the air.

Yet to overemphasize the cosmological dimensions of this moment would risk obscuring its phenomenological aspects, the importance of which become clear when one has lived in this way for a period of time and experienced first-hand this very moment. One of the greatest difficulties I faced in adjusting to life in the jungle was adapting to the highly erratic food supply. I generally made an effort to eat as and when others did, and this often meant long periods of time, sometimes a day or more, subsisting on little more than warm banana drink, which, as Urarina say, “deceives the stomach” but never really satiates. Hunger for meat would begin to dominate my thoughts, even as my belly was kept full by watery banana, and I began to devote more and more time to thinking about my next meal and where it might come from. I suspect others were often in a similar situation, which is why a hunter would usually set out into the forest on the stated grounds that his wife or children were desperate to eat meat. It is in this context, too, that we must place the sight of his successful return, animal in hand: an immediate relief from anxiety about the food supply, and an anticipated relief from hunger. This sense of relief brings with it a feeling of lightness, an easing of burdens, and a sense that one is being taken care of, looked after. In such moments, life is truly good.

It is worth spending some time on what happens next, for while sharing food has very often been discussed by anthropologists from a conceptual standpoint in terms of the creation of kinship through shared bodily substance, very few have explored it from the point of view of what it actually feels like for one doing the eating. In Amazonia at least, this has arguably led to an excessive focus on consubstantiality and the body at the expense of the emotional and affective dimensions of sharing a meal. The returned hunter is not a guaranteed positive experience, and can sometimes evoke anxiety as it is not always certain that one will be invited to eat or given a share. Being denied an invitation can easily cause offense, though, which is why the hunter and his family will usually be quite discreet, and as secretive as possible, if they are not planning on sharing with everyone in the vicinity. For this reason, perhaps, the truly happy sight is of an animal sufficiently large, say a peccary or tapir, that one can be sure of not being overlooked, avoiding the added discomfort and indignity of growing still hungrier while others eat.

Hospitality and generosity are central to what comes next. The animal as a whole is a gift from the Creator, but as meat, raw or cooked, it takes the form of gifts from the hunter and his wife to neighbors and loved ones. Sometimes cuts of raw meat are given, but more commonly a large, thick soup (*corerajaa*) is made, from which everyone shares. The men of the village come together to eat at the house of the hunter, whose wife sends their children with portions for neighboring wives and children who stay in their homes. People eat only what they have been offered to eat, such that food sharing forms part of a hospitable exchange that will be reciprocated in the future. Hence the distinction between human eating (*lenon-ihā*) and animal feeding (*quiha*), which so many languages seem to make. Eating a meal together in the human style is an inherently humanizing activity, much as eating foods such as game animals designated for humans is at the heart of what

distinguishes humans from other kinds of being—hence, for example, mythical accounts of transformation into animal form often describe the foods eaten (berries, leaves, grass) as the hallmarks of nonhuman existence.<sup>1</sup>

The moment of eating itself involves the stimulation and satisfaction of all the senses. Usually no condiments or flavorings are used other than salt, with the result that the flavor of the meat itself is very important. There is all the difference in the world between different species of animal, but while many people have their favorites, they would not mention this while eating, as this could seem ungrateful. Similarly, children always eat what they are given, without complaint; any hint of refusing food is met with extreme scorn. Eating is relaxing, an excuse to take a break from what one might have been doing, and sometimes to withdraw in a way, though eating is also, and perhaps more commonly, an excuse to enter into sociality. Women typically eat with their children, while men especially eat with other men, using this as an opportunity to sit together and talk, and this liminal phase approaches what Turner (1969) would have called “communitas.” At the conclusion of a meal, a few words are said by the host to each guest in turn, and a short speech is made of thanksgiving to the Creator.

A good meal is prepared such that everyone eats his or her fill and is left with the slight heaviness that comes of a full belly, associated with a real sense of satiation and a readiness to relax. Eating well thus makes it easier to achieve a state of tranquility. Yet if we examine this feeling of satisfaction more closely, or more specifically our experience of moving past satisfaction from one activity to another, it becomes apparent that this is more than simply a moment of closure or fulfillment. One never becomes specifically aware of moving past fullness to emptiness, or from absence to presence. As phenomenologists have pointed out, the feeling of satisfaction does not mean an absolute limit has been reached, so much as that a new horizon has opened to us: we reach the threshold of one particular engagement with the world and enter into another (Jager 1999). We notice a shift in our attention, a turn in our interest, and the opening up of a new path that invites our exploration. In other words, “to be satisfied” means to give in to a new adventure and to approach the world from a different angle. There is a strong sense of flow here, in other words, such that the moment of joy is anything but cut off from the rhythms of social life which encompass it, as anticipation gives way to satiety while opening up new horizons of activity.

The returning hunter thus precipitates a cycle of desire and satisfaction, in which the shared quality of the experience is crucial. Rather like enjoying a great view, there is a sense of shame or loss if one cannot share the experience with another, and shared experience is often, I suspect, more highly valued than individual experience. It is not a static moment, and does not simply end in satiety. While it certainly alleviates the anxieties that surround an uncertain food supply, thus paving the way for a state of tranquility, it also leads to an opening up of horizons, of new possibilities, in a continuous dynamic movement that orients daily life. The returned hunter might indeed be considered an example of what Mauss ([1925] 2002) termed a “total social fact,” a unifying event or a symbol of core social values

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1. In Urarina, it is possible to say that humans “feed” (*quiha*), just as it is in English, but it sounds odd or amusing.



that integrates all aspects of Urarina life, economic, moral, religious, and aesthetic; at once eminently sensory, social, and cosmological. It brings together the values and practices that, taken together, comprise the Urarina vision of the good life, and condenses these into a short-lived but multifaceted and dynamic subjective experience that lies at the heart of their conception of happiness.

## Conclusion

A distinction between short-term, affective or hedonic conceptions of happiness that emphasize satisfaction or “feeling good,” and long-term, objective or eudaimonic conceptions of happiness that stress self-actualization, a life of virtue, and a wider sense of “flourishing,” has pervaded Western thinking on the subject for millennia. While there is a growing sense that focusing on one of these contrastive aspects of happiness to the exclusion of the other is problematic, and that integrating them is necessary (e.g., Tomer 2011), exactly how they do or should inform people’s life goals and motivations in differing cultural contexts remains unclear, as does the nature of the relationship between them. How does momentary pleasure, in short, involving enjoyable and positive experiences, relate to active involvement or engagement in life and all that it requires, and to having a higher purpose, a meaningful life? In seeking to answer this question for the Peruvian Urarina, I have shown how they manage two interrelated concepts of happiness, one of which is long term and is epitomized by a state of “tranquility”; the other of which is short term and is epitomized by the joyous sight of the successful hunter returned from the forest. These are not opposed concepts; in fact they imply each other in several ways. Interestingly, some similar distinctions appear to be made by at least some other Amazonian peoples: one is reminded of the distinction Piro people make between “having a good time, having a festival” and “living well, living quietly” (Gow 2000); as well as the contrast drawn by the Trio between *onken*, the condition of everyday contentment that implies calmness and quiet, and *sasame*, a more climactic state of ritual happiness, exemplified by joyous, collective dancing (Rivière 2000: 257). According to Peter Rivière, the latter might be understood as a kind of “aesthetic intensification” of the former.<sup>2</sup>

The Urarina concept of “tranquility” (*raotojoein*) is central to their sense of a life well lived, and perhaps even more than short-term pleasure is a goal or ideal for which they actively strive. It must be understood, in the first instance, in relation to the uncertainty, danger, and violence that provide the backdrop of everyday sociality. In some ways, it recalls certain other, better-known concepts of happiness as tranquility, such as the ancient Greek concept of *ataraxia*, which is often described as a lucid state of robust tranquility, characterized by ongoing freedom from distress and worry. According to Epicurus, one reaches the pleasant state of tranquility by realizing that there are only a handful of desires that must be fulfilled in order to lead a pleasant life, and that those can easily be satisfied. Epicurean tranquility is “a state of contentment and inner calm that arises from the thought that one has or

2. According to Rivière, *sasame* means “happy” in its simplest sense, but also has a deeper meaning that “implies a sense of inner contentment and the feeling of belonging not only to society but to the whole of nature and the universe” (ibid.: 254).

can easily get all that one needs, and has no reason to be afraid of anything in the future” (Striker 1990: 100).<sup>3</sup>

The Urarina sense of tranquility differs significantly from this emphasis on imperturbability, and from the Stoics’ indifference to everything bodily or external, and consequent freedom from emotion (*apatheia*). For Urarina, tranquility is more an external condition, one that necessarily involves others, and it implies emotional engagement and spontaneity. It is the grounds from which an enjoyable but also virtuous life becomes possible, a collective resource, part of the immaterial commons. A state in which, to a casual outside observer, little seems to happen, it can easily seem rather boring, even if this boredom is recognized to be a purposive achievement, a space of calm carved out within a hostile cosmos pervaded by danger. Yet a quiet, calm but profound sense of enjoyment may be derived from going about one’s tasks in the right kind of way, in accordance with one’s attitudes to life, and I would suggest that the boredom of the anthropologist is directly proportional to his or her lack of practical mastery, a failure to develop the skills required to achieve small but meaningful goals from the materials at hand, and an inability to recognize opportunities for action and interaction. The only time I ever heard Urarina describe themselves as “bored” was when they were in the city, a place with few meaningful opportunities for the exercise of skill, and little if any available work that allows people to express their freedom and creativity. Work in the city for them was a drudgery, involving specialized routine tasks performed day in, day out, ad infinitum. Boredom, in short, is possible only in the absence of tranquility.

In their preferred forest environment, by contrast, work is freely chosen, flexible, and diverse. A happy, tranquil life is the result of creative activity developing in multiple directions, and where economic production just one form among others. Activity is not merely a means adapted to certain ends; it is an end in itself. People literally “do one thing today and another tomorrow,” to invoke Marx and Engels’ well-known (if half-joking) description of a nonalienated society, in which one might “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner . . . without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.” ([1845–6] 1970: 53)<sup>4</sup> Through their work, which ideally becomes a free expression of their life, people affirm themselves as well as those nearby who use or enjoy what they produce, whose needs they satisfy, and who in turn complete and confirm the worker in their thoughts and love. This kind of work is thus inherently communal, even when performed alone. The flexibility and nonalienated character of work encourage people

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3. For Pyrrho and his followers in particular, tranquility was also closely linked to suspension of judgment concerning the true nature or essence of things. The things of the world are ultimately unfathomable and unknowable, and refusing to trust in our senses or judgments, especially as concerns goods and evils, is the best way to avoid anxiety and achieve peace of mind (Striker 1990: 102–4). It is tempting to speculate whether the “highly transformational world” of native Amazonians, in which, as Rivière put it, “it is never entirely safe to believe the evidence of your own eyes” (1994: 261), might similarly be an attitude of skepticism, though it scarcely in this case seems conducive to tranquility.
  4. Alternatively, as Marx expressed the idea in an unpublished notebook: “The very activity of his work would enable him to enjoy his personality and realise his natural capacity and spiritual aims” (cited in McLellan 1969: 464).



to focus on the activity at hand, allowing themselves to be absorbed into or lost in the interaction. This experience of flow is valuable precisely because of the way it steers a middle course between boredom and anxiety. Challenges are perceived not as threats, but as opportunities for action; put differently, goals and challenges imply each other, allowing people to achieve a feeling of control. Getting to this point requires discipline and determination, and does not come naturally. Over and above the material goods that are perhaps the most obvious outcome, such work is also directly responsible for the production of those immaterial commons—affects, social relationships, forms of life—that are conveniently captured in the notion of tranquility.

The condition of tranquility allows people to act consistently and in accordance with their attitudes to life, their beliefs and emotions forming a harmonious whole. This means acting for others as much as for oneself, contributing to their well-being, exercising the virtues of hard work and generosity. Practical mastery in work is inextricably linked to fostering relatedness with others. In fact, these are mutually reinforcing: people work to meet the needs of their loved ones, but are loved in turn, respected by their spouse and family, because they work hard. Hence Rosa's account of her marriage to Lucho: "I'm happy with my husband because he works well. . . . Because of this, nothing ever happens." In its ideal, the entirety of life is transformed into a kind of single activity with unified goals that provide a constant sense of purpose. When thoughts, feelings, and actions are congruent with one another, when boredom and anxiety are absent, people find in themselves an admirable strength and serenity.

Within this broader state of tranquility (*raotojoein*) arise fleeting moments of joy (*rachojoiha*), epitomized by the scene of the returned hunter. At first glance, the difference between joy and tranquility appears to correspond to a difference between subjective and objective conceptions of happiness, or between the positive affective state of feeling good and the objective conditions of the good life, which include scope for self-actualization and the practice of virtue. Yet I have argued instead that the difference lies more in the fact that the momentary experience of joy, in its purest form, is a crystallization and intensification of all the ingredients that make up the good life, allowing for a harmony between sensory pleasure or gratification, and moral, virtuous living with and through others. Pleasure is effectively a measure for judging moral goodness, as delight is taken in actions perceived to be worthy. This does not mean that tranquility can be reduced to joy, or vice versa, nor does it mean that there can be a single standard of hedonic value through which all forms of the good may be evaluated. It points instead to a different kind of achievement: the ability to find enjoyment in those fleeting moments in life that integrate one's convictions of the good.

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### Un bonheur tranquille: des styles de bonheur des Urarinas Amazoniens

Résumé : Le plaisir pris dans la vie des urarinas amazoniens est envisagé à travers deux exemples contrastés du concept de bonheur. Le premier, la tranquillité, est envisagé au long-terme, il s'agit d'un état relationnel permettant une spontanéité émotionnelle et une routine de travail choisie librement, favorisant une symbiose de l'action de de la conscience du monde. Il représente un souci plus général pour le développement d'un "style de vie" individuel où les attitudes, les manières et les actes sont alignés. Le second concept, la joie est un état passager d'excitation et d'anticipation, typiquement incarné par le projet de partager un repas. Si les deux concepts présupposent une séparation des domaines sensuel et moral, des plaisirs et de la vie bonne - qui se rapproche de la distinction classique entre hedonia et eudaimonia - les urarinas conçoivent l'expérience de la joie dans sa forme la plus pure comme une cristallisation et une intensification de diverses composantes de la tranquillité, résolvant ainsi cette tension en créant la possibilité d'une harmonie entre plaisir sensuel et vie vertueuse.

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