

Philosophy and Progress

Vols. LXXI-LXXII, January-June, July-December, 2022

ISSN 1607-2278 (Print), DOI : <https://doi/10.3329/pp.v71i1-2.66523>

A PHILOSOPHICAL SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS: AN ENIGMA OR REALITY?

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Abstract

In philosophy happiness occupies a dominant position. From the beginning of philosophy, we find the scholarly engagement of philosophers in search of happiness for human being. It is actually a perennial search of mankind throughout history. My attempt in this paper is to become a part of that august journey. I will try to focus some points in my paper. At first, I will try to give an analytic presentation about the nature of happiness with references to different philosophers and philosophical schools. In this part I will attempt to find out the root causes of the changing patterns of happiness by maintaining a chronological order. In the next part I will try to depict some significant debates regarding the pursuit of happiness. The question of enigma and reality will be dealt here in a comparative fashion. And finally, I

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will try to give some recommendations and suggestions for a happy life. As this is a qualitative work, here I confine myself within some relevant textbooks of philosophy and recent research articles on the pursuit of happiness. Content analysis, comparative discussion with a critical outlook and philosophical speculation will be within the research methodology of the paper.

Keywords: Happiness, desire, pleasure, satisfaction, well-being.

Introduction

Socrates demands that just life is better than unjust life. Can we claim that these “betterment” includes the happiness of life? Can we claim that just life is happier than unjust life? To be happy in life, is it required to be just? Socrates and Glaucon had a fiery conversation regarding all these questions¹. Human life is a large picture where happiness holds a very significant colour. So, people always try to increase the colour of life by adding more and more happiness. But it is not a simple math, it is complicated and subtle mechanism of life. It is simply tough job to add happiness in life and defining happiness is no less tough than the first one. Happiness cannot be described completely only with material gain or by any subjective satisfaction. It is always required a comprehensive idea to define anything precisely. Here comes the questions of ethics and objectivity in the way to define happiness. Philosophers are rendering their scholarly efforts to define the happiness from the beginning of human history. That’s why philosophical search of happiness is always under a vital question whether happiness is reality and enigma? In this paper I will try to answer this vital question.

The Nature of Happiness

“What is happiness?”

This question may seem very plain and normal, but answering this question is not that much easy. It is true that we all want happiness, this desire is homologous to all human being but the way to happiness is highly heterogeneous. In the history of philosophy, we find Democritus, as the first philosopher who discussed the nature of happiness. He gave emphasis over mental state rather than external phenomena.

Democritus (460-370 BC), who suggested that a happy life is not exclusively the product of a favorable fate or of external circumstances but rather of a man's cast of mind, is considered to be the first philosopher in the western world to inquire into the nature of happiness.²

Here we can focus on ‘cast of mind’. We actually get happiness when our cast of mind is fulfilled. Say for example if someone engages his/her mind on a particular football match or any TV series, his/her happiness is confined with that particular action. In that situation he/she really does not bother in anything else. Same thing happens during our life in maximum cases of our search for happiness. We actually try to fulfill the position where we keep our mind casted.

In the common sense understanding of happiness, we can include some features as the representation of happy life, which we may find very common in the expectation list. We can cite here a paragraph from Tiberius.

What comes to mind when you think about what a good life is? Maybe you think of skiing and hot chocolate, or margaritas on the beach. Maybe you think of having a career and a family,

good friends and enough disposable income to enjoy some fun vacations. Or maybe you think of Monty Python's answer to the question of what the meaning of life is in their 1983 movie, *The Meaning of Life*: "Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations."³

The notion of good life is closely related to the notion of happy life. Here the philosophical question is how all those above-mentioned criteria are included in the list of happy life. It seems like that all people of the world are going to enjoy the happy life in a uniform way, but the way is not uniform for all. Skiing and chocolate may be good for someone and someone may find skiing is a tiresome job, and having chocolate is risky for increasing sugar level. So, these two things are not equally enjoyable for all people. Again, all those components seem like designed for urban people. Components of happiness are dependent on some factors. All the components cannot make everyone happy at the same time. Even the same component may fail to produce the same level of feeling in the same person every times.

Happiness is really tough to define. If we ask, what do you understand by happiness? Many people will answer this question in manifold ways. We cannot find uniformly singular answer. We all have some common intuitions about happiness, and we use to explain those as the criteria of happy life. Hayborn explains it in the following way.

The trouble is— as it often is with analysis— that the ordinary concept of happiness appears to be neither well defined nor univocal. Indeed, there may be no "the" ordinary concept,

but perhaps several, even many. Thus, people's intuitions vary widely: one person's intuitions may favor identifying happiness with, say, having an attitude of being satisfied with one's life as a whole; while someone else may find it equally plausible to identify happiness with something less cognitive – say, having a generally positive emotional state. Still others may feel the pull of both views, and perhaps their intuitions favor some other theory. How do we choose?⁴

So, we find that happiness is really tough to confine within definition. We may give thousands of examples of happy activities, but we cannot give a single hard and fast definition of happiness. It can be said that we face the naturalistic fallacy⁵ by defining happiness.

Changing nature of happiness in the chronological order

In the history of human civilisation, we find the changes in the pattern of happiness. One particular action could not remain as same pleasant activity for all periods. Same phenomena are not treated with same feeling in the two different periods. It's really normal that the happiness of the cave dwellers would not be the happiness of modern urban people. There would be some significant changes in quality and quantity in two different periods. To understand the nature of happiness we have to give a critical look in the chronological development of human mindset. Let's see the following equations.

...the history of the idea of happiness could be summarized in a series of bumper sticker equations: happiness = luck (Homeric era), happiness = virtue (classical era), happiness = heaven (medieval era), happiness = pleasure (Enlightenment era), and happiness = a warm puppy (contemporary era).⁶

Here we see some equations that show the notion of happiness in different periods of history. Though these equations are not absolute, but these give us a rough idea about the chronological change of nature of happiness from time to time. The historical journey of happiness is not very linear. It is multi-linear and bumpy. After a certain period, we experienced a generic change in the nature of human mindset about happiness.

In the medieval period, there was immense influence of religion over the lifestyle of human being, so the western world considered otherworldly happiness as the real end of life. The schools of thought were dominated by religion at that time. Happiness was popularly known as the spiritual state at that time. Following here we get the essence of happiness in a summary.

Happiness was an ethereal, spiritual matter; it now lay in the hands of God, attainable only by means of devoted faith and the grace of God. Whereas earthly happiness was fallible – albeit not impossible – the Kingdom of Heaven promised complete and eternal happiness.⁷

But with rise of industrial revolution and scientific discoveries, people's mindset over happiness took another shift. In this stage notion of happiness shifted from another worldly outlook to secular outlook. Happiness with visible sources becomes more important to people. "In the Age of Enlightenment, the idea of happiness grew more secular and less otherworldly."⁸

In the present individualistic society, the pursuit of happiness is immensely diversified. We cannot fix a particular iconic symbol as the happiness of modern people.

Pleasure as happiness

Considering pleasure as exact as happiness is the one of the most celebrated theories of happiness. Pleasure is really an important component of happiness. The philosophical school of hedonism gives emphasis on increasing pleasure and avoiding pain. To them, pleasure is intrinsically good. Eudoxus thought that pleasure is the good.

- (1) This was because (a) he saw that all [animals], both rational and non-rational, seek it. (b) In everything, he says, what is choice worthy is decent, and what is most choice-worthy is supreme. (c) Each thing finds its own good, just as it finds its own nourishment. (d) Hence, when all are drawn to the same thing [i.e. Pleasure], this indicates that it is best for all. (e) And what is good for all, what all aim at, is the good.⁹

The ancient hedonists, the Epicureans, thought that important kind of pleasure was a tranquil state of mind, free from distress and worry, called *ataraxia*.¹⁰ Sometimes it seems more important to be in a stress-free position than to be in an exciting moment. We can feel that tranquility is more important than having exalted excitement in life. Here we find similarities with Mill's view. Mill also emphasises upon tranquility rather than excitement. "The main constituents of a satisfied life appear to be two, either of which by itself is often found sufficient for the purpose: tranquility and excitement."¹¹

Happy life is a blend between tranquility and excitement. Excess of any item specially the second one may hamper the happiness. Because the pleasure of excitement is temporary. That momentary excitement cannot ensure happiness for a long

time. Need of tranquility will not lead anyone mad but need for excitement may lead to disease when this want turns into addiction.

The philosophers who fix happiness as the end of life, they are very much concern about those who want to taunt them for considering such things like happiness as the end of life. That's why they explain the idea of pleasure and happiness clearly. They do not mean the life of rapture as the happiness, not even the life of momentary and intensified excitement. It must concern about the happiness of perpetual mental peace and pleasure. The higher type of pleasure is always appreciated by the philosophers. Even the Epicurean philosophers consider the happiness of intellect as the higher happiness. "Even Epicurus, whose doctrines have at times been dismissed as self-indulgent hedonism, was possessed of the conviction that virtue and pleasure were interdependent and that it was simply impossible "to live pleasantly without living prudently, honorably, and justly."¹²

Common feature of happiness: Satisfaction

Happiness is a universal desire. There is no exception in it. Rather it is the common instinct of human being. Happiness is the psychological defense of our every action. Two opposite actions may make two different people happy together. It means exactly doing a particular task and not doing that task may make two people happy at the same time. "All men seek happiness. There are no exceptions. However different the means they may employ, they all strive towards this goal. The reason why some go to war, and some do not is the same desire in both, but interpreted in two different ways."¹³

In case of pleasant activities, one thing is common, that is the release of dopamine in the brain. It means when we go through any kind of pleasant experiences, we experience the release of dopamine in our brain. So, feeling of happiness is basically in every human being.

Most important common factor of happiness is the satisfaction. Being happy means being satisfied with one's existing position and situation. In modern psychology this theory is very much popular in recent days. According to life satisfaction theory in its simplest form, to live well is just to think and feel like you're living well. If you are satisfied with your life because you feel like you're doing great things, then it doesn't matter whether you are actually doing great things. L. W. Sumner considers life satisfaction as a complicated mental state which includes both a good feeling about own life and also a judgement that ensures life is really going well.¹⁴

If we consider mental satisfaction as the way to make one happy then we can go for a hypothetical project, where we will get the same mental feeling as we get during the time of mental happiness. It's actually a plan by Robert Nozick, where he thought about an 'experience machine'. The machine has capacity to give the experience of ant happy activities with the help of neuroscientists. They will produce the same brain signals as it happens during happy occasions. For getting such experience one has to hock up his head by wires with that virtual machine.¹⁵ The scientists are quite capable for giving exactly the same feeling of all human pleasures.

Can we say that men will choose this life? Is this life happy enough to live? One challenge may happen here that we cannot

survive physically in this way. Because physical organs need some movement for proper metabolism. On the other hand, winning a gold medal by participating any event and just having a gold medal without taking part in any event does not make the same sense.

Understanding happiness as a subjective well-being

Another important way to express the meaning of happiness is the subjective well-being (SWB) account. It is very compatible with the happiness of common people. Generally, people want to explain happiness from own perspective. This account is supported by psychologists more particularly. An agent's evaluation of his life properties and his satisfaction over it will determine his happiness.

As a way to capture what lay people mean by “happiness,” psychologists pioneering the scientific study of happiness proposed the term subjective well-being (SWB; Diener, 1984). SWB refers to people's evaluations of their lives and encompasses both cognitive judgments of satisfaction and affective appraisals of moods and emotions.¹⁶

Another evidence that, people consider subjective experience as the happiness. People want to be happy by fulfilling own interest.

In contemporary usage, the term “happiness” is generally considered to refer to hedonic happiness, a subjective experience that includes “the belief that one is getting the important things one wants, as well as certain pleasant affects that normally go along with this belief.”¹⁷

But there is many happiness which may make us happy though we do not consciously desire it. Like unexpected happiness.

This account tries to show us that if we get what we desire then we will be happy and if we don't get then unhappy, it always true? There are many expectations which may bring unhappiness.

A man must be unhappy if he cannot get what he wants, therefore, "happiness" is the name we give to what a man wants when we consider the objects of his desire not severally but collectively; getting what one wants is not only a necessary condition of happiness but also a sufficient condition; a man is happy if he is able to get whatever he wants. On this account it might be said: in pursuing other ends, whether or not he pursues these explicitly with a view to happiness, a man is ultimately seeking happiness, that a man seeks happiness follows simply from the fact that the man has desires.¹⁸

Common people use to think about happiness in more or less this way. To them satisfying their required needs is the happiness. Because this is the pre-condition for good life. If people use to think like this then morality will not concern about happiness. "Hopeness is first and foremost a folk psychological concept employed by ordinary people trying to satisfy their own practical interests in leading good lives."¹⁹

Someone may say that one particular song or any particular food item is the greatest pleasure for him/her. Can we say it for all the time? If that particular song is playing in front of him for days after days, can he get the same pleasure? Or say if any accident happens to his life or to any of his family members can he enjoy that music with the same frequency of pleasure? Definitely not. Keeping other thing constant is required for ensuring happiness.

Let's see a man is really happy if he gets whatever he wants. We can go through here an insightful paragraph.

So, we must concentrate on a man who has all he seriously wants. But suppose that he wants only one thing; he pursues it single-mindedly, to the exclusion of everything else, and while he gets it, his soul shrivels. Rich misers, successful avengers, triumphant climbers of greasy poles notoriously find themselves empty, once their obsessions are satisfied. Or a man may want only what he does not have, and when he gets it, like Don Juan, he no longer wants it. Yet others are mistaken in thinking that what they want will satisfy them. The glittering sophistication of an inner circle may pale once the outsider finds himself accepted. Having what one wants, therefore, is no guarantee of happiness.²⁰

So, we see that subjective well-being can not give us the certainty of happiness for all cases.

Moral ground for happiness

How ought we to live? It must be a burning question for any theory of happiness to answer whether morality and goodness of character are related to happiness. From the conversation of Socrates and Glaucon we can say that 'just life' is related to happy life viz 'good life'.

In the common sense understanding some philosophers have some negative remarks about pleasure. They want to make a difference between happiness and pleasure, sometime they put pleasure in a lower position.

Aristotle made a demarcation line between happiness and pleasure. Happiness is accompanied with normative notion while pleasure can be mean and evil also.

Furthermore, by his account, pleasure is just not the right thing to focus on in a normative account of the good life for a human being. Some pleasures are bad; evil people take pleasure in their evil behavior. Happiness, by contrast, is a normative notion : since it is constitutive of what we understand as “the human good life,” or “a flourishing life for a human being,” we cannot include evil pleasures in it.²¹

Pleasure and happiness may differ some time. Pleasures are not always required for happiness. For example, when someone sacrificed his life for the sake of mankind or the martyr who is embracing the death for his country, definitely he does not feel pleasure during death, but he is happy inside because he can feel the glory of his supreme sacrifice. That is what we find in the following saying. “This just goes to show, says Aristotle, that pleasure does not always accompany the activities that constitute happiness.”²²

Aristotle was mainly against the subjective happiness which seems stupidly selfish to him. He considered this type of happiness as the happiness of domestic animals. “The many, the most vulgar, seemingly conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life of grazing animals”²³

So, happiness must need attachment with morality. The ethically enriched pleasure is most worthy and welcoming for our life.

Here is a combination of hedonistic and psychological activities with the potential power of producing happiness. It will help us to make a decision in choosing options of work.

Logically, then, there are four possible categories of activities structured in terms of the presence or absence of the subjective conditions of eudaimonia and hedonic enjoyment, though one of these may be a null category: (a) activities giving rise to both eudaimonia and hedonic enjoyment, (b) activities giving rise to hedonic enjoyment, but not eudaimonia, (c) activities giving rise to eudaimonia, but not hedonic enjoyment (theoretically a null category), and (d) activities giving rise to neither eudaimonia nor hedonic enjoyment. In the distinctions among activities in these categories lies the potential to distinguish empirically between the two subjective experiences of happiness.²⁴

These categories give us a guideline in choosing the best options among the actions. Definitely the action which has both eudaimonia and hedonistic value that is the best one. We must try to achieve or do those actions. And it shows that the action of eudaimonia must be conducive for the hedonistic pleasure. So, those eudaimonia are not mere mundane action, it has close attachment with morality.

We can lead life without happiness too. Sacrifice or renunciation of happiness is considered as the virtue. Pains and sufferings may bring great virtue in human life. But the ultimate aim of these painstaking and sacrifice is to maximize the happiness of the society. We can go through Mill's view about sacrifice.

It is noble to be capable of resigning entirely one's own portion of happiness, or chances of it: but, after all, this self-sacrifice must be for some end; it is not its own end; and if we are told that its end is not happiness, but virtue, which is better than happiness, I ask, would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr did not believe that it would earn for others immunity

from similar sacrifices? Would it be made if he thought that his renunciation of happiness for himself would produce no fruit for any of his fellow creatures, but to make their lot like his, and place them also in the condition of persons who have renounced happiness?²⁵

So, the sacrifices are superior type of moral action which are done with the motivation of increasing happiness in the society or for the country.

Happiness as a prudential choice

Sometimes we have to accept some pain for future pleasure. At the moment of pain, it may seem a hardship of life but it brings the sweeter moments in the future which is more lasting and significant than that pain. Religions try to teach this to us to apply in our lifestyle.

Thus, a wise pursuit of happiness may often entail an investment, the acceptance of suffering in the present to receive future enjoyment. Such a pursuit is exemplified by the many religions which advocate the renunciation of pleasure in this existence in order to achieve an infinite bliss in a subsequent existence – an investment in future happiness.²⁶

Another very strong way to be happy is to seek or to do something for happiness of others, specially the near and dear ones. It gives us a happiness of different level, even sometime more enjoyable than own happiness.

Similarly, kindness to others, insofar as it aims after our gratification in seeing them prosper, is a pursuit of our happiness. As we grow close to others, their welfare becomes interwoven with our own. From experience you can attest to the pain involved in seeing someone hurt whom you

love dearly. As our connection with another deepens, that individual's well-being becomes essential to our well-being; pursuing the other's happiness becomes synonymous with pursuing our own.²⁷

To Nietzsche, happiness is not that much easy to gain. It is not any surface level feeling. For happiness we need deep realisation. To Nietzsche, this true happiness is to be found in the pursuit of a deep, burning joy. The extent of happiness is not defined by the 'removal of pain' as Epicurus posited, but by full devotion to what one loves.²⁸

We may set some principles for happiness, which we wish to see by any happy activities, or we may say to consider something as happiness it must fulfil some significant conditions.

First, happiness should be productive. That is, it should be prolific in its causal effects. Second, it ought to be wide ranging in its effects; its effects should not be limited to a narrow class of states. Third, it should be psychologically deep: it should affect one's state of mind at a very profound and basic level, in typically lasting ways, not simply in superficial and transient ways.²⁹

Epistemological and ontological bases of happiness

Happiness has some epistemological bases by which we decide which action to be desire and which things to be avoided. Thus, we feel the subjective happiness and objective happiness. For example, if someone is happy by his own understanding but people consider him as unhappy person, what will be happened? Can we say that the sanction of other people will hamper his own understanding of happiness? This debate is really tough to settle, because in understanding happiness we consider both subjective

and objective aspects of epistemology and ontology. We can go through a table for clearer understanding of it.³⁰

	Subjective	Objective
Ontological	Made by personal decision	Exists independently of personal decision
Epistemological	Acceptance or rejection depends only on personal decision.	Acceptance or rejection can be rationally appraised independently of personal decision.

Actually, we can determine the priority list of any man by seeing the things which are given importance to his life.

Thus, in making decisions man invariably ranks desires, selecting those which are most valued and working towards their realization. The actions humans consciously choose to reflect the hierarchical structure of their value systems. By carefully observing where an individual's time and effort are invested, we can discern what those individual values most.³¹

Here we can determine how a particular person is choosing his/her options of happiness. Generally, people invest more time and effort which they consider most valuable for them.

Recommendations

In searching for happiness, we also have to think about what make us unhappy. There are some situations and conditions which make our life sad and remorseful. Some situations make us anxious and worried, lead us to depression and frustration.

At that time our happiness becomes hampered, and we feel tormented. Even some may kill themselves to get rid of from such situation. Suicide is now frequent in our society. But that should not be the ultimate solution. Just think about the street beggar who has lost his two legs and hardly can enjoy three times meal in a day. Still that beggar is living and coming out to the street for alms, it means he has hope to live and has desire to fulfil. For the utter surprise is that he has also happiness in life may be more than many of us.

Happiness has some opportunity costs also. Say for example, someone has to live abroad keeping his family members at homeland for earning better salary. Here he has to sacrifice the company of his family for the sake of earning high salary. It may happen in case of abstract things also. If a married girl with babies wishes to do higher study she has to give significant amount of time for her research work, it means in those time she cannot give proper care to her children. So, we have to go for a particular happiness in one particular time span.

Searching happiness may seem Sisyphean task³² to many of us. Let's explain first about Sisyphean task, it actually means futile and unrewarding task. According to Greek mythology Sisyphus was given an eternal punishment for his crimes. The punishment was to roll a heavy boulder to the top of the mountain and to keep it there. But every time he managed to roll it up on the top of the mountain unfortunately it rolled back to the ground again. This was going to happen every day and it was his punishment. Let relate this punishment with our search for happiness, we search for happiness by gaining something, no sooner we find it we feel that we need something more. Say for example we earn our monthly salary to mitigate all the wants

and need of our lives. By doing so at the end of the month we find that our amount of income is again reach to the lowest point, exactly same as the Sisyphus task.

Someone may say that this is the picture of the lower and middle-income family not for riches. But riches are also in the same pattern of want of happiness. Consider the adult person who is passing days as a single person feels like it would be romantic if he/she has a partner. The person in a relation wish to give it a permanent status by getting married, then wish to have child, then to rear it up properly and it goes on. There is no station in life where someone can claim that he/she does not need anything more. Thus, happiness seems an enigma in our life. So, what should we do? Have to give up seeking happiness or to change outlook towards happiness? I would like to suggest the second option, to change our outlook toward happiness. It is better to think the options of life as the options of suffering and we have to choose the most meaningful suffering for our life. Say for example being unemployed and doing a job, both has different type of suffering, but the second suffering is more meaningful than the first one. So, we should go for the second one.

Another suggestion we may follow regarding happiness is to change our attitudes and attitude making episodes of our lives. Our attitude towards life depends on some episodes like which thing we are going to give priority. If we give priority on wealth and property, then these things will change our attitude towards life in a different way. On the other hand, if we focus on intellectual happiness then the attitude would be definitely different from the first case. So, it is a better and wiser choice to go for the happiness of intellects rather than those of material gains. We can give here a significant reference.

Happiness has two aspects: one is an attitude; the other is a collection of episodes contributing to forming the attitude. The episodes are satisfactions derived from what one does and has. The attitude is satisfaction with one's life as a whole. A man's life is largely composed of what he does and has. Of course, possessions need not be material goods. They may be talents, personal relationships, the respect of others, worldly success, or a private sense of well-being. Nor should activities be thought of merely as publicly observable behavior. Reflectiveness, aesthetic appreciation, feelingless, quiet amusement are private activities, yet they are conducive to happiness.³³

Conclusion

The search for happiness is never ending and we cannot give a conclusive remark about it. The search will be gone on and on. It seems sometimes as an enigma, but it is really achievable. If we consider happiness as any destination, then we never can reach there. We have to consider happiness as action, the action which will glorify our own life as well as other people. The philosophical search for happiness is also a part of the great endeavor of human intelligence to make the happiness possible and meaningful for the mankind. By this scholarly search we are not only seeking happiness, but we also try to remove unhappy things.

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