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Happiness

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Do you want to be happy? If you're like most people, then yes, you do.

But what is happiness? What does it mean to be "happy"?[1]

This essay discusses four major philosophical theories of happiness.[2]

1. Hedonism

According to hedonism, happiness is simply the experience of pleasure.[3] A happy person has a lot more pleasure than displeasure (pain) in her life. To be happy, then, is just to feel good. In other words, there's no difference between *being* happy and *feeling* happy.

Famous hedonists include the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus and the modern English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.[4] These philosophers all took happiness to include intellectual pleasures (such as reading a book) in addition to physical pleasures (such as having sex).

Although we associate being happy with feeling good, many philosophers think that hedonism is mistaken.

First, it's possible to be happy without feeling good (such as when a happy person has a toothache), and it's also possible to feel good without being happy (such as when an unhappy person gets a massage). Since happiness and pleasure can come apart, they can't be the same thing.

Second, happiness and pleasure seem to have different properties. Pleasures are often fleeting, simple, and superficial (think of the pleasure involved in eating ice cream), whereas happiness is supposed to be lasting, complex, and profound.

Things with different properties can't be identical, so happiness can't be the same thing as pleasure.

These arguments suggest that happiness and pleasure aren't identical. That being said, it's hard to imagine a happy person who never feels good. So, perhaps happiness involves pleasure without being identical to it.

2. Virtue Theory

According to virtue theory, happiness is the result of cultivating the virtues—both moral and intellectual—such as wisdom, courage, temperance, and patience. A happy person must be sufficiently virtuous. To be happy, then, is to cultivate excellence and to flourish as a result. This view is famously held by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics.[5]

Linking happiness to virtue has the advantage of treating happiness as a lasting, complex, and profound phenomenon. It also explains how happiness and pleasure can come apart, since a person can be virtuous without feeling good, and a person can feel good without being virtuous.

In spite of these advantages, however, virtue theory is questionable. An important part of being virtuous is being morally good. But are immoral people *always* unhappy? Arguably not. Many bad people seem happy in spite of—or even because of—their unsavory actions. And a similar point can be made about intellectual virtue: unwise or irrational people aren't always unhappy, either. In fact, some of these people seem happy as a direct result of their intellectual deficiencies. "Ignorance is bliss," the saying goes!

But virtue theorists have a response here. Maybe some immoral people *seem* happy, on the surface; but that doesn't mean that they are *truly* happy, at some deeper level. And the same thing can be said about people who lack the intellectual virtues: ignorance may lead to bliss, but that bliss isn't true happiness. So, there seems to be some room for debate on these issues.

3. Desire Satisfaction Theory

According to the desire satisfaction theory, happiness consists in getting what you want—whatever that happens to be. A happy person has many of her desires satisfied; and the more her desires are satisfied, the happier she is.

Even though getting what you want can be a source of happiness, identifying happiness with desire satisfaction is problematic.

To start, this implies that the only way to become happier is by satisfying a desire. This seems wrong. Sometimes our happiness is increased by getting something we didn't previously want—such as a surprise birthday party or getting stuck taking care of a neighbor's cat. This implies that desire satisfaction is not *necessary* for happiness.

Desire satisfaction is not always *sufficient* for happiness, either. Unfortunately, it is common for people to feel disappointed when they get what they want. Many accomplishments, such as earning a degree or winning a tournament, simply don't bring the long-lasting happiness that we expect.[6]

So, even if getting what we want sometimes makes us happy, these counterexamples suggest that happiness does not consist in desire satisfaction.[7]

4. Life Satisfaction Theory

According to the life satisfaction theory, happiness consists in being satisfied with your life. A happy person has a positive impression of her life in general, even though she might not be happy about every single aspect of it. To be happy, then, means to be content with your life as a whole.

It's controversial whether life satisfaction is affective (a feeling) or cognitive (a belief). On the one hand, life satisfaction certainly comes with positive feelings. On the other hand, it's possible to step back, reflect on your life, and realize that it's good, even when you're feeling down.[8]

One problem for this theory is that it's difficult for people to distinguish how they feel in the moment from how they feel about their lives overall. Studies have shown that people report feeling more satisfied with their lives when the weather is good, even though this shouldn't make that much of a difference. But measuring life satisfaction is complicated, so perhaps such studies should be taken with a grain of salt.[9]

5. Conclusion

Understanding what happiness is should enable you to become happier.

First, decide which theory of happiness you think is true, based on the arguments.

Second, pursue whatever happiness is according to that theory: seek pleasure and try to avoid pain (hedonism), cultivate moral and intellectual virtue (virtue theory), decide what you really want and do your best to get it (desire satisfaction theory), or change your life (or your attitude about it) so you feel (or believe) that it's going well (life satisfaction theory).

And if you're not sure which theory of happiness is true, then you could always try pursuing all of these things.

Notes

[1] This might seem like an empirical (scientific) question rather than a philosophical one. However, this essay asks the conceptual question of what happiness is, and conceptual questions belong to philosophy, not to science.

[2] Happiness is commonly distinguished from "well-being," i.e., the state of a life that is worth living. Whether or not happiness is the same thing as well-being is an open question, but most philosophers think it isn't. See, for example, Haybron (2020).

[3] The word "hedonism" has different uses in philosophy. In this paper, it means that happiness is the same thing as pleasure (hedonism about happiness). But sometimes it is used to mean that happiness is the only thing that has intrinsic value (hedonism about value) or that humans are always and only motivated by pleasure (psychological hedonism). It's important not to confuse these different uses of the word.

[4] For more on Epicurus and happiness, see Konstan (2018). For more on Bentham and Mill on happiness, see Driver (2014), as well as John Stuart Mill on *The Good Life: Higher-Quality Pleasures* by Dale E. Miller and *Consequentialism* by Shane Gronholz

[5] For more on Plato and happiness, see Frede (2017); for more on Aristotle and happiness, see Kraut (2018), and on the Stoics and happiness, see Baltzly (2019).

[6] For a discussion of the phenomenon of disappointment in this context see, for example, Ben-Shahar (2007).

[7] For more objections to the desire satisfaction theory, see Shafer-Landau (2018) and Vitrano (2013).

[8] If happiness is life satisfaction, then happiness seems to be "subjective" in the sense that a person

cannot be mistaken about whether or not she is happy. Whether happiness is subjective in this sense is controversial, and a person who thinks that a person *can* be mistaken about whether or not she is happy will probably favor a different theory of happiness.

[9] See Weimann, Knabe and Schob (2015) and Berk (2018).

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Dr. Kiki Berk is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Southern New Hampshire University. She received her Ph.D. in Philosophy from the VU University Amsterdam in 2010. Her research focuses on Beauvoir's and Sartre's philosophies of death and meaning in life.

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