THE NATURE AND VALUE OF HAPPINESS

CHRISTINE VITRANO
FOREWORD BY STEVEN M. CAHN

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For Julian and Gabriel, who have made me
happier than I ever could have imagined

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FOREWORD

Steven M. Cahn

What is happiness? How can it be achieved? Should attaining it be our ultimate goal? Might pursuing it ever conflict with our moral obligations?

These questions have been explored by philosophers since well over two millennia ago, when Socrates, then Plato, then Aristotle, then Epicurus strode the streets of Athens. And the issues have remained of concern throughout the centuries, discussed by such towering figures as Augustine, Aquinas, Hume, Kant, and Nietzsche, as well as leading philosophers of our own time. Indeed, as long as human life continues on earth, so probably will speculation about happiness.

Professor Vitrano has devoted many years to considering the numerous issues that surround happiness, and her understanding of the topic runs deep. Now, in this engaging book, she offers a remarkably lucid presentation of the subject, eschewing arcane terminology, obscure references, and convoluted arguments. She also illustrates her essential points with a host of illuminating examples.

I find her reasoning persuasive and her conclusions compelling. But even those who differ with her will appreciate the clarity of her style and her commitment to common sense.

In fact, reading her delightful book may even contribute to your happiness.

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Introduction

Everyone wants to be happy, but if we ask the simple question "What is happiness?" something that seems so familiar, even obvious, suddenly becomes difficult to explain. More than two thousand years ago, the ancient Greeks inquired into the nature of happiness, and much of the work in the history of ethics is focused on answering their simple question: how can we live happy lives? Aristotle, for example, assumed that even if we have very different understandings of what happiness is and how we go about achieving it, everyone would agree that being happy is the key to living and doing well.

When I teach my class on happiness, I often begin the first lecture with a free association. I write the word *happiness* on the board and ask the class to share whatever comes to mind. My query is usually met with complete silence. Of course, I know my students have a lot to say about happiness, but I understand their initial hesitation. For all the familiarity of the word, most people recognize that happiness is a complicated concept, and no one wants to risk saying something foolish. After assuring the students that I am not seeking a formal definition, they often relax, and soon the entire board is filled with ideas connected in some way to happiness.

The point of this exercise is not to reach a consensus on how to define happiness, for we have the entire semester to accomplish that goal. Rather, I want my students to realize that they already possess key insights into the nature of happiness, even if their understanding is incomplete. Indeed, I believe we all have important intuitions about when a person is happy or unhappy, and these

form the basis of our understanding of the term. These intuitions are useful when we analyze various philosophical views of happiness, and throughout this book, I shall appeal to these intuitions in order to assess particular theories of happiness.

When we examine the philosophical literature on happiness, we quickly note how little our struggles with this concept have changed in more than two thousand years. Although the rise of technology has improved many aspects of our lives, we are still grappling with the same questions posed by the ancient Greeks about how we should live and how we can achieve happiness. Recently, the work of philosophers has been eclipsed by empirically minded researchers in fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, and economics. Thus, research on happiness is no longer confined to academic journals, but rather frequently appears in newspaper and magazine articles. For example, psychologist Daniel Gilbert's book *The Pursuit of Happiness* was a national best seller, and Gilbert himself recently hosted a PBS special series entitled *This Emotional Life.*

I do not wish to downplay the importance of this empirical work on happiness, for it is interesting and sometimes even surprising.* I do wish, however, to emphasize the difference between the kinds of questions these empirical researchers ask and the questions that interest philosophers. Empirical researchers generally begin from the premise that the concept of happiness itself is something we already understand and is easily measured. Their studies typically look at the kinds of activities that promote or hinder happiness, which they often gauge using the subject's first-person reports of her satisfaction or dissatisfaction with her life. But this research begs the question against the philosopher, whose starting point is much more basic. In philosophy, we are not assuming we already have a clear understanding of happiness, for that is precisely why we are investigating the topic. Our goal is to answer questions relating to the nature and value of happiness, but providing answers to these kinds of questions requires a more theoretical approach.

One tradition in philosophy imposes artificial constraints on happiness, thereby distorting its meaning. Although the average person may not be able to present a formal definition of happiness that provides the conditions needed

* Perhaps my favorite surprising finding by psychologists is that having children does not actually increase happiness, but rather causes a dramatic decrease in happiness, from which the parents never fully recover until the children leave home (though I suppose parents of toddlers and teenagers already know that!).

to achieve it, she still has some understanding of what this term means, and I believe that commonsense view ought to constrain our philosophizing. We have a perfectly viable word in our lexicon—*happiness*—and it is adequate for the job it performs. Modifications of its meaning by philosophers are misleading and unnecessary if one is interested in explaining happiness, a notion employed by ordinary people.

In critically evaluating the different philosophical theories, I shall appeal to our commonsense intuitions about when a person is happy. Whenever a theory deviates from those intuitions—either by saying that a person is happy when our intuitions suggest that she is not or by saying she cannot be happy when our intuitions suggest that she is—I shall argue that we have serious reason to reject that view. The best theory will help us to understand the concept we commonly call "happiness," and it will not create a new concept.

This book will proceed by presenting and critically evaluating past and present philosophical theories of happiness, with each chapter focusing on one particular view. Some of the questions addressed include: How has our modern notion of happiness changed from its ancient origins? What is the precise value of happiness? Is happiness the greatest good or simply one good among many? Does being happy require one to be moral or to have a good life?

The first chapter will focus on hedonism, which identifies happiness with pleasure or with a strongly positive balance of pleasure over displeasure. Some theorists simply use the two words *happiness* and *pleasure* interchangeably, while others offer more extensive arguments as to why happiness and pleasure ought to be equated. But they all agree that *happiness* refers to a mental or psychological state of the individual, an account they believe is supported by common usage.

Our discussion will begin with the ancient philosopher Epicurus, who argues that all of our actions are directed toward happiness, which he identifies with pleasure. Epicurus rejects the typical hedonistic assumption that we should maximize the amount of pleasure we experience. Rather, he advocates moderation in our pursuit of pleasure, and he emphasizes the importance of reducing the amount of pain we experience so that we can achieve the ideal life of tranquillity. We shall also discuss two philosophers from the modern period, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, whose utilitarian moral theory views happiness as the foundation of morality. Their "greatest happiness principle"

directs us to maximize happiness whenever possible, and by happiness they mean simply pleasure and the absence of pain. Finally, we shall consider examples of contemporary philosophers who are hedonists about happiness.

Then we shall critically evaluate the hedonist's main thesis, which is that all instances of pleasure increase one's happiness and that all instances of pain decrease it. I shall raise several counterexamples that illustrate why this thesis is false and conclude that happiness must involve a more global attitude we have toward our lives. Although happiness is often affected by our experiences of pleasure and pain, it cannot be reduced to mere pleasure.

I have also included an appendix, which addresses the famous "Experience Machine" thought experiment posed by Robert Nozick. He argues that pleasure cannot be the key to living a happy life, because if there were a virtual reality machine into which one could plug that would provide nothing but pleasurable experiences of one's choosing, people would not plug in but would prefer to live in reality. In contrast to Nozick, I argue that many people would probably plug into the machine. But even if some people refuse, I suggest they may not do so for the reasons Nozick assumes. Instead, I conclude that Nozick's thought experiment does not actually present an objection to hedonism as a theory about happiness. However, given the other objections we have already discussed in Chapter 1, hedonism about happiness still ought to be rejected.

The second and third chapters will focus on the opposite view, which identifies happiness with virtue. The theorists in both of these chapters believe that happiness can be attained through a life of virtue or excellence, and this view is most closely associated with the ancient Greek and Roman moralists. Our discussion begins in Chapter 2 with Plato, who argues that having a just soul is both necessary and sufficient for achieving happiness. We shall consider Plato's view of justice, which he defines as the perfect balance of the different parts of one's soul, with each performing its distinct function. We shall also examine Plato's example of the just man who is unfairly persecuted by his society and put "up on the rack." According to Plato, despite all outward appearances, this man is happy, while an immoralist who appears to be flourishing is not.

Then we turn to the Stoics, who also identify happiness with virtue but define virtue in terms of living in accord with our essential rational nature. For the Stoic, one achieves happiness by recognizing the distinction between

what is within our control (our own will and judgments) and what lies beyond our control (all external events) and by concerning ourselves only with what is within our control. The goal is to remain apathetic or emotionally unaffected by anything that happens that is beyond one's control, thus enabling one to preserve happiness regardless of what traumatic events one may face.

The third chapter begins with a discussion of Aristotle's view of happiness, which also emphasizes the importance of virtue. I shall argue that Aristotle's view is an improvement over the views of both Plato and the Stoics, because he also recognizes the importance of certain external goods, such as friendship, wealth, health, and luck. According to Aristotle, Plato's just man on the rack is not living a happy life, even though he is virtuous, for he lacks too many necessary external goods. I believe Aristotle's analysis of Plato's example is much closer to our commonsense judgments of when a person is happy.

The third chapter concludes with a critique of the view endorsed by Plato, the Stoics, and Aristotle, which identifies happiness with virtue. I shall raise several objections, the most pressing of which is that associating happiness with virtue deviates greatly from the way we use the word today. I suggest this view sets the bar for achieving happiness too high, and if we actually adopted this standard in our ordinary attributions of happiness, very few people would qualify as happy. I conclude that we should reject this conception of happiness.

The fourth chapter can be seen as an attempt to preserve the spirit of hedonism, but instead of identifying happiness with pleasure, these theorists identify it with the satisfaction of one's desires. I refer to this perspective as the "simple satisfaction view." The identification of happiness with getting what you want is prevalent within the contemporary literature, but this view of happiness is rarely justified by formal argument and is often stated as if it were indisputable.

I shall argue that the main weakness of associating happiness with desire satisfaction is that we don't always like what we want once we have it. I draw upon the empirical research on "affective forecasting" (which involves our inability to accurately predict future emotional states) to provide further justification for this objection, and I conclude that it is the subject's satisfaction (and not necessarily the desire for satisfaction) that actually correlates with happiness.

The fifth chapter can be seen as an amalgamation of the views in the second, third, and fourth chapters, for it combines the idea that happiness is a kind of

satisfaction with the idea that happiness implies one is living a good life. The theorists in this chapter improve upon the theories I have already rejected by correctly identifying happiness with being in a state of satisfaction with one's life. But these theorists also wish to preserve the ancient moralists' intuition that being happy implies one is living the good life. To ensure the connection between happiness and goodness, these theorists view satisfaction as a necessary but not sufficient condition for being happy. They place a normative constraint on deeming someone happy.

I divide the theories in this chapter into two groups, based on the stringency of the standards they invoke in judging happiness. First, I consider the group with the most restrictive normative standards and show the incoherence of holding this view of happiness. Then I argue that even the more moderate evaluative view of happiness is indefensible. One problem with imposing normative constraints on happiness is that by permitting a third party to revert to her own values in judging other people's happiness, we turn happiness into an idiosyncratic concept that reveals nothing about the subject's own state of mind. According to this view, judgments of happiness become descriptions of the likes and dislikes of the third party who is making the judgments and do not reflect the subject or her values. But this approach deviates from the way we use the word *happiness,* and I argue that all of the normative theorists in this chapter are guilty of taking a word from the ordinary person's lexicon and providing it with a special philosophical meaning.

The sixth chapter focuses on the life-satisfaction view, which I shall argue is the most successful in capturing our ordinary understanding of happiness. I draw on the work of several contemporary theorists who believe happiness is nothing more than being satisfied with one's life, and I address several misconceptions people have about happiness. I also consider the question of whether happiness is a single concept and whether we can be mistaken about our own happiness. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss an objection raised by Daniel Haybron, who charges that judgments of life satisfaction are arbitrary. In response, I argue that Haybron's objection does not actually present a serious problem for the life-satisfaction view of happiness.

The seventh chapter focuses on the connection between happiness and morality. I defend the possibility that the immoralist can be happy, and I reply to the objections of two contemporary philosophers who deny this possibility.