

# THE VALUE OF HAPPINESS

Ryan Doherty

There has been much debate in the philosophical literature about the nature of happiness. The central point of contention is whether happiness is best thought of as a psychological state or as a concept with a distinctively evaluative element. This essay argues that a purely psychological conception of happiness is incapable of accounting for our intuitive idea that happiness has great value and significance. A satisfactory account would acknowledge the importance of the psychological aspect of happiness but would insist that this is not enough. To explain the role that happiness plays in our everyday life we need to adopt an evaluative conception that intimately links happiness with the idea that our life is going well for us. Only if we maintain this conceptual connection between happiness and the conditions of our lives can we go any way to explaining the intuition that happiness is valuable.

## 1. Introduction

While happiness has been a subject of Western philosophical investigation since the time of Aristotle in Ancient Greece, in the past decades we have seen a resurgence of interest in this topic on the part of philosophers and psychologists alike. The majority of us see happiness as one of our principal goals in life, and although today we might disagree with Aristotle that we do everything for the sake of it, we at least consider our happiness to be of fundamental importance. But what exactly do we mean when we say we want to be happy? Is it possible to pursue happiness fruitfully without a clear idea of what it is? Intuitively, happiness is something of great value, yet our intuitions reveal surprisingly little about the nature of happiness itself. A cursory examination of one's intuitive ideas about happiness would probably yield inconclusive results at best, and this elusiveness has prompted philosophers to try to make better sense of what we mean when we employ the term 'happy' in day-to-day life.

In philosophy, the debate has revolved around the question of whether happiness is a merely *descriptive* notion or whether it is somehow also *evaluative* in nature (Feldman 2006). My purpose in this article is to provide reasons for adopting a distinctly evaluative conception of happiness. I believe that when we say we want to be happy, we are not simply saying we want to *feel* happy; we are also saying that we want our lives to go well for us. We would like the people around us to judge our life in a positive light in the same way that, if we were to have an out-of-body experience, we would like to be able to look upon our *own* life and approve of its conditions. If we accept this, I think we must also be prepared to accept that approval of one's life necessarily depends on finding some sort of *value* in that life: happiness has value for us because it is inseparable from the value we place on life itself. Happiness is thus the satisfaction we experience from knowing that we live a life which we have evaluated in a positive manner. As such, for happiness to be of value it is essential that it preserve a connection to those characteristics which could plausibly be regarded as making life worthwhile.

## **2. Problems with a descriptive conception of happiness**

The simplest way in which our notion of happiness can be purely *descriptive* is if we conceive of happiness as a subjective psychological state. Here happiness is just the state of mind we experience when we say that we 'feel happy'. When we say that somebody is happy in this sense, we are simply describing or pointing out what it is that they feel like. This psychological element of happiness is clearly something that is almost universally desirable, whether we think that it just involves a feeling of lasting pleasure or tranquillity, or whether we think that it involves a more profound sense of satisfaction and contentment. Indeed, at first glance it would appear that this is *all* we are aiming at when we pursue happiness. For what more could we want than this

subjective inner happiness? The person who feels deeply happy, it seems, would not have a care in the world and could not possibly long for anything else.

Some important considerations, however, suggest that a purely descriptive or psychological conception of happiness is inadequate to capture all the nuances of our everyday use of this term. The emotional state of the person who is happy in a psychological sense seems much more precarious if, for example, we were to notice that his colleagues secretly despise him. What if they simply feign friendship in his presence in order to better profit from his generosity, but behind his back they are vicious in their criticisms of him? Here our happy person is systematically deceived about the character of his 'friends' and we are certain that if we informed him of their malicious behaviour, he would cease to be happy. Of course, we cannot deny that this person still *feels* extremely happy, but given that his emotional state is essentially based on an illusory interpretation of the conditions of his own life, we would be less inclined to say that *his life is going well for him*. It is safe to assume that his life would be going a whole lot better for him if his friends were actually loyal, as opposed to just seeming so. If given a choice between a life in which your acquaintances genuinely enjoy your company and a life in which they feign this enjoyment (unbeknownst to you), I contend that most people would choose the former even though in both cases you still *feel* equally happy. If this is true, then when a person says that he wants to be happy he intimates more than just a desire to attain a particular mental state – in addition, he expresses a desire to actually live a good life.

The above example is really a common take on the radical situation suggested by philosopher Robert Nozick (1989, p.104). Nozick argues forcefully against the view that happiness is just a

psychological state and furnishes us with a crucial idea of what conditions might need to be satisfied in order for us to say that our life was going well for us. Imagine an 'Experience Machine' which people can plug into, just like plugging into the Matrix, which will provide all manner of pleasurable sensations and faithfully simulate all of life's experiences. Subjects in the Experience Machine are capable of achieving whatever psychological state they most desire and can stay in that state for eternity, unaware that they are simply lying motionless in bed. Nozick's intuition is that this type of 'happiness' does not fully encapsulate what we mean when we say we want to be happy. It seems that we want our happiness to arise from things that we actually do in contact with reality rather than our happiness arising from what we are essentially 'fooled' into thinking that we have done. The latter type of 'happiness' seems to lack any real worth or value; it is a type of false or chimerical happiness, even though it might *feel* good to the person.

Ultimately, purely psychological accounts of happiness do not allow one to discriminate between one's preference to be surrounded by genuinely affectionate companions as opposed to more duplicitous acquaintances, or one's preference to actually do things in the real world as opposed to just thinking that you are doing so. It is here that the notion of happiness as an *evaluative* concept comes in: it seems that when we say we want to be happy, in addition to describing how we wish to feel, we are also stipulating some sort of condition which, if met, would allow us to approve of the way in which our life was going for us. This evaluative concept is broader than the narrow notion of psychological happiness discussed above, and is often termed 'prudential happiness' or 'well-being' by philosophers (Haybron 2008, p.17). To live a prudentially happy life is to be living in such a way that you can approve of the conditions and circumstances of your life. The interesting point is that adopting this evaluative notion of happiness accords with its

original archaic meaning: etymologically, 'happiness' stems from the Middle English 'hap', meaning chance or fortune, the first entry in the Oxford English Dictionary defining happiness as 'good fortune or luck in life'. I think this usage still has residual significance for us today and a psychological account of happiness fails to take this into account.

### **3. The value of happiness**

Now that the distinction between (psychological) happiness and prudential happiness has been made, we can use it to make sense of our muddled intuitions. What I believe Nozick's fanciful example suggests to us is that a purely psychological conception divests the notion of happiness of any value or worth. Happiness becomes a state of mind that we can be 'fed' through tubes and electrodes connected to our brain, without our moving a muscle. It seems that only if we adopt the evaluative conception of prudential happiness can we explain our intuitive reverence for the notion of happiness. Obviously it is a necessary condition for our lives to go well for us that we experience the state of mind that we call 'feeling happy', but this in itself cannot be sufficient for our well-being. In addition, it would seem, our happiness needs to be causally produced in a certain manner, out of a connection with the external world. Our happiness needs to arise from our various interactions with reality and only then, it seems, could we be inclined to say that we have achieved happiness in any genuine or authentic sense.

The conclusion that prudential happiness requires some sort of connection to actuality seems like an intuitively strong one. The problem for philosophers, however, is to try to explain why it is that we have such intuitions about the nature of happiness in the first place. I think that just as psychological conceptions trivialise the nature of happiness, evaluative conceptions are capable of preserving the value that happiness has for most of us. The notion of value and the realm of

axiology raise extremely difficult conceptual questions: is life intrinsically valuable? Is happiness intrinsically valuable? What would it take for something to be of intrinsic value? While these sorts of questions greatly worry philosophers, I don't think we need precise answers - it is enough to realise that for the vast majority of us happiness has *some* kind of intuitive value (whatever type of value it may be). The most I can hope to do here is point to some considerations which might help us clarify why we think happiness has any value at all.

The first consequence of the intimate relationship between happiness and external reality is that it allows us to see happiness in a new light. On the surface, happiness is clearly a product of our friends, family, relationships, achievements, and so on; but in the background is the idea that the very precondition for these elements of our lives is *life itself*, insofar as it brings us into a relationship with the world as subjects. In some ways, it is simply trite to assert that life has value because it gives us the opportunity to live. But the banality of this point should not be taken as showing its unimportance. Those who see happiness as a psychological state are certainly mostly right, but they make the mistake of focusing exclusively on the endpoint of the happiness process and assuming that the value of happiness resides only there. It is not the way that happiness *feels* that is wholly determinative of its value, however; it is also what it is *based* on - namely life itself, in the sense of living actively in connection with the world. When stripped of its foundations, we are essentially left with a feeling which seems devoid of valuable content.

A useful example which demonstrates all of these ideas comes from the realm of literature. In the 1932 novel 'Brave New World', Aldous Huxley portrays a modern city whose denizens are controlled by an apparently benevolent dictator, Mustapha Mond. The city's residents are conditioned and indoctrinated from birth in such a way that they come to accept their allotted places in society and unquestioningly fulfil their societal obligations. Should anything go wrong,

citizens are abundantly provided with 'soma', a 'happiness' drug with no side effects. Mond effectively metes out happiness via these pills and, in doing so, ensures that the population does not entertain thoughts of insurrection. Do we really want to say here that the Brave New World citizens are happy? I would personally balk at this conclusion and I think Huxley's main intention is for all of us to have this reaction as well. The man who spends long days in the factory indefatigably performing menial tasks, ignorant of his oppression and who takes soma as a form of blissful escapism, is surely not a happy man. He is not truly happy at least - even if he *feels* happy from the drugs - since his happiness is not representative of his actual life in any sense. He is not happy because of the way his life is going or the way in which he is living; he is not happy because he has achieved some goal or aim which he set for himself. His drug-induced happiness bears no relation to the real-world conditions of his life and for this reason, I think, it strikes readers as pitiful and illusory.

### 3. Conclusion

The lesson we can draw from the above considerations, I believe, is that happiness is best conceived *not* as simply having a happy life, but specifically as *living happily*. We do not normally say that the unfortunate person who has been in a coma for years is living happily; indeed such an existence where one's vital functions continue to operate but one is motionless and perpetually bedridden seems, to most of us, hardly like 'living' at all. Nor would our conclusion change if, like in the Experience Machine case, we could hook up the coma patient to a world of virtual experiences and sensations. Sure, we might admit that the patient is better off than he was before, but we would still hesitate to say that his life was going well for him. We might say in this case that the patient has a happy life (because he subjectively feels very happy), but we would be hesitant to say that he is *living happily*. Living happily, as we have observed,

seems to involve engaging with the external world and interacting with reality. When we say we want to be happy, we are saying that we want our lives to go well for us: we are saying that we want to establish a connection with actuality *and* we want to establish it in such a way that we earn our happiness from the way in which we go about the very process of connecting. This is why it has value for us – because we are not *given* it (we are not passive ‘receptors’ of happiness like the drug-induced citizens of the Brave New World), and because we do not *decide* our happiness but instead pursue it through meaningful interaction with the world around us.

-*University of Sydney*

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Feldman, F 2006, ‘Happiness and Subjective Desire Satisfaction’ (draft), University of Massachusetts, <http://people.umass.edu/ffeldman/DTH%20Sept%2021.pdf>

Haybron, DM 2001, ‘Happiness and Pleasure’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 62 (3), pp. 501-528.

Haybron, DM 2008, ‘Philosophy and the Science of Subjective Well-Being’, in M Eid & RJ Larsen (eds), *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*, Guilford Press, New York.

Nozick, R 1989, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*, Simon and Schuster, New York.

Parfit, D 1984, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Sumner, LW 1996, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.