

THOUGHTS ON HAPPINESS

The Importance of Sadness

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7

Countless philosophies are all based around achieving a maximum of the same ideal: happiness. From eudemonism touted by the likes of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Plato, to utilitarianism supported by Bentham, moral value has been placed on happiness and pleasure for centuries.¹ The impact of these philosophers and their prioritization of happiness persists to this day in fields such as philosophy, science, psychology, and theology.² Central to this concept of happiness is the concept of sadness at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum. The idea of maximizing happiness and reducing sadness at all times is taught to both young and old in school and self-help books. However, this notion ultimately

causes more harm than good, as it ignores the pivotal role that sadness plays in human lives.

Without understanding what sadness is, would one truly be able to understand happiness? While the emotions of happiness would still be present, having an understanding of suffering is vital to appreciating any feeling of pleasure. Imagine that you are sitting in a room with several switched-off light bulbs dangling from the ceiling—for now, you are in complete darkness. Suddenly, all of the lights turn on in the room at once. The sensation of the light would feel extremely drastic and intense. Now imagine that you are sitting in the same room with half of the light bulbs turned on. Then, the rest of the lights turn on as well. While you would be seeing the same amount of light as you did the first time, you would not feel that same acute sensation. This demonstrates the benefit of experiencing some level of suffering in tandem with happiness—the impact of the happiness, represented by light, would be increased, and you would have a better understanding of the importance of that happiness.

Nonetheless, the idea that one can live without experiencing sadness in any form is obviously absurd. There is not one human who has lived or is living on this planet that has not experienced suffering at one point or another. Emotion is not a binary, but rather, a gradient. One can never feel complete happiness at any one moment, although they may come close, and one can never feel complete sadness. At any point, there is still more suffering or pleasure to be had. Thus, it is unrealistic to use absolutes when discussing the importance of sadness in life. However, this does not negate the relevance of sadness to understanding happiness nor does it negate the relevance of sadness to living a fulfilled life.

Sadness has played a major role in the history of the human species, even before civilizations arose. Specifically, suffering is vital to the process of learning. Painful responses teach humans to avoid repeating certain ac-



WHY DO FLOWERS MAKE US HAPPY? OR DO THEY?

Continued on next page

THOUGHTS ON HAPPINESS

Importance of Sadness (continued)

8

tions, which is a necessary part of development emotionally and physically.³ Without suffering in some form, humans would be unable to distinguish detrimental situations. In a world where nature cannot guarantee happiness (as a result of attacks and accidents), knowing what to avoid is essential to survival. Additionally, feeling sadness is crucial to empathy. Even if one person could ideally feel only happiness, this would mean that their ability to empathize would essentially be gone. This could have disastrous consequences for humanity as well, because relationships of all kinds would not be as effective.

Sadness not only allows us to enjoy happiness to its fullest extent, but it also allows us to react accordingly to the suffering that inherently occurs in the world—intentional or not. This is what makes sadness so pivotal to the human experience, for in no reasonable world can this suffering be avoided. Society’s modern conception that sadness should always be minimized at all costs therefore fails; in order to

truly experience the most happiness and satisfaction in life, one must process sadness first. Turning a blind eye to pain in the world is neither effective nor honest to the goal of increasing joy. Instead, long-term fulfillment comes from the knowledge that one has experienced all that life has to offer—then, they may come out knowing what it truly means to be human.

Notes

1. Brian Duignan, “Eudaimonia,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/eudaimonia#ref1269929>; James E. Crimmins, “Jeremy Bentham,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019), edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/bentham/>.
2. Eric Spitznagel, “You Won’t Find Happiness Without Deep, Dark Sadness,” *Vice*, March 10, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gv3q94/you-wont-find-happiness-without-deep-dark-sadness.
3. Donald Broom, “Evolution of Pain,” *Vlaams Diergeeneeskundig Tijdschrift* 70 (January 2001): 17–21. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279903067_Evolution_of_pain.

A Sartrean Account of Happiness

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Being a teenage boy, there is something about Sartre’s early Existentialism that is so appealing to me. Often stubborn and rebellious, my restless passion is soothed by Sartre’s doctrines. Almost immediately, his concept of radical freedom resonated with me. Not only did it liberate me from all predetermined value systems, ranging from Kantian deontology to my mom screaming at me to clean up my room, it granted me the authority to shape the world around me to a certain extent. However, I soon enough learned that with such freedom entails great responsibility. As “existence precedes essence” for humans, I must define myself through my own project at all times, and to Sartre, that means that I also play a large role in defining humankind. Indeed, I am always in anguish as he says, feeling the nothingness of my identity. Nevertheless, Sartre kept reiterating that his philosophy was one of great optimism; the freedom he gives clearly outweighs its responsibilities. Then, what if I were to actually put Sartrean Existentialism into practice? Despite always being in

anguish, despair, and abandonment, does his philosophy still give me a chance to be happy while living in authenticity?

When we first think of happiness, it is the psychological state that we commonly classify as happiness. However, to Sartre, emotions “are all spontaneous, prereflective relations,” and “they are not the products of reflective decision.”² What this would implicate is that forcefully smiling to act “happy” would do absolutely nothing. Therefore, we must commit to the concrete actions that naturally create happiness. Nonetheless, when we attempt to maximize happiness by seeking for actions that are the most effective, it is likely that we would depend on a predetermined value system made by psychologists—such as the claim that socializing makes one feel happy. Sartre would probably argue that we would be in bad faith, as we are taking a “flight from freedom” by not inventing our own values for every situation, and instead relying on a widely-held generalized claim. Moreover, I

Continued on next page