

THOUGHTS ON HAPPINESS

Importance of Sadness (continued)

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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

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Sartrean Account (continued)

believe that such a project would be foolish in nature. As Sartre stated that ‘man... is nothing more than his sum of actions,’³ to seek a certain emotion would be the equivalent of seeking nothing. Even if we were to partake in concrete activities, they would have no underlying commonality except for the very fact that they were all attempts of creating happiness, which clearly indicates a bad fundamental project.

If Sartre’s definition of authenticity does not allow us to deliberately seek happiness and we are only defined by our action in itself, then emotion in general is not a significant factor for Sartre. Therefore, all that we may be able to get from an authentic life is the occasional unintended result of feeling happy. In other words, happiness may not be an experience that we could bring about with command.

However, there is another definition of happiness: the overall well-being of one’s life. Unlike the earlier definition, this is not a mere emotional experience of a second or two, but is a lasting condition. Yet, how would we measure well-being? If we follow society’s definition, such as fame, wealth, company, and so on, we would be in bad faith. In other words, the well-being of our lives must also be defined by the individual. For Sartre, that again means to live authentically under a fundamental project. Therefore, the fulfillment of our fundamental project would be the only way to attain complete well-being. Sartre believes that a fundamental project in nature has a universal goal: to form a concrete identity. The ultimate goal of a human is to establish an undeniable identity while retaining freedom. However, this is contradictory in nature. As long as we are human and we possess Sartrean freedom, we always have the choice to change our identity. This is why we do not have any identity whatsoever, that we are sheer nothingness, because of the eternal chance of change. Therefore, fulfilling our fundamental project by having our identity set in stone, all while retaining freedom, is theoretically impossible. Does that mean that we should just discard our project as it is futile? Although Sartre admits that one’s “projects are absurd because they are directed toward an unattainable goal,”⁴ he claims that one must still believe that a fundamental project is truly attainable. Having said that, now that I know that it is unattainable, it would be self-deceiving if I believed it was possible! Could this be a necessary

illusion for humans to live authentically, which is the only virtue in Existentialism?

As this indicates that complete well-being is impossible, perhaps the best we could get is the following: we can occasionally look back at our past achievements and praise it, however with major reservations. We could acknowledge that so far our life has been good, but we always need to be in mind that everything could change in the future; even in the last seconds of one’s life, the context of facticity of the past could radically change. It’s almost like that feeling you get when building a house of cards— everything could topple over with a single twitch of a finger. In addition, if we excessively praise our past to define our current self with the past, then we would again be in bad faith.

The current standing of my search for happiness in Sartrean Existentialism is a bit troubling. First of all, Sartre’s theory is not very obvious in daily life, if at all. There is surely a degree of truth when it was criticized as being a bourgeois philosophy— if you don’t read his works, you would never encounter his theory of the human experience. Yet, if we read too much to figure out that the fulfillment of one’s fundamental project is impossible, that prevents us from living in authenticity. But if we somehow succeed to live authentically, escaping the countless traps of bad faith, then Sartre may give us two small glimpses of happiness— a spontaneous encountering of a feeling of happiness, and happiness when we occasionally look back at the facticity we have established so far. Whether I will put Sartrean Existentialism into practice? Perhaps not for the meantime.

Notes

1. Thomas Flynn, “Jean-Paul Sartre”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/sartre/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 37.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Estela Barnes (Washington Square Press, 1992), 799.