

THOUGHTS ON HAPPINESS

The Acquisition of Fulfilling Happiness through Altruistic Action

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Happiness is a fundamental goal for countless people in societies around the world. In the search for happiness, there are numerous opinions on what exactly it is, and how it is to be acquired. While happiness from the Hedonistic definition attempts to acquire happiness directly through fleeting pleasures, other theories recognize that happiness only exists as a lasting and fulfilling end goal, achieved by the dedication of oneself to meaningful actions, specifically altruism. Acquiring happiness through the acquisition of pleasure is a fruitless pursuit as it is fleeting and lacks meaning. Happiness through generosity, however, is the proper happiness to pursue because it is long-lasting and fulfilling.

Happiness Through Pleasure

The first theory of acquiring happiness puts forth pleasure as the foremost importance and involves the constant pursuit of it in order to consistently obtain short-lived happiness. The ideals of Hedonism and Epicurean Pleasure originated the theory that constantly seeking pleasure while minimizing pain will result in happiness, a theory that has its modern conceptual roots in Utilitarianism. Though Hedonism existed long before Utilitarianism, this modern version of the hedonic theory was created by Jeremy Bentham, but written by John Stuart Mill, his student. In Bentham's book, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham explains that "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (1). Ultimately, Bentham's theory holds that any and all actions are to be evaluated and executed based on the pleasure and the pain that will result from them.

In addition, in Chapter IV of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham proposes an algorithm to determine the ratio of pleasure to pain of an action in order to measure its value. It states that "the value of a pleasure or pain considered by *itself*, will be greater or less, according to the four following *circumstances*: 1) Its *intensity*.

2) Its *duration*. 3) its *certainty* or *uncertainty*. 4) Its *propinquity* or *remoteness*" (29). These first 4 variables show the value of the pleasure "considered by itself." However, "when the value of any pleasure or pain is considered for the purpose of estimating the tendency of any *act* by which it is produced, there are two other circumstances to be taken into the account" (Bentham, 29). Meaning, the following two variables are parts of the event produced from the pleasure or pain, rather than the pleasure or pain *itself*. These two circumstances of an action are 5) its *fecundity*, or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the *same* kind. 6) Its *purity*, or the chance it has of not being followed by sensations of the *opposite* kind" (Bentham, 30). The morality of an action is measurable by the ratio of pleasure to pain inflicted on both the individual and all people affected by the actions. The Hedonistic Theory, especially when paired with Hedonistic Calculus, provides a propitious outlook on the acquisition of happiness. The theory is simple and straightforward as it solely requires the pursuit of pleasure with the mitigation of pain. In the end, happiness, by the Hedonistic definition, is defined in "What is Well-Being?" as merely "a matter of raw subjective feeling" (Seligman and Royzman).

Happiness is often classified into various types. In the case of Hedonism, a continuous pursuit of temporary pleasures will provide happiness by the definition of a pleasant life. In an article titled "What is Well-Being?," the "pleasant life" classification of happiness is "positive emotion; what we feel: pleasure, rapture, ecstasy, warmth, comfort, and the like. An entire life led successfully around this element, I call the 'pleasant life'" (Seligman). The pleasant life is a theory of happiness in Hedonism's sense. Ultimately, this theory of happiness solely appeals to temporary satisfaction. While one may be satisfied after eating a piece of chocolate, this happiness is not lasting. If you were in a state of unhappiness prior to eating the chocolate, you will soon be back to this state in a matter of time. A sense of satisfaction from an action will wear off. And, if one were to follow this theory

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as a means to happiness, they would never be fulfilled in their life. This theory would provide that the sole goal of your life is seeking pleasure for temporary happiness. In order to remain happy, you must continually perform actions that will bring you this feeling. Your happiness therefore depends upon each and every thing you do, leaving you empty with the failure to keep up with your fading pleasure. If one's goal is to achieve a "pleasant life," Hedonistic actions and the use of Hedonistic Calculus are the means to do just that.

However, opposition to the idea that seeking pleasure will provide you happiness is not scarce. This opposition exists as both direct objection and differing opinions on the matter of achieving happiness. Ultimately, the flaws of this definition account that you must consistently attain pleasures that can last for moments or for days. As stated by His Holi-

ness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, "temporary enjoyment can come through our senses, it is inevitably fleeting and not the source of enduring satisfaction" (Dalai Lama and Tutu 52). This method may fail when pleasures are exhausted or when certain actions no longer produce pleasure to the same extent, making this method highly inconsistent and, therefore, ineffective. Given that Hedonism achieves happiness through a life of often insignificant pleasure, this happiness lacks meaning and duration.

Happiness Through Altruism

True happiness, though, which is fulfilling and lasting, can only be achieved by having meaning in your

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life through application of oneself to altruistic pursuits. Happiness that is fulfilling can be defined as “partly objective and lodges in belonging to and serving what is larger and more worthwhile than the just the self’s pleasures and desires” (Seligman and Royzman 1). The Dalai Lama further distinguishes between the types of experiences of happiness in a conversation with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, where he explains that “The first is the enjoyment of pleasure through our senses. . . . But we can also experience happiness at the deeper level through our mind, such as through love, compassion, and generosity. What characterizes happiness at this deeper level is the sense of fulfillment that you experience. While the joy of the senses is brief, the joy at this deeper level is much longer lasting. It is true joy” (Dalai Lama and Tutu, 53). This implies that a fulfilling and lasting happiness requires dedication of oneself to a greater pursuit, which goes deeper than the shallow desires and pleasures of a human. It is by working towards this worthwhile action, specifically an altruistic action, that one will acquire fulfilling happiness.

But, this happiness does not come as the direct result of such actions. Rather, it should be the side effect of these actions, and must not even be the intention of doing said actions. This theory is known as the “Hedonistic Paradox.” The Hedonistic Paradox states that “homo economicus, or someone who seeks happiness for him- or herself, will not find it, but the person who helps others will” (Konow and Earley, 1). Fundamentally, if you seek happiness for the sole purpose of achieving it for yourself, you will fail. Instead, you must pursue other goals that help others, and it will bring you happiness or pleasure as a side-effect. The Hedonistic Paradox completely contrasts the theory of Hedonism, where one acquires happiness by seeking it directly and instantly. It refutes this idea by claiming that by pursuing it directly you are unable to acquire it. It takes helping others, without any intention of doing it for happiness, to actually attain happiness.

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl, a credible Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, further addresses the importance of having meaning in our lives in order to be happy. Frankl asserts that

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“[Happiness is the] side effect of one’s personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself” (13). This means the pursuer is not pursuing short term happiness through constant pleasure, but rather pursuing altruism that will give their life meaning, and thus, happiness.

Konow and Earley state that happiness is found by “The person who helps others” (1), and Frankl states that happiness is “the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself” (13). What can be taken away from this is that altruistic behavior is the means to a fulfilling and lasting happiness. While Hedonism seeks happiness and pleasure for oneself as the end goal, effective altruism seeks these things for others. Effective altruism aims to discover the way in which an individual can do the absolute most to benefit others, but does not seek to find happiness as an end goal for him or herself while doing so.

However, continuing to follow the theory of the Hedonistic Paradox, happiness must not be the motive of altruistic actions, though it may result as a side effect. Frankl supports this theory that happiness comes when you are not searching for it in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, where he states that “happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue,” and continues that “Happiness must happen . . . you have to let it happen by not caring about it” (13). Therefore, altruistic behavior cannot be practiced with the intentions of obtaining happiness as a side effect, because then it will not come.

A dilemma exists within this theory when determining what constitutes actions meaningful enough to result in happiness as a side effect because there are no parameters for actions that do not have in-

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tentions. An individual will not be searching for an action “great enough” to create happiness as a side effect, because that would simply imply he or she is searching for happiness, therefore eliminating the possibility to acquire fulfilling happiness. The dilemma explained by Alan Watts in *The Meaning of Happiness* holds that if “if happiness is found by not searching, or by searching for something else, is not this merely an indirect way of searching for happiness, as it were by a trick or deceit?” (xxv). Essentially, if one pursues a goal in order to acquire happiness as a side-effect, is it not the same as directly pursuing happiness, which, in turn, can not result in happiness. This situation makes it difficult to believe that happiness could ever be obtained as a side-effect because it would require a person to not know of this theory, and to only be exemplifying altruistic behavior out of their own good will, not for the reason that happiness will be a side-effect.

However, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl clarifies this misconception by explaining that you are “to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge” (14). This means that an individual is not going out of their way to fulfill generous actions for the sake of happiness, but rather, they are acting on his or her own natural inclinations, regardless of what he or she gains from it. As a result, the individual is focused on the goal of completing the action rather than the happiness that will end up coming from it.

Chief objections to the theory that fulfilling happiness through altruism is the correct and true form of happiness, is that it fails to take any shortsighted desires or pleasures into account. Desire and pleasure are an important part of any human life, regardless of the type of happiness achieved or being strived for. The Dalai Lama states, in regards to fulfilling happiness, that “This kind of joy or happiness comes from within. Then the pleasures of the senses become less important” (53). This indicates that the surface level pleasures and desires are not as important as they originally seem once the deeper level of fulfilling and lasting happiness is acquired through generosity.

The largest limiting factor in the altruistic theory is the inequality of wealth that provides wealthier

members of society an advantage in helping others. Beyond donating money, a less meaningful way to help others, wealthier individuals will have more resources that allow them to exhibit altruistic behavior, as opposed to someone with barely enough resources to help him or herself. An inquiry for further consideration beyond this research and limitation would question how the wealth or status of a person can affect the perceivable levels of generosity and happiness among said individuals.

Note

1. Though the opinion of what defines proper happiness can vary, its definition in this paper follows the Aristotelian definition, that happiness is the supreme good that supplies purpose and is self-sufficient. Happiness is an end rather than a means that requires virtuous behavior.

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