

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HAPPINESS: A STATE OF BEING

by

Cody Spencer

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Cody Spencer

Greenville, NC

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Approved by:

Dr. James LeRoy Smith

Department of Philosophy – Harriot College of Arts and Sciences

Abstract

Depression is a mental condition of dejection and can limit one's energy and motivation to engage in life. The purpose of this Senior Honors Project is to develop a concept of happiness so that a better understanding of happiness may be established. It is a secondary goal that the depressed can utilize this concept and incorporate it into their lives so that they may improve their mental health and state of being. With the aforementioned in consideration, it will be of further use for the research to provide a foundation for such a means of obtaining a state of well-being and contentment. It is important to note that this research highlights the importance of several ideas when discussing the pursuit of happiness, such as: "autonomy", "the state's duty", "virtuosity" and "mindfulness."

Findings will be ascertained through the examination of how respected philosophers (such as Aristotle, John Stuart Mills, Carl Rogers, Immanuel Kant, etc.) have viewed the concept of happiness and how these teachings can encourage one to find happiness. Moreover, a hybrid view of happiness will be gained from examining arguments from theories of hedonism and eudaimonism. Once there is a compilation of philosophical foundations for happiness, efforts will be motivated towards identifying how the depressed can utilize the information synthesized in this report to better understand how to promote enduring happiness in one's life. In combination with other efforts discussed in the research project, findings will illustrate how 'mindfulness' is an effective means towards promoting enduring happiness.

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Introduction

It's a young girl's birthday and she has grown impatient waiting for the moment when she can begin to dismantle the neatly stacked pile of presents. Upon receiving the first present, she is flooded with feelings of joy and excitement as she rips the paper off the box. This feeling lasts well over the next hour as she continues to receive gift after gift; however, how long would one expect this appeasement to endure true feelings of satisfaction in this little girl? Once the novelty of the new toys have diluted into the familiarity of every day existence, would the small child still feel the sense of overwhelming happiness? This distinction is necessary to make when considering the arguments presented in this work.

In one moment, the experience of being overwhelmed by immense joy can take hold over an individual. In this moment, *happiness* is the main emotion in that individual, but is there a difference between a short exposure to happiness or a prolonged state of being? Merriam-Webster defines *happiness* as, "a state of well-being and contentment (Merriam-Webster)." This construct for *happiness* is imperative when addressing the concept and distinctions will be developed further throughout the paper.

Purpose and Methodology

It should be noted that the purpose of this thesis project is to develop a concept of *happiness* so that there is a better understanding. It is a secondary goal

that the depressed can utilize this concept and incorporate it into their lives so that they improve their mental health.

I hope to discover how respected philosophers (such as Aristotle, Russell, Rogers, etc.) viewed the concept of happiness and how these teaching can encourage one to *find happiness*. Once there is a compilation of philosophical foundations for happiness, I will seek out how the depressed can utilize this information to gain happiness.

Addressing Depression

Depression is a mental condition of dejection and can limit one's energy and motivation to engage in life. Depression affects about 19 million people in the United States alone. It is of further interest that about half of all college students reported struggling with depression last year (Jed Foundation). Much research has contributed 50 percent of a person's happiness to genetics, 10 percent to living circumstances, and 40 percent to intentions or personal choices. Furthermore, certain nations have more cases of depression than others (Belic). Okinawa, Japan is a community that has the happiest and most individuals over the age of 100. America is ranked as the 23rd nation in regards to happiness (Belic). It has also been mentioned that the three areas people feel most unsatisfied with is *acceptance*, *money*, and *gratitude* (Belic). With this growing concern, it is the purpose of my Honors Thesis Project to discover what foundations may be gained from studying the philosophy of happiness in order to promote a more positive state of being for future generations.

A Personal Note

Having battled with depression for the past decade, I saw the requirement of an Honors Thesis as an opportunity to gain a better understanding of a concept I have long had issues grasping to the fullest. I found myself questioning on a daily basis, “What is happiness and will I ever be truly happy?” These two questions caused an avalanche of thoughts that I was forced to confront. It is my hope that I may personally benefit from gaining a better understanding of what *happiness* is through the constructs given from respected philosophical thinkers; however, it is equally imperative that the findings from this research be applicable to others who are struggling with depression or discontentment so they may find such findings beneficial.

Framework of Happiness

It is at this point in the paper that the examining of several philosophers’ views of happiness must occur for the development of a framework for happiness.

Theories of Happiness

There are several schools of thought when one is discussing *enduring happiness* in a philosophical manner; however, this research paper will be utilizing the two main theories of *hedonism* and *eudaimonia* in order to form a hybrid view of happiness.

Hedonism

Hedonism is a school of thought regarding happiness that encourages the importance of maintaining equilibrium between pleasurable and unpleasant experiences. In other words, it is not so much the pursuit of happiness; yet, on the contrary, hedonists would claim it is the pursuit of pleasure. There are certain philosophers that would be considered hedonists but take on a utilitarian view of hedonism. A utilitarian approach of hedonism would support the notion that the aim of social choice should be in regards to happiness. Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mills are examples of philosophers whom would fall into this category (Moore). John Stuart Mills' "Utilitarianism" will become a critical part in the development of the framework for *happiness* that this research project hopes to accomplish.

Eudaimonia Theory

Eudaimonia Theory focuses on the *good life* and incorporates the importance of *virtue* when discussing happiness. Many of the philosophers in this school of thought would describe *happiness* as *well-being* or *human flourishing*. Some philosophers that would be characteristic of this school of thought would be Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Stoic. This research paper will be focusing on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* when discussing the philosophical foundations of happiness.

Notes on Attainability

Is *happiness* something that every person can attain in life? It is imperative to address this question when forming the framework of happiness and for the relativity of this research project.

Written in the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776, Thomas Jefferson defends the thought that “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, *and the pursuit of happiness.*” Jefferson’s reference to the ‘*pursuit of happiness*’ as an inalienable right has reverberated across the decades and some would claim its reflection is observable in the modern day pursuit of the “American Dream”. In reference, how magnificent is such a claim? Merriam-Webster defines an *inalienable right* as, “impossible to take away or give up (Merriam-Webster)”.

With the aforementioned in mind, one would be able to validate that all persons have the right to happiness. It then could be inferred that all people would have a means to pursue such a virtue or state because such a pursuit is unable to be taken away (per the Merriam-Webster definition of an *inalienable right*). Building on this, it is obvious that the state would then have a duty to provide a means as to obtaining such an inalienable right (something that will be addressed further in the coming pages of this research paper). In agreement with the latter, it is the purpose of this research to provide a foundation for such a means of obtaining ‘a state of well-being and contentment.’

Nicomachean Ethics

Being the pupil of Socrates and Plato, Aristotle is acknowledged as the last great Greek philosopher. *Nicomachean Ethics* is Aristotle's attempt to engage thinkers in a discussion of happiness as an end and how one may live a life that will lead to achieving such an ultimate Good.

A Means To An End

Aristotle indicates that the community agrees on *being happy* is often times agreed on "as equivalent to living well and acting well (Aristotle 5). However, there is debate amongst the collectives of what constitutes happiness. All activities are meant to pursue in some direction of achieving an ultimate good. From this conceptual claim, one could dare to continue that *happiness* is one of the highest forms of good that is sought after as a higher end. Happiness is not subjective to any other end, but remains superior to all other goods. In other words, happiness is not achieved as a platform to bring one's self closer to some other end. Furthermore, the argument that *happiness* is the highest good is strengthened by the notion that happiness is acknowledged as a sufficient end, in which, no continuance in seeking out some other end is necessary.

Moreover, with this concept of *happiness* as the supreme good, one will begin to see that *happiness* is much more intrinsic rather than instrumental. It is something that is sought after but is ubiquitously omnipresent. This reservation of happiness as *intrinsic* is critical when the discussion of *autonomy* and *morality* are addressed later in the paper.

It is with this notion, that one may fully begin to realize that happiness is achieved over the life of a person. Moreover, only when life has been lived in its entirety, a person may be described as living a happy life. In another way, the achievement of *happiness* is subject to review by others, only after the experience of life has come to its completion (Aristotle).

Virtue vs. Happiness

Aristotle makes a distinction between the concept of *virtue* and the concept of *happiness*.

Eudaimonia

Eudaimonia is a Greek word that is often times translated to English as, “happiness”. It is important to bring up the notion that Aristotle is discussing *eudaimonia*, which characterizes much more than just happiness. The term characterizes a sense of “well-being” or “flourishing”. In this sense, happiness strongly correlates to fulfillment and success.

Happiness As Action

Aristotle would consider happiness as originating from actions that promote progression throughout a person’s life towards such a superior goal. Moreover, happiness requires a sort of dedication to acting in a way that promotes a life of well-being and fulfillment. It takes some energy in order to continuously accomplish some subjective end to reach the ultimate end goal of happiness. In this view, Aristotle does not view happiness as a state; however, happiness is regarded as an activity of living well.

In agreement with the latter, the conceptual distinction may be presented that virtue is much more relatable to a state of being. Furthermore, someone who is virtuously sound is disposed to live well, but is not necessarily living well. In this sense, virtue is merely a platform to live well and act in happiness. Having a grasp on sound virtuous behavior should delegate a sense of propensity towards the activities of living well (Aristotle).

Virtuosity & Central Tendency

Aristotle identifies two sources of virtues: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtues are acquired through exposure of education; on the other hand, moral virtues are thought of as being predispositions where reinforcement of making sound judgments and continuous improvement will strengthen one's ability to be morally virtuous.

Moreover, it is critical to address the concept of central tendency presented in Aristotle's work. Aristotle identifies twelve different spheres of action or feelings, in which, rational beings should strive to maintain a balance within. For every sphere of action, there are two extremes (*vices*) and one mean (*virtue*). Those twelve spheres are characterized by: *fear & confidence, pleasure & pain, giving & receiving (major/minor), honor & dishonor (major/minor), anger, self-expression, conversation, social conduct, shame, and indignation*. It is clear that of the twelve, several spheres of actions will have an effect on interpersonal relationships. By maintaining *integrity and friendliness*, self-expression will become easier when involved in social conduct. This is just an example of how the different spheres are

interrelated and being virtuous (by maintaining a balance) throughout all spheres will disposition one's ability to live in excellence (Aristotle).

Allan Bloom's "Our Virtue"

In Allan Bloom's introduction of his work, "Closing of the American Mind," there is a discussion of "our virtue" where Bloom identifies the current state of virtuosity in modern society.

Relativism has been inscribed within the new approach to academics as science continues to diminish the emphasis placed on the humanities. Bloom indicates the change of *openness* in our society as the study of science overtakes humanities. Originally, there was a sense that *openness* would provide humanity with a moral virtue by the ability to distinguish what is good through the use of reason. Today's society has a more modern concept of *openness* that advocates for a blind acceptance of any custom or belief on the basis that no reasoning can be superior to another (in thought and correctness). This *tolerance*, or *relativism*, ultimately creates "closed-ness" and diminishes *ethnocentrism* in society. *Openness* as moral relativity means that there is no longer a basis for ground level moral principle. For once Americans disregard *ethnocentrism*, they are minimizing their ability to be disturbed. Sensitizing society to inhumane actions will desecrate any chance of a cross-cultural basis for morality. Science has replaced our reasoning and blinded us in the quest to promote happiness (Bloom).

Carl Rogers: A Way of Being

Carl Rogers offers an enticing point of view on “a person-centered approach to life” in his book, *“A Way of Being”*. In his work, Rogers emphasizes the importance of effective communication in interpersonal relationships and how being a fully functioning person will promote personal growth towards living a life that promotes happiness and autonomy.

Effective Communication

When discussing the importance of effective communication, Rogers offers readers an examination of what is meant by such a term. It is critical that an individual has congruency with his or her inner feelings and how that person is presenting those inner feelings to others. There is to be consistency between the two so that the speaker’s intentions are understood and miscommunication does not pursue. Rogers makes another critical point when examining effective communication, where he believes that having a sense of curiosity of what life is like for another person will promote a person’s ability to establish a strong interpersonal relationship with another. This notion of *empathy* will encourage one to understand what another is going through and promote cooperation and collaboration between individuals; however, it is equally of substantial importance that this *empathetic understanding* is achieved without losing *integrity* (or a sense of one’s true self). Something that Rogers offers in this discussion is the concept of learning; or, that people should recognize facts to be genial in nature. By this, it is meant that facts (whether disproving or confirming of one’s own theories) are

always promoting and directing an individual or group towards reaching the truth (Rogers).

A Fully Functioning Person

Through the understanding of the aforementioned and with the addition of several other concepts, Rogers effectively describes what is characteristic of a fully functioning person and how such a person will have a way of being that promotes happiness into the individual's life.

Moreover, Rogers characterize a fully functional person as being open to his or her own experience and a commitment to living in the moment. Building off the concept of congruency, Rogers indicates that a fully functioning person will maintain a connection to his or her own stream of consciousness and have a strong sense of integrity when presented with a choice of action to do what is right or wrong. In such a case, the fully functioning person would act as they felt what was the "right" thing to do (Rogers). Interestingly enough, Rogers describes this concept of a "fully functioning person" as intrinsic and as something that one will always be approaching towards in life. The way of being is not an end state, but instead, a way of living one's life so that he or she may be living in *excellence*. It is critical to note the similarity of such a concept with that of Aristotle's theory of happiness.

Personal Growth

Rogers exemplifies that human nature at its most basic level is *good* and *trustworthy*. Rational beings as individuals have an inner freedom to choose and to be whatever may satisfy them. Personal growth becomes a topic in Rogers' work

and provides much insight on what is necessary for promoting happiness in one's life (Rogers).

Personal growth is achieved by the movement away from actions being guided by decisions based on fulfilling the expectations of others. This movement should be towards maintaining integrity, or, the true sense of self. This movement is characterized by placing kind and self-promoting values on oneself and the feelings one has towards himself or herself.

Furthermore, Rogers introduces readers to the concept of *transparency*. This concept is described as the understanding that feelings are not facts about another, but are actually revealing facts about one's self. To strengthen the understanding of this concept, it is imperative that one realizes that when another is bothering the individual, the feeling of annoyance is indicating some truth of that individual and nothing about the other person. It is the individual that is being annoyed by some behavior or pattern, not the other person involved. In addition to the latter, there must be an *unconditional positive regard*, where there is a judgment free zone; however, it is critical that the respect of personal integrity remain intact so one may not lose the sense of self that is aforementioned in this section (Rogers).

Of substantial importance is the Roger's notion that the principle of *autonomy* is imperative for personal growth. An individual should work towards allowing others to be separate from each other and maintaining a sense of respect; however, it must once be addressed that this sense of acceptance should not undermine one's integrity and self-identification. *Autonomy* has gained much

importance as the development of this framework for *happiness* unfolds and is something that must be examined in more detail later in the work.

John Stuart Mill's "Utilitarianism"

As mentioned previously, John Stuart Mill is a Utilitarian who characterizes a hedonistic view of happiness. Utilitarianism in this sense is mainly concerned with social welfare and that *happiness* can serve a much greater purpose than being linked to a result of pleasurable activities (Mill).

Mindfulness

Mill's philosophy of *happiness* is very critical in the framing of the concept and discovering applications for the pursuit of happiness. Mill argues that *happiness* can be a basis for ground level moral principle. In this ethics based off happiness, Mill examines the rational beings ability to choose an action that will either promote or discourage one from progressing towards *happiness* (Mill).

It is at this point, that being *mindful* becomes relevant to the formation of the framework. *Mindfulness* is considered by Mill to be a practice or mentality taken on by an individual who is consciously considering the choices that he or she is making and how those actions will promote or discourage *happiness*. By being mindful of how one's decision to act on something will bring about happiness in his or her life or not, is characterizing the pursuit of happiness.

Autonomy

When discussing Mill's utilitarian take on happiness, some criticism has been given on the upholding of inalienable rights. The reason for this criticism is that if

individuals are acting in ways that promotes self-happiness, some of those individuals may not respect the rights of others in the pursuit; however, it is obvious that Mill would sanction the preservation of justice and equality because there is a necessity to preserve the principle of *autonomy*. With this preservation of *autonomy*, individuals would have the ability to practice *mindfulness* and promoting happiness into their lives, while respecting the rights of others. Ultimately, this outlines the characteristics of a society that is able to approach *happiness* collectively.

Kantian Ethics

Thus far in the research, the philosophers that have been examined would agree that *happiness* is an integral part of forming ethical values and a way of being; however, Immanuel Kant is a respected philosopher who discredits *happiness* as a basis for ground level moral principle and recognizes the importance of the principle of *rationality*. From this principle, in combination with the principle of *unity*, the concept of *moral pluralism* and the six *prima facie* obligations are founded. The principle of *autonomy* becomes critical in the researching of *happiness* (Kant, Guyer and Wood).

Autonomy as Intrinsic

The principle of autonomy is one of six *prima facie* obligations that *moral pluralism* solidifies. In some sense it is the means to an end, or superior good. Autonomy is something that needs to always be present, and all actions ought to be guided towards reaching this superior good. The intrinsic nature of autonomy is

comparable to that of *happiness*. Aristotle believed that being fulfilling as a person, or *eudaimonia*, carries about autonomy in one's life. It will now become apparent how this applies to political knowledge and the requirements these justified beliefs put on the state. Moving forward, it will be of benefit to the reader to now understand the intrinsic nature of *autonomy* and what implications it has on state's duty.

Political Knowledge: The State's Duty

Due to *moral pluralism*, and on the basis of the principles of *rationality*, *unity*, and *autonomy*, there is much foundation given to the soundness of political knowledge from moral knowledge. Knowledge in this sense is considered to be justified beliefs. It is then of relevance to admit that this moral knowledge provides a means to justify certain inalienable human rights to all *rational* beings. The state being composed of *rational* beings would reflect the functioning as *rational*. Because the principle of rationality and unity is adhered by the state, it will also be exposed to the *prima facie* obligations. Furthermore, it will become the state's duty to provide a means to reach such inalienable rights, and maintain *moral pluralism* and the *six prima facie* obligations.

In order to further the investigation of the state's duty, moral conditions of law must be distinguished. *Laws* provide societal order through distinguishing appropriate and accustomed behaviors. The primitive purpose of *law* is to respect and reflect justice. In addition to state/human law, other forces may be responsible for originating law (natural law, divine law, traditional customs, etc.).

It would be the state's duty to provide laws that have a fair notion as to what behavior is prohibited/permitted and should provide assistance in determining how individuals should act in the future (in hopes of promoting autonomy within the society, and thus, the other 5 *prima facie* obligations).

State law is primarily concerned with maintaining state order. State law encourages state autonomy. The significance of autonomy to society may be demonstrated through an analogy: society is similar to an intersection. If there were an absence of procedures for intersections, chaos would emerge and gridlock would occur. In order for cars to reach their personal destinations, the intersection must be able to flow. For an intersection to flow properly, adequate structure and restrictions must be established. This requirement holds true for societal order. The state's order determines the ability of civilians to pursue other critical goals of that society (concept of specialization).

Literary Analysis: Commonalities of Concepts

There has been much development in our conquest for forming a framework of happiness. It has now come to the point where readers should be able to identify some of the commonalities presented in the framework and is able to effectively consider the morality of happiness.

Commonalities

It should become apparent at this point that there are several commonalities between the philosophers' views of happiness presented in the framework.

Happiness should be thought of as a supreme good, in which, all other actions are guided towards. The hybrid theory that has been formed would characterize happiness intrinsic. Several of the philosophers indicated the importance of *virtuosity* and maintaining a central tendency in the different spheres of actions. It was also noted that being virtuous is performing well in the function of being human. It will be the activity of the rational soul in conjunction with virtue that will promote one towards a way of being supportive of *happiness*. To build from this, through utilizing *rationality* one can make a commitment to being *mindful*.

Morality of Happiness

The ability of *happiness* to be a basis for morality is valid if there is preservation of *autonomy* amongst *rational beings*. This holds true as long as the principle of *autonomy* is preserved. Therefore, the upholding of *autonomy* will preserve the other five *prima facie* obligations because of the intrinsic nature of *autonomy*. From here, note that both, *happiness and autonomy*, are intrinsic in nature and should be thought of as supreme goods. It is also apparent that from the foundations of moral knowledge, political knowledge can be established. This indicates the state has a duty to provide a means of pursuing happiness to the people.

Application: The Pursuit of Happiness

With the formation of a proper framework for happiness, attention can be focused on applications gained from the previous examination of philosophers. It is

the goal of these applications to make it possible for those suffering with depression to gain a better idea on how to pursue *happiness*.

Mindfulness

The most noteworthy discovery in the discussion of the pursuit of happiness is the concept of *mindfulness*. Self-encouragement of being *mindful* is a way that those with depression can promote happiness in their lives. It is necessary to understand that being *mindful* requires putting energy and effort into making conscious and rational choices that leads one to happiness. *Mindfulness* promotes the pursuit of *happiness* and *autonomy*. It requires consciously eliminating negative thinking habits and it is critical that equilibrium in the spheres of actions (feelings) is maintained.

Other Implications

Some other important implications of this research is that the depressed must strengthen their ability to be resilient. Resilience is the ability to push through hardship. As with *mindfulness*, it requires effort and energy to put into practice; however, coming from personal experience, it does get better and easier to maintain the state of being I have described in the applications. Apathy will only discourage progress towards a state of being of happiness and will ultimately turn depression into a cyclic pattern. It may also require the depressed or those unsatisfied to change habits that feed into the depression. As discussed in being *mindful*, eliminating negative thinking habits will do wonders for those who see no hope in

the world. An example of a change of habit could be exercising. Rather than not working out at all, studies have shown that dopamine is released into the brain and increase pleasure and happiness by exercising; it should be noted that higher levels of dopamine would enable one to take action towards moving towards a goal (Psychology Today). Some cultures and religions utilize *meditation* as a means to eliminate negative thinking habits and guide one's self towards enlightenment. There are many different ways to strengthen mental stability and promote the pursuit of happiness; however, all methods require some commitment and energy to improve the state of being.

Conclusions

Understanding the philosophical foundations of happiness is imperative when discussing the pursuit of such a state of being. As an inalienable right, the pursuit of happiness is undeniable to any being. When considering happiness, the research presented in this thesis will support the notion that it is much more fluid than day to days sensations; instead, it is something that is sought after for a lifetime as we make progressions towards fulfillment. The application of *mindfulness* will do a great deal in promoting happiness to those dealing with depression or dissatisfaction. Eliminating negative thinking habits and choosing to act in ways that promote happiness in one's life will achieve *mindfulness*. It is important to seek internally for solutions, as well as, researching various views of happiness and the pursuit of such a state. Most importantly, it is critical that the depressed realize it

does take energy and effort, and apathy will only feed the depression. It does get better!

Personal Developments

Through this research project, I have gained a deep understanding of what is meant by the ambiguity of *happiness*. It is not so much a destination that we can arrive at, but it is more or less the journey that takes us there. In other words, it is the pursuit of happiness that is monumental to achieving the state of being I have discussed. Personally, travel has been the most rewarding experience as a means for personal growth (discussed by Rogers). It has given me the ability to understand how others live, build interpersonal relationships, and self-explore. Furthermore, being *mindful* has done wonders for my satisfaction and contentment in day-to-day life. By eliminating negative thinking habits, I have put an effort on minimalizing unnecessary stress and living in the present moment. Ultimately, the realization that actions will request reactions, and I have a choice to make which actions I engage in and if I want to continue on the pursuit of happiness. In these realizations, I continuously choose to act in ways that promotes a state of being for happiness.

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