

## Philosophy and Happiness

Many of us now, despite suffering the strains of isolation, are reasonably happy—but understandably, present conditions take their toll on how we feel as the days pass by. Even external reports give us grounds for genuine anxiety for the future and we strive for the level of contentment we once had.

Philosophers have always understood how central this concept of Happiness is to how human beings experience their lives: it became part of the Ethical component of philosophy.

Indeed, it was central to vital thought and debate from the days of the Ancient Greek philosophers. About 335BCE **Aristotle** as part of his Ethical context was tutoring the ‘Good’ or ‘Happy life’ in his Lyceum in Athens. He believed that above all other things, man sought a happy life ---necessarily flourishing and meaningful; his Greek word was *Eudaimonia* : the ‘Good life’. A person would be happy if they could perform the functions that they were uniquely designed to do---how to best fulfil their nature. The key to this was to use our *Reason* as a Virtue which unlocks our inner faculties; the power for us to understand our personal needs and desires, and to act with moderation and sound judgement.

**Seneca** the Roman Stoic, 400 years later, seemed to echo these sentiments :

*The happy life is a life that is in harmony with its own nature. The best life is one lived by those who have mastered themselves, have learned wisdom from experience, have learned to be considerate to fellow human beings.*

But we know what Stoics might think: we make ourselves unhappy, as our perceived problems are mainly due to errors of perception and judgement on our part!

**Epicurus**(300BC) regarded Happiness as simply avoiding pain and maximising pleasure; not exactly wine, women and song--- as these only intensified immediate desires, bringing eventual misery. We commonly regard Epicureanism as a hedonist philosophy, but he set up an academy and actually advocated a search for human Happiness in asceticism and tranquillity, and taught his students thus.

But Happiness can have a modern psychological definition too :

*Happiness occurs in the mind as a daunting multitude of reflections, analyses and flights of the imagination—rising and falling almost beyond our control.” (D.Brown 2017).*

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So happiness arrives and fades as we go through each day. Certainly more complex than Aristotle's idealism. But well phrased.

A more sombre thought. In the 5 century AD, **St Augustine** declared that there is no such thing as happiness on earth—it can only be gained in Heaven with the Father. Earthly existence is merely preparation for this afterlife.( *City of God* 426AD); whereby life is about human atonement for the Original Sin of Adam and Eve, a burden to be endured while we live. Apparently, there was no incentive then for people to develop any individuality of thought or action—or indeed, to seek happiness.

In 19C England **John Stuart Mill** (1860) propounded the concept of 'Utilitarianism': *"moral actions are right in proportion to how they promote happiness for the majority of society."*

The problem here of course would be to identify what a good action was but inevitably it would leave the underprivileged worse off; eventually if practised, could not bring happiness to those struggling to survive through poverty and disease. It did not prove viable over time.

On the interesting subject of where happiness resides in a geographical sense, a recent World Values Survey(Philosophy Now 2019 ) indicated that there is more appreciation of 'life satisfaction' in Western Europe and USA than in other parts of the world; curiously, it indicated that it was not necessarily based upon wealth and materialism ---but more on personal autonomy. Two main criteria predominated: 1. A sense of being in control of one's life. 2. A sense of being valued for what you do in life. Not rank nor income. Interestingly, it noted, older people were particularly sceptical about happiness being connected to wealth or prestige.

On a more sceptical note, psychologist **Wm. James** believes that it is normative --and so acceptable--- to be happy based on self- delusion, eg. religious beliefs or on false information about one's personal choices: we can bypass our doubts in this way and so attain a state of mental stability ( the psychology of cognitive dissonance might arise here).

Modern day philosopher **A.C. Grayling** has an intriguing observation on happiness. He believes that happiness cannot always be experienced as it happens-- but arrives as a 'by product' of past events. : *the surest way to be unhappy is to think that happiness can be directly sought. The fact is that happiness is an epiphenomenon---that is, something that arises as a 'by*

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*product' of other experiences. It arrives unconsciously. If you search for it, it will prove elusive. Indeed, very often you will not realise how happy you are.*

Extending this idea of how we can unknowingly make ourselves feel unhappy, research psychologist **Daniel Kahneman** (2011), wrote about how the patterns of the human mind compel us to feel pessimistic : *we have an inbuilt mental mechanism that gives priority to bad news*. In other words, we initially see a problem before the possibility of good news. We think at two levels: the *experience self* leaps to a conclusion too quickly, while the *remembering self* is the best utility to sort out and clarify other interpretations that might retain our happy frame of mind. This is based on our evolutionary survival mechanism. He explains that we are story- making creatures tending to choose the tragedy over the comedy. So...happiness might just be concealing itself!

This could suggest that we can actually miss some of our times of happiness, so many of the pleasures of our life. This idea of not recognising or acknowledging how happy we are is referred to by **Derren Brown** in his excellent book called 'Happy' (2017). Older people tend to have certain regrets as the years become limited and past opportunities dwell in a memory. These regrets always centre on a frame of happiness. After speaking at length with care home workers, he lists four recurring points voiced by residents:

1. I wish that I had had the courage to live a life true to myself---not a life others expected of me.
2. I wish that I had expressed my true feelings more often.
3. I wish that I had stayed in touch with people I felt close to.
4. I wish that I had allowed myself to be happier.

Perhaps that final point relates to Grayling's concern with clearly recognising happiness and enjoying its benefits.

To close this frantic romp through philosophical thought, I will leave you with a Stoical quote: *you are what you allow to govern your mind*. There are many more positives in your life which you are too modest or too noble to acknowledge. And of course, planning to see the grandchildren and considering next year's holiday, is a form of happiness too!

Socrates claimed that the greatest happiness was in gaining knowledge through philosophy..... Alas! This appears to be my best shot!

Everybody keep safe! Regards, John.