

Happiness: The Three Traditional Theories

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There are, in our view, three types of traditional theories of happiness. Which one you believe has implications for how you lead your life, raise your child, or even cast your vote.

Hedonism Theory

First, there is **Hedonism**. In all its variants, it holds that happiness is a matter of **raw subjective feeling**. A happy life maximizes feelings of pleasure and minimizes pain. A happy person smiles a lot, is ebullient, bright eyed and bushy tailed; her pleasures are intense and many, her pains are few and far between. This theory has its modern conceptual roots in Bentham's utilitarianism (Bentham, 1978), its contagion in Hollywood entertainment, its grossest manifestation in American consumerism, and one of its most sophisticated incarnations in the views of our fellow positive psychologist, Danny Kahneman, who recently won the Nobel Prize in economics. His theory must wrestle with an important question: Whose life is it anyway, the experiencer or the retrospective judge of pleasure?

Consider the following scenario: researchers beep people at random during the day, ask how much pleasure or pain a person is experiencing right now (the Experience Sampling Method, ESM), and extrapolate to an approximate total for the experienced happiness over the week. They also ask the same people afterwards "how happy was your week?" The retrospective summary judgment of happiness often differs greatly from the extrapolated total of experienced happiness. Remember your last vacation? "Yes, it was great!" you might say, even though if beeped during it, the mosquitoes, the traffic, the sunburn, and the overpriced food might gainsay your summary judgment. At the hands of an experimental psychologist, hedonism becomes a methodological commitment: your "objective happiness" for a given time period is computed by adding up your on-line hedonic assessments of all the individual moments that comprise that period. This computed aggregate of "experienced utility" becomes the criterion of truth about how genuinely happy your vacation (your childhood, your life) should be taken to be. On this view, the experiencer is always right. If the experiencer and the retrospective judge disagree, so much the worse for the judge.

One basic challenge facing a hedonist is that when we wish someone a happy life (or a happy childhood, or even a happy week), we are not merely wishing that they accumulate a tidy sum of pleasures, irrespective of how this sum is distributed across one's life-span or its meaning for the whole (Velleman, 1991). We can imagine two lives that contain the same exact amount of momentary pleasantness, but one life tells a story of gradual decline (ecstatic childhood, light-hearted youth, dysphonic adulthood, miserable old age) while another is a tale of gradual improvement (the above pattern in reverse). The difference between these lives is a matter of their global trajectories and these cannot be discerned from the standpoint of its individual moments. They can only be fathomed by a retrospective judge examining the life-pattern as a whole.

With this in mind, **Authentic Happiness's** principal challenge to Hedonism is Wittgenstein's last words: "Tell them it was wonderful!" uttered even after a life of negative emotion and even downright misery. Hedonism cannot handle this type of retrospective summary without tagging it as gross misjudgment ("he must have been delirious!")

Desire Theory

Desire theory can do better than Hedonism. Desire theories hold that happiness is a matter of **getting what you want** (Griffin, 1986), with the content of the want left up to the person who does the wanting. Desire theory subsumes hedonism when what we want is lots of pleasure and little pain. Like hedonism, desire theory can explain why an ice-cream cone is preferable to a poke in the eye. However, hedonism and desire theory often part company. Hedonism holds that the preponderance of pleasure over pain is the recipe for happiness even if this is not what one desires most. Desire theory holds that that fulfillment of a desire contributes to one's happiness regardless of the amount of pleasure (or displeasure). One obvious advantage of Desire theory is that it can make sense of Wittgenstein. He wanted truth and illumination and struggle and purity, and he did not much desire pleasure. His life was "wonderful" according to Desire theory because he achieved more of truth and illumination than most mortals, even though as a "negative affective," he experienced less pleasure and more pain than most people.

Nozick's (1974) experience machine (your lifetime is in a tank with your brain wired up to yield any experiences you want) is turned down because we desire to earn their pleasures and achievements. We want them to come about as a result of right action and good character, not as an illusion of brain chemistry. So the Desire criterion for happiness moves from Hedonism's amount of pleasure felt to the somewhat less subjective state of how well one's desires are satisfied.

Our principle objection to Desire theory is that one might desire only to collect china tea cups or orgasms or only to listen to Country and Western music or to count fallen leaves all day long. The world's largest collection of tea cups, no matter how "satisfying," does not seem to add up to much of a happy life. One move to deflect this objection is to limit the scope of Desire theory to the fulfillment of only those desires that one would have if one aimed at an objective list of what is truly worthwhile in life.

Objective List Theory

Objective List theory (Nussbaum, 1992; Sen, 1985) lodges happiness outside of feeling and onto a list of "truly valuable" things in the real world. It holds that happiness consists of a human life that achieves certain things from a list of worthwhile pursuits: such a list might include career accomplishments, friendship, freedom from disease and pain, material comforts, civic spirit, beauty, education, love, knowledge, and good conscience. Consider the thousands of abandoned children living on the streets of the Angolan capitol of Luanda. As the **New York Times** tells us, "dressed in rags, they spend nights in the sandy strip along the bay, and their days foraging for food through mounds of garbage." It seems conceivable that their existence, consumed with meeting momentary needs, adventurous roving in gangs, casual sex, with little thought for tomorrow, might actually be subjectively "happy" from either the Hedonism or Desire theory perspective. But we are reluctant to classify such an existence as "happy" and the Objective List theory tells us why. These children are deprived of many or most things that would go on anybody's list of what is worthwhile in life.

Although we find Objective List's shift to the objectively valuable a positive move, our principal objection to this theory is that some big part of how happy we judge a life to be must take feelings and desires (however shortsighted) into account.

Authentic Happiness

Where does our **Authentic Happiness** (Seligman, 2003) theory stand with respect to these three theoretical traditions? Our theory holds that there are three distinct kinds of happiness: the **Pleasant** Life (pleasures), the **Good** Life (engagement), and the **Meaningful** Life. The first two are subjective, but the third is at least partly objective and lodges in belonging to and serving what is larger and more worthwhile than the just the self's pleasures and desires. In this way, **Authentic Happiness** synthesizes all three traditions: The Pleasant Life is about happiness in Hedonism's sense. The Good Life is about happiness in Desire's sense, and the Meaningful Life is about happiness in Objective List's sense. To top it off, **Authentic Happiness** further allows for the "Full Life," a life that satisfies all three criteria of happiness.

For Further Reading

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