

Random Thoughts on Happiness & Meaning

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Abstract: Happiness has been the fixation of all men of all ages. Every living soul wants to be happy. Humans generally want to die happy. They want to be happy even after they are dead. All human endeavors are geared towards ultimately achieving happiness. Happiness appears to be the chief pursuit of man. But happiness in its fullness seems to elude the total grasp of man. It seems to be a mirage most men embrace only in fleeting moments. Perhaps the situation is exacerbated by men's inability to define happiness in universally common terms. Many a man has often set out in pursuit what he deems to be happiness but disappointedly ended up in sorrow. Yet, perplexedly many a man has beamed in ethereal happiness in the face of what men deem to be abject misery. This perplexity endures because, man as a value making animal ties everything to meaning. Man can truly be happy only when the pursuit of happiness is meaningful to him. Happiness is tied to the very meaning of human existence. It can only be defined in the context of meaning. What is happiness? This work sets out to find out in the best of philosophic traditions, using philosophical analyses and speculations as the bedrocks of its methodology.

Key Words: happiness, meaning, philosophy, life, living, human

1.0 Introduction

So many persons and so many schools of thought have variously attempted to define happiness and prescribe what ought to be a happy life. However, the definitions and prescriptions have been as different as there are proponents. Yet the quest to grasp the meaning of happiness and experience it continues today as it had been thousands of years ago. Every era expresses its version of the happy life. Yet, there is no historical era that can be called a blissful era as such. Every era presents its values and pursues its concept of happiness accordingly. The universal desire for well-being is manifest in the history of man's quest for happiness.

The human quest for happiness is ontological. It is as old as human consciousness. Man's existence is individual, social and transcendental in dimensions. Therefore, his happiness must necessarily be individual, social and transcendental. Man has been proven unable to achieve lasting happiness without factoring in these three dimensions of his being. Thinkers on happiness often choose a dimension among these three dimensions of man to build their theories of happiness. This incomprehensiveness often makes their theories unsatisfactory. A purely physical theory of happiness based on an individual's needs alone cannot suffice. Man is not an isolated animal. He is by nature a social animal (Aristotle, ca. 340 BC).¹ He necessarily lives in the society. Therefore, man can never be comprehensively happy if the society is not factored in his pursuit of happiness. But happiness transcends the individual and the society that demands conformity from him. When man sees himself as the ultimate end, the result is often ennui, depression, unhappiness and a crisis of meaning. Human nature is such that man must necessarily commit himself to a value other than himself. In other words, happiness is transcendental. The theories of happiness to be discussed in this work shall be critiqued in relation to these three dimensions of happiness.

2.0. Why do Men Seek Happiness?

To the question above, the most logical answer is that men seek happiness because it is ontological. Otherwise, man would not be in an all out search for something he could scarcely define. Happiness is tied to human functionality. The human person functions maximally only when happy. It is the ontological equilibrium for the manifestation of the fullness of his being. In other words, happiness is man fully alive. Human existence has no user manual. Man continues to seek ways to exist in full capacity. Happiness optimizes his existence. So he seeks happiness in order to exist optimally. He cannot do otherwise for that is how he has been configured to function by nature. It is an ontological experience.

The entire human history can be reduced to endeavors in the pursuit of happiness. Even wars are fallouts of these endeavors. Men go to war either to expand their happiness or to defend it. This is a reality age after age has grappled with. Apparently, the quest for happiness is no recent event. It is the fixation of all ages; the fixation of human history.

3.0. Happiness in the Earliest Times

As stated earlier on, the quest for happiness is as old as the human consciousness. The early man as a matter of priority had to satisfy his immediate physical needs in order to be happy. He must necessarily find food for his survival. The body by default goes into unhappiness in the face of starvation. A hungry man is an angry man. Happiness necessarily consisted in feeding well for him. Beyond feeding, he faced mediate needs like shelter and companionship. Man for his very survival needed to be sheltered from the elements. He also needed companionship. The invention of agriculture and its accompanying sedentary lifestyle solved the problem of food. The invention of the house solved the problem of shelter, and the creation of the society solved the problem of companionship. Freed from disproportional struggles daily satisfaction of pressing physical needs, man devoted ample time for contemplation. Death from want of physical needs was no longer a daily threat. Is all there is to do in life merely the satisfaction of physical needs? Meaninglessness set in. Unhappiness set in. Man began to seek happiness in the meaning of life.

The scenario above was a universal human experience but ancient Egyptians were the first to contemplate the meaning of life using formal institutions (James, 1954)². In other words, the desire for happiness, not curiosity gave rise to philosophy. The first human expressions of philosophy were in religious propositions and actions. Man wanted a happy life by bequeathing a befitting meaning to his existence. Life must not certainly be about the satisfaction of physical needs (which he has satisfied anyway). There must be more to life than the struggle for physical survival. There must be a transcendent dimension to life. Thus was born philosophy.

Ancient Egyptians accordingly dedicated their philosophy to the happiness of man (James, 1954; Diodorus, 54 BC; Herodotus, 450 BC)³. There was a strong religious theme in the philosophy (James, 1954). It was all about giving meaning to human existence and humanizing man. It was all about attuning man to values other than himself. It had all the components of happiness. It was scientific for no man is happy who has not satisfied the basic human needs upon which his physical survival depends. Accordingly, Egyptian philosophy copiously studied agriculture, invented irrigation and numerous agricultural techniques (Diodorus, 54 BC). They exhibited the same genius in architecture and engineering. Ancient Egyptians were very much aware of the importance of the satisfaction of the physical needs as an important component of human happiness. Their

philosophy was also expressed in their politics. The pharaoh was usually given the best education in the country. He was surrounded with the wisest of men (James, 1954). The state was modeled on their philosophy of life. It was more or less, a vehicle for the fulfillment of human happiness. Man cannot be happy in a society that does not pursue happiness as an end. A society that is in turmoil would not produce many happy citizens. A misgoverned society would not produce many happy citizens.

4.0. Classical Thoughts on Happiness

Philosophy in the classical Greek era opens with a total focus on the nature and composition of the cosmos. Philosopher after philosopher speculated on what could have been the cause of the universe. It was more or less an abstract inquiry that was far removed from the concerns of everyday life. Not until the emergence of Socrates of Athens was philosophy among the Greeks brought down from the realm of abstraction to the concerns of everyday life. Perhaps it was initially so because philosophy among the Greeks was a borrowed culture rather than an organic way of life (James, 1954; Diodorus, 54 BC). This contrasted with the practice among ancient Egyptians where it was an ingrown culture and was woven into the fabrics of daily existence. Attempts to bring philosophy to the Greek daily public domain cost Socrates his breath (Plato, 390 BC; Stumpf, 1994).⁴

4.1 Socrates

Socrates as pointed out earlier on redirected the focus of Greek philosophy from cosmic concerns to anthropocentric concerns. Perhaps the chaos, destruction and hopelessness of the Peloponnesian War turned his mind to focus on the frailty of the human condition and meaning of existence. Rather than engage in cosmic speculations, Socrates took up practical existential themes bothering the Greek society of his day. Among these existential concerns was the concept of happiness. Socrates discussed the concept of happiness in three dialogues authored by Plato, namely: Euthydemus, Symposium and the Republic. It is difficult to say with certainty whether the views represented in these works are faithful representations of Socrates' thoughts or whether there are pellets of Plato's ideas inserted into what has been assumed to be Socrates' thoughts (Roberson, 2009). At any rate, since Socrates wrote nothing (Saluti, 2000),⁵ we must assume that every word put in the mouth of the character "Socrates" in the dialogues are Socrates' words (May, 2000).

Socrates recognizes that happiness is the ultimate end of existence. Every human person intrinsically pursues happiness as an end. Happiness is not an arbitrary gift of the gods but a state that can be achieved through diligent efforts. Happiness does not lie in the external things we acquire or the intrinsic qualities we have but in how we use them (Mohr, 1987)⁶. Not all our desires lead to happiness. We need wisdom to know which course of action to take in order to attain happiness. Happiness requires knowledge, especially, the knowledge of the nature of the human mind. Ultimate happiness is transcendent for we must look beyond ourselves to focus on the universal goodness in order to achieve stable happiness (Plato, 375).

The above could be said to be the summary of Socrates' thoughts in the three dialogues mentioned above where he discussed happiness. The critical takeaway on happiness according to Socrates is that true happiness does not lie in instant gratifications but in disciplined pursuit of meaning and the contemplation of the long term good of not just ourselves but the universe. Knowledge, especially philosophical knowledge remains a veritable tool for achieving happiness.

4.2 Aristotle

Like Socrates and Plato before him, Aristotle saw happiness as the highest good. For him, happiness is the chief end of life. It is the only thing man pursues for its sake. It is the fulfillment of man's being as a rational animal. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote extensively on happiness. For Aristotle happiness is tied to virtue. It is neither virtue itself nor the attainment of virtue but the exercise of virtue. Happiness is not a passive state of being but a goal that man must diligently pursue if he must attain it. It requires the exercise of virtue. Man is daily confronted with choices. Not all the choices lead to happiness. Choosing the best actions necessarily involves the exercise of virtue. Happiness as conceived by Aristotle is neither a temporary state nor mere feeling of pleasure. It is tied to the meaning of human existence since it is viewed as the chief purpose of human existence. It is a lifetime goal (Bartlet & Collins, 2011).

To define happiness, Aristotle had to group nature into a hierarchy of: minerals, vegetative, animal and human. For Aristotle, the purpose of minerals is just to be in existence, vegetation to grow and flourish, animals to live reproduce and have pleasure but the purpose of the human being to lead a rational life (Aristotle, 40 BC). Rationality distinguishes man from all creatures. Happiness comes from man fulfilling his being as a rational animal. As Aristotle would put it, "happiness is the activity of the soul in accordance with nature (Aristotle, 340 BC)". Therefore, happiness necessarily involves man acting rationally – the exercise of virtue. It also involves basic material well-being like health and reasonable wealth. Since happiness is a lifetime goal, man should be necessarily futuristic in his choices. Sometimes, instant gratifications for instant happiness lead to long term unhappiness. The exercise of rationality to know the difference and the will power to choose it constitute virtue. The golden mean is Aristotle's path to virtue – a choice for the middle way between two extremes (Aristotle, 340 BC).

4.3 Epicurus

Epicurus conceived the chief end of life to be the avoidance of pain and fear (Wilson, 2015). Accordingly, he conceived happiness as the responsible pursuit of pleasure. For him, the happy life is the one that is free from the worries of fear and pain. He didn't advocate crass hedonism for he recognized that excessive pursuit of pleasure could end up in pain. He equally recognized that there are some painful engagements that could ultimately result in pleasure. Epicurus conceived the cosmos in atomic terms. Atoms were responsible for all events in the cosmos. Man should not fear gods because the gods have little or no interest in human activities. Humans should not fear death either because at the cessation of sensation, neither pain nor pleasure is possible (Cooper, 1998).

4.4 Stoic Thoughts on Happiness

For the stoics, happiness is the practice of virtue (Stephens, 2020). To them, only the virtuous life guarantees the happy life. Our responses to external circumstances guarantee our happiness; not the circumstances themselves. Like Aristotle, the stoics associated happiness with discipline and rationality. However, the stoics did not associate wealth or material well-being with happiness. The mind is the key to happiness. External conditions do not matter. The judgment of the mind about them is what matters.

5.0 Medieval Thoughts on Happiness

The medieval era coincided with the successful establishment of Christianity as the state religion. Philosophy during this period acquired significant theological coloration. It was

undeniably dominated by Platonic and Aristotelian ideas. Thinkers of the medieval era often adapted Plato or Aristotle to the medieval milieu which was largely dominated by Christendom. Among the philosophers of the medieval era who wrote on happiness were St Augustine of Hippo, Boethius and Thomas Aquinas.

5.1 St Augustine of Hippo

St Augustine agreed with Aristotle that happiness is the purpose of life. He agreed that happiness is achievable through discipline and virtue. However, Augustine differed by stating that true happiness is to be found only in man's proximity with God. This, he affirmed after an extensive argument that happiness is joy in the truth, which itself is God (Boammaaruri, 2019).

5.2 Boethius

Boethius was famous for his book, *The Consolations of Philosophy*. For him, happiness is the perfect good. Goodness can be found in perfection only in God (Fugikawa, 2008). Therefore, happiness can only be found in God. To be happy, one needs to love God. It is in loving God and prayer that man finds the path to happiness. He does not locate happiness in any material reality or the vicissitudes of fortune but in the love of God.

5.3 Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas sees perfect happiness as complete perfection which can only be obtained in God. However, man can obtain imperfect happiness in this world through contemplation and the practice of virtue (O'Callaghan, 2014). Happiness is different from enjoyment which is but the satisfaction of desire. All enjoyments are momentary as we would still yearn for the transcendental even if all our desires were fulfilled. Our soul yearns for perfect happiness, but it can only be obtained in the beatific vision of God after we are dead.

6.0 Modern and Contemporary Thoughts on Happiness

Philosophy in the modern era was too preoccupied with science and epistemology to pay sufficient attention to such a subjective state as happiness. It was a period that witnessed the turbulent events that gave rise to the separation of science from philosophy. Notwithstanding, some modern philosophers did find the time to pen down their thoughts on happiness.

6.1 Montaigne

For Montaigne, happiness is a private business. It is a subjective and personal domain that the society ought not interfere in. Everyone has to determine what makes him happy follow it in his private life. Since happiness is a subjective state of mind, there is no need for the society to prescribe what ought to constitute happiness or not (Edelman, n.d).

6.2 Jeremy Bentham

Bentham sees happiness as the maximum utility. An act is happy if the pleasure obtained from it far surpasses the pain involved in achieving it. His postulation assumes a calculus of pain and pleasure. In his view, greatness would mean maximum pleasure with no pain. He went further to describe as immoral, all acts which do not enhance happiness (Sweet, n.d). Essentially, for Bentham, happiness is pleasure.

7.0 Dimensions of Happiness

A critique of the theories of happiness across the ages clearly points out that to be wholesome, happiness must come to man in three dimensions. Man can be meaningfully happy

when he experiences happiness in individual, social and transcendental dimensions. Happiness that is expressed in these three dimensions often outlasts the momentary vicissitudes of life.

7.1 The Individual Dimension of Happiness

Happiness is chiefly influenced by individual factors. Personality, temperament, health and habits play great roles in shaping an individual's happiness. Beyond these, individuals have principles and values by which they define their lives. The individual has to engage in the daily struggle with nature to satisfy his natural needs. It is in this private sphere that most life struggles that influence happiness take place. It is at the individual level that the self is fulfilled, dreams are conceived and realized; and the mind and body are enjoyed.

The individual dimension of happiness is expressed in the body and mind. Happiness starts in the body when it is sound and functioning fine. The absence of deformities or infirmities in the body is a great source of happiness to the individual. It predisposes the individual to be positive about life. Extra bodily endowments are advantageous. They often predispose the individual to happiness. A beautiful body presents a woman with more opportunities, and predisposes her to happiness more than an ugly body. Often deformities in the body limit the individual's opportunities, and sometimes the potential to maximize happiness. A fully functional body is the bedrock of happiness.

Like the body, the mind is critical to an individual's happiness. The mental make up of the individual determines the individual's perception of reality which influences the individual's feelings. An individual's temperament often determines his capacity to experience happiness in himself and the world around him. A temperamental person is less predisposed to happiness than an easygoing person. Psychological dispositions of the individual are powerful ingredients of happiness. Happiness after all, is an act of the mind. It is an experience that takes place in the mind. The mind forms opinion of events, measures the values of those events and adjudges them as happy events or sad events. All this takes place in the individual. The influence of the individual's mind in the experience of happiness is so powerful that some thinkers adjudge happiness to depend solely on the predispositions of the individual's mind.

7.2 Social Dimension of Happiness

Man is defined in the context of the society. As an ontologically social animal; man is thoroughly influenced by the values, dictates and expectations of the society. The society regulates the interactions of man with other men. In fact, the society gives meaning to his existence. There is so much pressure on man to conform to the dictates of the society. The society praises him for living according its norms and readily sanctions him when he contravenes these norms. Ipso facto, the society necessarily constitutes a dimension of the life of a man. A man must necessarily make peace with the society if he is to be happy.

Every society has its worldview. In it are enshrined the sum total of its values, mores, mission and meaning. The society pushes its members to identify with its worldview consciously and unconsciously. The society has its own version of the happy life; the ideal life; the wonderful life. Members of the society consciously and unconsciously strive to model their lives according to these ideals. The society celebrates, measures, esteems and accepts man in relation to how he embraces the values of the society.

This is a dimension of being the individual must make peace with in order to be happy. He

must meet the demands of his social conditioning in order to be happy. Man is a social animal, and cannot do without the society. The culture has its version of the happy man. No man is immune to the influence of the culture of his society. The happy man to a great extent fulfills the expectations of his society and acquires the status that comes from fulfilling those expectations. Esteem is a veritable factor in human happiness. How an individual is esteemed by his society affects his happiness significantly.

7.3 The Transcendental Dimension of Happiness

The defining characteristic that sets man apart from the rest of the animal kingdom is the ability to contemplate. Man is capable of critique and value judgment. Man is the only animal that needs a reason to live. Man unlike other animals, does not live for life alone. He seeks meaning. He desires to live meaningfully. He is the only animal that is capable of passing judgment on life itself. He is the only animal that is capable of suicide. For being the only animal that seeks meaning, man is the only animal that is capable of religion. He is the only animal that is capable of spirituality.

Often, when man lives for life alone, depression and ennui set in. He must confront the ultimate questions of the meaning of life, the unknown, the contingency of the universe and the finality of death. He must confront the God question. No matter what his answers may be, no man can truly be happy without submitting himself to a value other than himself, be it love, the good, patriotism, humanitarianism, religion or dedication to family. Often man willingly faces danger and happily accepts death or the possibility of death because of values he holds dear. Soldiers march into the battleground happily facing the possibility of death because of patriotism. People go the extra mile, do the unthinkable and sometimes lay down their life for a loved one. People do great things, make great sacrifices and sometimes even give up their life because of highly cherished religious values. The list is endless. Happiness in man is inexorably tied to meaning. This meaning is ultimately found in the transcendental expressions of man.

8.0 Conclusion

Happiness has been viewed variously by various scholars. Scholars often view happiness from a particular dimension. But happiness is a multidimensional experience. Happiness incorporates pleasure but is much more than pleasure. It can be had from a mental experience but mental experiences alone cannot guarantee happiness. It is largely a subjective affair but the individual is not an island. The actions and values of his society impact on his happiness positively and negatively. Going to war is a societal decision but the individual experiences the unhappiness and ills of war notwithstanding that he may not have wanted such. Happiness is beyond the needs and wants of man and the concerns of his life. It often demands that man transcend himself and seek meaning in values other than himself.

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