

In Defense of Happiness

Presidential Address of the 50th Annual Meeting
of the Florida Philosophical Association

Shelley M. Park, *University of Central Florida*

Good evening. I hope you have enjoyed your time today and are looking forward to tomorrow's events as well, as am I. On behalf of all of us, let me extend my thanks to Vice President Jim Perry for putting together this year's program, to Jacksonville University for hosting us, to Scott Kimbrough for coordinating the local arrangements including the repast we are currently enjoying, for the staff at the Adam's Mark who have prepared and served this meal and taken care of us in myriad other ways, to Nancy Stanlick for producing our newsletter, and to Sally Ferguson for her ongoing coordination between all of us. As Secretary Treasurer for the past several years, Sally has been indispensable. Much more than a budget overseer or minutes taker, Sally has become the glue that holds us together and our institutional memory.

I follow in past president Bob D'Amico's footsteps tonight by promising you an appropriately brief talk. The banquet talk is not as serious as the term "Presidential Address" would signify. As a talk that comes at the end of a meal, the banquet talk is in the same genre as dessert. It should be tasty, but not too heavy. To err with regard to this genre is to risk oversaturating one's audience and making them dozy. So tonight I ask you simply to contemplate with me for a brief time the nature and value of happiness.

At the risk of beginning by insulting some of you (which is one way to keep you awake, but not perhaps an advisable one!) let me say that my topic emerges from the observation that philosophers are often a rather depressed bunch. Just as slightly crazy folk tend to be overrepresented among clinical psychologists, somewhat somber and cynical folk tend to be overrepresented among philosophers. True, given the Epicurean part of our lineage, we often liven up after a good meal and can even tend toward jovial if the meal is served with sufficient amounts of

wine. Nonetheless, we do tend as a group towards introversion, introspection, contemplation and brooding. There are also, of course, the extroverts among us. But typically, these are no ordinary extroverts. The philosophical extrovert is not your average social butterfly. She or he is more apt to be, like Socrates, a gadfly—less concerned about spreading happiness than spreading discontent. As such, the philosopher is more likely to make enemies than friends. This appears not to bother the philosophical extrovert, however.

Now stirring things up once in a while is not necessarily a bad thing. Nor (if we leave aside the brooding) are introspection and contemplation to be disdained. In and of themselves, such activities may be commended as virtuous. However, the contemplations of the contemporary western philosopher, it seems, are rarely aimed at discovering beauty or inner peace or love or happiness. Indeed, we are more apt to laugh with derision at such goals than to embrace them as the aims of a contemplative practice.

Medieval philosophers such as Saint Augustine were mired in confessions and guilt. Modern philosophers such as Hobbes painted a bleak picture of the world as rife with scarcity, competition, and short, brutish lives. Not dissimilarly, Marx wrote a human history as one filled with alienation, war and bloodshed. Descartes, an arguably self-alienated philosopher, despaired at even knowing the world. The existentialist philosophers were a notoriously angst-ridden bunch. And contemporary liberation philosophers—including Marxists, feminists, and environmentalists—fill our bookshelves with stories of oppression and injustice and human degradation of the “other.”

There are exceptions, to be sure, to these stories of philosophical solitude, skepticism, cynicism, and despair. Hume, advocating a moderate skepticism, was a congenial sort able to bracket philosophical reflections and enjoy a game of backgammon with friends. James defends tender-minded philosophies and brings a sense of optimism to thinking about social reform. Ryle adopts a cheerful tone in his works and was known as a lovely dinner companion. And some contemporary liberation philosophers—for example, bell hooks—have turned recent attention to issues of love in thinking about antidotes to oppression.

Nonetheless, the current milieu in social and political philosophy, as well as some philosophies of mind and epistemology, appears to embrace, in large part, the somewhat pop-Foucauldian notion that persons who are angry, crazy, and/or depressed (namely a good many

professional philosophers) may see the world more clearly or be more liberated from oppressive social norms than those who are not so afflicted.¹ The happy philosopher, on this view, is derided as a ‘Pollyanna’ too naïve, deluded, and/or self-absorbed to see or care about the bleakness surrounding her.

Are there things that are wrong with our world? Certainly. Yet, I wish to suggest that there is something slightly askew with a view of the world, our world, as only or primarily a source of misery. I think this view is particularly odd and, I might add, somewhat narcissistic, when issuing from contemporary western philosophers who lead relatively affluent and privileged lives—and who, thus, do not occupy a privileged vantage point on oppression, injustice, and misery. Chronic unhappiness, when one’s basic needs are met and one has ample opportunities for self-realization as the contemporary western philosopher does, betrays a fundamental lack of appreciation for what one has. And this lack of appreciation may reasonably be considered a vice, rather than a virtue. Similarly, we may view the person who does not notice natural beauty, human creativity, or human compassion—or who notices, but shows no appreciation for these things—as someone who is epistemically or ethically deficient.

In my remarks tonight, I wish thus to defend happiness as a disposition conducive to, or at least compatible with, a view of the world that is both cognitively and politically valuable, that is, both truth conducive and ethically appropriate.

In making this argument, it is necessary to say something about what happiness is. A brief look at how the term happiness is used in both the discourses of philosophy and the discourses of popular culture reveals that happiness is conceived of in a wide variety of ways. Happiness may be conceived of as a subjective state or an objective state of affairs; it may be considered temporary or relatively permanent, within our grasp or ever-elusive. Happiness may be considered a state of character that is either virtuous or suspicious. Or it may be considered a disposition or capacity that is related, positively or negatively, to epistemic responsibility. These different conceptions of happiness make a difference, I believe, to our attitudes of esteem or disdain toward happiness.

Happiness as an object of pursuit

The U.S. Declaration of Independence claims that “pursuit of happiness,” along with life and liberty, is to be viewed as an inalienable right. Presupposed by the claim that we have a right to pursue happiness is a conception of happiness as an “objective and obtainable object” (Hoffman 3). That we can and should pursue this end is a distinctively American—or at least western—idea. It is an idea, moreover, that may easily be interpreted as premised on both self-delusion and self-interest.

A category mistake with consequences for our behavior may be involved in thinking that happiness is something “out there” and thus can be found and captured. The idea that happiness is an object to be chased and caught may leave us in the proverbial position of the dog chasing its tail: some of us pursue happiness endlessly and even obsessively, but never quite find it. As Pascal claimed “we never live, but we hope to live and as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so” (Ch. V, sec. 1). As the folk wisdom on the World-Wide Web indicates:

We convince ourselves that life will be better after we get married, have a baby, then another. Then we are frustrated that the kids aren’t old enough and we’ll be more content when they are. After that we’re frustrated that we have teenagers to deal with. We will certainly be happy when they are out of that stage. We tell ourselves that our life will be complete when our spouse gets his or her act together, when we get a nicer car, are able to go on a nice vacation, when we retire.²

Life is always about to begin, but there is “always some obstacle in the way, something to be gotten through first, some unfinished business, time still to be served, a debt to be paid” (Anon.). The anonymous author of these observations, echoing Walt Whitman’s claim that “Now” is all we have, advises us to recognize that these obstacles *are* our life and that there is “no better time than right now to be happy.”³

Closely aligned with the American notion that happiness is something to be pursued, is the rather odd notion that happiness is something towards which we work. We work incessantly at being happy and in so doing turn happiness into a fetish. We hope to obtain happiness by working

to get a good education, a good job, a promotion, a positive professional reputation; by saving to buy a new car or a new home; by working to pay off our car, our mortgage, or our credit card bill; by working at losing weight or building muscles; by earning enough money to purchase a breast augmentation or a hair transplant; by working at our relationships, working on our marriage, working at raising our children and so forth.⁴ The fetishistic pursuit of happiness, at its finest, can be seen on any trip to Disney World, where parents drag tired and cranky children from ride to ride, working towards accumulating sufficient joy and happy memories to warrant the price of admission.

It is little wonder the philosopher might view happiness thus pursued with disdain. In addition to being premised on self-deception, happiness as an object of pursuit seems heavily tied to self-absorption, to a focus on self-improvement and material accumulation. It is noteworthy that Thomas Jefferson's emphasis on "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" was a modification from Locke's emphasis on the ideals of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of property" (Locke, sec. 123)⁵ If happiness is property then it *is* something that can be pursued, captured, and accumulated. And happiness has been increasingly defined as material accumulation in western, and especially American, culture. The pursuit of the American Dream, as revealed by a 1994 Roper Poll, brings to mind the acquisition of money and a state of financial security. While most Americans polled stated that they were happy, a third indicated they would be happier if their household income doubled (Hoffman 3). As McFague notes,

the current dominant American worldview . . . is that we are individuals with the right to . . . the happiness of the consumer-style 'abundant life.' . . . Consumer culture . . . defines human satisfaction solely in terms of consumer acquisition. (11, 49)

In fairness to Jefferson, he changed the Lockean language in framing the Declaration of Independence because he did not view happiness as the mere accumulation of money, property, or personal material goods. For Jefferson, the right to pursue happiness was, in keeping with enlightenment ideals, the right to pursue a life of reason and the acquisition of knowledge. These things were to be pursued not merely as valuable in themselves, but also as the preconditions of

liberty. Happiness, for Jefferson, as for Aristotle, was an end that served the polis as well as oneself. As Hoffman notes, however,

In changing property (an achievable material goal) to happiness (an unachievable affective state) and in ordering us to pursue it, Jefferson embedded a political and psychological contradiction in the American psyche. It is this confusion between personal happiness and transcendent political good that continues to frustrate and perplex political activists (Hoffman 3).

Happiness as a subjective state

As Hoffman's remarks suggest, we frequently equate happiness with a subjective mental state. In addition to defining happiness as "good fortune or prosperity," Webster's dictionary defines happiness as:

An agreeable feeling or condition of the soul arising from good fortune or propitious happening of any kind; the possession of those circumstances or that state of being which is attended enjoyment; the state of being happy.

Here, happiness is taken to be a positive, affective state of mind. This affective state is perceived as the result of external factors that trigger it. Thus, one is made happy when one finds love, or is given a promotion, or wins the lottery, or brings home a new puppy. But this positive emotional state may only last until love sours, the money runs out, the boss criticizes you or the new puppy pees in your shoes. Happiness thus conceived is highly contingent on the actions of others and on good luck. One cannot decide to be happy any more than one can decide to win the lottery. Happiness is the result of chance, "something impersonally positive that befalls one" (Hoffman 3). Viewing happiness in this light—as an arbitrary phenomenon outside of one's personal control, Montaigne declared pessimistically that "no man should be called happy until after his death, for human affairs are uncertain and variable and the slightest shock may change them from one state to another wholly different" (Montaigne 85).⁶

On the view of happiness as a mental state, it is easy to see how the happy person may be viewed as delusional. First, cognitive errors may occur if one projects one's subjective state onto an objective state of affairs. This may happen in one of two ways: first, the "rose colored glasses effect" may cause one to infer from the fact that one is happy that the world is a happy place—thus occluding the misery that surrounds her. Secondly, what I will call the "arrogance effect," may cause one to infer from the subjective fact of one's happiness that there is some objective property of one's self that warrants this positive subjective feeling. The arrogantly happy person does not necessarily ignore the unhappiness of those around her, but she attributes differences of positive and negative affect to relatively stable personal traits. But, of course, if happiness is, as per this account, a state of mind triggered by outside events, then happiness does not properly belong to either the objective world or to the objective self. Happiness is simply a positive emotional outcome of one's—potentially temporary—good fortune. Self-deception is thus involved in thinking that this feeling will remain beyond the state of affairs that brings it about. Alternatively, one may recognize the contingency of one's positive affect on some state of affairs, but be deceived in believing that the state of affairs in question will last, i.e. that love, honor, prosperity, or other good fortune will not fade or change.

To pursue happiness—if what we mean by happiness is a subjective emotional state—is hardly a political act. Hence it is also easy to see how the person obsessed with achieving "a happiness high" may be viewed, on this account, as self absorbed, as more concerned with his or her own subjective satisfaction than with that of others. There is nothing necessary, however, about the link between valuing happiness and self-interest. The person who values happiness need not be a hedonistic egoist concerned only with maximizing his or her own pleasure. As Utilitarians advocate, happiness may be pursued as a universal goal.⁷ When we attempt to bring about states of affairs that produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number, we value personal happiness for ourselves neither more nor less than the happiness of others.

One might still object, however, (as many critics of utilitarianism have) to happiness—for oneself *or* for others—as the ethical goal. And this objection carries some weight if we think of happiness as simply a subjective emotional state.⁸ The force of this objection can be seen, perhaps, most clearly when we consider the ability to inculcate this state by chemical means such as Prozac or

various illegal, but widely used, drugs. Some psychological research suggests that the most potent means of counteracting depression are pharmaceutical, not social, economic, or political.⁹ In light of this, a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis would then suggest that the most effective means for maximizing the moral good is simply to make available to the public the means for increasing serotonin levels in the brain. But an ethical theory that advocates Prozac and chocolate for everyone—despite the potential attractiveness of such a state of affairs—appears counterintuitive as a theory for maximizing the social good. Just as the normative force of Jefferson’s claim that we should pursue happiness depended on an assumed link between rationality and happiness, utilitarianism’s normative force seems to depend on a presumed empirical connection between bringing about social justice and bringing about personal happiness. Without this link, we may wonder whether happiness—for ourselves or others—is, indeed, the noblest goal to pursue.

We criticize the happy slave and the happy housewife as persons who fail to see the conditions of their own oppression. Happiness under conditions where self-realization is not possible is insufficient. Moreover, we may suspect that it is the happiness itself that occludes the oppressed person’s ability to liberate herself. Marx bemoaned religion as “the opiate of the people.” The difficulty lies not only with religion, however, but with any creed or practice that leads to contentment and complacency incompatible with social revolution. Thus, we may be reasonably concerned that pharmaceutical alterations of our prefrontal cortex may result in false-consciousness, in an inability to see the world as it is and do what is necessary to bring about social goods such as freedom, equality, or justice. Here is the force of the claim that the unhappy person may be more cognitively and ethically virtuous than the happy person. In seeing the misery surrounding her, she becomes the agent for social change. The difficulties with this claim, however, are two-fold: first, it simply isn’t true that our world is a merely miserable place; second, the chronically unhappy person may be paralyzed by her own misery—cynics are rarely effective leaders of social revolutions. The depressed person—as well as the mere curmudgeon—is disposed to see the world through dark lenses and wallow in her own misery. She thus lacks both the optimism and the motivation to make change. Insofar as chocolate or Prozac or other chemical interventions permit her to see the world less darkly and dispose her to greater optimism, they may be viewed as enhancing, rather than diminishing, her cognitive and ethical outlook.

Happiness as a disposition

To see the cognitive and normative value of happiness, it is necessary, I think, to move away from both the conception of happiness as an objective and attainable object and the conception of happiness as a subjective emotional state. The former notion of happiness, as I have suggested, leads to placing happiness in the ever-elusive future. The latter notion, as we have seen, may be too personal and apolitical. Both, I would suggest, are the result of a category mistake.

An alternative to both of these conceptions of happiness may be found in Aristotle, who viewed happiness as an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (24). Happiness, as thus defined by Aristotle, is the natural end of humans as social beings and best understood as a matter of developed character. This notion of happiness is certainly preferable to the other views we have considered from the point of view of understanding happiness as valuable. In particular, it acknowledges that happiness must be distinguished from states of affairs such as being honored (which are too contingent on the actions of others) and from mere pleasure (which is a temporary sensation). Nonetheless, there is something vaguely stipulative—to contemporary western ears, although not perhaps to ancient Greek ones—about this notion of happiness as the highest good. Moreover, it is not the notion of happiness as a well-functioning soul that the contemporary philosopher criticizes; hence this is not a version of happiness that is in particular need of defense against charges of cognitive and ethical error.

The person who is viewed with a certain suspicion by the contemporary western philosopher is not the well-functioning and virtuous individual; rather it is the person who is cheerful. Thus, the form of happiness I would like to defend here is best viewed as neither a state of affairs, nor as a mental state, nor even as a state of character, but instead as a disposition. Dispositions, like states of character, can be cultivated. We cannot simply decide to be cheerful, but we can practice it; as we practice being cheerful we become more disposed to smile and laugh and be friendly. Cheerfulness is not, however, to be equated with happiness; such affability is only one surface manifestation, I would suggest, of happiness. Happiness is best understood, I think, as a disposition to be appreciative and optimistic. Genuine cheerfulness is the consequence, not the cause, of a person's disposition towards gratitude and optimism. Viewed thus, cheerfulness is best cultivated by practicing gratitude and optimism, rather than simply practicing smiling.

Happiness as a disposition to be appreciative of the good in the world is perhaps best summed up by Albert Einstein's claim that "there are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle" (Brallier and Parker 3). The person disposed to live his or her life as though everything is miraculous will experience awe at nature's magnificence, feel wonder at the creativity displayed in various forms of human artifice, be grateful for life's simple—as well as more complex—pleasures, and be appreciative of the positive qualities of her or his families, friends and others. One might criticize such a disposition as parochial or apolitical. But it needn't be either. One who has cultivated the virtue of appreciation will be grateful not only for what she has. She will also be disposed to notice and appreciate the friendliness of strangers, the courage of the vulnerable, the generosity of the poor, and the resistance and creativity of the oppressed, including those from other cultures and nations.

The capacity to see the strengths and positive qualities of others is crucial to developing a tendency toward optimism. The optimist, like the cheerful person, is frequently viewed with suspicion as someone who does not or cannot see how bad things really are. To notice human misery, ecological degradation and so forth, however, doesn't require that one view the situation as hopeless. Notably, the most successful leaders of social movements have all been optimists. They have not, however, viewed the world through rose-colored glasses. Christ and Buddha did not fail to note suffering; they believed, however, that it could be transcended. Ghandi and Martin Luther King did not fail to notice social injustice; they believed, however, that it could be effectively resisted. The optimistic person, then, is mischaracterized as someone who fails to see or feel vulnerability, inequity, or oppression. The optimistic person, I would suggest, sees more than the pessimist, not less. To notice the potential for resistance among the oppressed, for example, requires noticing oppression. But it also requires noticing more than that. Unlike the pessimist, the optimist retains hope that oppressive situations can be transformed. This faith comes from noticing not only the misery, but also the resiliency and creativity of the human subject.

The difference between the pessimist and the optimist is frequently summarized as the difference between the person who notes that her glass is half empty and the person who notes that her glass is half full. This is, however, a mischaracterization of their differences. They do not merely see the same things differently. The pessimist, it is true, focuses on what is missing; her glass is

always half empty, and she does not appropriately appreciate what she has. But more than this, the pessimist is someone who projects that her glass will soon empty altogether, and she will be left with nothing. This is the attitude of despair. The optimist, however, focuses both on what is present and what is absent and, most importantly, on what is possible. Her glass is half full, and she is grateful for that fact. But she also knows as she raises the glass to her lips that it will empty further. She is no fool. What makes her an optimist is the hope that her glass will be refilled prior to reaching full emptiness. This is the attitude of happiness; it is an attitude that disposes one to see, taste, hear, and feel presence as well as absence, delight as well as sorrow, compassion as well as injustice, good as well as evil, and to have faith that the absence of those things we deem good can always be transformed into the full presence of that which is ethically desirable.

I enjoin you thus to fill your glasses and enjoy one another's company.

And having enjoined you to eat, drink and be merry,

I pass the torch, happily, to colleague Jim Perry.

Notes

¹ This was not, in fact, Foucault's view. Foucault's archeological and genealogical interests were in tracing the emergence of particular identities as socially salient categories. Nonetheless, I think there is a popularized reading of Foucault that (mis)characterizes him as a standpoint epistemologist who valorizes the perspective of those identified as crazy, criminal, or otherwise deviant.

² Anonymous. This has been widely circulated on various e-mail lists in the last several years and is recorded in various places on the World Wide Web, most notably on sites devoted to spiritual health and growth (whether Christian, Buddhist, new age, or other). See, e.g. <http://survive.org.uk/inspire3.html>, <http://members.aol.com/newme4life/dance.html>, <http://www.yogakingdom.com/wisdom/delusion.html>

³ Anonymous. This echoes Walt Whitman's claim that:

There was never any more inception than there is Now.
Nor any more youth or age than there is Now;
and will never be any more perfection than there is Now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is Now. (25)

⁴ For an analysis of the various ways in which we have transformed love into work (and the ways in which we also rebel against this), see Kipnis.

⁵ Jefferson's original draft stuck with the original Lockean language of "property." With prompting by Benjamin Franklin and others, he modified this language to emphasize happiness instead. See Klotz.

⁶ The notion that a life of contentment could be undone by events late in life comes from the ancient Greeks. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, we find the claim that:

No man should be called happy till his death;
Always we must await his final day,
Reserving judgment till he's finally laid away.

A similar notion is in Aristotle although it would not be accurate (see below) to characterize Aristotle's notion of happiness (or that of other ancient Greeks) as akin to a psychological state. The shift to viewing happiness as a psychological or affective state is modern. However, the notion that happiness (or well-being) is contingent on external affairs has a much longer history.

⁷ Utilitarianism contends that the morality of actions and/or principles depend on how well they advance universal human happiness (or the greatest happiness for the greatest number). It is rooted in an ancient Greek view about the unique value of pleasure and happiness; however, utilitarianism emerged in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a doctrine of social reform. Jeremy Bentham proposed the principle of utility as a standard for evaluating civil laws and

social institutions. John Stuart Mill advocated the principle of utility as compatible with advancing universal human freedom and sexual equality. Peter Singer suggests that the principle of utility mandates protecting the well-being of non-human animals. Utilitarianism is, thus, much broader in its concerns and scope than is hedonistic egoism. See e.g. Bentham; Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*; and Singer.

⁸ In defining happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain (and unhappiness as pain and the privation of pleasure), Utilitarians such as Bentham and Mill, appear to be defining happiness in terms of subjective states. See e.g. Mill, *Utilitarianism*. Responding to criticisms of hedonistic utilitarianism, ideal utilitarians proposed goods alternative to pleasure as the goods to be maximized for right conduct. G. E. Moore, for example, upheld experiences of beauty and relations of friendship as intrinsically valuable goods.

⁹ See e.g. M. Gold; P. Kramer.