

## **Happiness: A Psycho-Philosophical Appraisal**

Shagufta Begum\*, Shaista Jabeen\*\* & Aneeqa Batool Awan\*\*\*

### **Abstract**

*The concept of happiness has been under consideration among philosophers, psychologists, theologians and mystics since a long time. These disciplines have tried to explain the concept in their own respective manners. The purpose of this paper is to examine the theoretical and practical aspects of the notion of happiness. This would explicate two approaches to the problem of happiness: philosophical and psychological to know how to achieve happiness and avoid unhappiness. We claim that happiness is not merely a matter of fate but a skill that can be learnt to groom one's personality and to lessen pains. This paper deals with following core questions: Is the term 'happiness' definable? Is happiness an internal state of mind or the result of external state of affairs?*

**Keywords:** Happiness, Pleasure, Eudemonia, Positive psychology, Nirvana, Positive emotions, Wellbeing, Summum Bonum.

### **Introduction**

The concept of happiness has been the core subject right from hedonism to utilitarianism, from liberalism to positive psychology, and from religious judgments to mystic experiences. Many philosophical and psychological systems regard happiness as the *summum bonum* of life. What happiness is? Many scholars consider happiness as the fulfillment of desires, passions, whims, and aims. There are two senses of the term 'happiness': first, happiness in the sense of wellbeing or flourishing, and secondly, happiness in the sense of psychological aspects. Mostly joy, pleasure, satisfaction and contentment are the terms considered synonymous with happiness.

Many philosophers and psychologists have attempted to define the term happiness but they could not succeed in finding an

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\* Shagufta Begum, Associate Professor/Chairperson, Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore.  
Email: dr.shaguftabukhari@gmail.com

\*\* Shaista Jabeen, Senior Clinical Psychologist Resilience, Ireland.

\*\*\* Aneeqa Batool Awan, Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

adequate position. Sometimes it is conceived as the 'greater good' and sometimes as 'pleasure'. It is sometimes taken as the highest level of satisfaction, or the power to overcome fears, or obeying the laws of God, or the contented conscience. It is considered to be obtained by exercising reason or by hanging up reality or through the highest virtue or by achieving a target. None of these, however, have presented the satisfactory definition of happiness.

People acquire money, fame and power but they do not consider themselves happy. Similarly, one who seeks pleasure engaging in certain acts may not feel the state of happiness. Many historical evidences revealed that most of the conquerors such as Alexander the Great and Pharaoh could not enjoy the state of happiness and remained sad and depressed even after achieving their desired regimes. If happiness is not merely achieving something of or fulfillment of desires, then what is it?

### **Historical Background**

In order to investigate the concept of happiness, it is essential to have a look at the historical aspect of the term 'happiness'. It has been a subject of discussion among Ancient Greek philosophers. Before the late seventeenth century, people conceived happiness as a matter of fate or virtue or God's favor. Etymologically, the ancient Greek and Indo-European languages designated the term happiness with the word 'hap' means 'fortune' or 'chance'. This linguistic pattern suggests that happiness was out of man's control and it was just in God's providence. Most of the ancient people took happiness as a matter of 'luck' which is governed by heavenly stars. As a matter of fact, happiness literally meant what occurs to human naturally and nothing is in his own hands. As the monk in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* declares:

*“Thus can fortune hir wheel governe and gye,  
And out of joye bringe man to sorwe”<sup>1</sup>*

Moreover, Hellenic philosophers defined the term in different contexts. The Greek word used for happiness is 'eudemonia' means being true to one's inner self.<sup>2</sup> The origin of the concept of Eudemonia is based in Aristotelian philosophy. It is considered as a subjective state of mind at a given time such as having fun with friends, enjoying coffee on a cold day or a favourite cold drink on a hot day. Beginning from Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and many schools of the classical Greek philosophy like Epicureans, Stoics and so on had also discussed the concept of happiness with keen interest.

Socrates thought that happiness does not depend upon external good rather it depends on how wisely people use the external good. Happiness is the ultimate goal for which human beings demand naturally. One can get happiness if one's soul learns how to harmonize with the desires, keeping them away from physical pleasures, and thus soul redirects itself towards the love of knowledge and virtue. Happiness and virtue are inseparable and it would be impossible to have one without the other. The pleasures one gets as a result of knowledge and virtue are of higher quality. In the similar vein, Plato believed that a just man is a happy man. It can be entailed that in order to achieve happiness and harmony in life, justice is an unavoidable condition.

Epicurus (342-270 BCE) has introduced the concept of 'ethical hedonism'. Ethical hedonism maintained that the basic moral obligation is to maximize the experience of pleasure. Epicureans believed that people should not only seek God's will but they should also try to achieve happiness in this world. In fact, Epicureans and Hedonists shared a common belief to seek pleasure. As Epicureans do not believe in eternal and absolute 'shoulds' and they consider that there is no divine providence, they can choose a life as they want to live. Consequently, they emphasized on pursuing pleasure. Man is free to choose and there are always some choices better than others. It is the very nature of man to desire for pleasure and to refrain from pain. Epicureans focus on attaining pleasure rationally and intelligently. They hold that people's false beliefs make them miserable and unhappy. For instance, it is considered that status and luxury would make people happy but indeed their pursuit makes them unhappy. Epicureans stated that such kinds of external goods are to be the great hurdle in achieving pleasure rationally. Early Christian philosophers took hedonism as being contradictory with the purpose of refraining from sin. Renaissance philosophers such as Erasmus (1446-1536) and Thomas Moor (1478-1535) argued that God wants people to be happy, unless they did not choose artificial means to achieve pleasure. Hedonism became the staple of utilitarianism, liberalism and that later led to set the grounds for psychoanalysis and then to behaviourism.

### **Aristotle's Concept of Happiness**

Modern philosophical view of happiness is gleaned from Aristotle (435-366 BCE). Aristotle thought that happiness is an essential motive of human life and an end in itself. He further maintains that happiness depends upon human beings. He was convinced that

happiness is the key component for a happy life which requires physical and mental well being as prerequisites. Aristotle for the very first time introduced the concept of science of happiness as a new horizon of knowledge. However, modern psychology has recently started to study happiness employing scientific approach. Aristotle has presented 'Theory of Happiness' in his *Nichomachean Ethics* which is significant till today even after passing twenty three thousand years. For him, happiness is an end in itself and self-sufficient and it is the natural desire of humankind. Many people do not bother what is necessary in order to be happy. In the quest for happiness, one should be functional, and in order to be functional, it is mandatory to pursue the excellence or virtue which he calls 'arête'.

Aristotle argued that one can be happy if and only if one pursues a moral and intellectual virtue. A wise person will be excellent in one's functions and will ultimately gain a good life. In addition to the intellectual excellence, moral excellence is also compulsory because happiness can be obtained by practicing both kinds of excellences. Similar to Aristotle, Plato shared the same view as, "Happiness depends on conformity to our nature as active beings"<sup>3</sup>

Some people are not functional in their lives: they do not conceive life adequately but they think themselves as happy people; while they are not, in doing so, they deceive themselves. Wisdom differentiates human beings from animals. Human actions are performed in order to achieve a goal and that goal is not an end in itself. That is why honor, fame, wealth, pleasure and glory are the means to attain a goal (happiness) which is an end in itself. Desire for happiness is an agreed fact and there is no dispute over it. Aristotle says:

*"Now such thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves...Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself"*<sup>4</sup>

Aristotle stated that happiness is an ultimate goal to be achieved and it comprehends one's whole life. It is not just pleasurable sensation or a momentary experience but it refers to the ultimate value of one's life. Happiness is a feeling of good manner to live one's life in full potential. Aristotle considers happiness as a fundamental and main purpose of human life and an end in itself.

However Aristotle holds that happiness involves identifying ones virtues, nurturing them, and spending one's life according to them.<sup>5</sup> His concept of virtue is more individualistic as compared to Confucian's concept of social virtues. Aristotle's concept explains that a happy life consists in the fulfilment of certain conditions of physical as well as mental wellbeing.

Aristotle maintains that virtue can be achieved by 'the Mean': the balance between the two excesses. Aristotle's thoughts go around the key question: what is the ultimate end or purpose for which we should direct our activities? Was a source to further investigation into the subject of happiness and wellbeing?<sup>6</sup> People seek pleasure, money and fame; though these things have important value in human life, but they cannot be replaced by the ultimate good to which humanity should aim.

Aristotle considers that happiness depends on the actions performed by the rational part which is soul. Happiness is an activity which enhances virtue. It acts as a rosary which is made up of beads of virtues. He defines happiness as:

*"[...the function of man is to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case,] human good turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue"*<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle makes important distinction between right desire and wrong desire. According to him what we naturally desire is the need and need is always right desire while what we want is always apparently good and in reality it is wrong desire. There are some needs which people also want e.g. food and shelter. These are not just apparently good but really good. Thus the natural desire which is the right desire leads towards happiness. Some of the acquired desires which are right and relate with people's need help them in enhancing their level of satisfaction. Those acquired desires which are wrong detract them from the path of well-being and happiness.

Aristotle considers that happiness is good as a whole for human life. What he means is that a life must be completed or ended before we judge whether it was a happy life or not. Wealth, friends, knowledge, fame and power are good but the *Summum Bonum* (the highest good) is only happiness.

### **Russell's Views on Happiness**

Bertrand Russell, the eminent philosopher of the twentieth century conceived happiness into two categories: plain and fancy, or animal and spiritual, or of the heart and head. He stated that it is due to the complexity of emotions that makes human unhappy. Simple emotions face no obstacles; that is why, scientists are happy than artists. In *The Conquest of Happiness* Russell gives general requisite conditions of happiness as:

*"Happiness...depends partly upon external circumstances and partly upon oneself...Certain things are indispensable to the happiness of most men, but these are simple things: food and shelter, health, love, successful work and respect of one's own herd. To some people parenthood also is essential. Where these things are lacking only the exceptional man can achieve happiness"*<sup>8</sup>

### **Concept of Happiness in Major Religions**

Most of religions have considered the notion of happiness. In religious context, happiness and suffering are both parts of human life just like the two sides of the same coin. In Buddhist language, the terms 'Pali' and 'Sukha' are designated for happiness, pleasure and bliss. Buddha held that one can gain happiness if one remains away from the worldly desires. A person, who suppresses one's emotions and acts wisely, can achieve true happiness. It is due to the ignorance, hatred, feelings of winning or losing, sensual pleasures, domination and anger that people suffer. According to Buddha when one purifies one's soul from all above mentioned evils then one can pursue final happiness named as 'Nirvana'. This concept of *Nirvana* is akin to Plato's notion of 'Ultimate Good' which can only be achieved by suppressing cravings and lustful desires, and giving authority to reason which guides human towards the destination of Ultimate Good. The only difference is that Plato's Good was unattainable but happiness is achievable.

In the domain of mysticism, one can seek inner peace and serenity, consciously by avoiding worldly pleasures; and sometimes puts oneself in sufferings, so that artificial pleasures do not create hurdles in gaining one's ultimate goal. Society may consider the mystics insane persons, and make fun of them but mystics indulge themselves to the unrestrained will to love. For instance, Baruch Spinoza, seventeenth century, Dutch philosopher, remained in search of a 'lasting good' which would have given him an inner satisfaction, contentment and serenity of mind. Spinoza believed that 'lasting good' is in the love of God. He takes

God as an infinite, eternal and a being of mathematical necessity and scientific law. Wright states:

*“If a man can identify himself with God conceived of as the substantial underlying reality of all the processes of nature, which never has changed, and never will change, he will possess an inward peace of mind which the world cannot give and cannot take away. In this purely “intellectual love of God” conceived as the logical ground of the mechanical laws of the nature, Spinoza found his salvation”<sup>9</sup>*

Islam also fosters on the notion of happiness. The Holy Quran reveals that happiness is an activity which is concerned with soul. Material aspects can be a means of an extrinsic happiness but not an end in itself. The main focus of Islam is to purify the soul and to gain happiness through its development and growth. God of Islam has explained the paths of happiness for worldly life and life after death. The Holy Quran states:

*“Whoever does good whether male or female and he is a believer, We will most certainly make him live a happy life, and We will most certainly give them their reward for the best of what they did”<sup>10</sup>*

Islam emphasizes on the fact that to leave the material aspects means not to leave worldly activities rather it teaches man to identify the priorities. For example, one’s priority should be to live according to the righteous path of God. One should enjoy one’s personal wellbeing but not at the cost of other’s sufferings. When one dedicates oneself for the welfare and prosperity of humanity, one starts gaining actual happiness. Islam strongly condemns the selfish attitude which ultimately leads towards the suffering and destruction of individual as well as society. One of the unique factors of Islam is that it relates happiness of this world to the happiness of the world hereafter. Only those can experience real happiness in the world after here who bear sufferings and become source of other’s prosperity. Apparently, such a person suffers but that one feels the equanimity and contentment which a materialistic person can never have. In this context, the lives of king Karun and king Pharaoh had revealed that their hunger for wealth and mundane desires could not make them happy.

### **Stance of Positive Psychology**

Positive psychology is one of the recent branches of psychology which embarks on people’s positive emotions, virtues and individual strengths rather than negative states of mind, such as

anxiety, depression and stress. It encourages psychologists to focus on enhancing and extending life's positive aspects.<sup>11</sup> The term 'Positive Psychology' was invented by the American psychologist Martin Seligman. It focuses to make an average and normal life more fulfilling instead of just treating mental illness. It is the term 'good life' which is derived from the speculation about what actually means in our lives. According to Seligman, good life is, "using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic happiness and abundant gratification."<sup>12</sup>

However, it is only in the recent times when psychology started to study happiness using scientific approach. Study of happiness goes hand in hand with positive psychology. Happiness becomes a concern to Psychology because it is a concern to people in general.<sup>13</sup> According to US declaration of Independence, everybody is entitled to life, to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness. Thomson Jefferson the principal author of the United States declaration of Independence states that "All men receive from their Creator certain inalienable rights such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>14</sup>

### **Pleasure and Happiness**

People choose different routes to reach their goal of happiness. All of them are surely not positive. Some people think living full life can be defined by a life full of zest, exuberance and vitality but the route to achieve this is different for everyone.<sup>15</sup> However, there is no doubt that everybody aspires to be happy. So what does happiness mean? Happiness is casually associated with pleasure in the moment. The term pleasure is usually used for a limited sense of natural high. It is more related with the release of neurotransmitter dopamine which is sometimes also called a pleasure chemical. Happiness on the other hand is a long term feeling, a sense that life is going well. Everybody longs for that feeling rather than only a temporary feeling of pleasure. According to Richard Steven, although it is not easy to change your feelings at will but one can decide what to think about. If the thoughts are directed towards positive things, good things are likely to take place. This Steven describes a "powerful tool of happiness."<sup>16</sup>

The famous 'Peak-End Theory' reflects that the recollection of pleasure is not an exact summary of individual moments of an experience but the end product of the whole experience.<sup>17</sup> In fact pleasure is a part of happiness but philosophical view of happiness is broader, which is beyond fleeting feelings.<sup>18</sup> Paul Rozin discussed that 'raw pleasures'

associated with sensations are produced along the skin and are related with our body orifices. Philosophers call happiness as an 'ungrounded grounder' a rationale that receives no further rationale.<sup>19</sup> Understanding of the doctrine of hedonism is very important to understand true meanings of happiness. Hedonism is explained as maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. This was conceptualized thousands of years ago by Aristotle who was pioneer of the concept of immediate gratification.<sup>20</sup> According to the happiness expert Richard Steven, happiness has three major ingredients: Good feelings and positive mood; Engagement and Vitality and Meaningfulness e.g. making value choices in your life.<sup>21</sup>

A discussion on happiness is not complete without talking about some of the related concepts: Happiness is considered to be related with 'psychological good life'. Very few people would know that Hugh Hefner proposed the psychological good life in 1956 as part of his playboy philosophy. Hugh Hefner's formula for pleasure projected in Playboy philosophy might make some people feel put off because of its non radical concept of driving pleasure mainly through sexuality. Playboy philosophy argues that for majority of people the erotic and sexually attractive is sinful and objectionable. This leads to a conflict because the inner self rejects the ideas that sensually pleasing material may be clean and pure.<sup>22</sup>

According to psychologists there are some basic emotions and some 'positive emotions'. The basic emotions are more in number than positive emotions. If we eliminate negative emotions from life then it will create a vacuum in having variety of emotions. On the other hand it is not necessary that the number of positive emotions will increase on decreasing the negative emotions. Barbra Fredrickson's 'Broaden and build theory' suggests that positive emotions function differently and involve novel expansive and exploratory behaviour that eventually lead to meaningful long term resources e.g. knowledge and social relationships. She suggests that we should not try to fit positive into negative emotion scheme; rather she advocates looking at positive emotions (e.g. joy, interest, contentment, and love) in their own right. When comparing the functions of a negative and a positive emotion, she corroborated that negative emotions narrow down our response options. A negative emotion signals danger and we rush to avoid whatever danger is signalled. On the other hand a positive emotion broadens and builds on options as it signals safety.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes it is hard to determine the emotional reactions

because they are blended with both pleasant and unpleasant emotions and we even remain unaware of their real position.

In the recent years happiness and well being are two subjects which have caught a lot of attention of people working in the field of psychology. A term very commonly used in positive psychology literature is called 'well being'. Although there is no consensus on the definition of well being, this is closely related with happiness.<sup>24</sup> The synonyms used to describe 'well being' are happiness, self actualization, contentment, adjustment, economic prosperity, quality of life and well being.<sup>25</sup>

As described earlier, hedonism is something which can be referred as a meaningful happiness. 'Subjective Well Being' is defined as satisfaction with life and high positive affects.<sup>26</sup> It is judgement of people to evaluate their own lives in terms of affective and cognitive explanations.<sup>27</sup> Subjective well being is interconnected with happiness. A great change could be seen in the behaviour of people who attained higher level subjective well being. Normally they show an ability of higher level creativity more systematic and optimistic towards life. They become more social and do not like to be self-centred. These people develop trust, helpfulness and less hostility and even show less vulnerability to illness.<sup>28</sup>

### Conclusion

Happiness is basically a state of mind which is not transitory but a continuous process; this does not depend on different material things but it exists in human mind. The state of happiness comprising different levels of satisfaction is achieved gradually step by step by analysing rationally the state of affairs of life. It is required to understand the phenomena on a broader canvas to deconstruct its negative and positive aspects, and positive aspects should be given credence to negative aspects. Life is a two-sided coin, people need to pursue for the positive side of the coin by analysing the situation correctly and by acting for it. Happiness and sadness go side by side; sadness increases the degree of enjoyment of happiness. Lofty targets and the miscalculation of decisive factors cause unhappiness; while correct measurement of factors determining the situations gives success to achieve the targets.

Regarding happiness, both individual and social are embedded into a reciprocal relationship: individual's happiness gives rise to social happiness and the other way round. A society of happy individuals is a good society. Individuals should follow the

social laws in pursuing their happiness while social systems should also be framed considering the individual's desires.

Happiness is an umbrella term encompasses numerous states like contentment, joy, pleasure, satisfaction, comfortable, merry, bliss, and wellbeing. These states lead to the highest goal called happiness. It is a soul fulfilling process which provides tranquility even on the bed of thorns.

Happiness is related with the inner world of a person. It is normally found that when one is happy from one's heart, one enjoys in any situation, but when one is sad, one is feeling agony in spite of all comfortable circumstances. It was thought in antiquity that happiness is a matter of fate depends upon God's will. But in contemporary times, particularly the empirical studies have revealed that happiness is a skill which can be achieved with deliberate and conscious efforts. Individuals can learn how to improve the level of happiness by analyzing the circumstances with reason and to develop the strategies to achieve what they want. The skills can be enhanced by doing practice mentally as well as physically. In psychology, mysticism, and religion, there are different approaches that impart therapeutic effect on human heart. These approaches help to make one's personality positive and balanced. Moreover, happiness is not an abstract thing but a measurable and achievable phenomenon. One can learn the art of being happy by adapting a positive approach towards life engaging in religion, mysticism and positive psychology. Consequently, happiness is a state of mind that is achievable.

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**Notes & References**


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