The Nature, Theories and Science of Happiness: Analytical Essay

The nature of happiness

Abstract: The concept of happiness has been one of the most misinterpreted notions in social research. Philosophers and psychologists have put forward many definitions and explanations of this important concept but no single meaning is generally accepted. Happiness has been liken to life satisfaction, as emotional state, as well-being and as a state of pleasure. Is there more to the nature of happiness? To answer this question, we need to look into the four major theories of happiness namely; hedonism, life satisfaction theory, emotional state theory and hybrid theory. Attempts to answer further questions were made, questions like; can happiness be measured, the sources of happiness and what is the cost of happiness?

What is happiness? Or what does happiness entail? There is no direct and generally acceptable answer to this question. In fact, the meaning of the question is not clear because the nature of happiness has been the topic of debate for researchers over the years. Most philosophers that have attempted to provide explanation to the concept of happiness have all broadly categorized it in two broad sense: a state of mind and a life that goes well for the person leading it.

As a state of mind, happiness is simply described as a psychological matter. Like depression and pleasure, inquiry about happiness is basically the study of some mental states. Based on these premises, happiness is reduced to concepts like pleasure, positive emotional condition or life satisfaction. Based on this notions, one can then ask, how valuable is happiness since is it just a psychological term? As for the second case, the subject matter is a kind of value. Happiness in this sense is seen to be something that benefits a person, makes him better off, is good for him or her or serves his or her interests. To be high in well-being is to be faring well, doing well, fortunate, or in an enviable condition. Ill-being, or doing badly, may call for sympathy or pity, whereas we envy or rejoice in the good fortune of others, and feel gratitude for our own. Being good for someone differs from simply being good, period: perhaps it is always good, period, for you to be honest; yet it may not always be good for you, as when it entails self-sacrifice. Not coincidentally, the word ‘happiness’ derives from the term for good fortune, or “good hap,” and indeed the terms used to translate it in other languages have similar roots. In this sense of the term—call it the “well-being sense”—happiness refers to a life of well-being or flourishing: a life that goes well for you.

Importantly, to ascribe happiness in the well-being sense is to make a value judgment: namely, that the person has whatever it is that benefits a person. If you and I and have different values, then we may well differ about which lives we consider happy. Theories of well-being—and hence of “happiness” in the well-being sense—come in three basic flavors, according to the best-known taxonomy (Parfit 1984): hedonism, desire theories, and objective list theories. Whereas hedonists identify well-being roughly with experiences of pleasure, desire theorists equate it with the satisfaction of one’s desires—actually getting what you want, versus merely having certain experiences. Both hedonism and desire theories are in some sense subjectivist, since they ground well-being in the individual’s subjective states. Objective list theorists, by contrast, think some things benefit us independently of our attitudes or feelings: there are objective prudential

goods. Aristotelians are the best-known example: they take well-being (eudaimonia) to consist in a life of virtuous activity—or more broadly, the fulfillment of our human capacities.

Now we can sharpen the initial question somewhat: when you ask what happiness is, are you asking what sort of life benefits a person? If so, then your question concerns matters of value, namely what is good for people—the sort of thing that ethical theorists are trained to address. Alternatively, perhaps you simply want to know about the nature of a certain state of mind—happiness in the psychological sense. In this case, some sort of psychological inquiry will be needed, either philosophical or scientific. In short, philosophical "theories of happiness" can be about either of at least two different things: well-being, or a state of mind. Accordingly, there are essentially two bodies of philosophical literature about "happiness" and two sets of debates about its nature, though writers often fail to distinguish them. For instance, some psychologists identify "happiness" with attitudes of life satisfaction while remaining neutral on questions of value, or whether Bentham, Mill, Aristotle, or any other thinker about the good life was correct. Such researchers employ the term in the psychological sense. Yet it is sometimes objected against such claims that life satisfaction cannot suffice for "happiness" because other things, like achievement or knowledge, matter for human well-being. The objectors are confused: their opponents have made no claims about well-being at all, and the two "sides," as it were, are simply using 'happiness' to talk about different things.

Which use of 'happiness' corresponds to the true meaning of the term in contemporary English? Arguably, both. The well-being usage clearly dominates in the historical literature through at least the early modern era, for instance in translations of the ancient Greeks' 'eudaimonia' or the Latin 'beatitudo', though this translation has long been a source of controversy. Jefferson's famous reference to "the pursuit of happiness" probably employed the well-being sense. Even later writers such as Mill may have used the term in its well-being sense, though it is often difficult to tell since well-being itself is often taken to consist in mental states like pleasure. In ordinary usage, the abstract noun 'happiness' often invites a well-being reading. Moreover, the locution 'happy life' may not naturally take a psychological interpretation, for the simple reason that lives are not normally regarded as psychological entities.

Contrast this with the very different meaning that seems to attach to talk of "being happy." Here it is much less clear that we are talking about a property of a person's life; it seems rather to be a property of the person herself. To be happy, it seems, is just to be in a certain sort of psychological state or condition. Similarly when we say that so-and-so "is happy" (as opposed to saying that he is leading a happy life). This psychological usage, arguably, predominates in the current vernacular. Researchers engaged in the self-described "science of happiness" usually do not take themselves to be making value judgments when they proclaim individuals in their studies to be happy.

Theories of happiness

Philosophers have most commonly distinguished two accounts of happiness: hedonism, and the life satisfaction theory. Hedonists identify happiness with the individual's balance of pleasant over unpleasant experience, in the same way that welfare hedonists do. The difference is that the hedonist about happiness need not accept the stronger doctrine of welfare hedonism; this emerges clearly in arguments against the classical Utilitarian focus on happiness as the aim of

social choice. Such arguments tend to grant the identification of happiness with pleasure, but challenge the idea that this should be our primary or sole concern, and often as well the idea that happiness is all that matters for well-being.

Life satisfaction theories identify happiness with having a favorable attitude toward one's life as a whole. This basic schema can be filled out in a variety of ways, but typically involves some sort of global judgment: an endorsement or affirmation of one's life as a whole. This judgment may be more or less explicit, and may involve or accompany some form of affect. It may also involve or accompany some aggregate of judgments about particular items or domains within one's life.

A third theory, the emotional state view, departs from hedonism in a different way: instead of identifying happiness with pleasant experience, it identifies happiness with an agent's emotional condition as a whole. This includes nonexperiential aspects of emotions and moods (or perhaps just moods), and excludes pleasures that don't directly involve the individual's emotional state. It might also include a person's propensity for experiencing various moods, which can vary over time. Happiness on such a view is more nearly the opposite of depression or anxiety—a broad psychological condition—whereas hedonistic happiness is simply opposed to unpleasantness. The states involved in happiness, on an emotional state view, can range widely, far more so that the ordinary notion of mood or emotion. On one proposal, happiness involves three broad categories of affective state, including "endorsement" states like joy versus sadness, "engagement" states like flow or a sense of vitality, and "attunement" states like tranquility, emotional expansiveness versus compression, and confidence (Haybron 2008). Given the departures from commonsensical notions of being in a "good mood," happiness is characterized in this proposal as "psychic affirmation," or "psychic flourishing" in pronounced forms.

A fourth family of views, hybrid theories, attempts an irenic solution to our diverse intuitions about happiness: identify happiness with both life satisfaction and pleasure or emotional state, perhaps along with other states such as domain satisfactions. The most obvious candidate here is subjective well-being, which is typically defined as a compound of life satisfaction, domain satisfactions, and positive and negative affect. (Researchers often seem to identify happiness with subjective well-being, sometimes with life satisfaction, and perhaps most commonly with emotional or hedonic state.) The chief appeal of hybrid theories is their inclusiveness: all the components of subjective well-being seem important, and there is probably no component of subjective well-being that does not at times get included in "happiness" in ordinary usage.

The science of happiness

With the explosive rise of empirical research on happiness, a central question is how far, and how, happiness might be measured. There seems to be no in-principle barrier to the idea of measuring, at least roughly, how happy people are. Investigators may never enjoy the precision of the "hedonimeter" once envisaged by Edgeworth to show just how happy a person is (Edgeworth 1881). Indeed, such a device might be impossible even in principle, since happiness might involve multiple dimensions that either cannot be precisely quantified or summed together. If so, it could still be feasible to develop approximate measures of happiness, or at least its various dimensions. Similarly, depression may not admit of precise quantification in a single number, yet many useful if imprecise measures of depression exist. In the case of

happiness, it is plausible that even current measures provide information about how anxious, cheerful, satisfied, etc. people are, and thus tell us something about their happiness. Even the simplest self-report measures used in the literature have been found to correlate well with many intuitively relevant variables, such as friends' reports, smiling, physiological measures, health, longevity, and so forth (Pavot 2008). Importantly, most scientific research needs only to discern patterns across large numbers of individuals - to take an easy case, determining whether widows tend to be less happy than newlyweds—and this is compatible with substantial unreliability in assessing individual happiness.

This point reveals an important caveat: measures of happiness could correlate well with how happy people are, thus telling us which groups of people tend to be happier, while being completely wrong about absolute levels of happiness. Self-reports of happiness, for instance, might correctly indicate that unemployed people are considerably less happy than those with jobs. But every one of those reports could be wrong, say if everyone is unhappy yet claims to be happy, or vice-versa, so long as the unemployed report lower happiness than the employed. Two morals emerge from these reflections. First, self-report measures of happiness could be reliable guides to relative happiness, though telling us little about how happy, in absolute terms, people are. We may know who is happier, that is, but not whether people are in fact happy. Second, even comparisons of relative happiness will be inaccurate if the groups being compared systematically bias their reports in different ways. This worry is particularly acute for cross-cultural comparisons of happiness, where differing norms about happiness may undermine the comparability of self-reports.

The discussion thus far has assumed that people can be wrong about how happy they are. Is this plausible? Some have argued that (sincerely) self-reported happiness cannot, even in principle, be mistaken. If you think you're happy, goes a common sentiment, then you are happy. This claim is not plausible on a hedonistic or emotional state view of happiness, since those theories take judgments of happiness to encompass not just how one is feeling at the moment but also past states, and memories of those can obviously be spurious. Further, it has been argued that even judgments of how one feels at the present moment may often be mistaken, particularly regarding moods like anxiety.

The idea that sincere self-reports of happiness are incorrigible can only be correct, it seems, given a quite specific conception of happiness—a kind of life satisfaction theory of happiness on which people count as satisfied with their lives so long as they are disposed to judge explicitly that they are satisfied with their lives on the whole. Also assumed here is that self-reports of happiness are in fact wholly grounded in life satisfaction judgments like these—that is, that people take questions about "happiness" to be questions about life satisfaction. Given these assumptions, we can plausibly conclude that self-reports of happiness are incorrigible. One question is whether happiness, thus conceived, is very important. As well, it is unlikely that respondents invariably interpret happiness questions as being about life satisfaction. At any rate, even life satisfaction theorists might balk at this variant of the account, since life satisfaction is sometimes taken to involve, not just explicit global judgments of life satisfaction, but also our responses to the particular things or domains we care about. Some will hesitate to deem satisfied people who hate many of the important things in their lives, however satisfied they claim to be with their lives as a whole.

In a similar vein, the common practice of measuring happiness simply by asking people to report explicitly on how "happy" they are is sometimes defended on the grounds that it lets

people decide for themselves what happiness is. The reasoning again seems to presuppose, controversially, that self-reports of happiness employ a life satisfaction view of happiness, the idea being that whether you are satisfied (“happy”) will depend on what you care about. Alternatively, the point might be literally to leave it up to the respondent to decide whether ‘happy’ means hedonic state, emotional state, life satisfaction, or something else.

To measure happiness through self-reports, then, it may be wiser to employ terms other than ‘happiness’ and its cognates—terms whose meaning is relatively well-known and fixed. In other words, researchers should decide in advance what they want to measure—be it life satisfaction, hedonic state, emotional state, or something else—and then ask questions that refer unambiguously to those states. This stratagem may be all the more necessary in cross-cultural work, where finding suitable translations of ‘happy’ can be daunting—particularly when the English meaning of the term remains a matter of contention (Wierzbicka 2004).

This essay focuses on subjective well-being studies, since that work is standardly deemed “happiness” research. But psychological research on well-being can take other forms, notably in the “eudaimonic”—commonly opposed to “hedonic”—literature, which assesses a broader range of indicators taken to represent objective human needs, such as meaning, personal growth, relatedness, autonomy, competence, etc. Other well-being instruments may not clearly fall under either the “happiness” or eudaimonic rubrics, for instance extending subjective well-being measures by adding questions about the extent to which activities are seen as meaningful or worthwhile (White and Dolan 2009).