

Julia Annas

Happiness as achievement

Ten years ago, shortly after publishing a book called *The Morality of Happiness* about the structure of ancient ethical theory, I received an email informing me that I had been added to a bibliography of “happiness researchers” on a website called the World Database of Happiness. I explored this site with interest, only to find that this was not a research program that I felt myself to be part of.

The website assumes, without discussion, that happiness is “subjective,” that it is enjoyment or pleasure, and that it should be studied “empirically.” Philosophy is then derided for failing to “operationalize” happiness and to produce “measures” of it. (Philosophy has a meager 88 entries in the bibliography, compared to 2,927 for the social sciences.) Empirical studies are lauded for their measures of happiness, while the website claims that “preliminary questions

about conceptualization and measurement are now fairly well solved.”

The website, however, gives off a definite air of disappointment. No sound body of knowledge on happiness, it admits, has yet been achieved. In the present state of research, we can claim only that “there are obviously several universal requirements for a happy life (such as food and possibly meaning).”

Philosophers (and some psychologists, too) will find it unsurprising that if you rush to look for empirical measures of an unanalyzed ‘subjective’ phenomenon, the result will be confusion and banality.¹ After all, what is it that the social scientists on the World Database of Happiness are actually measuring? Here is the heart of the problem. Is happiness really something subjective? Is it simply a matter of pleasure, a positive feeling? We can at least hope that it is not, and that we can come to conclusions better than the claim that what anyone needs to be happy is food and possibly meaning.

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1 For an amusing example, see <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/2630869.stm>>, where “scientists” claim to have solved “one of the greatest mysteries plaguing mankind” by actually giving us a mathematical formula: $P + (5 \times E) + (3 \times H) = \text{happiness}$, where P = personal characteristics, E = existence, and H = higher-order needs. You compute your formula by answering four questions.

For many years I have taught, discussed, and written on ancient ethical theories, whose basic concepts are those of happiness and virtue. During this time, philosophical interest in these theories has grown rapidly and has in turn produced a crop of modern 'virtue ethics' theories, a fair number of which are eudaimonist – that is, theories which take happiness and virtue to be basic concepts. Philosophers are now taking virtue and happiness more seriously than they had for some time, and realizing the importance of clarifying and deepening our understanding of these before rushing into empirical studies. (Judging by recent publications, this concern is shared in some areas of psychology.)

As a result, one of the best places to seek understanding of happiness is the study of ancient ethical theories and of those modern theories which share their eudaimonist concerns. For these recognize, and build on, some of our thoughts about happiness that have become overwhelmed by the kind of consideration that emerges in the claim that happiness is obviously subjective. Given the systematically disappointing results of the database approach, it is time to look seriously at our alternatives.

When it is asked what happiness is, a first answer may well be that it is some kind of feeling. Being happy is easily taken to be feeling happy – as when I wake up in the morning – a kind of smiley-face feeling. This line of thought takes us rapidly to the idea that I can be happy doing any old thing. Some people feel happy when helping old ladies across streets; others feel happy when torturing puppies: happiness comes down to whatever you happen to like.

But this line of thought cannot stay up for long. It is immediately obvious that

when we talk about feelings we are talking about *episodes*; I wake up feeling happy but am depressed by the time I get to work, never mind lunchtime. Getting a smiley-face feeling from good deeds or bad deeds lasts only as long as the deeds do. And this kind of happiness does not matter to us all that much once we start to think in a serious way about our lives. As we bring up our children, what we aim for is not that they have episodes of smiley-face feeling, but that their lives go well as wholes: we come to think of happiness as the way a life as a whole goes well, and see that episodes of happiness are not what we build our lives around.

This point can produce a variety of responses. One is to say that when we are thinking of our lives as wholes, we should think in terms of flourishing or welfare or well-being rather than happiness. These terms may be useful in some circumstances to avoid misunderstanding, but we should not yield talk of happiness without further discussion to its most trivial contexts of use. In my experience, discussion rapidly reveals that we do talk about happiness over our lives as wholes, or at least over long stretches of them. We should not, then, restrict talk of happiness at the start to contexts of short-term feeling.

The point that these are the contexts which first occur to many people when they are asked about happiness indicates that our notion of happiness has indeed been affected by the notion of smiley faces, feeling good, and pleasant episodes. Doubtless this is the source of some of the empirical researcher's problems in trying to measure it. For if we try to measure the happiness of lives in terms of smiley-face feelings, the results will be grotesque. I have seen a survey that asks people to measure the happiness of their lives by assigning it a face

*Happiness
as
achievement*

from a spectrum with a very smiley face at one end and a very frowny face at the other. Suppose that you have just won the Nobel Prize; this surely merits the smiliest face. But suppose also that you have just lost your family in a car crash; this surely warrants the frowniest face. So, how happy are you? There is no coherent answer – unless you are supposed to combine these points by picking the indifferent face in the middle!

So, even if episodes first come to mind, we do think, centrally, of *living* happy lives. And this is because we think of our lives as wholes when we are thinking of how to live, what kind of people we are to aspire to be.

At this point, another characteristically modern, and more reasonable sounding, idea tends to come in. Surely having a happy life has something to do with getting what you want, rather than being frustrated and deprived of what you want? We all have desires; the happy person will be the person whose desires are fulfilled. The philosopher's term for this is the 'desire-satisfaction' account, which appeals to more thoughtful ideas about happiness than our initial ones.

Why wouldn't a happy life be one of getting what you want? People, after all, can live happy lives in many different ways. We feel that there is something wrong in trying to build any particular content into our notion of happiness such that only people living certain kinds of life could be happy. The idea that happiness is desire-satisfaction seems suitably neutral on the content of happy lives, allowing happiness to the intellectual and the incurious alike as long as they are getting what they desire.

It is possible to think of happiness as desire-satisfaction if we are prepared to think of happiness – in the spirit of the suggestion that it is subjective – as some-

thing on which each of us is the authority. I am happy if I think I am, since I am getting what I want. For who could be a better authority than I am on the issue of whether I am getting what I want? Perhaps the idea that happiness is desire-satisfaction does justice to the initial thought that it is something subjective – without the obvious problems of the smiley-face-feeling interpretation.

Why might we be dissatisfied with this result? We would have to hold that anyone getting what he or she wants is happy, whatever the nature of the desire. Happiness would thus lose any purchase as an idea that could serve to rank or judge lives; Nelson Mandela, Bill Gates, and Madonna, if they are all getting what they want, are all happy, so any comparative judgments about their lives cannot involve the idea of happiness. We might accept this, thinking that there must be something else about lives which can be compared – perhaps well-being or some other kind of value on which the agent is not necessarily the best authority.

One thing the desire-satisfaction account disables us from doing is making judgments about the happiness of people whose desires are in obvious ways defective. Notoriously, some desires are based on radically faulty information or reasoning. Some desires are unresponsive to the agent's reasoning powers because of the force of addiction or obsession. At a deeper level, some desires are themselves deformed by social pressures. Girls who desire less for themselves than for their brothers, poor people who see desire for self-betterment as unimaginable – these are just two of many kinds of desires that are open to criticism, despite being honestly expressed and open to modification in the light of reason and information, because they spring from the internalization of

ideas that deny the agents themselves proper respect.

Once again, the idea that happiness is desire-satisfaction can absorb these points and even deny their faults, at the cost of shrinking happiness to something where only I am authoritative. Suppose, however, that I am happy if I think I am, because I am happy if I am getting what I want, and I am the authority on whether I am getting what I want. If we take this point seriously, we can see that we have not really moved forward from the smiley-face-feeling conception of happiness. Happiness is still just a state I am in that I report on: getting what I want, rather than feeling good, but still a state, namely a state of having my desires fulfilled.

Both the smiley-face and desire-satisfaction accounts of happiness, despite their current popularity, especially among social scientists, turn out to conflict with two other surprisingly deep and far-reaching convictions about the meaning of happiness, convictions which emerge readily in simple discussion. These are the thought that happiness has an essential connection with my life as a whole and the thought that happiness is an *achievement* on my part.

Why should I even bother thinking about my life as a whole? It can seem, from a modern point of view, like an excessively cautious thing to do – prudential in the way that people are prudential who save and buy life insurance. But it is actually rather different, and it is something we all do all the time, since there are two perspectives which we take on our lives.

One is the linear perspective, from which we think of our lives as proceeding through time, one action being followed by another as we slowly get older.

The other perspective opens up as soon as we ask of any action, *Why* I am doing it. Why am I getting up? A number of different kinds of answers suggest themselves, but we readily recognize one kind that is *purposive*: I get up *in order to* get to my classes. Why am I going to my classes? In order to major in Spanish. Why am I majoring in Spanish? In order to get a job as a translator. The answers collected by this question will not all be on the same level of generality. Taking a course is a particular goal that gets its salience from some more general goal, such as having a satisfying career. Our goals are in this way *nested*.

One feature of this way of thinking that soon becomes clear is its capacity to *unify*. I cannot have as concurrent aims the ambition to be a great ballet dancer *and* the ambition to be a lieutenant in the Marines; I have to find a way to sequence these aims coherently. As this way of thinking reveals to me what my aims are, I realize that they are constrained by considerations of consistency, available time, resources, and energy. These constraints come from the fact that *my* aims are the aims I have in the only life I have to live. Confused or self-undermining aims force me to get clearer about my priorities and to sort out competing claims on my time and energy.

So thinking about the way one action is done for the sake of another leads seamlessly into thinking about my life in a nonlinear way, one we can call *global*. I may not leap right away into thinking of my life as a whole; I might start by considering smaller units circumscribing various phases of my life, such as my twenties or my life at university. But when large aims, typically associated with careers or self-fulfillment, come in, I have to move to thinking of my life as a whole – a whole given in terms of my

*Happiness
as
achievement*

goals and the way they fit together overall – rather than as mere duration through time.

This way of thinking, we should notice, strikingly refutes the initial supposition of a timid, over-prudent way of thinking about my life. Such a perspective would come from assuming that I already know, at least in outline, what will happen in my life, and respond to this cautiously. What we are concerned with here, by contrast, is an exploratory way of thinking about my life in which my plans are *shaping* and actively *organizing* what is going to happen in it.

Suppose I recognize this perspective and realize that what faces me is not just a series of actions trailing into the future, but a task, namely the task of forming my life as a whole in and by the way I act. I then have, even if in a vague and muddled way, a conception of my life as a whole and of the overall way my endeavors are shaping it – my *telos* as the ancients put it.

Does this get us to happiness? Aristotle famously said that everybody agrees that our *telos* is happiness. We, however, do not so readily come to this conclusion. Some respond at this point by denying that happiness is our overarching aim in life. Others accept Aristotle's point verbally, but trivialize it by taking happiness just to be whatever you want, thereby expelling from discussions of happiness serious concern with the formation of our lives.

It is important, however, to note that Aristotle at once goes on to add that agreement that our final or overarching end is happiness does not settle anything, since people disagree as to what happiness is. Some think it is pleasure, others virtue; unreflective people think it is money or status.

We can now see that we have made progress after all; for once we recognize, even if at an indeterminate level, that we have a final end, questions and problems about happiness now occupy exactly the right place. Coming up with the proper specification of our overall goal in living will make us happy. But before this is helpful for us, we need to know what happiness is.

Is it pleasure? We now know that the right answer to this question must recognize that happiness specifies not a transient feeling, but our final end in a way that makes sense for us of the aims we pursue. Am I studying Spanish, ultimately, to get pleasure? We can see right away that if the answer is to be yes, then pleasure has to be explicated in a way that makes sense of its role as an aim I could have in studying Spanish as one way to shape my life. If this can be done, it will turn out to have little to do with smiley-face feeling; it will turn out to be a blander, Epicurean kind of pleasure.

We are on the right track, then, in looking for happiness in the search for the best way to live, the best way to understand our *telos*. Once we follow through this train of thought, we can see why the smiley-face-feeling and desire-satisfaction accounts were so hopeless. The issues that matter are issues about the living of our lives, not about feelings or desires. Once this is clear, we can avoid verbal disputes about whether happiness properly applies to feelings or to lives as a whole. We talk in terms of both; but the issues about happiness that concern us most are those that are formulated once we think about our lives in a global as well as a linear way.

Do we actually think about happiness in this way? Certainly a lot of our discourse implies it. When I wonder

whether winning the lottery will make me really happy, this is the point in mind; I am not wondering whether it will produce smiley-face feeling or give me what I want.

Discussion and debate about others' lives also makes clear to us that we are disputing about what happiness really is, and that this is a point about our lives and the ways these have been shaped. Two people may dispute whether their colleague ruined her life or not when she lost her job as a result of acting in accordance with her values. (She blew the whistle on corrupt practices, say.) One onlooker may say that she has ruined her prospects for happiness; now she is unemployed, and all her training and ambition will go to waste. The other may say that she would never have been happy had she not acted as she did; had she failed to live up to her values, her life would have been infected by hypocrisy. This is a dispute about happiness that could not be settled by reports about her feelings or desire-satisfaction. It is a substantive dispute about what we are seeking overall in life, and resolving it requires substantive discussion of our values and priorities.

Why does this sort of discourse not spring more prominently to the minds of social scientists when they embark on happiness research? It seems to be at least as prominent in the way people think and talk about happiness as are thoughts about feelings. It does not, of course, fit into the framework that conceives of happiness as subjective – and perhaps this should lead us to doubt the assumption that we have a well-grounded idea of 'subjective' happiness and that that assumption is the proper place to start our investigation of happiness. For, as we have seen, we do think of happiness as something to be achieved, or not, by living a life of one kind or another;

and we do think of this issue as one to be discussed in terms of values and ideals. And this does not look 'subjective' in any of the many ways in which that term is understood.

Is happiness really an achievement, though, in the way suggested? Suppose we agree that I aim at happiness by specifying my aims in life overall, and agree, further, that this is something for which competing accounts are available, so requiring choice and direction on my part. Still, is happiness itself aptly to be thought of as a matter of the direction I give my life?

We are used to theories that take happiness to be a *state* – a positive one, of course. On this view, shared by consequentialists of all kinds, aiming to be happy just is aiming to get myself into this positive state. In principle, somebody else could do the work for me, and if the work is laborious it is hard to see why I would insist on doing it myself.

But could happiness be a state of myself that I (or if I am lucky, others) bring about in myself? Here it is relevant to mention a discussion with students that I have had many times, but which I first borrowed from a former student, Kurt Meyers.

Kurt asked the students in his business ethics class, mostly business school students, what they thought a happy life consisted of. All mentioned material things like a large salary, a nice house, an SUV, and so on. Well, he said, suppose you find in the mail tomorrow that an unknown benefactor has left you lots of money, so that these material things are now yours for the having. Would this make you happy? Overwhelmingly they said no (and this is uniformly what I have found also).

What this little thought experiment shows is that it was not really the materi-

*Happiness
as
achievement*

al things, the stuff, that they imagined would make their lives happy. Rather, they thought of a happy life as one in which they *earned* the money, *made* something of their lives so that these things were an appropriate reward for their effort, ambition, and achievement. Just having the stuff was not all they wanted.

This is a mundane enough example, yet it is surprisingly powerful when we take it seriously. How many people really think that stuff alone will make them happy, regardless of how they obtain it? That you could be made happy by money or an SUV, regardless of how you got them? The thought extends readily to other things that have been taken to be objective measures of happiness in numerous studies. Am I made happy by being strong, healthy, intelligent, beautiful? By having an income at or above the average in my society? By having a reasonably high status in my society? Once we bear in mind the importance to us not just of having these things but of having them in one kind of life rather than another, we can see that these questions cannot sensibly be thought of as having yes or no answers. They open the discussion rather than tell us what we need to know to close it.

So we are not so far as we might think from the ancient thought that happiness is an achievement, even given the fact that our thoughts have got confused by the association of happiness with feelings. We do have the thought that happiness comes from living in some ways and not others, that it is not something that others can give you, either by giving you stuff or by getting you into a particular state. Too often these reflections have been ignored by the social sciences, and this has been something to regret, and the source of much of the disappointing state of happiness studies in that area.

One final objection is worth mentioning: it is that the idea of happiness as achievement is unrealistically high-minded.

We see all around us, it is claimed, people who do think of happiness as some kind of positive state, and who seem not to care greatly whether it is their own efforts which produce this state for them, or those of others. If this is a common way of thinking, is it not too idealistic to think of happiness as achievement?

To this the right response is, I think, that low expectations should not automatically lead us to lower our ideals. People have low expectations for a number of reasons – prominently, social conditions that have discouraged them from having higher ones. If someone does not think of himself as having much control over the shape his life can take, it is natural that he should not readily think of happiness as something *he* can achieve, and he may rest content with the notion that happiness is a state that others can just as well bestow. But this example does not show that happiness as achievement is a hopelessly ideal notion. As I have indicated, it does not take a lot of reflection to find it.

To show that eudaimonism is the right form for ethical theory to take would require more argument than I can provide here, but I hope to have shown at least that the notion of happiness as achievement which forms the center of such theories is already a part of our reflective lives.

In the meantime, it is worth redirecting our attention to what we actually think about happiness. We are faced with the point that we do think of happiness as an achievement in the way we live our lives: one subject to dispute and disagreement that we will need theories to clarify, never mind settle. And even this much shows us that philosophy has

more to contribute than social science has allowed, both in refocusing the study on the proper data and in giving it fruitful direction.

Smiley faces are fun as reward stickers in children's books, but they are no help in serious thought about happy lives. It is a pity that we need philosophers to point this out.

*Happiness
as
achievement*