

Happiness, Pleasure, and Satisfaction

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In *The Nature and Value of Happiness*, Christine Vitrano defines happiness as a mental state in which people feel satisfaction about how their lives are going (pp. 103-10).¹ As she notes, many competing theories of happiness are either broader or narrower than this. Some theories would permit cases that Vitrano does not count as part of happiness, and so are broader than her view. Others include additional necessary conditions for happiness that rule out cases Vitrano would count as happiness, and so are narrower than her view.

In my comments, I want to challenge Vitrano's account from the perspective of the broader theories. While I do not endorse hedonism as a complete theory of happiness, I will discuss a few cases of pleasure and satisfaction that seem to count as happiness but fall outside the bounds of Vitrano's definition. These are cases where people seem to be happy but are not feeling satisfaction in how their lives are going.

First, though, I want to mention two helpful methodological strategies that Vitrano uses in her book. The first is the distinction she draws between *happiness* and *well-being* (pp. 66-67). As Vitrano notes, there may be more to a good and fulfilling life than just happiness. This makes sense to me. The term "well-being" is often used to refer to whatever benefits a person or is in a person's self-interest. I believe that there are objective elements of well-being, such as meaningful knowledge and loving relationships, that are good for people even aside from their effects on happiness. The main point, though, is that this is not the focus of Vitrano's book. As she explains, the debate about well-being is distinct from the debate about happiness. Even if certain objective goods are worth pursuing for their own sake in life, this does not mean that they are needed for happiness. Since happiness seems to be at least one of the things worth pursuing in life, it is worth setting aside other debates and getting straight on what this involves, as Vitrano seeks to do in her book.

The other strategy I want to mention is Vitrano's appeal to people's everyday use of the word "happiness" as a constraint on our philosophical theories (pp. 2-3). I agree that this is a good strategy. For one thing, it helps to

¹ Christine Vitrano, *The Nature and Value of Happiness* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013).

keep philosophers' use of the term close to people's everyday usage, so as to avoid miscommunication. Second, as Vitrano notes, it affirms that everyday people and society as a whole possess important insights about happiness on which philosophers can draw. This does not mean that everyday views are beyond question or that there are not some non-standard uses of the word "happiness." Still, insofar as everyday people spend a lot of time talking about and pursuing happiness, it is reasonable to assume that they are at least in the ballpark of some real value. Like Vitrano, I will operate on this assumption and draw on people's everyday use of the word "happiness" in some of my arguments.

I will now turn to consider some possible cases of happiness that fall outside of Vitrano's definition and so challenge her theory. In doing this, I will raise the question of whether she should broaden her account of happiness to include these cases.

In her discussion of hedonism, Vitrano notes that some instances of pleasure should not count as cases of happiness. For example, she describes a person who is on a diet but craving a high-calorie piece of cake and who may be filled with guilt, anxiety, and frustration if he or she eats the cake (pp. 25-26). In this case, I agree that the pleasant taste of the cake is not enough to count as happiness. Here, I agree that we should not even count this pleasant taste as a small piece of happiness that is outweighed by the unhappiness of the person's other feelings. Rather, small pleasures such as eating cake, chewing gum, hearing good news, or feeling sunshine are not enough to count as happiness at all if the person enjoying them is not sufficiently attentive to them or if, as in Vitrano's case, the person is weighed down by other negative feelings.

Vitrano explains her assessment of the dieting case by stating that "happiness appears to involve a more global attitude one has toward her life, an attitude that takes into consideration how one's immediate experiences fit into her life as a whole" (p. 26). However, I am not sure that this is correct. That is because *some* immediate experiences of pleasure do seem to be enough to constitute happiness, even if they do not involve a more global attitude toward one's life.

I am thinking, in particular, of cases where a pleasant experience fills the better part of a person's consciousness for a period of time. One example is a child opening birthday presents. There is typically an overflow of positive affect in this case, and many people would describe this as happiness. For example, many parents would say that they love seeing the happiness on their children's faces when they open birthday presents or think about which presents their children will be the happiest to receive.

There are cases where adults experience similar kinds of pleasure and call this happiness, too. For example, people may say that some of their happiest moments have been on the golf course, or at the movies, or at home playing with their children. These kinds of pleasant experiences are different from the way people feel when they reflect on their lives as a whole and are probably not the only kind of happiness. Still, they strike me as cases of

happiness. Part of their appeal seems to lie in the way these activities provide an escape from the concerns of everyday life and involve pleasant feelings that fill the better part of a person's consciousness, at least for a time.

Vitrano might respond by suggesting that her definition of happiness is actually satisfied in these cases, at least indirectly. She defines happiness as a mental state in which people feel good about how their lives are going, so she might suggest that people who are enjoying a round of golf or opening birthday presents will tend to view their lives as a whole more positively. As she says, "happiness is a mental state that is often influenced by one's experience of pleasure and pain and one's positive and negative attitudes" (p. 31). In this way, the pleasures I have described could at least count as important means to happiness.

Still, I do not think this is the best way to explain the cases I have described. I agree that a pleasant and relaxing afternoon can leave people feeling better about their finances, their relationships, and the other aspects of their lives. However, this does not seem to be the only way in which these pleasant experiences contribute to happiness. In addition to these feelings of life satisfaction, the specific feelings of delight, excitement, and relaxation that people feel in activities like golfing or opening birthday presents also seem to be a part of happiness. At least, this is how I would interpret these cases.

The example of children may be especially relevant. Children who are five or six do not think much about how their lives as a whole are going, but most people think that these children are still capable of happiness. In fact, some people think that children at this age are much happier than teenagers and adults precisely because they do not think much about their lives as a whole. This also suggests that there is some kind of happiness that does not require feelings of satisfaction about how one's life is going.

I do not endorse hedonism as a full theory of happiness. I believe that some minor pleasures do not involve happiness and that some cases of happiness do not involve the overflowing sense of pleasure that I have just described. However, I have identified some cases in which people seem to be happy on account of pleasure, even though they hold no attitudes at all toward their lives or these attitudes are not central to their experience. These examples put pressure on Vitrano's account of happiness from the perspective of greater broadness.

I can note that the core examples that Vitrano describes of life satisfaction also strike me as cases of happiness. People seem to be happy when they are satisfied with their present circumstances, optimistic about the future, and enjoying other forms of positive affect that accompany this (pp. 103-10). As a further point, though, I would like to consider some cases in which people take satisfaction in things other than their own lives. Vitrano describes her view as a life satisfaction theory and seems to require that people take satisfaction in the way that their lives are going in order to count as happy (pp. 103-10). But I wonder if we could broaden this view to include other kinds of satisfaction, where people feel good about the way others' lives

are going or about states of the world that they care about. These might be additional cases in which feelings of satisfaction can constitute happiness.

One case that comes to mind is the feelings that parents often have about their children's lives. If a child begins failing classes at school or is diagnosed with a serious illness, the child's parents may experience unhappiness. On the other hand, if the child's grades improve or the disease is cured, the parents are likely to feel an upsurge of happiness. Here, though, they seem to be taking satisfaction primarily in how their child's life is going, not in how things are going in their own lives. They are happy *that their child is doing well in school* or *that their child is healthy again*. Still, many people would classify these as paradigm cases of happiness.

Someone might suggest that the parents in these cases are really feeling satisfaction or dissatisfaction with some aspect of their own lives and that their happiness is still connected to their life satisfaction. If their child is failing classes, for example, parents may feel that their goal of being good parents is being frustrated, or worry about the inconveniences this will mean for them. More abstractly, they may be unhappy that their lives now include the unpleasant experience of watching their child fail classes. However, these do not seem to be the main sources of their unhappiness or the main objects of their concern. Rather, what these parents seem to be focused on, first and foremost, is how their child's life is going. It is their feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with this that primarily constitute their happiness or unhappiness in these cases.

In addition to the well-being of children and other loved ones, people can take satisfaction or dissatisfaction in other states of affairs, as long as they have an emotional investment in them. For example, a passionate supporter of President Obama may have felt great happiness when he was reelected in 2012. Or a long-time fan of the Boston Red Sox may have been overjoyed when the Red Sox won the World Series in 2004 after an eighty-six year championship drought. In these cases, the people in question felt emotions of relief, joy, and contentment that a certain event occurred. These emotions filled their consciousness and affected the rest of their feelings, at least for a time. Significantly, some supporters of President Obama—or the Red Sox—may have been more concerned about the outcome of the election or the playoffs than about their own well-being, at least for a few critical days. Still, the satisfaction these people felt seems to count as happiness. For example, it is natural to ask whether a person was happy about Obama's reelection or to talk about the happiness that could be seen on people's faces in Boston on the day after the World Series victory.

Vitrano discusses some similar cases in her discussion of attitudinal hedonism. She states that there are some distant events that please people but have no effect on their happiness. She notes, for example, that people might be pleased about the impeachment of a corrupt politician or the selection of Brazil to host the 2014 World Cup but that these feelings may have no effect on people's happiness (p. 29). I agree that this can be true in some cases. It does seem, for example, that some events are just too small or emotionally

distant from a person to affect his or her happiness. This is similar to the case of minor pleasures, such as chewing gum, which may have no effect on a person's happiness. Still, it seems to me that feelings of satisfaction are enough to constitute happiness if they fill the better part of a person's consciousness for a time. This could be true even if this satisfaction is taken in something other than how a person's own life is going.

Vitrano explains her stance on the example of people who are satisfied by the impeachment of a corrupt politician, or the decision to hold the World Cup in Brazil. In this context, she notes that "a person can have a positive attitude toward many things that are not important, valuable, or significant enough to affect her happiness" (p. 29). I agree that positive experiences must have a certain kind of significance in order to count as part of happiness, but I think I disagree with Vitrano about how this significance should be construed. Her strategy, I think, is to focus on *the object of a person's satisfaction* and use this to separate cases of happiness from other cases. In particular, she requires that a person take satisfaction in some aspect of his or her own life in order to count as happy.

In contrast, I am drawn to use *the quality and structure of the feelings a person experiences* to separate cases of happiness from other cases. In particular, I am inclined to use the word happiness for cases where positive feelings such as pleasure, excitement, joy, relief, and contentment fill a significant part of a person's consciousness for a period of time. This would include cases where these feelings are the result of pleasant activities or of satisfaction about a person's own life or some other event. In some ways, the view I am suggesting is similar to that of Daniel Haybron, who relates at least a significant part of happiness to moods, and talks about different kinds of positive affect that can form part of happiness, such as joy, engagement, and attunement.²

There are some similarities between the view I am suggesting and Vitrano's own account. In light of this, I am not sure whether she would consider my comments to fit with the general spirit of her account or to be a more serious departure from it. One similarity is that on both views—whether happiness requires life satisfaction or can involve satisfaction from some other sources—happiness is an internal mental state and we can expect people to be good judges of their own happiness (p. 107). In neither case does it require a special kind of knowledge or virtue (pp. 33-69, 83-101, and 113-16).

Furthermore, as on Vitrano's view, the kind of happiness I have described would ordinarily affect a person's whole psychology when it is present, be perceptible to others, and endure for at least a moderate period of time (pp. 27-28). People look and feel happy when they are enjoying a relaxing round of golf or have just received good news about their kids or an emotionally meaningful sports victory. They smile, walk with confidence, and

² Daniel Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

are less likely to be rude or short-tempered toward others. Furthermore, this happiness typically fades away over a period of days or hours, not in a few seconds, in the way that a minor pleasure such as chewing gum can abruptly end.

Finally, the kind of happiness I have described can be pursued using some of the same recommendations from the Stoic tradition that Vitrano presents. She notes that people who are dissatisfied with their lives can either work harder to achieve their goals or adjust their expectations to better fit their circumstances (pp. 132-34). The same could be said of many of the cases of happiness I have described. A person who finds happiness on the golf course can either find time to golf or learn to take pleasure in other activities, such as tennis or card games. Similarly, parents who are unhappy with their child's grades in school can either take steps to help their child or become less emotionally invested in this aspect of their child's life.

Overall, Vitrano's book provides an engaging survey of several theories of happiness, as well as a strong defense of her own view. While I have suggested a possible revision to this view, I also appreciate the arguments she has presented for it and the other ways in which her book helps to clarify and advance our current understanding of happiness.

