Life and the Pursuit of Happiness

[Essay]

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Abstract

Humans strive for some kind of happiness in a world that is not conducive to it. As each human life is a collection of random thoughts, choices, experiences, memories, and their interpretations, a permanent state of vague happiness does not exist, since everything is temporary. The pursuit of happiness, or the pursuit of anything in life, does not lead to a permanent state or thing. One can only experience moments of contentment in life. Some measure of temporary sense of perceived happiness is achieved not by pursuing it but by recognizing meaningful moments that could be missed during the pursuit itself.

The pursuit of happiness is fruitless, as it is the pursuit after something that does not have a clear definition or any permanence. Whatever meaning is given to the concept of happiness, its pursuit is one of the main themes of life. But happiness is not a permanent state of being; it is only a temporary state of mind. But the dilemma of the pursuit of happiness is that one can miss the meaningful moments in life, in which random chance plays a major role in creating these moments, if one is not open to them and is only preoccupied with an undefined state of happiness sometime in the indeterminate future.

Human life seems to be a drama to those who are in constant anticipation of the future, but in retrospect life often appears as melodrama and even farce. This melodrama is full of pretense and exaggerated self-importance and emotions, masked by some insightful ideas and efforts to change the world. Set against the background of the immeasurable universe and the limited understanding of reality, a fragmented and finite life appears to be a cosmic accident. And yet many believe that this life has an important role, although in reality human efforts have an insignificant impact on the universe. The tension between this perceptual illusion and reality inevitably results in suffering as reality shatters the illusion. Except for the pain and struggle for survival of the sick and disabled

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and vulnerable, human reality is filled with illusions and seemingly important pursuits of self-realization and exploration against the largely unknowable reality. In the grand cosmic drama, humans often mistakenly believe that they are the central characters and thus turn drama into melodrama. This melodrama includes the pursuit of happiness and the quest for immortality, gods and religious practices, unanswered prayers and unfulfilled desires, romantic illusions and tormented characters, and existential suffering and boredom. All these not only shape what is perceived as life, but also contribute to a massive attempt at distraction from the reality of human existence in an indifferent universe. Modern society is so permeated with melodrama that one can no longer recognize it as such, and this is what makes human life so tragic.

Willingly or unwillingly, humans substitute the uncertainty of their daily lives with melodrama, which is easier to handle than the real drama of life. Thus, life becomes an ordeal, in which one marches towards the inevitable under various illusions and music genres that offer a fertile ground for melodrama to unfold. For most of the waking hours, the mind is preoccupied with thoughts and illusions about life based on hopes and desires. Humans also strive for happiness as an antidote to suffering in life.

Humans do not have a clear understanding of the purpose of their lives. It appears that one has a myriad of choices, and one could have had a different life if circumstances were different. But most outcomes in life are not under full individual control, and the result is often a matter of chance rather than choice or design. In the end, there is no satisfactory conclusion to the life lived. The basic questions about the nature of reality and the meaning of life are never resolved.

The dilemma of life is that the individual strives to find some meaning and happiness in it while being immersed in the absurd world, and thus this requires an inquiry into the meaning of the absurd world. Such a perplexing existence in an endless struggle, accompanied by the ever-present unknown and uncertainty, demands adaptation through a myriad of illusions and self-delusions that are necessary to go on with life in a constant tension between the probabilities and desires, on the one hand, and outcomes and disappointments, on the other.

Throughout life, high hopes and expectations dominate human aspirations. The concepts of meaning and happiness are constantly present in the background of life, but the reality and details of existence are perceived in terms of discrete moments. Real life consists of a myriad of these random moments, perceptions, and choices, which are constantly fleeting into memory and

continuously analyzed. Thus, what one calls life becomes an interpretation of random events. But it is hard to account how all these moments get integrated into abstract concepts of meaning and happiness. The metaphor that may describe the assembly of those moments is that of a digital image composed of pixels that provide the form and composition of the image. Looking at a small area composed of several pixels may not describe much, but a greater number of those pixels develop into a specific image.

The question is, what is happiness and how to define and achieve it? This concept is linked to another ambiguous concept, that of the good life, which is often associated with well-being or satisfaction with life. The good life can in principle be associated with the state of greatest happiness. But happiness is a cognitive state; it is a subjective state of mind. The association of the good life with happiness is dubious. For a life to be good, it must be meaningful and worthwhile and have positive values and effects. But having virtues and leading a meaningful life do not always ensure happiness or pleasure. In the end, one must distinguish between the good life and the worthwhile life and happiness, as they mean different things for different individuals. Furthermore, happiness is localized in time, as it is a fleeting state of mind, whereas the good and meaningful life is extended in time, since it also relates to the past and the future, and thus it is valued as a whole.

Natural language adds its own ambiguity, as words typically cannot fully articulate all the details and intricacies of human experiences. In addition, words can lose their exact meaning in translation from one language to another, and some words or concepts, such as "the good life" and "happiness" and "well-being" and "pleasure", have multiple meanings and are often used interchangeably, leading to possible misinterpretation of the intended meaning. In general, broad concepts such as "happiness" are rather vague, as they include many different emotions and states of mind.

Questions of the good life and happiness have preoccupied many thinkers for centuries. Each theory of happiness is shaped by the assumptions that underlie it and by the respective cultural and social contexts of the time. These include the prevailing values of the society. Thus, in the absence of any external reference or guide, differences in views and disagreements are inevitable. While in general the concept of happiness is relative, the individual's desires and circumstances are much more complex and changeable, so not all of them will fit into narrow categories that any theory of happiness can offer.

Early concepts of "the good life" were formulated by ancient Greek philosophers. Socrates, whose thoughts and ideas are mostly known through the writings of his associates and especially from Plato's book *The Apology*, emphasizes the importance of intellectual virtues as the most valuable of all things. The good life is a life of inner contemplation and inquiry. According to Socrates, happiness does not depend on external factors but how they are used, and living a virtuous life is preferable because it leads to a happier life. In *The Republic*, Plato relates the good life to such virtues as moderation, justice, courage, wisdom and knowledge, which are necessary for cultivating a good character and a balanced lifestyle. But Plato is suspicious of pleasure, which he links with the illusion that prevents one from distinguishing between appearance and reality.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle outlines the notions of virtue, happiness, and the good life; and he concludes that humans have a natural desire for knowledge, God, happiness, and society, and the good life is one that satisfies them fully. For Aristotle, happiness is not pleasure or having material things, but it is about self-fulfillment and living in accordance with virtue; furthermore, happiness is not a temporary state but a goal in life. Aristotle states that although virtue is a necessary component of the happy life, it alone is not sufficient, since it cannot guarantee full happiness that also depends on various external circumstances, such as physical and financial health and having a supportive family. According to Aristotle, virtues are acquired through the Golden Mean between two extremes or two vices: that of excess and that of deficiency. The mean is a rational calculation based on each individual's need and situation. The principle of the mean does not apply to the intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and knowledge, which were to be maximized. According to Aristotle, intellectual virtue offers the greatest happiness.

Epicurus, the founder of the Epicurean School of thought, argues that the goal in life is to achieve happiness and most satisfying life includes simple pleasures, tranquility, moderation, and intellectual contemplation. Whereas unsatisfied material desires are a source of unhappiness, natural desires are easily satisfied. Thus, one should refrain from excessive and vain desires, such as wealth and power and fame, which have no natural limits and are hard to satisfy. This removes the stress and worry of expectation and possible failure to fulfill these desires, and thus results in peaceful and happy life. According to Epicurus, mental pleasure was superior to physical pleasure, and the true

happiness comes from inner peace of mind and not from external things. He considered it best to avoid politics, which is the source of corruption and stress and unhappiness, and to pursue the good life within a small community of friends. Epicurus also cautions against worrying about things one cannot control, and especially about death.

In contrast to the Epicureans, who emphasized pleasure as the goal in life, the Stoics place the highest importance on reason, self-control, and the virtues of wisdom, justice, moderation, and courage for achieving happiness. One of the important principles of Epicureanism related to happiness is the need to measure pleasure and pain. The issue of measurement of happiness is currently of great interest, as it also influences public policy.

Some thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer were rather pessimistic about the possibility of achieving lasting happiness. As Kant argues in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the concept of happiness is so indeterminate that one can never clearly know what the individual truly desires to attain in life. According to Kant, one cannot articulate what happiness is, as it is an experiential concept that can be influenced by a myriad of factors specific to each individual. Kant distinguishes between sensible and intelligible happiness. While sensible happiness relates to seeking pleasure through desires, intelligible happiness is related to reason. According to Kant, as happiness depends on external circumstances, there is too much ambiguity in defining an individual's happiness, making it incompatible with morality. For Kant, happiness is virtuous if it is based on one's duty and moral law, rather than being an end in itself.

According to Schopenhauer, life is full of suffering, happiness is an illusion, and the best one can do is not to pursue happiness but to minimize suffering. Human suffering is the result of endless desires, most of which cannot be satisfied, and those that are fulfilled are only temporary. Schopenhauer also advocates self-sufficiency, since external sources of perceived happiness cannot be sustained, as they are subject to many variables. He was influenced by Buddhist teachings related to the role of desires in human suffering, and believed that suffering can be reduced by limiting desires. This is a sort of minimalist view, as it is understood at present.

The Enlightenment brought new ideas and theories, including those related to the concept of happiness. Ideas and theories related to the human nature, such as those developed by John Locke and David Hume, inspired Jeremy Bentham

to develop his ethical theory. In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham advanced the Greatest Happiness Principle, which is the main tenet of Utilitarianism and which evaluates things on the basis of the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The principle of utility estimates happiness in terms of the greatest amount of pleasure against the minimum amount of pain. In response to the Kantian arguments on happiness and morality, Bentham introduced a method for measuring pleasure and pain produced by different actions and experiences. The criteria for measuring happiness or pleasure include, for example, intensity, duration, certainty, proximity, and extent. The extent represents the basic tenet of utilitarianism: the greatest good for the greatest number of people. According to Bentham, this principle allows to determine what is good and to make personal decisions by examining the consequences of choices. Furthermore, on a communal level, this principle provides a measure of welfare in society. Bentham's theory is referred to as Act Utilitarianism, as individual actions are judged on the basis of pleasure against pain.

John Stuart Mill amended utilitarianism by distinguishing between higher pleasures, such as knowledge and intelligence and creativity, and lower pleasures, such as satisfying bodily functions. According to Mill, higher pleasures are more valuable, as they set humans apart from animals. Thus, Mill considers happiness as something more substantial and lasting than just simple pleasures. For attaining happiness with the best consequences, Mill also proposes to establish basic moral rules that must be followed by everyone. Thus, an action is considered morally right if it follows rules whose observance would produce the greatest good. This theory is referred to as Rule Utilitarianism.

According to Viktor Frankl, happiness is closely linked to the search for meaning in life. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl concludes that satisfaction and fulfillment in life arise not from the pursuit of happiness, but as a result of the pursuit of meaning in life, or something greater than oneself. For Frankl, finding some meaning in life is the key to happiness. In this context, finding meaning in life requires transcending the self, whereas finding happiness puts the self first and in the center of life.

For Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the creative state of "flow", which is complete immersion in a challenging activity requiring skill, such as art or work, is the key to happiness. During the flow experience, the mind is so absorbed in a specific activity that one transcends oneself and acts effortlessly, with

heightened concentration and awareness and creative thinking. For such a state of flow, the activity must be voluntary and fulfilling, with motivation and happiness arising from within the individual, and with an optimal balance between the challenge of the activity and the skill of the individual.

In spite of the myriad possibilities open to humans, practical options available to each individual are limited. Throughout life, the human mind is preoccupied with everyday living, but many events and situations are beyond one's control. The individual perception of happiness may vary and relate to such factors as experiences, needs, circumstances, and beliefs. Happiness can arise from meeting basic needs of life, or the absence of suffering, or having meaning in life, or having wealth and comfort. However, unless these notions of happiness are minimalist in every sense, the dilemma of the pursuit of happiness is that typically human desires are endless, as nothing is ever good enough. In life, there are always things that can never be achieved, and all that can be realized is partial and temporary. This can lead to permanent dissatisfaction and inability to seize happy moments. In this context, minimalism is an important concept, as it reduces unnecessary complexities and distractions of life. Minimalism helps to maintain a balanced perspective on what is essential in life, and it prevents external factors to dominate one's sense of happiness; and it also harmonizes individual expectation and satisfaction levels with the realities of life.

An important question is, what is the main source of happiness – experiences or material objects? Some research indicates that experientialism, or using experiences to gain pleasure, seems to contribute more to happiness. Striving for material wealth and fame does not necessarily result in happiness, as they are fleeting and impermanent.

The current theories and research on happiness are based on subjective and objective aspects of happiness and its quantitative analysis, positive psychology, well-being and life satisfaction. These are overlapping concepts that include many different ideas and views from different fields of study, and thus it is hard to define them in satisfactory terms acceptable to everyone. They signify different things to different people. The notions of the good life and happiness and well-being are highly subjective, as each individual has different experiences and perspectives in life. Some qualitative data is accumulated by asking individuals to evaluate their state of happiness or well-being. However, such self-assessment of happiness can be highly distorted. Quantitative

measurements of any characteristic related to happiness and well-being are dependent on a great number of both known and unknown factors. Some of these are hidden in the subconscious mind and others are hard to articulate accurately. Therefore, no meaningful comparison of self-descriptions of happiness between individuals can be made.

The definition of happiness, as any other related concept, is elusive since it is a subjective and individual experience and a state of mind, and thus it can differ greatly from person to person. This makes it very difficult to establish an objective standard for measuring happiness. The calculation of happiness is beyond any reasonable method and precision required to be truly scientific. The crucial question is whether happiness or any other state of mind can be measured reliably, as subjective feelings and human memories are not sufficiently dependable as evidence. Not all the details and levels of various experiences can be recorded, and what is remembered may also be biased or masked by inauthenticity. In addition, the stored memories are constantly reconstructed with each recall. Misinterpretations can arise from preconceived expectations and selective memory that is typically augmented with information available in memory to form a coherent picture. This may result in a biased interpretation of happiness. Some, however, think that the objective evaluation of happiness, independent of memory recall biases, is possible. Daniel Kahneman and his co-workers have proposed to accumulate individual reports on happiness as it is experienced in the moment in order to measure instant utility and integrate such momentary occurrences of pleasure or pain, experienced in real time, over a certain period for the assessment of happiness. Thus, this would avoid relying on memory and its recollection. This, however, still involves a self-assessment, which must be truthful and accurate and unbiased to be reliable.

One may think that it is a great challenge for a moral human being to achieve the good life in an immoral world. However, morality is a human construct based on established values, behaviors, beliefs, traditions, social requirements, and concepts. But nature is neither moral nor immoral; it is neither malicious nor caring; it has no sense of right or wrong; and it owes humans neither happiness nor unhappiness. Nature is indifferent to human concerns and values. Such concepts as morality, virtue, sense of justice, and happiness are unique to humans. These concepts have evolved in a society as a set of norms for achieving some measure of harmony within it.

Irrespective of the various meanings and interpretations attached to the concepts and theories of happiness, in reality they offer no measurable quantities. Without any tangible measure of happiness, any theory remains only a theory, a conjecture, which is hard to verify. Nevertheless, life in the pursuit of happiness is riddled with the anxiety of how to attain a state of happiness, which cannot be defined, but can only be perceived or experienced in some moments or series of moments. The pursuit of happiness is an escape from the present, from the state filled with uncertainty and anxiety; and as any other state of mind, this elusive state of perceived happiness is only temporary.

The pursuit of happiness implies that such a state exists, and one just has to pursue and attain it, although the concept of happiness is vague and one can never clearly know what happiness is and how to achieve it. One may experience more satisfaction in life not by pursuing happiness, but by searching for some measure of meaning in life, without which life would be pointless.

In the final analysis, life is not about achieving lasting happiness, as the world is not conducive to it. Life is a series of moments and memories. Some of these have to be endured and others, which are more agreeable, are perceived or interpreted as good. The good life is often defined not by experiences but by recollections and interpretations of those experiences in a specific context. As these recollections are typically fragmented and biased, the good moments are recalled more frequently than the bad moments. One can never achieve lasting happiness in life, but one can be open to seizing meaningful moments in it. In the end, all these moments, perceived as good and bad, turn into minutes and hours and days and life itself.