

PHILOSOPHY OF HAPPINESS: A BASIC PRIMER

Transcript of a Video Presentation by Martin Janello

Hi, my name is Martin Janello. Welcome to the Philosophy of Happiness channel, where we discuss how we can improve our happiness. I have no idea whether you in particular are in need of help in this area. But I have never met or heard of anybody who is perfectly happy all the time. So we all can more or less benefit from improving our happiness. Overall, the emphasis seems to be on more in this regard. Just look at the statistics of misery in the world. How many are tormented by poverty, disease, hunger, oppression, injustice, or violence. How many are unhappy with themselves, their work, relations, or general situation. How many take drugs or immerse themselves in other diversions to numb their pain. Then imagine all the negative experiences behind or beyond the statistics. Stories of frustrated, forlorn, tired, regretful, fearful, angry, or desperate people, hurting from disorientation, miscalculation, negligence, or abuse.

I submit to you that solving individual problems with happiness is a requisite for solving the problems of the world. This is because these problems are mostly caused by individuals' lack of care for themselves or others. We cannot control the readiness of others to improve their happiness. They or conditions they create may still hold sway over us. But we can improve our happiness to the extent of our control. And as we as individuals get a handle on our happiness, the impact of this in the world will reflect back on us.

To achieve all this, we need to make certain we live a life that is true to us. True to our reality and to our reflected ambitions. This is of utmost importance because we cannot be happy if we do not live our truth. Living lies, we waste our life and we hurt our conscience. There are many incentives and pressures to not live our truth. Causes that may falsely be advertised to us or imagined by us for the happiness they can bring. Causes that make us presume we can draw advantage from them for deferred enjoyment. Causes that make us believe we need to endure them to secure our existence or happiness. Such incentives and pressures hold more of an edge on us if we do not know what our truth is. But regardless of whether we know our truth or to what extent we know it, not living according to it is bound to become evident to us.

If we live according to our own pretenses or someone else's directions, we will sooner or later detect their incompatibility and ineffectiveness. Their denial of our nature and its related purpose aggravates us on an existential level. They divert us from following our true desires. They make us invest precious resources in activities that cannot make us happy or as happy as we could be if we lived our truth. And the more and longer we are entangled in the fake life they champion, the more difficult and painful it becomes to extract ourselves. But our limited lifetime urges us to fill it with meaning. This pressure increases as we inescapably advance toward its end. Our greatest tragedy is not having lived according to our genuine intent. And with every minute we ignore, suppress, or fail to form our intent, we contribute to this tragedy.

Understanding this source of our happiness and unhappiness then forms a vital concern, as does holding on to our truth or reverting to it. Living our truth may not always be possible. We may sometimes have to give in or compromise as a tactic to protect our happiness or potential of it. But overall, the satisfaction from living our truth is more precious than life itself. This is because a wasted life is meaningless to us. It fills us with regret, frustration, anger, and despair for which we can only hope to compensate if we recover and advance our meaning in time. We derive this meaning from the realization and expression of our true needs and wishes. We become conscious of them and what they mean to us by the happiness we draw from their anticipation, pursuit, and fulfillment. Happiness is then an indicator of meaning, of living true to our self. But in our mind, these concepts are inseparable. We would not recognize our true self and the meaning it generates without accompanying happiness or its absence. Because it provides the ultimate emotional attraction and most immediate experience of our truth, happiness matters to us supremely.

This is why deep consideration of our happiness and its pursuit can greatly benefit us, and if only to assure us we are on the right track. As all worthwhile undertakings, our consideration must begin with a look at how things are. This review is crucial so we can properly conduct ourselves regarding our conditions and effectively influence them to our liking. We might then ask ourselves a few basic questions regarding our status, like: How happy are we? How much do we know about making and keeping us happy? How is the application of such knowledge going? And how much are we improving our knowledge or its application?

We rarely ask these questions, and much less ask them systematically. Not because we do not recognize their importance. But pressing chores, obligations, and looming concerns have us glad to just keep abreast of them in the now. We do have regrets, hopes, and dreams. Yet often, these are not well enough defined to form a concrete concept of a future life. And we frequently do not have a concerted approach on how to make this desired life happen. Thus, we may be unsure about our ideals and whether they are feasible.

Such issues do not keep many of us mired by indecision. We work with what we can grasp and try to move in the direction of our ambitions. We formulate ideas and plans we believe or hope might make or keep us happy. And we try to implement them as well as we can in our personal and surrounding circumstances. Often, these circumstances seem to dictate or confine how we live and where we venture. To the extent of our remaining discretion, we may try to address insecurities about what we want or how to go about it as affairs present themselves. And even if we have a good idea regarding a concern, we may not be good at reconciling it or its pursuit with other concerns. Most of us seem uncertain how to address the weight of our circumstances and deficiencies in fathoming or affecting our existence, and many look for advice.

They do not have to look far. There is a great variety of sources peddling ideas of how to be happy, or just using the concept of happiness as marketing ploy. While rampant offerings and demand for advice confirm the importance of happiness, overuse and abuse of the term have confused it and yet made it deceptively overfamiliar. Such trivialization has discouraged serious reflection of the underlying existential concept. A majority of us have become resistant, rolling their eyes or scoffing whenever happiness is mentioned. I am not immune to this sentiment and feel embarrassed every time I use the word, even after years of publishing about it. I also realize that prominently using this word places me and my work at risk of being ridiculed and dismissed right out of hand. But I also know that a deeper consideration of happiness is far too important for us, and for humanity, to let these humiliations keep me from talking and writing about it. In fact, the trivialization of happiness makes my pointing to its vital functions even more necessary.

Understanding this mission requires looking at the nature of happiness. Happiness is complex because it involves the entirety of our subjective and objective reality. All we encounter, sense, think, feel, undergo, or undertake will likely influence our happiness. For our entire life, we are occupied with reaching out and holding on to happiness in ever-changing personal and surrounding conditions. And we must do so aware that the happiness we achieve is unstable by its nature and threatened to be devoured by unhappy events.

Acknowledging this complexity is unpopular with some audiences because it implies that a broad diversity of efforts is and will remain necessary. And we may not be able to meet some and maybe a great number of our goals despite all our efforts. Many of us feel overwhelmed, intimidated, or downright frightened at this prospect. We would rather hear about a few simple recipes that can propel us to, and keep us in, a happy state, or even better have someone else promise to do our work. Acknowledging the complexity of happiness is also unpopular with presenters of happiness propositions. It proves their ideas deficient or small and stands in the way of influencing audiences as they wish. It places them at odds with a populace that prefers and is accustomed to easy, quick, and foolproof solutions. And it creates for them competitive disadvantages compared to others who cater to these demands. This alignment of wishes has inhibited deep and broad discussion of happiness and is keeping many of us from following the light of their truth.

Deficiencies and distortions in the exploration of happiness are not limited to its popularized treatments. Theories of happiness in philosophy and other sciences also try to condense the human experience into manageable explanations that imply how people should live. Their conclusions regularly fall into either of two extremes: One position argues that happiness is too capricious or fleeting to much make sense of it, value it, or put effort into securing it. The other advocates that happiness can be pared down to following some principles and resulting directives. Both views capitulate to a seeming impossibility of defining and pursuing happiness on its own terms. Their inferences discourage or disenfranchise us from straightening out our mind and way of life. We either give up or give in to them. Neither does us justice because they contaminate the substance and function of our happiness with how they see the world or want it to be.

My statements about popular or academic approaches toward happiness may appear overly harsh. Surely, we can find some propositions in them that assist our happiness. That may be so. Hardly any theory about happiness is 100% wrong. And a portion of works set forth some agreeable basics. Only, these are without exception commonsense ideas. It might be good to see them reflected. But obviously, stating them is not enough. This is why most sources I consulted expound on happiness in the first place. But after many years of formal and informal studies, I found their claims of adding value misleading or otherwise deficient. This motivated me to reconstitute the concept of happiness from the ground up according to its sources. I felt compelled to undertake this since all the theoretical and practical constructs about happiness I reviewed proved ultimately not only unhelpful but harmful. They play off and into the bewilderment of audiences, either confirming it or using it to back their own opinions and objectives. By proposing agendas according to their truths they suppress or conceal ours. That some in their audience share their views does not make these objectively applicable. Nor does consensus on broad applicability in some aspects warrant adoption of others. Judging this and possibly finding alternatives that work for us better comes down to sensing, thinking, feeling, and acting for ourselves. But this reflects us back on our insecurities that made us look for advice in the first place. How can we resolve this bind? The answer has been hidden by us and from us in plain sight: Our innate sense of happiness equips us to cut through apparent complexities of life.

Saying this often evokes immediate objections that everybody has a different sense of happiness and that we might enjoy conduct that hurts others or even ourselves. Both these statements are correct. But they resolve themselves as objections by pointing toward two fundamental insights about happiness. One is that humans share but also differ in ideas of happiness depending on their dispositions and circumstances. And if they have the same ideas, they may compete with one another. The other insight is that our ideas of happiness must be reflected and harmonized in their totality to be of maximum benefit for us. If we act on a whim without consideration of all consequences, we risk that some of them will hurt our happiness.

This requisite of comprehensive consideration means that we must reconcile our attitudes and conduct, not only with our immediate concerns but also concerns reflecting on us from our surroundings. Although the benefits of such a requirement are irrefutable, it significantly defines and confines our objectives and pursuits. To the extent we do not appreciate its benefits, it seems an imposition on our needs and wishes that distracts from happiness we otherwise could derive. This makes us prone to contest reactions to our overreaching. Conversely, we can be subject to overreaching by others due to their lack of self-regulation. When we look for protections from mutual overreaching, it bears recalling that the basis for reconciliation is optimization of our happiness. To reliably enable it, we must concede to others an optimization of their happiness to the same extent. Reconciliation issues only arise in case of overreaching. Thus, not all we do must be reconciled. We each keep a zone within which we can define and pursue happiness as we wish.

Given our particularities and experiential individuality, each of us must undertake this work for ourselves. Others may have ideas based on observations of us. But ultimately, only we can experience the entirety and nuances of how we feel and emotional causes. Even if others could trace this on an intellectual level,

they would lack our emotional impressions in their production and result. We must generally participate in creating circumstances and events to make us feel happy about them. Favorable happenstances may give us some satisfaction, at least if we believe we deserve them. We may also experience happiness by proxy through others. But fundamentally, happiness is a rewarding emotion we earn by our behavior. Its function is to motivate us into beneficial conduct, just as unhappiness is to deter us from deleterious conduct. We may describe this polarity as our compass for navigating life. Our commonalities provide a unified field that orients this compass toward objectives of human happiness generally. But our personal and surrounding conditions exert major influences on what makes us happy and how happy it makes us.

For these reasons, it would be presumptuous for anybody to tell us about the substance of our happiness. To be competent, such insights must develop and mature within each of us. Nor is it possible for anybody to make us happy in our stead. Others can contribute, and quite possibly contribute significantly. But many of these contributions may not come forth, and may not be appreciated by us, if we do not warrant them. And they are ineffective unless we know how to incorporate them into our life. Thus, our responsible and responsive engagement is necessary to make us happy. This holds true in conditions where some of our objectives or pursuits conflict with other immediate concerns of ours or with concerns reflected on us by surroundings. Others may suggest and assist in reconciliations. But ultimately, we must produce necessary insight in ourselves. External enforcement is not a good substitute. It will provoke resentment toward the curtailment of our pursuit of happiness as we deem right. We can only be happy with conflict resolutions if we recognize they optimize our happiness under the circumstances and we thus want them to exist. Unhappiness with a proposed resolution may indicate lack of consideration. But it may also indicate that a proposed resolution is not in our interest and direct us to look for better alternatives. Either situation requires due consideration and judgment. Compliance without the support of such insight and voluntary resolve is unstable and at risk of fading or breaking. This damages our happiness. And so would keeping a commitment against better insight. Our personal reconciliation before commitment is then indispensable.

Unfortunately, some of us are pathologically impeded from forging their happiness in these respects. Such individuals require professional assistance I cannot provide. I am exclusively addressing individuals who are not so impeded and therefore stand to benefit from the philosophical approaches I suggest. My work empowers them to develop their own philosophy, rather than falling victim to trials and errors, influences of others, or doubts about how much their happiness should even matter. It helps them find, understand, and implement the components and aggregate system of their happiness. Self-help assistance then in the true sense, it enables them to conceive, aspire to, and be their best self. Grasping what that is and why it matters, and taking prudent strides toward it, allows us to produce more and heightened happiness.

When we comprehend our happiness and act in accordance with it, a previously unexperienced degree and range of harmonization set in. Our mindfulness advances our wellbeing in the context of advancing the wellbeing of our human and nonhuman environment. Happiness then reveals itself as the universal organizational principle for thriving. When we participate in it, we benefit. If we exclude ourselves or work against it, we suffer. Observations of this principle may seem obvious to us even now. And after reflecting on it more, we may deem it odd we did not grasp its simplicity and universality before. But living according to it may well require that we more deeply register, think, and feel through our existence and its context. I believe this is the only way we can substantially and lastingly secure and improve our individual and collective wellbeing and existence. We spend all our efforts on the pursuit of happiness anyway. Why not avail ourselves of a considered, systematic approach that increases our chances and levels of succeeding?

I invite you to explore further how you might benefit from my work. The philosophyofhappiness.com site linked below contains a host of materials dedicated to this purpose. I thank you for your kind attention and welcome your comments. Until you see me again, please take care, be well, and spread happiness.