
THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

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The Ultimate Bull's Eye: Considering the Rational Search for Happiness

by Eric Verhine

Humans have rationally groped after happiness since the days of Aristotle. With their minds they have searched, and searched, believing that if they could simply “discover” what happiness is, they would be able to “own” it. Rarely has the value of happiness been questioned; rather, most, if not all, have assumed its value to be inestimable. The question that has ever seized the human mind is this: “What *is* happiness?” Not a trite formulation or an estimation of the value of happiness have humans sought, but an actual, concrete definition and explanation. What is the nature of happiness? Is it a way of life, a psychological state, a physical emotion, none of these – or all? Aristotle himself wrote about the essential nature of happiness, and, in one of his rare figurative moments, he wrote that knowing the nature of it is necessary in order that “like archers who have a mark to aim at,” humans may “hit upon what is right.” Thus began the two thousand year groping.

Theories in abundance have been concocted by philosophers. Plato proposed that happiness is the harmony of the soul; Aristotle, a life lived rationally in accord with excellence; for Epicurus, it is a life of minimum pain and sufficient pleasure; the harsh Stoics conceived of happiness as a mental state existing in a person who has accepted her determined fate; and for Herr Kant, happiness is the satisfaction of the sum total of all inclinations. Theologians, psychologists, poets, novelists, and others have also cooked up definitions for happiness: a life of service to God, a life of physical pleasure, a state of contentment. These thinkers have labored to find “the” notion of happiness and have used that definitive human tool, reason, in the search. Others, however, have asserted that a rational search for happiness only opens the door of one’s soul and invites unhappiness in; that is, reasoning about happiness only makes the concept vaguer, and one who meditates assiduously on happiness grows unhappy. Whether or not this is true, I am unsure, but for our purposes (those of the PDG), the statement undermines itself: the only way to arrive at it is via thinking and contemplation of one’s experience. So, of the aforementioned definitions of happiness, which is true? Is it A) Plato, B) Epicurus, C) None of the above? Obviously there is no consensus among humans: no one target is aimed at.

Having dived to these easy depths, reader, we must again turn our heads downward and plunge deeper. To ask how one’s worldview should affect one’s notion of happiness is the deeper task, requiring more breath and strength. Everyone has a worldview, which includes one’s assumptions, or presuppositions, about the basic nature of the world, the universe, and all reality. For instance, the atheistic-materialist assumes that all reality is material, including humans, which are mere bags of biological matter subject to the laws of chemistry and physics; according to the atheist, there are no spiritual or immaterial entities such as the soul or God. Further, the atheist assumes that reality is what it is by chance; this does not mean that reality is without necessity, but without order or purpose. Set against the atheist worldview is the worldview of the Christian theist. The Christian assumes that the world is composed of both material and immaterial things and that

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

A Philosophical Debate Group meeting is scheduled for **March 28, at 7:00 p.m.** Happiness, its nature and grounds, is the subject of the discussion. Anyone who is interested is invited to attend, including students and staff. The meeting will be held in the Honor's lounge in Gamble Hall.

On April 11, at 7:00 p.m., Dr. Weaver will give a lecture titled "History, Philosophy and the Search for Truth: a Ricoeurian Perspective." After the lecture, Dr. Weaver will answer questions pertaining to his subject. The meeting will be held in the Honor's lounge in Gamble Hall.

On April 25, at 7:00 p.m., Dr. Nordenhaug will give a lecture titled "A Nietzschean Perspective on the History of Philosophy." After the lecture, he will answer relevant questions. Dr. Nordenhaug has written the lecture during this semester, so for those in his class on Nietzsche, this will be a chance to find out what he has been struggling with in Nietzsche. However, all are welcome. The lecture will be given in the Honor's lounge in Gamble Hall.

Philosophy and Related Classes Offered This Summer:

Philosophy 2201: *Introduction to Philosophy*, Dr. Weaver

Philosophy 2251: *Introduction to Ethics*, Dr. Weaver

English 5000: *Postmodern Fiction*, Dr. Holcomb

Thanks to Dr. Theodore Nordenhaug!

The Philosophy Debate Group thanks Dr. Theodore Nordenhaug for his delightful lecture, "The Complete Idiot's Guide to a Liberal Education," which he gave on February 2.

Study Abroad!

There is still time to earn summer semester credits for Armstrong while in Greece or London. Visit <http://www.nt.armstrong.edu/flyer.htm> for more details.

it is purposely ordered by God. Now, to be consistent, both the Christian and the atheist must discover or create a conception of happiness that comports with their respective worldviews and assumptions about reality. The atheist must, it seems, admit that there is no such thing as a "correct" notion of happiness after examining the atheistic worldview; the concept of happiness is necessarily a creation of the human mind. No standard exists to justify any one conception of happiness against another – the concept becomes relative and arbitrary. That there can be no necessary conception of happiness on atheistic assumptions may or may not be a bad thing. I am simply trying to point out that it does not make much sense for an atheist to "search;" one should, rather, create. The Christian, however, has a better teleological foundation for a belief in a single, "correct" notion of happiness, but the Christian also has problems. The foremost problem is not one of metaphysical foundations, as I just said, but of discovering a notion of happiness that agrees with the Christian worldview as a whole. Adequate reflection on the Christian worldview is seriously lacking today. Most Christians seem to bend and shape Scriptural teachings so that those teachings affirm the very American happiness of looks, SUV's, and television.

Please do not misunderstand, in the previous paragraph I attempt not to defend one worldview and to defeat another, but simply to point out that to be consistent, one must examine what one's assumptions about the world and man imply about happiness, or belief in it. I have superficially examined only two worldviews, but many more exist. The point in doing so is to show that one's worldview must provide a ground on which one's target can logically stand.

If you are interested in this topic, please join the Philosophical Debate Group on March 28. Together, we will address this topic more thoughtfully.

Please send any questions or comments regarding this article or the PDG to:

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