Theories of Happiness: an overview

Philosophers have traditionally distinguished two accounts of happiness: hedonism, and the life satisfaction theory. Hedonists identify happiness with the individual’s balance of pleasant over unpleasant experience, in the same way that welfare hedonists do. (See, e.g., Brandt, 1979, 1989; Carson, 1978, 1981; Davis, 1981b, 1981a; Griffin, 1979, 1986; Kahneman, 1999; Mayerfeld, 1996, 1999; Sprigge, 1987, 1991.) The difference, of course, is that the hedonist about happiness need not accept the stronger doctrine of welfare hedonism; this emerges clearly in arguments against the classical Utilitarian focus on happiness as the aim of social choice. Such arguments tend to grant the identification of happiness with pleasure, but challenge the idea that this should be our primary or sole concern, and often as well the idea that happiness is all that matters for well-being. Also common are life satisfaction theories, which identify happiness with having a favorable attitude toward one’s life as a whole. This basic schema can be filled out in a variety of ways, but typically involves some sort of global judgment, an endorsement or affirmation of one’s life as a whole. This judgment may be more or less explicit, and may involve or accompany some form of affect. It may also involve or accompany some aggregate of judgments about particular items or domains within one’s life. (Variants of the life satisfaction view appear to include Barrow, 1980, 1991; Benditt, 1974, 1978; Campbell, 1973; Montague, 1967; Nozick, 1989; Rescher, 1972, 1980; Sumner, 1996; Telfer, 1980; Veenhoven, 1984, 1997; Von Wright, 1963. Those making life satisfaction central or identical to well-being—often using the word ‘happiness’ for it—appear to include Almeder, 2000; Kekes, 1982, 1988, 1992; McFall, 1989; Meynell, 1969; Tatarkiewicz, 1976; Thomas, 1968, among others.)

A third theory, the emotional state view, departs from hedonism in a different way: instead of identifying happiness with pleasant experience, it identifies happiness with an agent’s emotional condition as a whole (Haybron, 2005). This includes nonexperiential aspects of emotions and moods (or perhaps just moods), and excludes pleasures that don’t directly involve the individual’s emotional state. It might also include a person’s propensity for experiencing various moods, which can vary over time. Happiness on such a view is more nearly the opposite of depression or anxiety, whereas hedonistic happiness is simply opposed to unpleasantness. One reason for taking such a view is intuitive: psychologically superficial pleasures do not obviously make a difference in how happy one is—the typical pleasure of eating a cracker, say, or even the intense pleasure of an orgasm that nonetheless fails to move one, as can happen with meaningless sexual activity. The intuitive distinction seems akin to distinctions made by some ancient philosophers; consider, for instance, the following passage from Epictetus’s (1925) Discourses: “‘I have a headache.’ Well, do not say ‘Alas!’ ‘I have an earache.’ Do not say ‘Alas!’ And I am not saying that it is not permissible to groan, only do not groan in the centre of your being” (1925, 1.18.19, emph. added). The Stoics did not expect us never to feel pain, or unpleasant sensations, which would plainly be impossible; rather, the idea was not to let such things get to us, to impact our emotional conditions.

But why should we care to press such a distinction in characterizing happiness? The hedonic difference between happiness on an emotional state versus a hedonistic view is probably minimal. But while little will be lost, what will be gained? For one thing, the more “central” affects involving our emotional conditions may bear a special relation to the person or the self, whereas more “peripheral” affects, like the pleasantness of eating a cracker, might pertain to the

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1 From “Philosophy and the Science of Subjective Well-Being.”
subpersonal aspects of our psychologies. Since well-being is commonly linked to ideas of self-fulfillment, as we saw earlier, this sort of distinction might signal a difference in the importance of these states (Haybron, in press-b). Another reason to focus on emotional condition rather than experience alone is the greater psychological depth of the former: its impact on our mental lives, physiology, and behavior is much deeper and more pervasive. This enhances the explanatory and predictive significance of happiness, but more importantly it captures the idea that happiness concerns the individual’s psychological orientation or disposition: to be happy is not just to be subjected to a certain sequence of experiences, but for one’s very being to manifest a favorable orientation toward the conditions of one’s life—a kind of psychic affirmation of one’s life. This reflects a point of similarity with life satisfaction views of happiness: contra hedonism, both views take happiness to be substantially dispositional, involving some sort of favorable orientation toward one’s life. But life satisfaction views tend to emphasize reflective or rational endorsement, whereas emotional state views emphasize the verdicts of our emotional natures.

A fourth family of views, hybrid theories, attempts an irenic solution to our diverse intuitions about happiness: identify happiness with both life satisfaction and pleasure or emotional state, perhaps along with other states such as domain satisfactions. The most obvious candidate here is subjective well-being, which is typically defined as a compound of life satisfaction, domain satisfactions, and positive and negative affect. (Researchers often seem to identify happiness with subjective well-being, sometimes with life satisfaction, and perhaps most commonly with emotional or hedonic state.) The chief appeal of hybrid theories is their inclusiveness: all the components of subjective well-being seem important, and there is probably no component of subjective well-being that does not at times get included in “happiness” in ordinary usage.