

Can happiness be a moral principle? essay

[Experience](#), [Happiness](#)



Happiness is a state which many strive for; some achieve it and others don't. However, the means and ways of attaining happiness are varied and can often involve questionable ethics. For instance, by taking an ecstasy pill, the side effect is to feel happy and as if you love everyone and everything; however, the purchasing of such a drug is illegal and the money goes into the drug trade which has links to countless un-ethical associations. It is also an unsustainable state which wears off after a few hours, so is that really happiness anyway? The pursuit of happiness is man's greatest goal and in that chase, man is often tempted, or even persuaded, to break the law, affect someone else or behave questionably in order to attain it. During the course of this essay, I will be discussing the concept of happiness as a moral principle with reference to two philosophers who have prominent arguments in this area: Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill.

Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher who lived during the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th. Kant was particularly taken up with the ideas of ethics and moral philosophy, and he had some fixed ideas on the concept of happiness too. He thought of happiness as being in two forms: as a sensible state and as an intelligible state. The first of these is described as being "a sensible world, which can be very different to various observers, because of differences in their sensibilities." (Kant 44) This is perhaps the common association with happiness, held by the majority of people. We all place different emphases on what will make us happy. For example, when we see an advert for a new product, we instantly assume that it will bring us happiness (through better skin, a faster car or a quirkier gadget, for example). When we achieve this desired purchase, we are happy.

Kant also discussed happiness as being an intelligible state: “ an intelligible world, which underlies the sensible world, and remains always the same.” (Kant 44) . This refers to a less superficial, more long-standing sense of happiness that can only be attained through living a good life: ‘ good’ in the sense that you are kind, giving, generous and thoughtful. However, in order to fully appreciate this happiness, a certain amount of wisdom must be employed: realising that you are happy because of this does not always immediately happen. Most people will feel proud of being a good person, but that in itself is, arguably, a form of happiness.

John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher who lived and worked during the 19th century, referred to happiness as being. Mill states: “ happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain.” (Mill 10) This is quite self-explanatory but is also a very broad overview of what happiness is rather than delving into the various states of happiness, like Kant. Mill does, however, go on to discuss the moral implications of happiness: “ men's sentiments, both of favour and of aversion, are greatly influenced by what they suppose to be the effects of things upon their happiness.” (Mill 5) Put more simply, an act of happiness is most acutely felt when the actions don't harm anyone else involved. Mill confirms: “ One of the strongest obstacles to the reception of the doctrine that Utility or Happiness is the criterion of right and wrong” (Mill 72) Mill is suggesting that true happiness is derived from a deeper, less superficial place; much like Kant's discussion of happiness as an intelligible state. In this sense, both philosophers consider real happiness to be based on moral principles of being kind to your fellow man and in being able to hold your head high because this. To use Mill's exact words: “ It is better to be a

human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." (Mill 14) This succinct summary strongly suggests a particular way of behaving and living as being the way to true happiness.

Kant argued that " the highest good—what is unconditionally good—can be found only in such a will." (Kant 10) Compared with Mill's view on this, they are remarkably resolute: true happiness is dependent on the individual's worth and virtues. Without these conditions, the state of happiness cannot be completely reached. However, it is Kant who also recognises that being virtuous does not necessarily lead to well-being, and as such, men are often drawn into a web of immoral behaviour in the pursuit of both happiness and well-being. Focusing on the idea of being virtuous, Kant's view of real virtue is: " To behold virtue in its proper form is simply to present morality with •nothing sensuous stirred into the mixture and •every spurious adornment of reward or self-love stripped off" (Kant 27), ergo it should not be based on a single act or an act which directly reflect the benefits received by that individual, as a result. Kant's discussion of virtue suggest that in order to be happy, a person must be virtuous all the time and not just when it will benefit themselves. If we were to view happiness as a form of freedom, as indeed Mill seems to, he suggests that " that a person of confirmed virtue, or any other person whose purposes are fixed, carries out his purposes without any thought of the pleasure." (Mill 58) This suggestion links heavily to Kant's view that only a person of true virtue is deserving of true happiness (and freedom). In discussing this view, Bruce David Baum refers to this best being clarified through the word " autonomy" (Baum 29) as in, a person of true

virtue and, therefore, happiness, is a person who is completely virtuous all of the time, regardless of the benefits that they may or may not receive.

The two philosophers seem to match comparatively in their discussion of 'happiness.' Both feel that true happiness is gained through an ultra-virtuous lifestyle and no doubt, link to a pious state of mind too. Kant goes in to some further detail through his discussion of more superficial happiness: he refers to the sensible state as being manifested through "physical feelings," and the intelligible through "moral feelings." (Kant 37) This in itself is a fair description: the excited, 'buzzy' feeling that is felt in the stomach upon achieving a level of happiness is most often felt upon the purchase of a much-wanted item for oneself. However, the warmer feeling that is felt upon giving someone else the gift of something they really want is a far deeper emotion and tends to last longer than the novelty of a new purchase too. That said, both philosophers were theorizing during the 18th and the 19th centuries: a time before online shopping, non-prescription drugs, promiscuous sex and higher expectations of the standard of living. While some of these things may have been the custom in certain areas of society, the participators of such activities would have been written off as immoral anyway, and the chances of one of them ever questioning their behaviour long enough to consider the ethical quandary of their superficial happiness, is highly unlikely. However, in the 21st century modern world, these things are regularly available and while sometimes frowned upon, the majority of people indulge a lot more frequently than the piety of previous times.

Kant and Mill both make strong arguments for happiness as being based on extremely moral principles of virtue, dignity and being deserving of such relation. Indeed, their discursive points concerning this are still standing although a lot less emphasis is placed on behaving virtuously in mainstream cultures today. However, the implied meaning behind Kant distinguishing between the two states of happiness, is that he is quite dismissive of the superficial, passing state. While this shallower type of happiness may not be the better of the two, it is still a valid sense of happiness and in our modern world, life is far more complicated than in Kant's time and as such, happiness is a welcome commodity wherever it is found. Both philosophers discuss the more significant form of happiness as being a deeply moral principle which only the truly autonomously virtuous are privy to. When examining humanity in its broadest, chronological sense, religious belief is infused with ideas of virtue and morality and as such, these ideas are interwoven with our upbringing and sense of what is right and wrong. Therefore, it is highly likely that we are all striving for the deeper happiness based on moral principles that both philosophers discuss, but in today's modern, busy world these theories do not necessarily stand up as ultimately, today's world is a lot less selfless.

References

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