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English

Philosophy of Happiness: Approaches to Happiness Around the Globe (A Cultural Comparison)

Introduction

It is generally understood that everyone would like to be happy. However, how happiness should be defined is often called into question. Happiness can mean different things to different people. The way that a person defines happiness for him or herself can be based on individual goals and values. This makes the examination of happiness difficult from a philosophical standpoint. Each person's own definition of happiness makes it hard to measure what happiness is across a cross-section of people. What makes one person happy may not suffice to provide happiness to another person. Therefore, selecting individual factors and trying to determine whether or not a person or group of people are happy based on these factors may not lead to an accurate answer. This is why many in the field of philosophy have tried to come up with theories of how to define happiness and ways to measure happiness on an empirical level. Throughout this paper, I will discuss what happiness is including some of the differing definitions and theories that have been proposed to study and ascertain the level of happiness in a person or group of people. Next, I will discuss how the culture in which someone lives has an impact on the person's definition of happiness. After this, I will discuss happiness in the United States and how it corresponds to happiness in other cultures. Following this, I will discuss some of the problems that arise with the study of happiness. Lastly, I will give my suggestions for the study of happiness.

Happiness does not have a concrete definition. However, philosophers have sought to define the term in many different ways. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy suggests that happiness is both a state of mind and a sense by a person that the life he or she is leading is going well (See Haybron). The “Happiness” article appearing in the encyclopedia goes on to state that philosophers have measured happiness by three different theories, hedonism, life satisfaction, and emotional state. Additionally, there are hybrid theories by which happiness is measured and defined.

The article “Advances in Happiness” examines and seeks to define the concept of happiness. The article uses quality of life as a measure of happiness. It states that “the best society is one that provides the greatest happiness for the greatest number” (Veehoven, p. 1). “Currently, the term quality of life denotes two meanings: 1) the presence of conditions deemed necessary for a good life and 2) the practice of good living as such. The first meaning is at the societal level. It is a measure of whether happiness can be achieved in a particular culture. The presence or absence of particular factors within the culture help to determine whether or not happiness is actually achievable in that particular culture. The second meaning is not at a societal level; instead this meaning of quality of life and how it affects happiness is at an individual level.

After defining happiness according to quality of life, the article goes on to list determinates of happiness. The author breaks the determinates of happiness up into separate categories. One of the categories is the quality of society. Some of the factors that go into determining the quality of society according to the article are: Material affluence, security, freedom, equality, cultural

climate, social climate, population pressure, and modernity. Additionally, the article lists individual position in society factors that play a role in happiness as well. These individual position in society factors include: social status, age, gender, income, education, occupation, social ties, intimate ties, and social participation. Furthermore, the article lists individual characteristics that have an impact on happiness. These factors include: health, ability, and personality. The article defines how these factors impact happiness. Next, the author discusses how individual events and experiences play a role in happiness as well. It is easy to see how these factors play a role in determining how happy an individual may be at a given moment or throughout his or her life. This article discusses happiness in a way a layperson can relate to the concept more easily, whereas other articles tend to focus on philosophical concepts, abstracts, and theories.

Happiness Across Cultures

The article “ Cultural Values and Happiness: An East-West Dialogue” examines how cultural values and experiences in different cultures affect the level of happiness of those within that particular culture. The authors define happiness by stating, “ happiness is currently defined (a) as a predominance of positive over negative affect and (b) as satisfaction with life as a whole” (Lu, p. 477). The article goes on to point out that happiness can be defined in different ways by different cultures. “ Cultural values can be a major force in determining the conception of happiness and, consequently, in constricting its subjective experiences” (Lu, p. 480). After conducting its examination of happiness in different cultures, the article goes on to conclude that happiness is defined by those in western cultures more in terms of individual

and internal concepts, whereas the people in the eastern world tend to define happiness more in the relational context (See Lu, p. 487).

Happiness in the United States

“ The Declaration of Independence states that ‘ all men are created equal,’ vested with rights to ‘ Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’” (Wilkinson, p. 4). Thus, the founding fathers of the United States understood that happiness is an important ideal for the citizens of the United States to have a chance to achieve. The article “ In Pursuit of Happiness Research: Is It Reliable? What Does it Imply for Policy?” examines whether the United States lives up to the Constitutional belief that all people who reside within its borders are entitled to the pursuit of happiness. The author argues that the country has failed to live up to offering this happiness ideal in a number of ways. The author feels that the market economy of the United States is a negative factor that weights against the citizens of the United States of America being able to achieve happiness. One of the major claims that the author focuses on in the article is the assertion that “ The relatively greater dynamism of the U. S. market economy and the relatively smaller scope of the U. S. welfare state are bad for happiness, and we would be happier with European-style social democracy” (Wilkerson, p. 5). The second major argument that the author makes with respect happiness in the United States as compared to other countries is that, “ the importance of relative position to happiness provides a justification for higher taxes on income and/or consumption” (Wilkerson, p. 5). The author thus seeks to examine how relative position in U. S. society impacts the ability to achieve happiness. People with a higher relative position in society as compared to others have

a greater chance of attaining happiness; therefore, these people are taxed at a rate that is comparable to their opportunity to achieve happiness. The last major argument that the author asserts concerning happiness in the United States of America as compared to other countries is that, “ economic growth is unimportant to happiness, and measures of social welfare such as GDP per capita (or growth in GDP per capita) should be replaced or at least augmented with measures of happiness” (Wilkinson, p. 5). Thus, the author feels that it is important to examine other measures in addition to economic growth in order to truly gain a sense of the quality of life within the United States of America.

A major claim concerning happiness that the author examines and refutes is the claim that happiness is more easily achieved in social welfare states. “ Life satisfaction should increase as we move from less to more social democratic welfare states. More generally, life satisfaction should vary positively with the dominance in government of political parties committed to the social democratic program of limiting human dependence on the market” (Wilkinson, p. 3). The article goes to point out that although a number of countries in Europe with a number of socialist policies should tend to rank higher in the category of happiness than the United States, the United States actually does tend to have a higher rank overall in the category of happiness. “ The United States is evidently among the world’s happiest nations, on par with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and a few surprises like El Salvador and Nigeria. Notably the largest social democracies, Germany and France fall one or two ranks below the United States” (Wilkinson, p. 17). Therefore, according to the author, a social form

of democracy may not be the main factor in determining the level of happiness within a country. Therefore, the author concludes that the happiness level does not increase quite as hypothesized when moving toward more social welfare states. In fact, the author asserts that from looking at self-reported happiness surveys, the United States is one of the happiest countries on earth.

Problems with the Study of Happiness

The article “ Two Philosophical Problems in the Study of Happiness” points out that there are several philosophical problems with the study of happiness. The author points out that there is a problem with deciding on a concrete theory of happiness. To help decide on an effective theory of happiness, the author suggests that it is important to first determine what people want theory of happiness to accomplish or measure. After identifying what one wants from a theory of happiness, identify the view that best helps to coincide with the answers to the first part. The author then discusses some common theories of happiness including the hedonic theory, the life satisfaction theory, the affective state view, and the perceived desire satisfaction theory. The author points out on page 216 that one of the problems that arise when trying to decide on a theory of happiness is that happiness is more of a practical concern. The author acknowledges that most people do not look at happiness as a theory or even in a way that it can be clearly captured in a theory. Happiness is a practical goal that people wish to attain. Therefore, the study of happiness encompasses the problem that is created by happiness not being the type of concept that can generally be studied as a concept across a group of people. Happiness includes both

measurable and non-measurable elements. This adds to the difficulty of the study of happiness. I agree with the problem of trying to encapsulate happiness into a theory is that people generally do not view happiness as an abstract theory at all but instead in a practical way as to how happiness affects their lives as individuals and the lives of others around them.

Contribution to the Study of Happiness.

I feel that the simplified approach to the study of happiness is best. This most coincides with the article “Advances in Happiness.” This is because happiness is a concept that people can define for themselves and have a definite opinion of what it means even if it is difficult to define happiness beyond an individual level based on the individual’s definition. The use of self-reporting studies to determine the level of happiness within a culture probably would most accurately measure happiness within that culture. I agree with “Cultural Values and Happiness: An East-West Dialogue” that the culture in which someone lives has a definite impact on the way the person defines happiness. This is because the society in which the person lived often determines the person’s goals and values and the things that the person sees as important. The author of “In Pursuit of Happiness Research: Is It Reliable? What Does It Imply for Policy?” believed that a society that was more of a social democracy in nature would possess a higher percentage of happier people than a society such as the United States of America. The data that the author analyzed, however, contradicted this assertion by the author. One reason that the author was incorrect could be because he failed to take into account the fact that people in a society that is not as much of a social democracy in nature may value things that do not correspond as much with

the values that people in a social democracy possess. The difference in values of the two societies may lead people in each society to be able to achieve happiness in their own society type. Although I agree with the author of “ Two Philosophical problems in the Study of Happiness” that to try to study happiness one must first determine what one wants from a theory of happiness and then identify the best view to go along with the desire for the theory, I do not agree that happiness needs to be studied in quite a theoretical prospective as the author suggests. Happiness to most people can be defined in a way that is analogous to obscenity; they may not be able to put a clear definition to it, but they know it when they feel it.

Conclusion

Happiness can be hard to define and even harder to measure in an empirical study. Still, many within the field of philosophy have tried to put a definition on the concept of happiness. Most agree that the definition should include a focus on the individual’s state of mind as well as the individual’s quality of life. There are several measurable factors that go into determining the quality of an individual’s life; however it is the individual who gives these factors their relative weight based on the values of that individual and what he or she deems to be important. This make it rather difficult to define and study happiness because the definition varies from person to person.

There are some factors that can help determine how much weight an individual gives to a certain factor. The culture in which someone lives can have a significant impact on how the individual gauges happiness and the actors that weight into happiness. People in western societies tend to gauge happiness as a concept that encompasses mostly individual and internal

factors, whereas people in eastern societies tend to gauge happiness as a concept that is mostly relational in nature.

Furthermore, notions that people in certain societies are happier based on the qualities tend to be proven wrong. This could be because no matter how good or bad the quality of one's values are it is not the quality of the values that determine whether or not the individual is in a state of happiness, it is whether or not the individual manages to achieve the things that he values that makes this determination no matter the quality of the values compared to that of another society.

Additionally, there are some problems with studying happiness. Happiness is not an abstract concept to most people. It is a practical concept, the definition of which can vary from person to person. However, regardless of what theory one chooses to try to ascertain the level of happiness of individuals in a given society, happiness is one thing that everybody would like to attain.

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