Happiness

By Robert Nozick

From *The Examined Life*

SOME THEORISTS HAVE CLAIMED that happiness is the *only* important thing about life; all that should matter to a person—they say—is being happy; the sole standard for assessing a life is the amount or quantity of happiness it contains. It is ironic that making this exclusive claim for happiness distorts the flavor of what happy moments are like. For in these moments, almost everything seems wonderful: the way the sun shines, the way that person looks, the way water glistens on the river, the way the dogs play (yet not the way the murderer kills). This openness of happiness, its generosity of spirit and width of appreciation, gets warped and constricted by the claim pretending to be its greatest friend—that only happiness matters, nothing else. That claim is begrudging. unlike happiness itself. Happiness can he precious, perhaps even preeminent, yet still he one important thing among others.

There are various ways to nibble away at the apparent obviousness of the view that happiness is the one thing that is important. First, even if happiness were the only thing we cared about, we would not care solely about its total amount. (When I use "we" in this way, I am inviting you to examine whether or not you agree. If you do, then I am elaborating and exploring our common view, but if after reflecting on the matter you find you do not agree, then I am traveling alone for a while.) We would care also about how that happiness was distributed within a lifetime. Imagine graphing someone's total happiness through life; the amount of happiness is represented on the vertical axis, time on the horizontal one. (If the phenomenon of happiness is extremely complicated and multidimensional, it is implausible that its amount could be graphed in this way—but in that case too the purported goal of maximizing our happiness becomes unclear.) If only the total amount of happiness mattered, we would be indifferent between a life of constantly increasing happiness and one of constant decrease, between an upward- and a downward-sloping curve, provided that the total amount of happiness, the total area under the curve, was the same in the two cases. Most of us, however, would prefer the upward-sloping line to the downward; we would prefer a life of increasing happiness to one of decrease. Part of the reason, but only a part, may be that since it makes us happy to look forward to greater happiness, doing so makes our current happiness score even higher. (Yet the person on the downward-sloping curve alternatively can have the current Proustian pleasure of remembering past happiness.) Take the pleasure of anticipation into account, though, by building it into the curve whose height is therefore increased at certain places; still most of us would not care merely about the area under *this* enhanced curve, but about the curve's direction also. (Which life would you prefer your children to have, one of decline or of advance?)

We would be willing, moreover, to give up some amount of happiness to get our lives' narratives moving in the right direction, improving in general. Even if a downwardly sloping curve had slightly more area under it, we would prefer our own lives to slope upward. (If it encompassed vastly greater area, the choice might be different.) Therefore, the contour of the happiness has an independent weight, beyond breaking ties among lives whose total amounts of happiness are equal. In order to gain a more desirable narrative direction, we sometimes would choose *not* to maximize our total happiness. And if the factor of narrative direction might justify forgoing some amount of happiness, so other factors might also.[1] Straight lines are not the only narrative curves. It would be silly, though, to try to pick the best happiness Curve; diverse biographies can fit the very same curve, and we care also about the particular content of a life story. That thing we really want to slope upward might be our life's narrative story, not its amount of happiness. With these stories held constant, we might then care only about happiness's amount, not its slope. However, this too would support the general point that something matters—an upward slope, whether to the narrative line or to the happiness curve—besides the quantity of happiness.

We also can show that more matters than pleasure or happiness by considering a life that has these but otherwise is empty, a life of mindless pleasures or bovine contentment or frivolous amusements only, a happy life but a superficial one. "It is better," John Stuart Mill wrote, "to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." And although it might be best of all to be Socrates satisfied, having both happiness and depth, we would give up some happiness in order to gain the depth.

We are not empty containers or buckets to be stuffed with good things, with pleasures or possessions or positive emotions or even with a rich and varied internal life. Such a bucket has no appropriate structure within; how the experiences fit together or are contoured over time is of no importance except insofar as some particular arrangements make further happy moments more probable. The view that only happiness matters ignores the question of what *we*— the very ones to be happy—are like. How could the most important thing about our life be what it *contains,* though? What makes the felt experiences of pleasure or happiness more important than what we ourselves are like?

Freud thought it a fundamental principle of behavior that we seek pleasure and try to avoid pain or unpleasure—he called this the pleasure principle. Sometimes one can more effectively secure pleasure by not proceeding to it directly; one countenances detours and postponements in immediate satisfaction, one even renounces particular sources of pleasure, due to the nature of the outside world. Freud called this acting in accordance with the reality principle. Freud's reality principle is subordinate to the pleasure principle: "Actually, the substitution of the reality principle for the pleasure principle implies no deposing of the pleasure principle but only a safeguarding of it. A momentary pleasure, uncertain in its results, is given up but only in order to gain along the new path an assured pleasure at a later time."[2]

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[1] It requires some care to accurately delineate the preference, all other things being equal, for the upward slope, to take into account the full complexities as one moves through life of anticipating and recollecting time intervals of changing lengths. However, the preference about the contour of one's children's lives avoids this problem, for you then are evaluating the life as a whole from a point outside it. and their anticipation and recollection will not enter if they do not know the life's contour. If anticipation of a future good pleases us more now than recollection of a past one, thereby affecting where the curves are placed, this fact itself might indicate a preference for the upward-sloping curve. (Similarly, people with amnesia might prefer that a given happiness were in their future rather than their past, even if the memory could be retrieved.) We also need to disentangle the preference for the upward slope from the preference for a happy ending which the upward slope might be taken to indicate. Consider one curve sloping upward until nearly the very end, and another curve sloping downward until nearly the very end, each having the same total area underneath; these two curves cross like an X. At nearly the very end, though, things are more complicated: For a person on each curve there is a half chance of staying at that level, and a half chance of immediately dropping or being raised to the level of the other curve, with life ending soon thereafter. The level of the end cannot be predicted from the course of the curve until then; if under these circumstances the upward slope still is preferred to the downward one, this preference concerns the course of the curves, not just their endings.

That we prefer the upward (and very much dislike the downward) slope might help explain other phenomena. Recently, two psychologists, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, have emphasized that in making choices people judge the outcomes of actions (contrary to the recommendations of existing normative theories) not by their absolute level but by whether they involve gains or losses as compared to some baseline or reference point, and that they weight losses more heavily than gains. (See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory," *Econometrica,* Vol. 47, 1979, pp. 263—291; "Rational Choice and the Framing of Decisions," in Robin Hogarth and Melvin Reder, eds., *Rational Choice* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 19871, pp. 67—94.) If people do prefer an upward-sloping curve, these two features are what one would expect: They will categorize outcomes as above or below a current or hypothetical reference point—are they gains or losses?—and they will give especially great weight to avoiding losses. (If, however, the preference for upward slope varies depending upon where the zero-level was, then that preference cannot be used to explain the two features; in any case, some might try to run the explanation in the other direction, seeing the preference for the upward slope as arising from the two features.)

These principles can be formulated more precisely, but technical refinements are not needed here.[3] Notice that there can be two different specifications of the pleasure to be maximized: the net immediate pleasure (that is, the total immediate pleasure minus the total immediate pain or unpleasure), or the total amount of net pleasure over a lifetime. (This latter goal might fully incorporate Freud's reality principle.) Since pleasure alone seemed too much tied to immediate sensation or excitement, some philosophers modulated the pleasure principle by distinguishing some kinds of pleasure as "higher." But even if this distinction between higher and lower pleasures were adequately formulated—something that hasn't yet been done—this would only add complications to the issue of choice: Can some amount of lower pleasure outweigh a higher pleasure? How much higher are the higher pleasures and do they too differ in their height? What is the overarching goal that incorporates this qualitative distinction? The distinction does not say that something different from pleasure also is important, just that the one thing that is important, pleasure, comes in different grades.

We can gain more precision about what pleasure is. By a pleasure or a pleasurable feeling I mean a feeling that is desired (partly) because of its own felt qualities. The feeling is not desired wholly because of what it leads to or enables you to do or because of some injunction it fulfills. If it is pleasurable, it is desired (in part at least) because of the felt qualities it has. I do not claim there is just one felt quality that always is present whenever pleasure occurs. Being pleasurable, as I use this term, is a function of being wanted partly for its own felt qualities, whatever these qualities may be. On this view, a masochist who desires pain for its own felt quality will find pain pleasurable. This is awkward, but no more so than masochism itself. If, however, the masochist desires pain because he (unconsciously) feels he deserves to be punished, hurt, or humiliated, not desiring pain for its own felt qualities but for what that pain announces, then in that case the pain itself will not count as pleasurable. Someone *enjoys* an activity to the extent he engages in the activity because of its own intrinsic properties, not simply because of what it leads to or produces later. Its intrinsic properties are not limited to felt qualities, though; this leaves open the possibility that something is enjoyed yet not pleasurable. An example might be tennis played very forcefully; lunging for shots, scraping knees and elbows on the ground, you enjoy playing, but it is not exactly—not precisely—pleasurable.

From this definition of pleasure, it does not follow that there actually are any experiences that are wanted because of their own felt qualities; nor does it follow that we want there to be pleasurable experiences, ones we desire because of their felt qualities. What does follow from (my use of) the term is this: If experiences are pleasurable to us, then we do want them (to some extent). The term *pleasurable* just indicates that something is wanted because of its felt qualities. How much we want it, though, whether enough to sacrifice other things we hold good, and whether other things also are wanted, and wanted even more than pleasure, is left open. A person who wants to write a poem needn't want (primarily) the felt qualities of writing, or the felt qualities of being known to have written the poem. He may want, primarily, *to write* such a poem—for example, because he thinks *it* is valuable, or the activity of doing so is, with no special focus upon any felt qualities.

We care about things in addition to how our lives feel to us from the inside. This is shown by the following thought experiment. Imagine a machine that could give you any experience (or sequence of experiences) you might desire.[4] When connected to this experience machine, you can have the experience of writing a great poem or bringing about world peace or loving someone and being loved in return. You can experience the felt pleasures of these things, how they feel "from the inside." You can program your experiences for tomorrow, or this week, or this year, or even for the rest of your life. If your imagination is impoverished, you can use the library of suggestions extracted from biographies and enhanced by novelists and psychologists. You can live your fondest dreams "from the inside." Would you choose to do this for the rest of your life? If not, why not? (Other people also have the same option of using these machines which, let us suppose, are provided by friendly and trustworthy beings from another galaxy, so you need not refuse connecting in order to help others.) The question is not whether to try the machine temporarily, but whether to enter it for the rest of your life. Upon entering, you will not remember having done this; so no pleasures will get ruined by realizing they are machine-produced. Uncertainty too might be programmed by using the machine's optional random device (upon which various preselected alternatives can depend).

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[2] "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning," in James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Vol. 12 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 223.

[3] Behavioral psychologists offer more precise quantitative versions of the pleasure principle in statements of the law of effect; operations researchers and economists offer formal theories of the (reality) constraints on actions. The reality and pleasure principles together are mirrored in decision theory's dual structure, with its probabilities of alternative possible outcomes of feasible actions, and its utilities of these outcomes; as did Freud, decision theory maintains the priority of the pleasure principle in its own principle of maximizing expected utility.

The question of whether to plug in to this experience machine is a question of value. (It differs from two related questions: an epistemological one—Can you know you are not already plugged in?—and a metaphysical one—Don't the machine experiences themselves constitute a real world?) The question is not whether plugging in is preferable to extremely dire alternatives—lives of torture, for instance—but whether plugging in would constitute the very best life, or tie for being best, because all that matters about a life is how it feels from the inside.

Notice that this is a *thought* experiment, designed to isolate one question: Do only our internal feelings matter to us? It would miss the point, then, to focus upon whether such a machine is technologically feasible. Also, the machine example must be looked at on its own; to answer the question by filtering it through a fixed view that internal experiences are the only things that *can* matter (so of course it would be all right to plug into the machine) would lose the opportunity to test that view independently. One way to determine if a view is inadequate is to check its consequences in particular cases, sometimes extreme ones, but if someone always decided what the result should be in any case by *applying* the given view itself, this would preclude discovering it did not correctly fit the case. Readers who hold they *would* plug in to the machine should notice whether their first impulse was *not* to do so, followed later by the thought that since only experiences could matter, the machine would be all right after all.

Few of us really think that only a person's experiences matter. We would not wish for our children a life of great satisfactions that all depended upon deceptions they would never detect: although they take pride in artistic accomplishments, the critics and their friends too are just pretending to admire their work yet snicker behind their backs; the apparently faithful mate carries on secret love affairs; their apparently loving children really detest them; and so on. Few of us upon hearing this description would exclaim, "What a wonderful life! It feels so happy and pleasurable from the inside." That person is living in a dream world, taking pleasure in things that aren't so. What he wants, though, is not merely to take pleasure in them; he wants *them to be so.* He values their being that way, and he takes pleasure in them because he thinks they *are* that way. He doesn't take pleasure merely in *thinking* they are.

We care about more than just how things feel to us from the inside; there is more to life than feeling happy. We care about what is actually the case. We want certain situations we value, prize, and think important to actually hold and be so. We want our beliefs, or certain of them, to be true and accurate; we want our emotions, or certain important ones, to be based upon facts that hold and to be fitting. We want to be importantly connected to reality, not to live in a delusion. We desire this not simply in order to more reliably acquire pleasures or other experiences, as Freud's reality principle dictates. Nor do we merely want the added pleasurable feeling of being connected to reality. Such an inner feeling, an illusory one, also can be provided by the experience machine.

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[4] I first presented and discussed this experience-machine example *in Anarchy, State, and Utopia,* pp. 42-45.

What we want and value is an actual connection with reality. Call this the second reality principle (the first was Freud's): To focus on external reality, with your beliefs, evaluations, and emotions, is valuable *in itself* not just as a means to more pleasure or happiness. And it is this connecting that is valuable, not simply having within ourselves true beliefs. Favoring truth introduces, in a subterranean fashion, the value of the connecting anyway—why else would true beliefs be (intrinsically) more valuable within us than false ones? And if we want to connect to reality by knowing it, and not simply to have true beliefs, then if knowledge involves tracking the facts—a view I have developed elsewhere—this involves a direct and explicit external connection. We do not, of course, simply want contact with reality; we want contact of certain kinds: exploring reality and responding, altering it and creating new actuality ourselves. Notice that I am not saying simply that since we desire connection to actuality the experience machine is defective because it does not give us whatever we desire—though the example is useful to show we *do* desire some things in addition to experiences—for that would make "getting whatever you desire" the primary standard. Rather, I am saying that the connection to actuality is important whether or not we desire it—that is *why we* desire it—and the experience machine is inadequate because it doesn't give us *that.*[5]

No doubt, too, we want a connection to actuality that we also share with other people. One of the distressing things about the experience machine, as described, is that you are alone in your particular illusion. (Is it more distressing that the others do not share your "world" or that you are cut off from the one they do share?) However, we can imagine that the experience machine provides the very same illusion to everyone (or to everyone you care about), giving each person a coordinate piece of it. When all are floating in the *same* tank, the experience machine may not be *as* objectionable, but it is objectionable nevertheless. Sharing coordinate perspectives might be one criterion of actuality, yet it does not guarantee that; and it is *both* that we want, the actuality *and* the sharing.

Notice that we have not said one should never plug in to such a machine, even temporarily. It might teach you things, or transform you in a way beneficial for your actual life later. It also might give pleasures that would be quite acceptable in limited doses. This is all quite different from spending the rest of your life on the machine; the internal contents of *that* life would be unconnected to actuality. It seems too that once on the machine a person would not make any choices, and certainly would not choose anything freely. One portion of what we want to be actual is our actually (and freely) choosing, not merely the appearance of that.

My reflections about happiness thus far have been about

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[5] One psychologist, George Ainslie, offers an ingenious alternative explanation of our concern for contact with reality, one that sees this as a means, not as intrinsically valuable. According to Ainslie, to avoid satiation (and hence a diminution of pleasure) by *imagining* satisfactions, we need a clear line to limit pleasures to those less easily available, and reality provides that line; pleasures in reality are fewer and farther between (George Ainslie, "Beyond Microeconomics," in Jon Elster, ed., *The Multiple* Self [Cambridge, England: Cambridge University' Press, 1986], pp. 133—175, especially pp. 149-157). Note that the phenomenon of satiation itself presumably has an evolutionary explanation. Organisms that don't get satiated in an activity (as in the experiments where apparatus enables rats to stimulate the pleasure centers in their brains) will stick to it to the exclusion of all else, and hence die of starvation or at any rate not go on to have or raise offspring. But in a reality framework too organisms will have to show some self-control, and not simply pursue easy pleasures even when they have not yet been satiated, so a reality principle would not completely fulfill the purpose Ainslie describes, and presumably other quite clear lines also could serve the purpose as well. One line might depend upon a division of the day according to biological rhythms—is sleep the time for easy pleasures and dreams the vehicle? Other lines might depend upon whether you were alone or accompanied, recently fed or not, close to a full moon, or whatever; these too could be used to restrict when the easy gain of pleasure was acceptable. Reality is not a unique means to this, nor is our concern with reality simply a means

the *limits* of its role in life. What *is* its proper role, though, and what exactly is happiness; why has its role so often been exaggerated? A number of distinct emotions travel under the label of *happiness,* along with one thing that is more properly called a *mood* rather than an emotion. I want to consider three types of happiness emotion here:
first, being happy that something or other is the case (or that many things are); second, feeling that your life is good now; and third, being satisfied with your life as a whole. Each of these three related happiness emotions will exhibit the general threefold structure that emotions have (described in the previous meditation): a belief, a positive evaluation, and a feeling based upon these. Where these three related emotions differ is in the object of the belief and evaluation, and perhaps also in the felt character of the associated feeling.[6]

The first type of happiness, being happy that some particular thing is the case, is reasonably familiar and clear, a straightforward instance of what has been said about emotion earlier. The second type—feeling that your life is good now—is more intricate. Recall those particular moments when you thought and felt, blissfully, that there was nothing else you wanted, your life was good then. Perhaps this occurred while walking alone in nature, or being with someone you loved. What marks these times is their completeness. There is something you have that you want, and no other wants come crowding in; there is nothing else that you think of wanting right then. I do not mean that if someone came up to you right then with a magic lamp, you would be at a loss to come up with a wish. But in the moments I am describing, these other desires—for more money or another job or another chocolate bar—simply are not operating. They are not felt, they are not lurking at the margins to enter. There is no additional thing you want right then, nothing feels lacking, your satisfaction is complete. The feeling that accompanies this is intense joy.

These moments are wonderful, and they are rare. Usually, additional wants are all too ready to introduce themselves. Some have suggested we reach this desirable state of not wanting anything else by the drastic route of eliminating *all* wants. But we don't find it helpful to be told to *first* get rid of our existing wants as a way of reaching the state of not wanting anything else. (And this is not simply because we doubt this route leads to an accompanying joy.) Rather, what we want is to be told of something so good, whose nature is so complete and satisfying, that reaching it will exclude any further wants from crowding in, *and* we want to be told how to reach this. Aristotle projected the quality of the feeling of not wanting anything additional out onto the world; he held that the complete good was such that nothing added to it could make it any better. I want to keep that quality within the feeling.

There are two conditions in which you feel that your life is good now, that there is nothing else you want: with the first a particular want already is satisfied; with the second you are embarked upon a process or path through which the other wants you have will be satisfied, and you have no *other* want than to be engaged in that process. Suppose someone wants nothing other than to go to the movies with friends, which he is doing. To be sure, he wants also to reach the movie theater, that it will not have burned down, that the projector will be operating, etc. However, these things all are included as parts of the process he is engaged in; they will come up in their appropriate turn. It would be different if instead he wanted to be going to a concert alone; then there *would* be something else he wanted. Since few goals are final and terminal—mi point emphasized by John Dewey—the first mode of not wanting anything else usually will be found implicitly to involve the second mode, process. The fairy-tale Prince Charming wants nothing else once he has freed and married the princess because this means their living happily ever after. One might worry that being happy all the time, in this second
sense of the emotion of happiness, wanting nothing else, would eliminate all motivation for further activity or accomplishment. However, if what we want nothing other than isto be engaged in a process of living of a certain kind, for example, one involving exploring, responding, relating and creating—to be sure, we

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[6] There is a need for an accurate phenomenology of the specific character of these feelings.

may want and expect this process also to include many moments of complete satisfaction of the first (nonprocess) type—then further activities and endeavors will be components of that very process.

When someone thinks, "My life now is good" the extent of time denoted by "now" is not fixed in advance. Hence, one can change its reference according to need. Even in a generally miserable period, you might narrow your gaze to a very particular moment, and want nothing else right then; alternatively, during a miserable moment you can recall that over a wider time period, one you also can call "now," your life is not miserable, and you might want nothing other than to be engaged in that life process, miserable moment and all. On the other hand, during moments of intense happiness we sometimes want to recall other kinds. For instance, within the Jewish tradition, at weddings one recalls and acknowledges the most bitter event, the destruction of the Temple; during school class reunions, one might pause in the celebrations to remember those who have died. We have not forgotten these events or people and even in our most intense happiness we pause to give them continuing due weight.

The third form taken by the emotion of happiness—satisfaction with one's life as a whole—has been explored by the Polish philosopher Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz.[7] According to his account, happiness involves a complete, enduring, deep, and full satisfaction with the whole of one's life, a satisfaction whose component evaluation is true and justified. Tatarkiewicz builds so much into this notion— complete and total satisfaction, etc.—because he wants nothing to be superior to a happy life. But this makes it difficult for there to be two happy lives, one happier than the other. Here, we can be more relaxed about the fullness of the satisfaction, and about how high a degree of positiveness the evaluation involves. A happy life will be evaluated as good enough on the whole. A life can be a happy one in another sense, too, by containing many events of feeling happy about one thing or another—that was the first type of happiness emotion. Such a life might frequently feel happy, yet that person need not positively evaluate his life as a whole, even unconsciously. Indeed, he might make the opposite evaluation if he focused upon his life as a whole, perhaps because he thinks the constituent happy feelings not very important. Despite his frequent happy moments, then, he would not be happy in the third sense of being satisfied with his life as a whole.

We would be reluctant to term someone happy at a particular moment or in life in general if we thought the evaluations upon which his emotion was based were wildly wrong. Yet it would be too stringent simply to require that the evaluations be correct. Looking back upon earlier historical times, we may see people making evaluations which (by our lights) are incorrect yet which were understandable and not egregiously unjustified at that time; the incorrectness of the evaluation should not be an automatic bar to its composing happiness. (After all, we hope that recent gains in moral sensitivity to issues such as women's equality, homosexual rights, racial equality, and minority relations will not be the last.) Simply to substitute "justified" (or "not unjustified") for "correct" would misclassify the person whose emotion is based upon correct but at that time, in that context, unjustified evaluations. Perhaps what serves is the weaker disjunction: true or at any rate justified (or not completely unjustified). Someone whose emotion is based upon completely and egregiously unjustified and false evaluations we will be reluctant to term happy, however he feels. He should have known better.[8]

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[7] Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *Analysis of Happiness* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), pp. 8—16.

[8] Notice that an evaluation made now about your life during an earlier time period can differ from the evaluation you made then. The fact that different evaluations can be produced of that period of life—yours then, yours now, and also the evaluation that we, the observers, make—complicates the question of whether that period counts as happy. We are reluctant simply to treat its proper evaluation, for these purposes, as the one the person actually made then. For example, if you then evaluated your life positively and felt accordingly, but now in looking back you evaluate your overall life then in a negative way, were you happy then or not? At that earlier time you felt happy about your life then, but now you do not feel happy about your life then. Because of your current negative evaluation (especially if it is one we endorse), we would be reluctant to say, simply, that you were happy then.

This third sense of happiness—satisfaction with one's life as a whole—makes it extremely easy to understand why we would want to be happy or to have a happy life. First, there is simply the pleasure of having that emotion. Feeling happy or satisfied about one's life as a whole is pleasurable in itself; it is something we want for its own felt qualities. (This feeling generally will not be as intense, though, as the joy which accompanies the second notion of happiness, wanting nothing else.) However, other emotions also can involve equally intense pleasurable feelings; why, then, has happiness loomed so central? We also want this emotion of happiness to *befitting.* If the emotion does fit our life, then the component beliefs about our life as a whole will be true and the component positive evaluation will be correct. Hence, we *will* have a life that is valuable, one it is correct to evaluate positively.

The object of this third form of the emotion of happiness is one's life as a whole. That object—life as a whole—also is precisely what we are trying to evaluate when we try to discover what a very good life is, in order to decide how to live. What could be simpler than to focus upon an emotion that does the evaluating for us? Add that the emotion is fitting, and we therefore can be sure the life is a good one.

Consider the corresponding question on the other side. If you then negatively evaluated your life and felt accordingly, yet now in looking back you positively evaluate that time, were you happy then or not? Your negative feelings then mean that you, even in retrospect, were *not* happy then, unless you also had many happy feelings then and your overall negative evaluation then, producing no extensively lasting feelings of unhappiness, was based upon more abstract grounds, perhaps that you weren't an exemplary tragically suffering hero at that time. If you now come to evaluate that period positively, feeling accordingly about it, and it did not contain extensive negative feelings then even though it was then negatively evaluated, might we not conclude that it *was* a happy time then, after all? Such complications make it difficult to offer a sleek and straightforward view of happiness.

Notice also an ambiguity in the notion of one's life as a whole, the object that is evaluated. It might mean the *whole* time slice of your current life, including all its aspects, not just a few; or it might mean the whole of your life until now. (Does it include also the future that is expected?) A person might be happy now, and be a happy person now, because of her current life and how she (correctly) evaluates it, even if her past was unhappy enough to lead her not only to have evaluated it negatively then but to now evaluate all her life until now as (on balance) negative. The question of whether a life is a good one overall does not focus just upon an evaluation of the current time slice, nor does it simply average the contemporaneous evaluations of each time slice (even if these were accurate), for the answer might depend also upon the narrative contours of the life, upon how these different time slices fit together. (Add only that the evaluation was justified or not egregiously false, and it has a decent chance of being a good one.) However, for all we yet know, the reason a happy life must be a good one is not necessarily because of any feelings it contains but merely because if that evaluation was correct, the life has to be good. To think, because happiness certifies that a life is desirable, that happiness is supremely important in life is like thinking an accountant's positive statement is itself the most important fact in the operation of a firm. (Each statement, though, might produce further effects of its own.)

Another way to make this point: A life cannot just be happy while having nothing else valuable in it. Happiness rides piggyback on other things that are positively evaluated correctly. Without these, the happiness doesn't get started.

Happiness can occur at the metalevel as an evaluation of one's life, and at the object level as a feeling *within* the life; it can be in both places at once. No wonder happiness can seem to be the most important constituent of a life. For it *is* extremely important at the metalevel and it does occur (and can have some importance) at the object level too. The central importance of (this third notion of) happiness lies at the metalevel, though, as an evaluation of a life as a whole; hence, the crucial question is what in particular makes a life best. What characteristics must it have to be (correctly) evaluated in an extremely positive way? It is not very illuminating at this point simply to mention emotions of happiness once again.

This conclusion is reinforced ifwe ask what particular evaluation enters into this third emotion of happiness. Precisely which of the many different possible positive evaluations does happiness make of a life as a whole? Not that the life is a *moral* one, for that needn't make one happy; not that it is a happy one—that circle would not help; not simply that it is valuable that the life exist, that the universe is a better place for it, for someone might make that evaluation without being happy; not simply that the life is good, for you might grudgingly recognize that without thinking it fulfilled your major goals or that it was very good. Perhaps the evaluation of the life must be something like the following: that it is very good, also for the person living it, in whatever dimensions he considers most important and whatever dimensions *are* most important. This clearly leaves us with the question of which dimensions of a life *are* the important ones. What does make a life a good one? Once again, it is not illuminating simply to mention the emotion of happiness here. When we want to know what is important, we want to know what to be happy *about.*

There is another sense of the term *happiness:* having a happy mood or disposition. This is not itself an emotion but rather the proneness or tendency to have and feel the three types of happiness emotions just described. A mood is a tendency to make certain types of evaluations, to focus upon facts that can be evaluated that way, and to have the ensuing feelings. In a depressed mood, one is disposed to focus upon negative facts or upon the negative features of otherwise positive situations and hence to have the feelings appropriate to these. A happy person tends to look upon the bright side of things. (However, it would be foolish to want to do this in every situation.) A person's disposition, I think, is a tendency one level up, the tendency to be in certain moods. A person of happy disposition might be in a sad mood on occasion, because of specific factors, but that particular mood will not be an expression of his or her general tendency.

A happy disposition may be a more important determinant of happy feelings than any one of the person's true beliefs and positive evaluations, however large one of these may seem to loom for the moment; it may be more important than the specific character of the actual situation. For example, people frequently pursue goals that they think will make them happy (such as money, fame, power), yet achieving these produces happy feelings only temporarily. They do not linger long in making positive evaluations of these changes, and so the attendant feelings do not last very long either. A *continuing* tendency to look upon positive features of situations and have the attendant feelings—a happy disposition, in other words—is far more likely to result in continuing feelings of happiness.

If there is any "secret of happiness," it resides in regularly choosing some baseline or benchmark or other against which features of the current situation can be evaluated as good or improving. The background it stands out from—hence, the evaluation we actually make—is constituted by our own expectations, levels of aspiration, standards, and demands. And these things are up to us, open to our control. One salient background against which to evaluate is the way things recently were. Perhaps the importance to our happiness of things improving, of some or another upward slope to our lives, is due not, then, to the intrinsic importance of a directional process but to the fact that such a process leads us to judge the present against the recent past, which, happily, it surpasses, rather than against some other baseline from which it might fall short. A person intent upon feeling happy will learn to choose suitable evaluative benchmarks, varying them from situation to situation—he might eventually even choose one that would diminish that very intentness.

Happiness can be served, then, by fiddling with our standards of evaluation—which ones we invoke and which benchmarks these utilize—and with the direction of our attention—which facts end up getting evaluated. The experience machine was objectionable because it completely cut us off from actuality. How much better, though, is aiming at happiness by such purposeful selectivity, which points us only toward some aspects of reality and toward some evaluative standards) omitting others? Wouldn't happiness gained thus be like being on a *partial* experience machine? In the next meditation I consider the issue of which facts to focus upon; while the correct evaluative principles that apply to these facts may not be up to us, the benchmarks and baselines we employ and when we are satisfied in comparison to what are a matter not of external actuality but of our stance toward it. No particular benchmark or baseline is written in the world; when we employ one, even when we select a particular one just in order to be happy, we need not be denying any portion of reality or disconnecting from it. It is in this sense that our happiness is within our own power. Yet just this fact, that happiness depends upon how we look upon things—to be sure, looking upon them in a certain way may be harder in some situations than in others—may make us wonder how important happiness itself can be, if it is that arbitrary. How someone looks upon things, however, might be an important fact about him; people who can never be satisfied, no matter what, may have not simply an unfortunate trait of temperament but a flaw of character. Yet to willfully and constantly shift baselines to suit various situations in order to feel happy in each seems flighty and arbitrary too. Perhaps, although the baselines are not fixed by anything external, we expect a person to show a certain congruence or consistency in these, with only smooth and gradual changes over time. Even so, a person could increase his happiness by setting his uniform sights accordingly.

Moods can affect one's feelings in various obvious ways: by directing attention toward positive (or negative) facts, by resisting dwelling on certain types of facts when they come to attention, by adjusting the benchmarks, by intensifying the degree of the evaluation, by intensifying the degree of the associated feeling by affecting the factor of proportionality, or by lengthening the feeling's duration. What determines the mood, though? Most obvious is the person's general disposition, which is just his tendency to be in certain moods. Another factor—more surprising—is a prediction of what the day's emotions will be. A person wakes up in the morning with some general idea of what emotions are in store for him that day, what events are likely to occur, and how these events will affect him. Of course, this prediction draws upon knowledge of yesterday's conditions and events and of today's likely ones, but it also is to some significant extent self-fulfilling. By setting his mood, the prediction affects what he will notice, how he will evaluate it, and what he will feel, and hence helps to make the prediction come true. A mood is like a weather prediction that could affect the weather. (Moreover, the prediction will not be independent of the first factor, the person's disposition.)

"Anticipation is better than realization," the saying goes. Here is one reason why this sometimes might be so. When we anticipate the occurrence of a likely future event, an event we desire, our current level of felt well-being already gets raised by the amount of that future utility (as the economists term it) we think is coming, discounted by the probability. To make the point clear, let us suppose or fantasize that units of happiness and probabilities can be measured exactly. Then, for example, an event that we initially estimate as bringing us ten units of happiness later and which we think will have a .7 probability of happening raises our level by seven units (.7 times 10) immediately. For that expectation, that expected value, is a current one. When the event itself finally occurs, then, there is room for a rise of only three more units. (This corresponds to the uncertainty that it would occur, the remaining probability of.3 times 10.) Hence the anticipation now might feel better, a rise of seven units' worth, than the realization, a rise of only the remaining three units, when it finally comes; this phenomenon will hold when the probability of that future satisfaction is greater than one half.[9]

We have found various reasons for thinking that happiness is not the only important thing in life: the contours of happiness over a lifetime, the importance of some contact with reality as shown by the experience machine example, the fact that other intense positive emotions have a similar status, the way evaluations built into the notion of happiness presuppose that other things too are of value. Still, we might grant that happiness is not the whole story yet wonder whether it isn't *most* of the story, the most important part. How can one try to estimate percentages on a question like this? Judging by happiness's small role in my own reflections—much of my thinking here was called forth by the weight others have given to it—it is only a small part of the *interesting* story.

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[9] That this occurs when the probability is greater than one half is a frequent psychological phenomenon, not a law. Some people look ahead with great fear to the possibility of the event's not occurring, and discount the future accordingly. When anticipation of a future good does add an amount to a person's current utility level, how will that person fare when the event doesn't occur?

Nevertheless, I want to recall near the close of this meditation how undeniably wonderful happiness, and a happy disposition, can be. How natural then that sometimes we think happiness is the most important thing in life. Those moments when we want to leap or run with exuberant energy, when our heart is light—how could we not want to have our life full of moments like these? Things feel just right, and with its optimism happiness expects this to continue and with its generosity, happiness wants to overflow.

Of course we wish people to have many such moments and days of happiness. (Is the proper unit of happiness the day?) Yet it is not clear that we want those moments constantly or want our lives to consist wholly and only of them. We want to experience other feelings too, ones with valuable aspects that happiness does not possess as strongly. And even the very feelings of happiness may want to direct themselves into other activities, such as helping others or artistic work, which then involve the predominance of different feelings. We want experiences, fitting ones, of profound connection with others, of deep understanding of natural phenomena, of love, of being profoundly moved by music or tragedy, or doing something new and innovative, experiences very different from the bounce and rosiness of the happy moments. What we want, in short, is a life and a self that happiness is a fitting response to—and then to give it that response.