

Practicing Philosophy

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Edited by

Aleksandar Fatić and Lydia Amir

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this book arose from a conversation with Sam Baker, Cambridge Scholars Publishing editor, in the offing of the 13th International Conference on Philosophical Practice, which was held in August 2014, in Belgrade. Indicatively, the title for the conference was ‘Philosophical Practice as a New Paradigm in Philosophy’. Indeed, as soon as the idea for the book was broached, it became clear that the contributions would present the breath of philosophical practice so as to illustrate the limits of the new paradigm, rather than focusing on a single stream of philosophical practice. Thus the present book brings together contributions dealing with a wide array of fields of philosophical practice, ranging from philosophical counseling to philosophical cafés to teaching to corporate and even judicial consultancy. The obvious advantage of such an approach is that it stimulates thought on the many fields in which philosophical practice holds promise; the obvious disadvantage is two-fold: first, the present collection cannot delve into any of the specific fields of philosophical practice in-depth, and second, it inevitably brings views which, while relevant to philosophical practice, are not necessarily shared by the editors. With both advantages and disadvantages in mind, the reader can hopefully appreciate the potential of practicing philosophy professionally outside academia for an array of practical fields of human life and professional work.

The editors have worked on this book through some trying times in their personal lives, as well as in the development of the philosophical practice movement. The latter has faced directional challenges, which is part of the evolution of most fields, and an expansion in the sense that parts of the academia, especially in Great Britain, have started to focus on philosophical practice independently of the philosophical practice movement itself. Both latter developments are welcome: they hold promise for the development of the field which will both test and improve its current quality and engage a broader array of professional philosophers in it.

The preparation of this book was conducted in Serbia and in Israel, for the most part. The Editors are grateful to all the colleagues who have contributed their authoritative views on their fields. Special gratitude is

due to Ms. Bojana Simeunović, a young philosopher, who has contributed to the preparation of this volume in both substantive and technical respects more than can be acknowledged in an introduction to a volume.

Belgrade and Tel Aviv, 13 June 2015.

I

ANCIENT PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON TWO CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS

DIMITRIOS DENTSORAS

Ancient eudaimonism

In a moment of dramatic honesty during his *Apology*, Socrates turns to his judges and offers a description of his divine calling, which brought him infamy and, eventually, a death sentence (*Apology* 29d). Two activities are mentioned. The first is doing philosophy, which Socrates vows never to stop, even under penalty of death. The second is imploring Athenians to abandon their pursuit of wealth and reputation, and to devote themselves to the pursuit of wisdom and virtue, instead. For Socrates, the two activities are faces of the same coin. Philosophy's goal is not merely to discover truth. It is also, and perhaps primarily, to guide people through life, help them set their priorities right, and train them to be successful in attaining what is most valuable. With respect to one's priorities, Socrates is adamant. What really matters, and what one should pursue primarily, if not exclusively, is not money or fame, which most Athenians seem to be after, but knowledge and virtue.

This is a radical position that clearly did not get Socrates, Athens' 'gadfly,' many friends, as his predicament shows. But, more inflammatory than the claim that Athenians have all their priorities mixed up is Socrates' reason for constantly hammering his moralism on Athenians' heads. Socrates does not merely challenge his fellow citizens' right to seek what they feel will make their own lives happy, the kind of liberty that modern liberal societies take for granted. Neither does Socrates present the imperative to seek virtue as a God-given commandment, demonstrating the kind of divinely inspired self-righteousness that sealed the fate of countless prophets. Rather, Socrates seems to insult the Athenians' ability to reason, by making the claim that seeking money and honor is the wrong way for becoming happy, and by implying that Athenians are stupid for

adopting goals that are detrimental, rather than beneficial, to their own happiness. With his mix of argument and irony, Socrates tries to convince Athenians that virtue is necessary for enjoying any benefit from possessions, while money and fame by themselves are useless without wisdom and virtue.

A characteristic example of how Plato's Socrates understood philosophy's role in guiding people towards things that are truly beneficial and contributing to happiness appears in *Euthydemus*, where Socrates tries to convince young Clinias to devote himself to the pursuit of philosophy and virtue. Socrates begins his exhortation in *Euthydemus* by making the apparently self-evident claim that all men wish to do well (*Euthydemus* 278e). Moreover, Socrates notes, every person seems to have an idea of what doing well, or being happy, requires. As Clinias admits, most people think of being happy as a state of possessing many things that are good, such as health, bodily strength and beauty, power, honor, and money. To this, they may add intellectual ability (perfected by wisdom), and even some moral and social excellences, and the benefits that accompany them (friends, social esteem, etc.). Not surprisingly, this is, more or less, the kind of list that the average person would compose today, if asked about what good things would make them happy.

Up to this point, philosophy seems to have little to offer to the pursuit of happiness, except instrumentally by finding ways to best achieve the goals that one sets. But Socrates has something completely different in mind. So, he goes on to show to Clinias that the centrality of happiness in our daily endeavors, choices, and pursuits contrasts with the lack of reflection that we often demonstrate in deciding what is valuable and can truly contribute to our happiness.¹ This is a malady, Socrates thinks, which only philosophical thinking and devotion to wisdom and virtue can amend.² Clinias' list of good things mentioned above appears common-sense, but also demonstrates an evident looseness. Some of the goods included in the list, such as money and good fortune, are clearly instrumental. Others, such as good reputation and professional success, seem to be desirable

¹ Happiness is, obviously, not the only thing that plays into our decision-making process and our subsequent actions. Moral and social commitments, settled practices, peer pressure, and many other factors influence what we do and how we do it. Nevertheless, our happiness seems to be an important, if not the most important factor, at least for most of us.

² Cf. Socrates' reaction to Callicles' view that happiness comes with being able to satisfy whatever one may desire, in *Gorgias* 491e, discussed by White 2006: 7.

more for their causes (achieving something great, or being good at one's job), rather than for themselves, even if one would prefer that great deeds and professional achievement be recognized. Is there any way to place all these seemingly disparate pursuits in a neat hierarchy, with all intermediate goals being means to a further end, or at least components of a single goal? Socrates in the *Euthydemus* seems to think so, taking his model from goal-directed crafts, such as generalship or medicine. For Socrates, the end-goal of all action is happiness, just as the end-goal of generalship is victory and of medicine health. All intermediate pursuits are valuable only if they contribute to this end-goal. Otherwise, they are indifferent, or even harmful, as one can see in cases of people who use their wealth for harmful pleasures or their power to oppress others.³ If one is to achieve happiness, one has to re-evaluate all pursuits and goals in line with a hierarchy of goods that places happiness at the top.⁴ And this can only be achieved by adopting a philosophical attitude similar to the one Socrates exercised his whole life.

The thought that all of human action can and should be broken down to a series of means towards the single overarching goal of happiness is the basis for ancient eudaimonism. According to the theory's most recognized proponent, Aristotle, the purpose of philosophical ethics (the science of human conduct) is to provide the right description of our ultimate end, i.e. happiness, as well as a blueprint of how happiness can be attained.⁵ The driving thought in Aristotle's eudaimonism is that well-being (Greek *eudaimonia*) is a value term denoting an intrinsically good quality, which characterises the course of one's life, and does not occur merely in isolated instances. For Aristotle, whether one is happy or not is something that can be objectively assessed by an outside observer, according to a set of more-or-less fixed criteria, the same way that someone's health can be objectively ascertained. And, just as in the case of health, the assessment of happiness requires an expert (the virtuous person, exemplified by the philosopher), who knows what criteria should be used.

³ For a similar point, see also *Meno* 88c.

⁴ Aristotle makes such a point in *Eudemian Ethics* 1214b6, discussed by White, 2006: 12.

⁵ See *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094a23), where Aristotle outlines the importance of the science that can provide us with the knowledge of the good.

Modern accounts of happiness

The Aristotelian conception of happiness as a state that characterises one's life and is achieved when certain (objectively determined) conditions are met appears in the majority of philosophical approaches to happiness, up to the modern period. However, beginning with Hobbes' famous rejection of the Aristotelian highest good ('the felicity of this life consists not in the repose of a mind satisfied') and his claim that happiness is nothing other than 'a continual progress of the desire from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter', philosophers have been moving towards description of happiness as the satisfaction of one's desires.⁶ These desires, of course, are subjectively determined and may vary from person to person. Moreover, their satisfaction is not some stable and lengthy state, but may vary in intensity and duration.

Bentham's utilitarian theory clearly expresses the modern conception of happiness and the way this conception is related to moral philosophy. According to Bentham's *Greatest Happiness Principle*, an action is morally right or wrong 'according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question'.⁷ While Bentham proposes a scientific method of measuring the different aspects of happiness (its intensity, duration, purity, etc.), the core of his notion of happiness is a subjective positive feeling of satisfaction, invariably referred to as utility or pleasure. Mill's version of utilitarianism seeks to introduce differences in the quality of pleasure that take us back to the ancient, 'objective' notion of happiness (most strikingly, if somewhat crudely, through Mill's image of a dissatisfied Socrates next to a satisfied pig).⁸ However the main thought remains that what can make someone happy differs from person to person, according to their varying preferences, goals and aspirations, social and personal attachments, etc.

Contemporary accounts of happiness, for the most part, tend to describe it rather loosely as a positive psychological state that may be caused by a range of things, from reflecting on one's life achievements, to reacting to personal circumstances, to doing nothing at all and simply letting the

⁶Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. XI. On this development, see Kraut (1979). For a description of the contrast between the Aristotelian naturalistic understanding of happiness and the modern focus on feeling happy, see also Belliotti (2004: 41).

⁷Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* I.II.

⁸John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* II.

brain's chemical predispositions manifest themselves.⁹ According to this conception of happiness, being happy is primarily the same as feeling happy, and, as in the case of most feelings, there can only be a loose description that partially portrays the subjective character of the experience. Such an understanding of happiness as a positive feeling reflects common usage. When my wife walks in the room saying 'I am so happy!' I take her to mean that she is feeling happy. If her face were to be drooping when she utters the words, I would take her to be ironic, not to mean that she *is really happy* even though she does not *feel happy*.

Given its popular use, it is no surprise that the conception of happiness as a positive psychological state is adopted by contemporary psychologists and numerous self-help professionals, who provide advice on how people can become happier. What people want is to feel happy, or, more often, to stop feeling unhappy. This is what their counselors also aim at through a variety of techniques that aim at changing people's perceptions of their circumstances and life quality (through positive psychology, for example), at encouraging choices that are more likely to bring about happy feelings (stressing less about work, spending more time with friends and family, etc.), or at influencing the brain's chemical balance directly, through the use of drugs. On the other hand, alternative accounts of happiness as an objectively assessed state that includes more than a subjective feeling, or an evaluation of one's successes and failures, are adopted by most major religions, based on dogmatic principles that give a definitive description of happiness (usually some otherworldly state), and of the ways happiness is best attained (usually by following certain rules and rites).¹⁰

Where do philosophers fall in this division? Although philosophers acknowledge the existence of the two different conceptions of happiness, they often do not insist on any one of them being proper and correct.¹¹ In fact, much of contemporary philosophy tends to say less about happiness and how it can be attained than one would have expected, given the

⁹ There are many different terms used for this positive quality, with definitions of these terms often varying. The most common term among psychologists is 'subjective well-being'. The term is supposed to capture not only positive feelings of pleasure, but also evaluations of how well one's life is going, from their subjective point of view.

¹⁰ For such a view, see Lewis (1972), especially the essays 'We Have No "Right to Happiness"' and 'Answers to Questions on Christianity'.

¹¹ For a clear account of this division, see Dan Heybron's entry on happiness in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/happiness/#ClaOurInq>), also in Heybron (2013).

centrality of happiness in everyday life. Unlike philosophical moral theories, which retain their vigor, and often their absolutism, there are relatively few philosophical descriptions of the good life, and even fewer attempts by philosophers to offer practical advice towards it, as Socrates and his successors did in antiquity.

The reasons for such an attitude are, to a great extent, the same reasons that have led to the abandonment of ancient *eudaimonism* by modern philosophy. Aristotle's account of happiness, as well as those of Plato, the Stoics, and most other ancient philosophical schools, are based on natural philosophy, theories of human nature, and metaphysical assumptions about the world and the divine. These theories have been long abandoned, of course, taking with them the accounts of happiness that depended on them. The most important among them is the abandonment of the teleological account of the world and human life. While human beings undoubtedly have a whole number of dispositions and natural endowments, such as the desire for food and shelter, the enjoyment of sex, and the need for care, there seems to be no goal (single or otherwise) that our nature directs us towards, just as there is no goal that the universe is trying to fulfill. Unlike philosophical ethics, which can be developed even without a definitive theory of (human) nature, as Kant has shown, normative theories of happiness of the kind that ancient philosophers developed are tied to a theory of human nature and a notion of human fulfillment. But there seems to be no such theory, leaving us with a multiplicity of values and goals that each one can pick as representing what happiness is all about.

A further reason for the abandonment of ancient theories of happiness has to do with the rise of political liberalism in modern Europe and North America. Plato's ideal republic, and to some extent Aristotle's best regime, are based on the thought that citizens are by-and-large unable to set the proper goals for their own lives, and need to be told what they should pursue, by a wise and benevolent ruling class. Epicureanism and Stoicism adopt a more liberal political scheme, where no single authority establishes every citizen's occupation and life-goals. But they also offer a patronizing scheme where only a privileged class of sages is able to determine its proper life-goals, while most people are not able to determine what is best for them, and should be prevented from pursuing the (mistaken) goals they may happen to adopt.

In contrast to the ancient Greeks, the modern liberal state, as envisioned by the American Founding Fathers and their Enlightenment predecessors, is based on people's right to pursue happiness as they conceive it, in

whichever way they find appropriate, as long as they do not impede the same pursuit by others. A part of the right to pursue happiness is the right to choose what will make one happy. Happiness cannot be attained only by reading books and looking at art; one can also be happy by taking a walk, watching football with friends, or going to the mall. Any attempt to impose a conception of happiness by rulers, religious leaders or philosophers, violates people's right to liberty, and could lead to alienation, by trying to make people act in ways that conflict with their innermost desires.

Ancient happiness revived

While ancient eudaimonism is still considered, by and large, as outdated as the theories of human nature that went with it, some aspects of ancient moral theory have enjoyed a comeback in the past decades, as what has come to be called 'virtue ethics'.¹² While much of virtue ethics stems from dissatisfaction with modern deontological and consequentialist theories, a number of virtue theorists rightly point it out that the moral theories of Aristotle, Plato, the Stoics, and Epicurus, contain insights into the nature of human action and value of morality that are as useful today as they were then.¹³ Some contemporary philosophers have even presented ancient philosophical theories of happiness as paradigms that could help modern people overcome some of their most persistent problems and achieve a more fulfilling and happy life.¹⁴

Any attempt to revive ancient theories of happiness, and to make practical recommendations based on them, is bound to face two serious challenges. The first is that of divorcing the ancient accounts of happiness from the natural and metaphysical theories that gave rise to them, which are rightly

¹² Although virtue plays a significant role in the moral theories of many modern philosophers, such as Hume and Kant, there had seemed to be little interest in reviving ancient eudaimonism, until the appearance of Anscombe (1958). In the following decades, virtue ethics has enjoyed a significant growth, and is now considered a third major normative ethics theory, next to deontological/Kantian ethics and consequentialist/utilitarian theory.

¹³ There is a long list of scholars who make a strong case for the value of ancient philosophy in answering contemporary moral philosophical questions. Among the most influential, see Hurka (2001), Hursthouse (1999), MacIntyre (1985).

¹⁴ See, for example, Becker (1998). For attempts by psychologists to apply ancient eudaimonism in a contemporary practical context, especially within the framework of positive psychology, see Cohen (2003), Robertson (2010).

rejected by modern science and philosophy. The second difficulty arises when we compare the ancient philosophical descriptions of happiness with the contemporary popular understanding of the concept. Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, Stoic *apatheia*, or Epicurean *ataraxia*, might fit the formal requirements of happiness set by philosophical reasoning, but they seem very distant from how the vast majority of people view happiness today. Socrates, the Stoics, and Epicurus may have had little regard for common opinions on happiness. After all, part of their philosophical agenda was their attempt to drastically revise public perceptions of happiness, as Socrates' attitude in the *Apology* amply shows. But why would anyone today bother with such accounts of happiness, which try to satisfy some formalistic philosophical and logical conditions, rather than really expressing what people think being happy is all about?

The remainder of this paper attempts to provide an answer to this question. Starting with the observation that popular conceptions of happiness have not changed much since Socrates' time, I show that the ancient philosophical conceptions of happiness address many common intuitions and try to combine them in a logically consistent manner. The main point of contention is the attempt by ancient philosophers to combine the two conceptions of happiness (i) as a value term denoting an objectively and intrinsically valuable quality and (ii) as a positive subjective feeling. Ancient philosophers try to combine the two conceptions in intentional terms, through a single unitary account of happiness. Happiness is what all our actions ultimately aim at. Such an ultimate goal must contain not only some subjective feelings and preferences, but a set of views about the world and what is valuable in it. Certain kinds of feelings, such as pleasure, might be part of this general goal. However, even pleasure is dependent on our judgments regarding what is valuable. I discuss this theory and raise some objections from the contemporary point of view. These objections are directed against both the ancient formulations of the ultimate end, as well as the very claim that there is such a thing as happiness. I conclude with some suggestions about how to make use of the ancient conceptions of happiness that, on the one hand, take into account the brain's complicated decision-making mechanism, and, on the other, pay respect to the quest for a unitary account of happiness.

Happiness as the ultimate goal of action

Everyday life has changed dramatically since Socrates walked the streets of Athens. Yet, for all the technological, intellectual, and moral

developments of the past millennia, it seems that little has changed when it comes to the question of what we all really want, what is worth striving for, and what gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Very much like the ancient Athenians, people today think that happiness is what we all want. Moreover, the popular conception of happiness seems to have remained, more or less, the same throughout the centuries: it consists today, as it did earlier, in the possession of good things such as good health, financial security, a family, a circle of friends, public recognition, and participation in a flourishing, well-functioning and just community.

The common conceptions of happiness and the intuitions accompanying them provide a starting point for philosophical reflection in Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic philosophers.¹⁵ And while ancient philosophers do not treat these intuitions as self-evident, or even necessarily correct, they are willing to build their own accounts of happiness based on them, rejecting the intuitions that are logically contradictory along the way. The distinction between two kinds of happiness, subjective and objective, is one of the common intuitions that invited the ancients' philosophical reflection. The ancient philosophical vocabulary does not include a term for what we would call life-satisfaction, or even the concept that 'happiness' expresses in its common usage as a subjective pleasant feeling. Rather, the ancients seem to have understood the subjective conception of happiness under the general concept of pleasure (*hêdonê*). Part of the broader concept of pleasure are the pleasant feelings that arise from the satisfaction of physical desires, such as eating and sex, entertainment, and pastimes. But there is also an intellectual kind of pleasure that accompanies significant accomplishments, life milestones, or even the reminiscing of memorable experiences.¹⁶ Such a pleasure is a rather steady and continuous state that accompanies the truly happy and blessed life — the kind of life we should all aspire to.

Without a doubt, such pleasure is something desirable. But it does not quite amount to true happiness as the contemporaries of Plato and

¹⁵ On common conceptions being the starting point for philosophical reflection in Epicurus and Stoicism, see Diogenes Laertius (10.33), Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.22. Cf. Aristotle's treatment of *eudoxa*, commonly held views on a variety of topics that invite philosophical reflection and, often, amendments of rejection.

¹⁶ Even the Epicureans, who believed that all pleasure and pain (ultimately) originate from the body, accept pleasures of the mind that stem from recollecting past pleasures or looking forward to future ones. In fact, they thought that the ability to properly direct one's thought and maximize the pleasures of the mind was the best way to become happy. On this, see Cicero, *De finibus* 1.55–57.

Aristotle understood it under the concept of *eudaimonia*. There are a number of reasons for this. One has to do with the fact that *eudaimonia* was conceived by the ancients as a quality that characterised the whole of one's life, or at least a big part of it, contrary to the feeling of pleasure that might accompany single events. The popular story of Solon, who refuses to proclaim King Croesus the happiest man alive until he has seen Croesus' end, expresses such an attitude.¹⁷ Furthermore, the religious undertone of the term *eudaimonia* itself (literally meaning having or being accompanied by a good guardian spirit (*daimon*)) points at an external, objective evaluator — and providential provider — of happiness.¹⁸ Being happy for the ancients was being blessed by the gods, and such divine good grace was not merely bestowed upon those who experienced a subjective and temporary feeling of elation or satisfaction.

Such religious connotations are by-and-large missing from contemporary understandings of happiness. The central intuition remains the same, namely that happiness may include a subjective positive feeling, even do so as a necessary condition, but extends well beyond it, in order to include the possession of goods that are objectively valuable. Robert Nozick (1974: 42-45) attempted to capture this intuition through the Experience Machine thought experiment. According to Nozick, most people would refuse to enter an experience machine that simulates a world where all our desires are satisfied, and where we live in perpetual bliss. Nozick's reason for this view is that we do not merely want to believe (falsely, in the case of the experience machine) that everything in our life is going the way we want it, but we also want this to be the case. There may be a number of reasons for this. Nozick mentions our (presumably intuitive) desire to *do* some things and not only experience them, the fear that by plugging into the machine we — in a sense — lose ourselves, and the desire to live in something deeper than a man-made reality. Part of our intuition may also stem from our cognitive aversion to falsehood. In any case, the intuitions

¹⁷ The story is narrated in Plutarch's biography of Solon, in his *Parallel lives of noble Greeks and Romans* 93-94. For a discussion of the Solon story, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1100a15). The conclusion that Aristotle reaches is that happiness has to be a stable trait, so that the happy person cannot be represented as 'a kind of chameleon' changing from happiness to unhappiness along with his fortunes.

¹⁸ Cf. Aristotle's discussion of blessedness (*makariotes*) in *Eudemian Ethics* (1215a10, 1179b9), which describes the perfect happiness of the gods, and *Nicomachean Ethics* (1101a8), where the blessedness of humans is liable to horrible misfortune and can be lost as a result, unlike happiness (happiness cannot be lost, since the blessed person will never act wrongly).

behind the choice to stay out of the experience machine run deep, involving thoughts about who we are, and what is valuable and worth pursuing in life. These are intuitions that we often use in evaluating the lives of others. We tend to pity the delusional person who thinks he is Napoleon and is planning the conquest of Europe; we do not envy him for experiencing a feeling of grandeur, even if we recognize that the subjective emotional state of such a delusional person is not very far from the emotional state of Napoleon himself. The fact that he is *not* Napoleon, even if he thinks so, makes all the difference in the world with respect to how we evaluate this person's happiness.

The intuition behind Nozick's Experience Machine is also present in Plato's *Republic*. According to Plato, people are not satisfied with possessing what merely appears to be good. Rather, they want what is truly good. Similarly, they are not satisfied with having a true belief about what is good, but desire knowledge of true goodness (*Republic* 505d). The most telling parallel is that between happiness and physical health. We do not merely wish to feel well and healthy. Rather, we wish to be really healthy (*Republic* 445a.). Nobody would choose disease over health, even if the disease was accompanied by dozens of pleasure-generating medicaments and ointments. Similarly, we do not want a subjective feeling of happiness, but to be truly, objectively happy. Very much like the cancer patient who blissfully smiles under the influence of morphine, the alcoholic, or workaholic, who proclaims to 'feel great' although his life is 'objectively' unhappy by any external standard, should be pitied and not lauded or set as an example.

The unconditional superiority of objective over subjective happiness is one of the central intuitions behind ancient eudaimonism, as well as part of the contemporary understanding of happiness (if one is to agree with Nozick). Why do we offer such superiority to constitutional, rather than emotional happiness? Part of the reason has to do with the relative instability that emotional happiness possesses. People on antidepressants or other mood-modifying medication are well aware of this. They may feel happy now, but this can quickly change, even with no significant change in their actual lives. The most important reason for the superiority of constitutional, 'objective' happiness, however, comes from the very conception of happiness. The subjective pleasant feeling of being happy may be something desirable, but it is dependent on, and subordinate to, a state of the world that we have chosen to pursue. We feel happy when we marry, have children, get promoted, etc. *because* we are now married, a parent, and a manager, and because we consider these states to be good and

desirable. If it turned out that we only mistakenly thought that we possessed all these goods, the rational response would be to reconsider our (past) happiness. The devoted housewife who lives a seemingly happy family life in the suburbs, only to find out that her husband has had a series of mistresses throughout their marriage and that all their possessions had been acquired through drug trafficking, does not merely lose her current happiness. She comes to doubt that she has ever been happy, and rightly so. Her past illusive happiness was due to the mistaken belief that she had a loving and law-abiding husband. Without these external goods, there should be no happiness. Otherwise we end up with the cyclical and problematic view that she was happy merely because she felt happy.

The problem of identifying happiness with a positive feeling becomes most evident when we consider the main function of happiness in ancient eudaimonism, namely its providing an overarching goal that our actions aim at. The large majority of the ancient philosophical schools considered pleasure — their equivalent to subjective happiness — to be a problematic overarching life goal. This was not due solely to their teleological theories of human nature and the world at large, although these metaphysical views played a central role in the rejection of pleasure as the highest good. Even if one were to be completely neutral with regard to our naturally appropriate goal — if one were to pick whichever life goal they wanted, without considering any of them ‘naturally better’ than the other, and if one simply proclaimed the pleasure that comes from achieving one’s goals to be the ultimate good, one would be getting things backwards.¹⁹ It cannot be that my goal in trying to win the Nobel Prize is the pleasure that I will feel when I do so. The potential pleasure itself can only come about if I consider winning the Nobel Prize to be a worthwhile cause that warrants a feeling of self-satisfaction, and my opinion on the value of winning the Nobel Prize is based on independent reasons that have nothing to do with pleasure. Wanting to win the Nobel Prize for the pleasure that this will bring about, without considering the Nobel Prize something valuable on independent grounds is simply bad reasoning.²⁰

We are now at the point of being able to spell out and evaluate the main idea behind ancient philosophical eudaimonism. According to the theory, the distinct feature of human action is that it is goal-oriented in a way that

¹⁹ This is the thought expressed in Kraut (1979: 177). For a similar account, also see Goldstein (1973).

²⁰ For the opposite view, see David Gauthier’s view discussed in McFall (1984: 603).

is reflective, reason-based, and structured. At the highest level of the hierarchical structure of one's goals stands happiness. In order to function as such an overarching goal, happiness cannot be simply some subjective positive emotion or evaluation of one's life. Such an emotional state is completely uninformative as a general goal. After all, our judgments about what will bring self-satisfaction and pleasure must be based on thinking about what we find valuable and good. Hence, the general life-goal has to be some state of the world where one enjoys a certain character and position in life that is deemed valuable and choiceworthy. Spelling out what this state should be requires, at least to some extent, a substantial metaphysical and moral theory about what is valuable and worth pursuing in life. Our projected feeling of self-satisfaction and happiness is inevitably tethered to our life-goals.

In addition to this thought, many ancient philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, and to some extent the Stoics, suggested that the life goals that function as our substantive description of happiness have to go beyond the satisfaction of basic needs, or simple pastimes. This is not because one could not imagine a life where one seeks nothing other than easy-to-reach pleasures. Rather, such a life would leave out much that is valuable in life. Surely, we do not think that great artists, statesmen, and scientists devoted their lives to the pursuit of something that has no value. If that is so, then similar achievements should be part of everyone's overarching life-goals, to the extent possible.²¹ Ancient philosophers considered this need for happiness to include a significant degree of achievement. A moral and intellectual excellence, *aretê*, was seen as a necessary condition for happiness. Correspondingly, they presented philosophy as guidance towards the achievement of genuine objective happiness, i.e. as guidance towards moral and intellectual excellence, and not merely as an instrument for enhancing one's emotional states. Even the psychological advice that Stoic philosophers, such as Epictetus and Seneca, offered in helping people with life's challenges and disappointments was supposed to be part of a process of moral development towards a virtuous disposition, i.e. towards becoming a certain kind of person.

²¹ The basis for this claim seems to lie on an objective, third-person account of value. We do not admire virtuous people and want to become like them because they seem to have what *they* think is valuable. When we hear of grand and heroic acts, we do not shrug our shoulders and say: 'Good for them! If this is what they wanted and what made them happy, I am glad they managed it.' Rather, we seem to think that what virtuous people do is good and valuable in an absolute manner. By doing so, we *must* imply that virtuous actions are something we also aspire to.

At this point, a note needs to be made regarding two ancient descriptions of happiness that seem to diverge from the objectivist account given above. The first is the adaptive theory offered by some Socratic philosophers and the second is Epicurus' hedonism.²² The adaptive theory maintains that the best way to achieve happiness is by limiting one's desires to what can be achieved. This is the way of life advertised by the Cynics.²³ It is also how one could interpret some of the Stoic Epictetus' moral claims, especially the view expressed in his *Manual (Enchiridion)* that we should accept whatever is not in our power to alter. This is what most people nowadays associate with the Stoic attitude. However, the Stoic view, and to some extent that of the Cynics, is not supposed to merely provide a strategy for satisfying one's desires and thus reaching subjective well-being. Rather it is meant to harmonise our desires with nature. Therefore, for the Cynics as well as for the Stoics, knowledge of nature and agreement with nature are necessary prerequisites for developing an immunity to frustration and thus achieving a full happiness. It is nature, rather than some subjective preferential ordering, which provides the human end that constitutes happiness.

On the other hand, Epicurus' hedonism might seem to allow for some degree of subjective variation on what constitutes one's happiness. His claim that 'all pleasure *qua* pleasure is good', and the view that happiness is the state that results from experiencing pleasure and satisfying one's desires, seem to imply that people, who might find pleasure in different things, can be happy in different ways.²⁴ However, Epicurus also contends that nature determines not only that pleasure is the good, but also which pleasures should be pursued and can lead to happiness.²⁵ He also explicitly denies that a life of eating, drinking and sex can be happy, or that such pleasures can be part of a hedonist's goal. So in his *Letter to Menoeceus* (Diogenes Laertius 10.132) he claims: 'for it is not drinking bouts and continuous partying [...] which produce the pleasant life, but sober calculation which searches out reasons for every choice'. This may be because Epicurus thinks that partying is a bad strategy for reaching any

²² On the adaptive strategy and how it was adopted by the Socratic philosophers of the Hellenistic period, see Terence Irwin's treatment of what he calls 'one-sided Socratics' in Irwin (2007: chapters 2–4).

²³ On the Socratic tradition of the Cynic movement, see Irwin (2007: chapter 4) and Long (1996: 28–46).

²⁴ See Epicurus, *Key doctrines* 8, Cicero, *De finibus* 1.32.

²⁵ For the division of pleasures into natural and empty, see Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*: 127.

kind of lasting pleasant feeling. Or, he might think that partying is not really pleasant at all, even though it might appear so. Rather than being a subjective feeling that can accompany a variety of activities, Epicurean pleasure seems to follow more the naturalistic account of the other ancient philosophical schools, who endorsed an objective evaluative account of happiness.

Objections, replies, and conclusions

For all its philosophical justification, one cannot help but notice that the model of happiness offered by ancient philosophers seems quite out of line from our modern understanding of what constitutes a happy and valuable life. Socrates' moralism, Plato's elitism, Aristotle's obsession with the life of study, and the Stoic complete lack of emotions seem both out of reach for ordinary people, and fundamentally unappealing to many. This is not simply a mismatch between two different historical periods. Even in their own time, philosophical accounts of happiness were treated with reservation, if not all-out rejection. This might make one wonder about the extent to which these accounts can be taken seriously at all. Their elitism and stringency seem to promise little happiness to people who are not or might never be able to become sufficiently virtuous. According to the Stoics there was hardly a man alive who was truly happy. Aristotle also seems to reserve the possibility of happiness for only a select few intellectuals, while Plato assigns full happiness only to the rulers of his perfect (and fictional) state. How could such an untenable condition function as a goal?

The best response, it seems, is to argue that such extreme demands do not need to be taken at face value. Philosophical happiness aims at providing an ideal that our actions should work towards. Such a mark has to be set high. For even if we fail to reach all the way, making considerable progress towards the goal of full happiness should result in a life that is meaningful and well-lived. Moreover, most ancient philosophical schools seem willing to accommodate less-than-perfect stages of the development of virtue and provide guidance on how to progress through them.²⁶ The only condition is that one does not abandon the ultimate goal of fully virtuous, 'objective' happiness.

²⁶ Cf. the Stoic concept of the person who is progressing towards virtue (*prokoptôn*), or Plato's account of the lesser happiness of the lower parts of the ideal city.

The second objection against the eudaimonistic account of happiness is not directed against any particular description of happiness, but against the basic idea that our actions are, or at least should be, directed towards a goal that we set through a process of deliberation and evaluation, which we aspire to be valid objectively. Presumably this is an intuition that we all have, and it lies behind the refusal to enter an experience machine. However, as contemporary research in psychology consistently shows, there is little evidence that people really arrange their actions and choices in such a manner. This may account for the considerable difference between the life choices and actions that people make, and what philosophers, both ancient and modern, prescribe. Ancient philosophers often take this difference in life choices to be indicative of an unreflective, non-philosophical, and deeply flawed attitude. On the other hand, these are exactly the kinds of issues that contemporary counselors and psychologists mostly occupy themselves with. Surely contemporary scientists do not think that the people's common worries and aspirations are simply misguided and should be flatly ignored.

The common tendency to associate happiness with a positive emotion rather than a state of the world that can function as an overarching goal is not merely the product of a lack of reflection on our actions. Contemporary research on the brain's function has shown that the brain makes decisions based on a complicated mechanism that employs two different systems.²⁷ The first is a rational deliberating system, which we employ when we contemplate important life decisions macroscopically. The second system is more intuitive, much quicker, and less reflective. It is the system often employed in short-term and quick decisions. The decisions that it makes are based on heuristics that involve emotional reactions. In essence the second system does what philosophers would find backwards and nonsensical: it tells us to try and win the Nobel because it will feel good to do so, just as it tells us that eating and having sex are good and choiceworthy because they are pleasant. Since the second system is much faster than the first, in essence, most of our short-term choices and actions are done for the 'wrong' reasons. For the most part, this goes unnoticed and produces no problems in our choices and actions. But the unreflective, intuitive system is also victim to common heuristic fallacies and cognitive biases.²⁸ For this reason, it may guide people in the wrong

²⁷ This is the two-system model that Daniel Kahneman defends in Kahneman (2011).

²⁸ For a list of such heuristics and biases, see <http://www.psychologyconcepts.com/category/biases-and-heuristics/>

direction, even if they are rationally aware of the wrongfulness of their way.

This picture of the brain's decision-making mechanism explains, to some extent, people's unwillingness or failure to act according to a rationally laid-out long term plan. But one cannot simply suppress the intuitive-based decision-making mechanisms, as ancient philosophers suggested we do with the lower, irrational parts of the soul; after all, intuition is as much part of who we are as rationally reflection is. It would, therefore, be more beneficial if we were to train the non-reflective system to recognise and avoid common fallacies, thus shaping the right intuitive responses to external perceptions. To a great extent, this is what contemporary psychology and counseling try to do. Some of their techniques are similar to techniques employed by ancient philosophers, such as the Epicureans and the Stoics, who put emphasis on training oneself to find pleasure in the right things, and avoid emotional excesses.

There are also further lessons to be taken from ancient philosophy. One is the realization and awareness of the fact that happiness, as the overarching goal that our lives should aim at, cannot be the mere enjoyment that follows the achievement of our intermediate goals, but something more substantial: a stable state that we reach when we make objectively recognized achievements. Another one is the need to reflect rationally on our actions and place them in their proper perspective. This may not necessarily help with controlling our emotional responses to events in our lives. Telling someone that a break-up over a trivial issue is nothing bad, since the kinds of relationships that matter are not affected by trivialities, may not make one feel less disappointed. It could, however, affect one's *future actions*. Rather than skulking, one may choose to do something else that really matters; take a course or volunteer for something, for example. Doing so will have a real effect on one's happiness, even if it does not feel so immediately.

We can all distinguish between being happy and feeling happy. This is especially so in the case of unhappiness: we have no trouble envisioning someone whose life is really miserable, but he is feeling fine because he had four dry martinis, or has been keeping up with his medication. But we can similarly think of a successful person suffering from depression claiming that her life is happy and meaningful, but she feels terrible because of her depression, the same way that she would feel if she had just broken a leg. Knowing that one's life is meaningful and happy is, by itself, important enough to warrant all of one's attention and effort. The feeling

might not immediately follow. Just as in Kantian ethics every person can behave morally, even those with the worst predisposition, every person can be truly happy, even those prone to feeling depressed. This, if anything, is the lesson ancient philosophers tried to give us. Even in the most adverse and painful circumstances, such as Epicurus' disease or Socrates' ordeal, true happiness is available for as long as one's acts aim right and steadfastly.

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II

THE PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTITIONER AS A CO-RESEARCHER

FINN THORBJØN HANSEN

This essay is not about Philosophical Practice as a modern place for ‘guests’ who wish to work on their personal issues and problems. Rather, its aim is to introduce another area where the philosophical practitioner unfolds his or her ‘art’ – the human science research. For many years I have worked with the special kind of philosophical practice I have developed, a wonder lab.¹ There, professional practitioners learn how inquire into their own practices and lived experiences through a Socratic Community of Wonder and through a special ‘philosophical way of living’ *in* their daily professional lives. As a researcher employed at a university as well as a trainer and practitioner of philosophical practice and counselling I have found it intriguing to combine my skills and virtues as a Socratic midwife with what I call ‘phenomenological-oriented action research’. I believe that contemporary qualitative and action research should find ways to enlighten and disclose the tacit and *ontological* dimension of a professional practice (say nursing or designing).² Those involved in human science research usually reach only the dimension of the epistemological and empirical fact, but according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology “must stick close to experience, and yet not limit

¹ Wonder Lab is a research unit at the Centre for Dialogue and Organization, Aalborg University. It is one out of part of four labs under Dialogue Labs: http://www.kommunikation.aau.dk/forskning/vidensgrupper/cdo/dialogue_labs/.

² My work with phenomenological-oriented action research has been developed through two 3-year research projects. The first was in co-operation with and sponsored by a Danish School of Design where the question was about the relationship between wonderment and creativity (Hansen 2014). The second sponsored project was on a Danish Hospice where we inquired into the question: In what way do wonder-based and philosophical questioning in palliation can qualify the existential and spiritual care.