

Happiness

The following dialogue conducted between Aristotle and Epictetus concerning the nature of happiness and the role that circumstances have on happiness has been reproduced with permission of Ryan Potter Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Aristotle starts:

“I shall start by congratulating you on your conclusion about the relationship between virtue and happiness. You are right, to a degree, to say that happiness is the effect of virtue.ⁱ But, even more than that, it is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue.ⁱⁱ Even so, not that alone—happiness is the end of the final good. It is chosen for the sake of itself. It is, then, something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.ⁱⁱⁱ I see, though, that you are not agreeable with that.”

“Happiness is in fact the effect of virtue. By molding ourselves into virtuous beings, we hit the mark.^{iv} I agree with you that happiness is related to the final good of man. To always be happy is ultimately desirable. Happiness, though, cannot simply be an activity in itself, toward an end. Instead, it is a state of being.”

“I disagree.”

“If we have not mastered control over those things that are in our power to control, then we will certainly fail of that by which alone happiness and freedom are procured.^v Without this control, we cannot be virtuous, and therefore cannot be happy. Mastery of oneself, then, allows a continuous state of virtue, and thus happiness.”

“But, happiness is an activity done for the sake of itself. It itself is an end, and not a means. Therefore, it is not a state of being as you say.^{vi} Virtue belongs to virtuous activity. But it makes, perhaps, no small difference whether we place the chief good in

possession or in use, in state of mind or in activity. For the state of mind may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive, but the activity cannot; for one who has the activity will of necessity be acting, and acting well.”^{vii}

“Again, you are correct that the state of mind may exist without producing any good result. However, I cannot consider that necessarily virtuous. Virtue requires action and attention and desire. Thus Socrates became perfect, improving himself by everything, following reason alone.”^{viii}

“Ah! So you imply that happiness is the end of action, and not a state. If virtue requires action, and happiness is the effect of virtue, then, as it follows, happiness comes out of action.”

“While it is true that happiness comes out of action, it is still a perpetual state of being. You imply that happiness occurs at certain times, in intervals, or for seasons depending on one’s circumstances. I contend that that does not have to be the case.”

“The man who is truly good and wise, I think, bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances. And if this is the case, the happy man can never become miserable—though he will not reach blessedness, if he meet with fortunes like those of Priam.”^{ix}

“So happiness is conditional, you say.”

“It needs external goods,^x as well as virtue. There are some things the lack of which takes the luster from happiness—good birth, goodly children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy. Happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition. More wine?”

“Please.”

“Nor, again, is he many-colored and changeable; for neither will he be moved from his happy state easily or by any ordinary misadventures, but only by many great ones, nor, if he has had many great misadventures, will he recover his happiness in a short time, but if at all, only in a long and complete one in which he has attained many splendid successes.”^{xi}

“This, my friend, is where we have a fundamental disagreement.”

“Do explain.”

“There are things which are within our power, and there are things which are beyond our power. Now, the things within our power are by nature free, unrestricted, unhindered; but those beyond our power are weak, dependent, restricted, alien. Remember, then, that if you attribute freedom to things by nature dependent, you will be hindered and circumstances will surely weigh you down.

“Interesting.”

“But if you take for your own only that which it really is, then no one will ever compel you, no one will restrict you, you will find fault with no one, you will accuse no one, you will do nothing against your will; no one will hurt you, you will not have an enemy, nor will you suffer any harm.”^{xii} Taken as this, circumstances lose all holds on one’s life.”

“So you prefer to live life without feeling then? Numb until old and haggard?”

“Not at all. It is both a matter of how one takes events, even as you said before, and what is controlled. If one discriminates and says: “Nothing is portended to me, either to my paltry body, or property, or reputation, or children, or wife. But to me all portents

are lucky if I will. For whatsoever happens, it belongs to me to derive advantage therefrom.”^{xiii} *then he overcomes the effects of circumstances. Shall I cut more cheese?”*

“Thank you, but not on account of me. Regardless, no man can control circumstances. Say a man’s wife dies? Does he not become sorrowful? And what if his whole family dies? Does he not become bitter and unhappy?”

“*With regard to objects that are tenderly beloved, remind yourself of what nature they are. When you embrace a wife or child, you embrace a mortal. With this, you can bear it if either of them dies.*”^{xiv}

“So callous!”

“*Not callous at all. Stoic, actually. If a wife dies, then do not say, “I have lost her”, but rather “I have restored her.”*”^{xv} *The same principle applies and contributes to all circumstances. Those things beyond our power are body, property, reputation, office, and, in one word, whatever are not properly our own affairs. If we try to control these things, then, by definition, we will fail and be hindered in happiness. While it is true that I have not defined happiness to such a detailed degree as you, I contend that it is not necessary. If you are not unhappy, and you are in harmony with nature, and in control of those things that are in your power to control, regardless of circumstances, then you are happy. Stoicism overcomes your definition of seasonal happiness based on circumstances, and allows a perpetual state of happiness to exist.”*

“This state of happiness that you have reached may be possible, but, I do not agree that it is attainable even to the commonest of men. Only those men with ability for complete self control may exist in your state of happiness. For all others, it is well enough to be said that happiness is the end good for all of man, that all men seek it, and

that men who live in a blessed state are often happy. Enough, then, of these questions. One thing that we must agree on is that the contemplative life brings perfect happiness.”^{xvi}

“Thus Socrates became perfect.”

One major point of difference between Aristotle and Epictetus lies in the extent to which they both define happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Enchiridion*. Aristotle goes into much greater depth and detail and spends many more words coming to his definition of what happiness is. Epictetus on the other hand, seems to have a firm definition, but it is, like his book, short, succinct, and to the point. In fact, the only line in his book about the relation of virtue and happiness comes from a footnote. He never comes out and says it. If both men have exactly the same concept of what happiness is or not is left questionable, largely due to Epictetus’ vagueness in defining it.

Both, however, seem to have somewhat similar thoughts about how happiness relates to circumstances. Aristotle takes a little more practical approach, and says that if a person is repeatedly beaten down by bad fortune, then unhappiness is eventually going to result. Epictetus insists that one can maintain the state of happiness without being affected by the circumstances surrounding one’s life. Both must be talking about a long-term well-being kind of happiness, too. If they were talking in terms of today’s loose emotional version of the word, then both men have weak arguments that don’t make sense. For instance, could any reasonable human not mourn for a deceased loved one?

Epictetus insists on realizing the nature of things, thereby putting death into perspective. I have no doubt that if Epictetus was married then he would have cried and mourned for a short period upon death of his wife. He would have had a short period where his “emotional happiness” was not consistent with his philosophy. However, he would not have allowed the death to affect him for a long period or in such a significant way that his long-term well-being type of happiness would have been affected. The difference between the two men’s ideas relating circumstances and happiness is that Aristotle allows for a finite time of bad fortune before someone shifts to an unhappy state. This period seems to be related to how virtuous a person’s character is. Epictetus simply extends this from finite to infinite by saying that any given person who follows his philosophy will have a character such that unhappiness will never have to be an option again.

Based on experience, I tend to agree in large part with Aristotle that real happiness is a volatile thing, and that it can in fact be changed over long periods of time. I think it is a very real thing that once someone is not happy, it takes a long time to become happy again. But, I also agree with Epictetus that happiness can be a perpetual state of being. I have always firmly believed that to be so, and have always searched for the ‘secret’ that will allow one to be fundamentally happy independent of circumstances. If leading an intensely mentally disciplined life is the secret, then I am afraid the way to perpetual happiness is not easy, and happiness may continue to come and go with circumstances.

I think there is a more general notion toward happiness that is not so cut and dry as these two imply. Aristotle took this into account indirectly, but not specifically, and Epictetus completely ignored it. What about personality types? Does the genetic makeup of a person have any bearing on the extent of happiness possible? What if the

environment and society that the person grew up in was horrific, or depressed? Does a person who has natural tendencies toward melancholy behavior more readily accept that happiness cannot be perpetual? Does a sanguine personality believe that Epictetus is ignorant? These factors, I believe, are part of the equation. Each of the philosophers seems to have a slightly different perspective on happiness that fit different people. Not that I believe happiness is a relative thing, but just that it is more complex (from a societal view point) than either Aristotle or Epictetus chooses (or knew) to address.

ⁱ Enchiridion XXVII

ⁱⁱ Ethics I.13

ⁱⁱⁱ Ethics I.7

^{iv} Enchiridion XXVII

^v Enchiridion I

^{vi} Ethics I.6, X.6

^{vii} Ethics I.8

^{viii} Enchiridion L

^{ix} Ethics I.11

^x Ethics I.8

^{xi} Ethics I.9

^{xii} Enchiridion I

^{xiii} Enchiridion XVIII

^{xiv} Enchiridion III

^{xv} Enchiridion XI

^{xvi} Ethics X.7