THE VALUE OF UNHAPPINESS

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John Stuart Mill famously remarked that it is 'better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied'.[1] But is it necessarily better to be Socrates satisfied than Socrates dissatisfied?

The prudential benefits of happiness are well-established; its value has been championed by philosophers since ancient times and is further supported by recent empirical research. But the value of *un*happiness is rarely recognized and almost never celebrated, perhaps because it is characterized by such unpleasant feelings as disappointment, dissatisfaction, discontentment, and anxiety, feelings most rational people seek to avoid. I believe, on the contrary, that being unhappy can often be good for one and I shall offer several arguments in defense of the value of unhappiness, which demonstrate the important role it plays in living well.

1. Happiness and Unhappiness

Let us begin with a thought experiment: Suppose neuroscientists create a pill that can reduce or eliminate all experiences of unhappiness. The function of this pill is to provide the equivalent of a very thick skin or an ideal Stoic temperament. You will still experience the same positive feelings when you perceive things are going well for you, but the pill will essentially blunt the trauma you normally would experience when you perceive something negatively, such that you will not be upset or bothered by it.

I refer to the effect of this pill as making one a perfect Stoic, because the Stoics identify happiness with virtue,

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which involves achieving a state of apathy or passionlessness that renders one unaffected by recalcitrant events. By adopting the right attitude, namely one of indifference to anything that is beyond her control, the Stoic is able to preserve her happiness regardless of what adversities she faces. Although the Stoic achieves this state of apathy by developing her rational powers, the effect of taking the pill will be similar in that it shields one from experiencing negative feelings.

Taking this pill is different from entering Robert Nozick's infamous experience machine, because your experiences are not being fabricated. Thus, the standard objections to entering the experience machine (which typically appeal to our desire to remain connected to reality, and to actually do certain things rather than have the experience of doing them) would not count against taking this pill. The pill does not make you believe that you received an A on an important exam, when in reality you received a C. Rather, it makes you content with the C. You are still living in reality; only your emotional reactions are being manipulated.

The question I wish to examine is whether you should take this pill. If it were possible to avoid all the unpleasant experiences of unhappiness, would that be a good thing for you to do?

Before addressing this question, however, let me clarify what I mean by happiness and unhappiness. I shall assume a subjective conception of happiness that identifies it with being in a psychological state of satisfaction with one's life. Being happy implies only that one has a positive impression of her life or views it favorably, and need not imply anything about the quality of a person's well-being or her moral character.[2]

Since happiness is identified with satisfaction, unhappiness is the contrary state in which one is dissatisfied with her life. Both happiness and unhappiness are degree concepts that refer to a range of positive and negative emotional states that fall along a continuum. A happy person will experience positive emotions that range in intensity from

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very mild contentment to extreme joy or ecstasy, whereas the unhappy person experiences negative emotions that range from mild dissatisfaction or discontentment to abject misery.[3]

The pill described in the thought experiment allows one to avoid unhappiness by preventing one from experiencing all the unpleasant feelings that contribute to dissatisfaction. So, returning to our question, if such a pill existed, would you take it? And, more importantly, should you take it to promote your well-being? Is living in a perpetually content state good for you?

Given the general public's obsession with happiness, I suspect many people would be in favor of taking this pill, especially because no one enjoys being unhappy, sad, fearful, depressed, anxious or angry. One might appeal to our natural aversion to pain to justify taking the pill, viewing it as analogous to the use of general anesthesia during surgery: why choose to suffer, when one can avoid the experience altogether?

Pharmaceutical companies have capitalized on our natural aversion to pain, creating a plethora of psychiatric medications designed to make us feel better, and their advertisements reinforce the idea, already prevalent within popular culture, that a happier life is a better life. Many people now expect (and demand) to feel happy all the time, and have become intolerant of any kind of emotional discomfort. But unlike the Stoics, who used reason to alter their emotional reactions to external events, many people today turn instead to medication, which is easier to obtain. Even mild cases of unhappiness, which fail to meet the clinical standards for a psychiatric illness, are often treated with a prescription, thus contributing to the view that being unhappy is a medical condition.

Our desire for happiness is further fueled by mass media outlets that publicize research by positive psychologists on the benefits of being happy. To cite a few of their recent findings, besides feeling good, happiness improves our health and longevity, makes us less introverted and

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neurotic, more sociable and agreeable, and more likely to enjoy strong romantic attachments. Positive emotions have also been found to broaden attention and cognition, produce patterns of thought that are flexible and creative, and initiate upward spirals toward emotional well-being that make it more likely one will feel good in the future.[4]

If being happy not only feels good, and but also improves our health, longevity, relationships, creativity, and enhances the likelihood of future well-being, one might conclude we are obviously better-off taking the pill to avoid unhappiness.

Peter Kramer, clinical professor of psychiatry and author of the bestselling book *Listening to Prozac* is likely to support this conclusion. Kramer introduces the idea of 'cosmetic psychopharmacology', which involves prescribing antidepressants like Prozac to non-depressed people for the purpose of modifying their personalities. Kramer's idea for using medication to achieve 'psychic enhancement' (which parallels the use of plastic surgery for cosmetic enhancement) stems from the actual changes he witnessed in many of his patients, who he describes as being 'better than well' after taking Prozac. Kramer discusses the 'power of medication to reshape a person's identity', even when that person does not qualify as having a psychiatric illness, and he lists among its virtues the possibility of increasing one's self-esteem, confidence, alertness and social skills, the ability to think faster, and cause life to seem brighter.[5]

Kramer admits to being uncomfortable with the idea of prescribing a medication like Prozac to patients who do not have a psychiatric illness, and he acknowledges that there would be serious ethical and sociological ramifications of cosmetic psychopharmacology if it ever became widespread. But he finds the effect of Prozac on his patients so compelling, especially its ability to transform people from angry and neurotic to calm and pleasant, that he suspects the use of pharmaceuticals will only continue to increase in the future. Perhaps one day, he speculates, these drugs will be used to treat perfectly healthy individuals who

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simply wish to alter their personalities, and as more people turn to medication to enhance their moods, our objections to taking medication may fade away just as they did when psychotherapy gained popularity.

Mark Walker, a philosopher who was clearly influenced by Kramer's work, has gone further, calling cosmetic psychopharmacology a moral imperative. Walker envisions 'happy-people-pills', which 'put into pill form the chemicals that promote above-average happiness' and enable normally happy people to experience even more frequent positive moods and emotions.[6] The idea is to boost the moods of normally happy people in the same way that antidepressants boost the moods of the clinically depressed.

While neither Kramer nor Walker disparages unhappiness, their arguments imply that its value is negligible. Both theorists appeal to the prudential benefits of happiness in arguing for psychic enhancement. But altering our moods chemically will have unavoidable consequence of decreasing our capacity to experience unhappiness, and both theorists appear to be comfortable with this trade-off.

My intuition, in contrast, is that you should not take the pill, for however unpleasant unhappiness may be, the experience is valuable. Having the capacity to experience unhappiness often improves our lives, and we miss that opportunity by seeking to avoid it.

2. Historical Considerations

Let us begin with Aristotle, whose discussion of virtue and practical wisdom highlights the importance of experiencing unpleasant emotions if one is to live well.

Julia Annas describes Aristotle's account of phronesis as 'the state of the developed virtuous person, who not only makes the right judgment and decision on particular occasions, but does so from a developed intelligent disposition, which is the basis for doing so reliably and correctly'. Part of the development of phronesis involves having the right

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emotional dispositions such that one's 'attitudes and emotions are in harmony with his judgments; his judgments are the right ones, and correspondingly his attitudes are the right ones'.[7]

My question is whether one can develop the 'right emotional dispositions' if one lacks the capacity to experience unhappiness. If one were perpetually content, and never experienced anger, fear or anxiety, could one achieve practical wisdom? I suspect one could not, because reaching the right judgments in certain situations will entail experiencing negative emotions. That is, certain situations will require one to experience negative states that make one unhappy; if one lacks that capacity, one will be incapable of reacting correctly (virtuously) in those situations.

Consider Aristotle's account of how we attain moral virtue: we become just by doing just acts, and brave by doing brave acts. Only by performing acts in the presence of danger can be become habituated to the feelings of fear, and thus become brave or cowardly. No one enjoys being afraid, but Aristotle suggests experiencing this emotion is necessary for becoming virtuous. Aristotle describes the person who is never afraid as rash, which is a vice, because there are situations in which one ought to feel fear.

Aristotle explains, 'it is not easy to determine both how and with whom and on what provocation and how long one should be angry'. He also notes 'it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle. . .anyone can get angry – that is easy – or to give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, *that* is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.'[8]

Notice, the ideal state for Aristotle is not one of complete indifference; the practically wise person is not in a state of perpetual contentment. Rather, there are situations in which one ought to feel angry, and just as one is blamed for an excess of anger (irascibility), one is also blamed for its

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deficiency. 'For those who are not angry at the things they should be angry at are thought to be fools, and so are those who are not angry in the right way, at the right time, or with the right persons.'[9]

Perhaps one could raise the following objection: even if we suppose that practical wisdom and virtue require one to experience unpleasant emotions, why should we view those emotions as contributing to unhappiness? That is, assuming a person is experiencing fear or anger that is appropriate, why should we view those states as diminishing that person's happiness.

Recall that on my view, unhappiness occurs when one is dissatisfied with the conditions of her life, viewing it unfavorably. Which factors contribute to that overall impression? Our daily experiences, including our emotional reactions to what is happening around us. Consider the kinds of experiences that inspire anger or fear or any other unpleasant emotions: they typically occur when one is not getting what one wants, or when things are not as one wants them to be. The recalcitrant events that elicit negative emotional reactions from us are precisely those experiences that reduce our satisfaction with our lives, thus contributing to unhappiness. Although, as Aristotle emphasized, experiencing unpleasant emotions is appropriate when bad things happen, those bad occurrences (even if they are inevitable) are precisely what cause our dissatisfaction.

Aristotle's reflections on virtue and practical wisdom also present an objection to Walker's happy people pills and the psychopharmacology described by Kramer. The psychic enhancement envisioned by both theorists is supposed to alter our personalities by increasing our positive moods, confidence and mental quickness. But what these pills can't supply is the wisdom that leads one to make good judgments. If your judgment is good, then you are likely to benefit from increased confidence and mental alertness. But what if your judgments aren't particularly good? In that

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case, the false sense of confidence inspired by these pills may lead to rash actions that leave you worse off.

Returning back to the question posed by our thought experiment, should we take a pill that would render us perpetually content? These historical reflections suggest we have good reason *not* to avoid unhappiness, for these negative emotions are valuable experiences that contribute to our living well.

3. Empirical Considerations

Suppose one experiences unhappiness by striving for a realistic goal that one fails to achieve due to a lack of hard work or bad luck. My view is that being upset over the failure to achieve such a reachable goal is not only reasonable; it can also be prudentially beneficial. Consider an example: a student receives a low grade on an important exam she expected to ace. Her expectations arose, because she sees herself as an excellent student, but her overconfidence led her to study insufficiently, and now she is unhappy over the low grade.

The question is whether this student's experience of unhappiness is good for her, or whether she would be better off avoiding it. In this case, the student's unhappiness is precisely due to the attainability of her ideal. Had she studied enough, she would have done well, though her dissatisfaction may prevent her from being overconfident next time. Unhappiness can be a humbling experience, teaching us valuable lessons about what we ought to do in the future.

Consider an alternative scenario in which the student has taken the pill from our thought experiment: she receives a low grade on her exam, but suffers no negative emotional repercussions. She feels fine, exactly as if she had aced the exam. My question is what motivation she could possibly have to work harder in the future if she feels good no matter what happens? If studying intensely for an A, or

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studying inadequately for a C feel the same in the end, why would she put in the extra effort for the A?

This example was inspired by real life events: I sometimes see students who are bright, articulate and clever, and demonstrate an impressive philosophical instinct. But when it comes to the exams, they fail to realize their potential, receiving mediocre grades, but appearing perfectly content. When I think about what these students are capable of, I feel disappointed *for* them, and I wish they weren't so easily satisfied with merely passing. I wonder whether these students wouldn't be better off having higher expectations for themselves, and actually feeling bad about not succeeding.

Kramer describes the effect of Prozac as shifting people from 'dysthymia to hyperthymia, to use a shorthand for relative vulnerability and invulnerability to psychic pain'.[10] Although Kramer does not seem to accord any value to the experience of psychic pain, pain of all kinds can be instructive. Dissatisfaction, disappointment and discontentment are all powerful motivators that often encourage us to work harder.

Andy Thomson, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia who researches depression, tells the story of one of his patients who requested to lower the dosage of her antidepressant. When asked if the medication was working, she said that it was and she felt better, '"But I'm still married to the same alcoholic son of a bitch. It's just now he's tolerable."'[11] This woman realized that her unhappiness was warranted by the conditions of her life. Although the medication made her *feel* better, it did not help her make any real progress with her problems, suggesting maybe she would be better off *not* feeling so well.

Recent empirical research on the benefits of depression lends further support to the value of unhappiness, which some psychologists view as an evolved adaptive response that helps us to solve complex problems.[12] The basic idea is that rumination, the thought process that defines depression, is often brought on by a serious psychological

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setback, like the death of a spouse, divorce, or problems with one's job. The ruminative process appears to help people achieve greater mental focus, heightening their analytical abilities, and enabling them to break down their problems into smaller, more manageable parts. Although unpleasant, rumination seems to help people solve the triggering problem.

Depressed people often think intensely about their problems, and researchers have found this analytical style of thought can be productive. Depressed people also lose the ability to experience pleasure from normal activities, such as eating and having sex, but some researchers have argued the social isolation can be good insofar as it enables people to focus on resolving their problems without getting distracted.[13] Ironically, the use of anti-depressants, which alleviate the unpleasant symptoms of depression by elevating one's mood, can actually be more harmful, because the medication can interfere with one's actual recovery.

Negative moods have long been seen as emotional states we should avoid, but this research suggests we need to consider the possible benefits of these unpleasant feelings. If '[d]epression is nature's way of telling you that you've got complex social problems that the mind is intent on solving,' then instead of viewing depression as a disorder, we should see it as 'an adaptation, a state of mind which brings real costs, but also brings real benefits'.[14]

If being unhappy has all of these potential prudential benefits, then we have a serious reason to refrain from taking the pill from our thought experiment and to resist the psychic enhancement envisioned by Kramer and Walker. However, just as with other behaviors that are prudentially beneficial (such as eating more vegetables and exercising regularly) it will be up to the individual to decide how to balance the 'good' of unhappiness against all the other goods one pursues in life. Just as many people choose to indulge in pleasures that jeopardize their physical health,

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some people may prefer a life of happy contentment to one of unhappiness.

While I see many arguments in favor of the value of happiness within the literature, I see very few on the other side, arguments that question what we lose in our relentless pursuit of happiness. This paper attempts to defend the value of unhappiness, which has been largely overlooked, especially within popular culture. We may not like feeling unhappy, but we may not like many things that are good for us.

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Notes

[1] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 260.

[2] I present a more detailed defense of the life satisfaction view of happiness in my *The Nature and Value of Happiness* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014).

[3] My argument is limited to states of unhappiness that are warranted by the conditions of one's life. Excluded are cases of unhappiness that have no connection with reality, such as psychiatric disorders including severe clinical depression, bipolar disorder and post-partum depression, which are generally attributed to chemical or hormonal imbalances.

[4] See Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005); D. Danner, D. Snowden, and W. Friesen, 'Positive Emotions in Early Life and Longevity: Findings from the Nun Study', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **80** (2001): 804–813; E. Diener and M. Seligman, 'Very Happy People', *Psychological Science* **13** (2002): 81–84; and Fredrickson and T. Joiner, 'Positive Emotions Trigger Upward Spirals Toward Emotional Well-Being', *Psychological Science* **13** (2002): 172–175.

[5] Peter Kramer, *Listening to Prozac* (New York: Penguin Books, rev. ed. 1997), xiii, 18, and 245.

[6] Mark Walker, 'Happy-people-pills for all', *International Journal of Wellbeing* **1**(1): 128.

[7] Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 73, 74.

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[8] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1109b15–17, 1109a24–25.

[9] Ibid., 1126a3–1126a9.

[10] Kramer, *Listening to Prozac*, 260.

[11] Jonah Lehrer, 'Is There An Evolutionary Purpose to Feeling Really Sad?' *New York Times Magazine*, 28 February 2010, page 42.

[12] P.W. Andrews and J.A. Thomson, 'The Bright Side of Being Blue: Depression as an Adaptation for Analyzing Complex Problems', *Psychological Review* **116**.3 (2009): 620–654; P.W. Andrews and J.A. Thomson, 'Depression's Evolutionary Roots', *Scientific American Mind* **20** (2010): 56–61.

[13] Andrews and Thomson, 'The Bright Side of Being Blue', 632.

[14] Andrews and Thomson, 'Depression's Evolutionary Roots', 60.

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