

# Wrestlers and Jugglers: Etzioni on Happiness

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**Abstract** In “Happiness Is the Wrong Metric,” Amitai Etzioni challenges the dominant metaconception of human nature that focuses solely on happiness, suggesting it be replaced by the view of a person as a “moral wrestler,” who is “subject to an irreconcilable conflict between the quest for happiness...and the quest to fulfill their moral values.” I have two minor issues with the way Etzioni characterizes happiness. First, I argue that it is a mistake to reduce happiness to a state of pleasure. Second, I take issue with the image of the moral wrestler, for it seems to imply the domains of happiness and morality are not just independent but mutually exclusive. This view omits the possibility of achieving happiness through moral behavior and ignores the kinds of conflicts that arise when our moral values are incompatible. These conflicts are not between happiness and morality; instead our unhappiness arises precisely because we have failed morally.

**Keywords** Happiness · Morality · Well-being · Satisfaction · Hedonism

In “Happiness Is the Wrong Metric,” Amitai Etzioni challenges the dominant metaconception of human nature found within social science and public discourse that focuses solely on happiness, suggesting that it be replaced with an alternative conception that also reflects the moral component of the good life. Etzioni argues that we ought to replace “satisfier” meta-

conceptions, which hold that an individual is self-centered and seeks satisfaction, with the view of a person as a “moral wrestler,” who is “subject to an irreconcilable conflict between the quest for happiness (of one kind or another) and the quest to fulfill their moral values, with the conception of the latter resulting in a sense of ‘affirmation.’”<sup>1</sup>

I am quite sympathetic to the idea that our capacity to engage in moral behavior is a crucial part of human nature and ought to be reflected in our view of the good life. Indeed, my own view is that we live well when we achieve long-term happiness in morally acceptable ways.<sup>2</sup> I also agree that happiness is an independent evaluative domain with no necessary connection to morality, and so judging that a person is happy implies nothing about the state of her character. Thus, I am in favor of Etzioni’s suggestion for broadening the focus within the social sciences to include other values.

However, I have two minor issues with the way happiness is characterized in this paper and more generally within social science. First, I don’t see why we ought to equate happiness with pleasure. Although it is true that a life without any pleasant episodes would probably not be very happy, it is a mistake to reduce happiness to a state of pleasure. In the first section of this paper, I shall discuss several objections to hedonism, and argue that the life satisfaction view provides a much better explanation of common usage of ‘happiness’ today.

My second issue is with the image of the moral wrestler, a person who faces an “irreconcilable conflict” between happiness and her moral duties.<sup>3</sup> This image seems to imply that the domains of happiness and morality are not just independent but also

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<sup>1</sup> Amitai Etzioni, “Happiness the Wrong Metric,” *Society*; Symposium on Happiness, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Steven M. Cahn and I present an argument for this view of the good life in *Happiness and Goodness: Philosophical Reflections on Living Well* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Etzioni, 3.

mutually exclusive, such that our behavior can only be described as motivated by one or the other, and not both. But this picture, though better than the one that interprets every motive as egoistic or hedonistic, still oversimplifies human nature, for it omits the possibility of achieving happiness through our moral behavior. This view also ignores the kinds of conflicts that arise when our moral values are incompatible, and we are forced to choose which to honor. These conflicts affect our happiness, because failing to realize our moral ideals is often disappointing. But the conflict itself is not between happiness and morality. Rather, our unhappiness arises precisely because we have failed morally.

## On Hedonism

Let us begin with what appears to be the dominant view of happiness within social science, hedonism. According to hedonism, happiness reduces entirely to having a favorable balance of pleasure over displeasure. Although the concept of pleasure has been a source of debate within philosophy, one characterization that is generally accepted equates pleasures with enjoyable mental states. We say someone is enjoying herself when, at the time of her experience, she likes the activity for itself, meaning she does not wish to change it, and would avoid changing, should some change be impending.<sup>4</sup> Thus, feelings of pleasure are united not by the way they feel, but because of the favorable attitude one takes towards them. The attitude is that one desires the experience to continue, and finds it enjoyable on the basis of its felt quality.

The problem with hedonism is that it is vulnerable to many counterexamples where enjoyable experiences fail to promote one's happiness (and painful experiences do). For instance, consider the pleasure one experiences when eating chocolate cake, indulging in an extramarital affair or going to the beach instead of working on a research paper. Insofar as one is tempted to indulge, it is the potential pleasure that is enticing. However, will that pleasure automatically increase one's happiness? Certainly, that depends on a person's values and ideals. If one is committed to losing weight and adopting a healthier lifestyle, then indulging in chocolate cake will likely be seen as a setback, bringing one disappointment and regret. Similar negative feelings can be expected if one values the relationship with one's spouse, or is facing a serious deadline that one promised to meet. In all of these cases, indulging in a pleasure will most likely lead to unhappiness, not happiness.

L. W. Sumner makes a point about the nature of pain that sheds some light on why hedonism is tempting as a theory of happiness. He notes that pain is often "accompanied by feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, indignity, depression or

despair."<sup>5</sup> Since all of these negative states reduce happiness, it is only natural to associate pain with unhappiness. But just as there are pleasures that make us miserable, there are pains that make us happy. The pain of childbirth is one obvious example, with some women even refusing epidural anesthesia in order to fully embrace the experience of that pain.

These kinds of counterexamples illustrate why hedonism about happiness is too simplistic; it fails to capture how happiness reflects the more global attitude one has towards her life, factoring in how these immediate experiences fit into life as a whole. Many pleasant experiences do make us happy, but happiness cannot simply be reduced to the balance of pleasure over displeasure.

Instead we ought to adopt the life satisfaction view of happiness, which says that a person is happy to the extent that she is satisfied with her life, and the more favorable her impression, the happier she will be.<sup>6</sup> Robin Barrow describes happiness in terms of having "a sense of enmeshment with one's world," while H. Meynell describes happiness in terms of being satisfied in relation to one's environment.<sup>7</sup> According to Roger Montague, "having no standing dissatisfactions, achieving goals (subject to qualifications) and being positively pleased about the way things are going make a man happy in a constitutive sense of 'make.'"<sup>8</sup> G. H. Von Wright views happiness as liking your circumstances in life. "Happiness is not in the circumstances... but springs into being with the relationship... To judge oneself happy is to pass judgment on or value one's circumstances of life."<sup>9</sup>

Thus a person's values, commitments and expectations are all involved in her happiness. Theodore Benditt explains, "If a man says that he is satisfied with his accomplishments, he implies that what he has accomplished does not (significantly) fall short of his hopes and expectations, with the goals which he has, explicitly or implicitly, set for himself."<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Rescher suggests an individual's happiness is "a matter of his personal and idiosyncratic perception of the extent to which the conditions and circumstances of his life meet his needs and aspirations."<sup>11</sup> John Rawls identifies happiness with the successful execution of one's rational life plan, such that "someone is happy when his plans are going

<sup>5</sup> L.W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 102.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Nature and Value of Happiness* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014) I provide a defense of the life satisfaction view.

<sup>7</sup> Robin Barrow, *Happiness and Schooling* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 74; H. Meynell, "Human Flourishing," *Religious Studies* 5 (1969): 151.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Montague, "Happiness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 67 (1967): 98.

<sup>9</sup> G.H. Von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 98.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Benditt, "Happiness," *Philosophical Studies* 25 (1974): 8.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Welfare* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Brandt, "Hedonism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P. Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 432–433.

well, his more important aspirations are being fulfilled, and he feels sure that his good fortune will endure.”<sup>12</sup>

John Kekes further emphasizes the importance of a life plan, which he describes as a person’s clearly formed view about which satisfactions she ought to pursue.<sup>13</sup> For Kekes, a life plan is essential for happiness, because it provides a hierarchical ordering of a person’s desires based on her commitments. Kekes describes three kinds of commitments: unconditional (which are violated only with great psychological discomfort), defeasible (which are normally honored, but can be overridden) and loose commitments, which reflect how we choose to pursue unconditional and defeasible commitments. Kekes argues that your life plan determines the kind of person you wish to be, and balances your desires thus enabling you to achieve happiness.

The life satisfaction view does not place any constraints on the sources of one’s satisfaction. Although Kekes describes the kinds of commitments that make up a life plan, he leaves it to the individual to determine the content of those commitments. For many of us, moral and religious values will play a prominent role in our unconditional and defeasible commitments, such that living up to these ideals will be necessary for our happiness. But this need not be the case, and it is entirely possible for one to be happy and thoroughly immoral. Thus, I see it as strength of Etzioni’s account that he recognizes these two motives (happiness and affirmation) as distinct, with both playing a role in governing our behavior.

However, although life satisfaction allows for the possibility of happiness in the absence of morality, it does not imply the two are mutually exclusive. A person’s happiness will be proportional to how positively she views her life, the more favorable her impression, the happier she will be. To the extent that a person values having a moral character and living up to her moral obligations, her happiness will be a function of realizing those moral ideals. Recognizing that happiness and morality can come apart need not imply they never go together, and I suspect a lot of the time they do mutually reinforce each other.

For instance, I value being a good parent, co-worker, daughter, wife and friend, and all of these roles present moral obligations I must meet if I am to be satisfied with my life. Inevitably, conflicts will arise, and I will be forced to choose which ideals to realize and which to sacrifice. Etzioni is correct to point out the significance of these conflicts in our lives, but he identifies their source as arising from the conflict between happiness and affirmation. This overlooks the inevitable conflicts that arise amongst our moral ideals, when they cannot all be realized. For instance, my friend wants to chat, my children need attention, my students have papers that must

be graded, and all of these things are important to me. My happiness will depend on trying to find some balance between them, but all are valid moral commitments that will inevitably affect my happiness. We all face challenges in how to live up to our ideals and moral obligations, but the conflict isn’t only between our happiness and our moral obligations; it is between all of our values, which must be juggled constantly.

### Etzioni’s “Moral Wrestler”

Now let us return to the metaconception favored by Etzioni, which features a “moral wrestler” who faces a conflict between happiness and moral duty. Notice Etzioni’s language: the conflict is “irreconcilable,” meaning only one of these values will win out. This idea of irreconcilable conflict is further echoed in his description of “satisfier” metaconceptions, which view the individual as someone who “seeks satisfaction rather than to serve a common good.”<sup>14</sup> Once again, the choice is binary: either we serve happiness or the common good. Etzioni suggests the most important reason to reject happiness as a measure of the good is that “the good life has a major moral component,” which often requires one to engage in behavior that involves “pain and sacrifice.”<sup>15</sup> Again, this implies pain and sacrifice are incompatible with happiness.

Given the hedonistic conception of happiness that appears to dominate the social science literature, it is understandable why Etzioni is determined to keep happiness and affirmation distinct. As he explains, “this motivation [affirmation] cannot be reconstituted as another source of satisfaction, most importantly because it typically entails pain.”<sup>16</sup> He also argues that viewing affirmation as “one source of satisfaction among many others” causes us to “lose major insights into the dynamics of human behavior that result from the conflict between satisfaction and affirmation.”<sup>17</sup>

I see Etzioni’s insight about the conflicts between happiness and morality as an improvement over the view that happiness is the only value that matters. However, my worry is that this new model of the moral wrestler rules out the possibility that one important source of happiness is our moral behavior. Etzioni appears to have set up a false dichotomy between happiness and affirmation, when in reality, many people find satisfaction in living up to their moral ideals.

The conflicts we face are often neither egoistic (should I pursue happiness or should I be moral?) nor hedonistic (should I pursue pleasure or should I be moral?). Rather, they arise from trying to live up to our moral obligations. Therefore, I see us less as wrestlers and more of jugglers – we have a lot of values in play, with limited time and finite resources, and we are

<sup>12</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1971), 480.

<sup>13</sup> John Kekes, “Attitudinal and Episodic Happiness,” in *Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy*, eds. Steven M. Cahn and Christine Vitano (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 179–193.

<sup>14</sup> Etzioni, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15.

constantly trying to compromise and find some balance between them. Happiness and morality aren't opposing forces here; they are often on the same team, and becoming a good juggler will enable one to achieve long-term happiness. And assuming one is not doing anything immoral in the pursuit of satisfaction, this will also enable one to live a good life.

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