Philosophies of Happiness

Chapter 11 Creative Engagement: Supplementary Notes

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Martin Seligman repeatedly claims that he writes as an objective social scientist, who describes how human beings achieve happiness, but does not make normative judgments or value-laden prescriptions. Seligman describes four pathways by which human beings experience fulfillment—pleasure, meaning, engagement, and accomplishment—and asserts that if a person wants a more fulfilling life, these are pathways by which he or she can achieve it. However, at times Seligman slides into the role of moral philosopher. For example, he terms the goal of his endeavor “authentic,” “true,” or “genuine” happiness, in contrast to artificial imitations, which aim purely at momentary pleasures that cannot bring genuine fulfillment. Here it seems Seligman approaches Aristotle’s moral perfectionism—the notion that human beings have an objective nature that it is their telos to fulfill.

Seligman also includes language of value. He explicitly draws an identification between what he calls authentic happiness and Aristotle’s eudaimonia, writing that “eudaimonia [and] what I call gratification, is part and parcel of right action;” eudaimonia “can only be had by activity consonant with noble purpose.” Seligman, Authentic Happiness (New York: Free Press, 2002), 112, cited by Mike Martin, “Happiness and Virtue in Positive Psychology,” Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour 37:1, 89-103 at 95. The language of right action and noble purpose suggests that happiness can only be achieved through action that is objectively virtuous—a claim Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all draw, but one that is more normative than Seligman’s purported value-neutral stance would allow (Martin, 94-95).

Thus one may well ask, are the actions Seligman terms “gratifications” any actions that produce a flow experience, or morally worthwhile activities? Is it only genuinely normative virtues that produce flow and subjective well-being? This is an objection Robert Eno raises with respect to Zhuangzi: If one can be a wu-wei butcher, why not a wu-wei murderer? Ivanhoe responds that Zhuangzi’s stories of perfected skill activities do not include examples of immoral behavior; thus he implicitly ties wu-wei with a positive normative order. Michael Puett concurs. See Robert Eno, “Cook Ding’s Dao,” 142; Ivanhoe, “Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Skill and the Ineffable Dao,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 61:4: 639-54, at 651; Michael Puett, “’Nothing Can Overcome Heaven’: The Notion of Spirit in Zhuangzi,” in Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Essays on the Zhuangzi, ed. Scott Cook (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 255-60.

The parallel question is whether flow activities must also conform to an objective moral order. Scholars thus note that the goal of Aristotelian eudaimonia is excellent activity, not a subjective experience of flow; the Aristotelian eudaimon aims to do what is right because it is right, rather than to produce the experience of flow or a state that feels good. The good and meaningful life seeks a telos outside the self and self-fulfillment. See Roger L. Woolfolk and Rachel H. Wasserman, “Count No One Happy: Eudaimonia and Positive Psychology,” Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology 25 (1) (2005): 81-90.

In a parallel Confucian critique, Louise Sundararajan argues that Seligman’s positive psychology is not free of judgments of value, but lacks a moral map, such as is found in Confucian ethics. In the Confucian model, virtues are not simply fungible signature strengths designed to produce self-fulfillment, optional and interchangeable. They are objective norms that describe what it is to be a full human being, with its attendant moral responsibilities. She argues that positive psychology introduces values surreptitiously, supported by scientific evidence produced by experts; and “it is when values are bolstered by scientific facts that they become opaque and impervious to critical reflection.” Louise Sundararajan, “Happiness Donut: A Confucian Critique of Positive Psychology,” Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 25:1 (2005), 35-60, at 54. Likewise, Daniel Nettle writes that “it looks like an evaluative moral framework is being smuggled to the underbelly of psychological science,” Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile, 29.
The social psychologist George Herbert Mead distinguished between two aspects of the self: the “I,” or knower is defined by the sum of our conscious processes, while the “me” or the “known” is made up of the information about ourselves that enters our awareness when we turn attention upon ourselves. The I is the subject who is conscious; the me is that aspect of the self of which the I is conscious. 85-86. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi use this distinction to describe what they call vital engagement. This is a certain way of being related to the world through a felt connection to an object, experience, or other person that are experienced as vital in two ways. They are vital because of the relationship’s “felt significance” or meaningfulness to the self (what Mead defines as the “me”). There is also a vitality experienced when interaction with the object is going well for the individual (what Mead defines as the “I”). 86.