

A History of Ethics and Happiness

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Some background questions

- What do we mean when we speak of ethics and of happiness?
- Is there a connection between these aspects of our lives, and if so, what is it?
- What would show us that there is no such connection?
- What is there is no general basis for ethics? If so, should we support ethical relativism?

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Ethics

- The terms 'ethics' and 'morals' derive from Greek and Latin words that mean 'customs'.
- In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle studies the question of what habits reasonable people want to encourage in citizens. These habits develop the good character traits of virtues.
- Cicero introduced philosophical discussion to the Romans. He translated 'ethics' as 'morals'.

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The debate over ethics

- Some ancient and modern thinkers believe that ethical behavior in its very nature promotes happiness in society. Others do not.
- Some argue that moral decisions and requirements can be based on effects on the happiness of those affected by actions.
- How we understand these claims will plainly depend on what we take happiness to be.

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Some ancient thinkers

- Pythagoras
- Plato
- Aristotle
- Epicurus
- Sceptics
- Stoics

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Happiness - 1

- Happiness can be considered a mental state.
- It may be a state filled with pleasure, so persons who lead lives full of pleasure are happy. Jeremy Bentham thought we could measure happiness by measuring pleasure.
- Alternatively, happiness is related to personal fulfilment. Happy people are satisfied with the way their actions reflect what they value.

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Happiness - 2

- The Greek terms (*euphoria eudaimonia*) that are translated 'happiness' refer to the state of human beings that best expresses human nature or the spirit (*daimon*) of a being.
- *Euphoria* refers to the state of the body and those powers that support a good bodily state.
- *Eudaimonia*, translated in a Greek dictionary is said to mean firstly "prosperity, good fortune, opulence" and later "true, full happiness".

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Happiness - 3

- Famously, the Epicureans promoted the idea that the best life was one of pleasure, but they did not mean empty sensual pleasures. They thought that please and pain were a measure of good and evil, and the best life, was to be lived among good friends, peaceful and free from confusion and fear. Epicurus' own school was based in the garden of his house and called "The Garden".

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Happiness – 4

- If pleasure is the basis of ethics, why should someone be considered good if they endure pain and torture to help others?
- The Stoics thought that the aim of life was the best expression of one's nature in a world that was completely deterministic.
- One's soul is in the best state when it best expresses the nature we all share. The Stoic seeks to understand nature through science.

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Happiness is a basis for ethics

- Some thinkers suppose that an ethical life is the best life for human beings, thus providing them with a basis for happiness.
- Here happiness is taken to be either
 - the best state for a human being to be in
 - or
 - the most pleasant state for the individual

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Happiness is not a basis for ethics

- Others believe there is no philosophical connection between ethics and happiness. They may argue as follows:
 - Happiness is an emotional state.
 - Ethical behaviour is initially the practice of customs found within a society that have contributed to the preservation of that society.
 - Ethical problems are to be settled by discussion and reasoning, not by appeal to emotions.

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Modern Views - Rationalism

- There are several modern positions regarding the foundations of ethics.
- Rationalism, applying to ethics the approach that people like Descartes and Newton applied successfully in science. Kant's work was an example of this approach. The theory developed by John Rawls in his influential book *A Theory of Justice* (1971) is the most recent successful application of rationalism to ethics.

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Modern Views - Utilitarianism

- In England, the Utilitarians were a very influential in removing many of the problems that had arisen as society went from feudalism to industry, especially in the new large industrial cities. The members of the Utilitarian circle in London, England were in business, not academics. They met weekly to discuss ancient philosophical texts and some of them contributed to periodicals.

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The Utilitarian view of Ethics

- The Utilitarians thought that morality should be founded on happiness.
- They used the mathematics developed by Adam Smith for the economy to develop a scheme for allowing rational discussion of ethical matters.
- The best action in a situation is the one that most improves the happiness of all affected or least increases their unhappiness.

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