

What Is Happiness?

A Quick and Dirty Overview

And the answer is . . .

It depends. (That's what you get for asking a philosopher.) What exactly are you asking? The word 'happiness' has lots of meanings, and this question probably means one of two things:

1. What is this *state of mind* that so many people seek? ('happiness' in the psychological sense)
2. What is it for my life to *go well* for me? ('happiness' in the "well-being" sense)

'Happiness' in the psychological sense

The most common usage, and the one I and empirical researchers employ. Here 'happiness' simply denotes a broad psychological condition, resembling words like 'depression' or 'tranquility'. It should not be confused with the emotion or mood of joy or feeling happy: many think we can *be* happy without feeling happy at all, say by being satisfied with our lives or achieving tranquility. And *Aristotle had no theory of happiness in this sense of the term.*

What is happiness in the psychological sense? Most writers identify it either with pleasure or life satisfaction, or some combination (e.g., subjective well-being theories). I think ordinary usage centers on emotional well-being (see below), but "life satisfaction" uses are also common. I survey the literature on happiness in this sense here: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/happiness/>.

'Happiness' in the well-being sense

Here the word is basically a synonym for 'well-being', 'flourishing', or 'welfare', which are my preferred terms. It refers to what benefits a person, is in her interest, or makes her life go best for her. A natural reading of talk about leading a happy *life*, as opposed simply to *being* happy. When people talk about Aristotle's theory of "happiness," this is what they mean.

What is "happiness" in the well-being sense? This is a question of value, not psychology. Aristotelians think it's a life of virtuous or excellent activity, some think it is getting what you want, others simply value pleasure, etc. My view of well-being is below. For an excellent survey of the literature, see: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/>

What is happiness? The short answer, in my view: emotional well-being

Happiness is *most usefully* understood as consisting in a person's overall emotional condition. Essentially, the opposite of anxiety and depression. This includes moods, emotions, and a person's mood propensity, or tendency to experience various moods and emotions (which changes over time). To be happy is roughly for one's emotional condition to be solidly positive, with a heavy predominance of positive over negative affect. I sometimes use "psychic affirmation," or "psychic flourishing" for the more pronounced forms of happiness, but "emotional well-being" better fits the way psychologists talk about it.

Well-being consists in nature-fulfillment, making my view eudaimonistic. I have not defended a complete account, arguing only for a *self-fulfillment* form of eudaimonism in which authentic happiness is a central element. A fuller account might look like this: well-being consists mainly in the fulfillment of the self's emotional and rational aspects—i.e., in being authentically happy, and in success regarding the commitments that shape one's identity. But our subpersonal natures may also count, so we might add, secondarily, the fulfillment of our "nutritive" and "animal" natures: health and pleasure.