



Research Paper

RARA AVIS Views of Happiness

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Abstract

Every living being struggles for a comfort zone. It is, needless to say, a natural tendency. Human beings struggle for the same but in a greater measure. Unlike in the plant and animal kingdoms, human beings suffer to a great extent on the mental plane. Many times, it amounts to psychosomatic disorders. There are many solutions proposed and these attempts have been going on for centuries. However, nothing can be universalized as a concrete formula to overcome the angst within. We have pragmatic as well as spiritual approaches but nothing seems to be guaranteed when put to a test in the living mercantile world. In all the attempts from any field the claimed motivation serves partially and satisfies only a faction of the society. The motivational literature and speeches too, provide a temporary comfort. Ultimately it is our own responsibility to tackle the problems and discover the suitable pathway. In fact, we need to look into psychological and later philosophical aspects so that we initially can cognize the dimensions of the problems before attempting to solve. It would be always wise to accept certain realities of life which have been rolling on since ages. It is sad to see that somehow, in general, people either ignore or deliberately overlook the intensity and as a consequence suffer at own hands. In the modern age we have access to many behavioural sciences in detail and therefore, we have the liberty to select a particular 'ism' suitable to our temperament. We may find some guidance or ray of hope through Stoicism, Existentialism, Epicureanism, Materialism, Spiritualism, etc. Therefore, this paper attempts to surface certain important aspects of such 'isms' based on Psychological and Philosophical outlooks so that one can choose a workable pathway.

Keywords: Happiness, Psychological outlook, Philosophical viewpoint.

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I. Introduction

Everyone has his own concept of 'Happiness' although mostly it is driven to a comfort zone. Material comfort needless to say has its own importance which none can deny. However, as we advance in life our idealism grows in varied forms and therefore owing to many factors there are radical changes. There are fleeting pleasures which may theoretically be devalued but they too provide a sort of comfort which cannot be denied. Overanalysis at times becomes detrimental as finally nothing can satisfy us thoroughly. It's only an impartial scrutiny which can first provide a genuine or true picture of the existing reality so that one can, with a deep thought, propose remedial measures. In this context we need to follow what exactly happiness stands for. It is considered to be a complex term because it definitely provides contentment and satisfaction than merely pleasure on a temporary basis. In fact, practically speaking nothing would be having the lasting effect. However, the sense of complacency provided by 'happiness' remains unique in its own way and of course it is to be treated or looked upon as subjective. Many thinkers, scientists, and novelists have expressed their viewpoints regarding happiness. Despite the active adverse forces around us, everyone explores various pathways and techniques to bring in 'happiness' under own custody. Another fact to be remembered is that happiness has mercurial temperament and therefore ever elusive. In fact, barring a very few, none can claim to be the master of it and those who claim before others may not be truthful or trustworthy. Another curious fact observed is that many words are freely and synonymously used for happiness. There are many shades of difference although at times apparently, they might be having pretty close resemblance. Social circumstances, heredity and personal free will also play an important role in shaping our nature or approach to combat with life challenges. Therefore, everyone invents his own concept/theory of happiness.

In general, happiness comes out as a by-product and that too in a package. Activities generate happiness while dullness remains far away. Many times, people as a precautionary measure not only detest the unhappy moments but instead of facing distance away. Absence of unhappiness does not promise happiness.

Therefore, when we explore the details, we realise that often it so happens that we are neither happy nor unhappy. We are merely safe from the negations and one may call such a situation as a standstill position. Longing for our ideals is human nature but then generally our ideals are mostly difficult to achieve or not within our reach. Further, our ideals lose their importance once they are in our custody. They do provide initially euphoric joy or create on a temporary basis ecstatic state but then that also remains merely as a fleeting pleasure. To summarize this, happiness as such has its own arena and age providing a soothing feeling. Expecting any source of happiness to discharge the same intensified feeling, is a faulty assumption.

Ancient Philosophers on Happiness

In ancient times philosophers both Western and Eastern initially rather struggled to know Nature and its varied forms of functioning. Therefore, they were more astonished at the fluctuations and could not draw any conclusions until they decided to deal scientifically. That is why we have a tidy line up in the ancient time where Nature too steadily revealed the shades which seemed to be absolutely intricate and beyond human comprehension. In this regard, we can reckon many names like Anaximander, Heraclitus, Democritus, Thales of Miletus, Plato, Aristotle etc. who exerted to prove a basic substance as the only fundamental or foundational entity in erecting the world. Some have gone to the extent of defying the Divine which many had held as the main agency responsible for creation. Thales proposed water as the basic substance, Anaximander suggested an infinite/boundless which could be abstract as the basic substance. Similarly, Heraclitus spoke of fire which exhibits a constant state of flux and Democritus felt individual atoms. In the post Socratic period we can refer to Plato who viewed the world as an imperfect form as compared to eternal forms and Aristotle supported the need of investigating everything scientifically and systematically owing to which his approach brought importance to natural entities, purpose/reason, causation and motion.

On the other hand, the ancient Indian philosophers who were more inclined to place their views on a canvas of religious background adhered to spiritual outlook. They felt genuine happiness free from the fleeting pleasures whose base obviously remains on the sensory pleasures. Therefore, the pleasures drawn from such a source will never give a genuine satisfaction whereas life led on the basis of ethical living with a sense of detachment will definitely provide lasting happiness. If we see in the Vedanta or the Upanishads, we find a lot of emphasis is laid down on the inner tranquillity which arises out of the detached state of mind leading to Divinity. We have an indirect criticism on the material pleasures which are temporary and also based on mostly unethical practices. In Bhagwad Gita too there is a tremendous impetus on right action and wisdom which automatically takes us to Karma Yoga (action oriented). All our actions should be free from desires which can happen only when performed with mind control. For this transcending over the physical plane and managing flawless mental sublime nature are absolutely required, as essential qualifications. With any type of Yoga-philosophy, it is presumed that ultimately it leads to happiness. It is in this context that the ancient Indian philosophy recommends mainly Raja Yoga, Gyana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Karma Yoga. The ritualistic portion need to be held as the highest spiritual discipline. Yet it may be regarded as one of the disciplines to be adopted for a common man.

Modern Philosophical Approach

Tolstoy said, "Rest, nature, music and books.... such is the idea of my happiness". This indicates that as we approach the modern world, thinkers and philosophers have given up the soothing symbolism and conjectures often found excessively in the literature. On the other hand, placing our thoughts in a tidy fashion and having a pragmatic base was made as the essential qualification. Anything which could withstand the reality and march on the righteous path was considered apt enough to be presented in the society. In this vein, we can have a few theories propagated for 'happiness'.

We have the modern trend giving importance to the psychological aspect and as an extension, satisfaction too. Happiness nowadays and also in the recent past centuries, is looked upon as a combination of many qualities and therefore, expecting a definition solely depending on a single element/entity/characteristic may be considered as a narrow outlook. Most of the times particular the educated class suffers because of its innate tendency to reasoning the past, complaining of the present and pessimistically speculating the future.

In Buddha's teachings it is said, "You cannot suffer the past or future because they do not exist. What you are suffering is your memory and your imagination." It clearly means everything falls under the mind game which we permit. In the modern age 'happiness' is totally viewed as subjective only.

So long as a sense of purpose floats, happiness automatically flows in. At the most during the efforts employed we can be assured that at least we are far away from unhappiness. Therefore, mental serenity is required. As we peep into the recent two centuries, we realize that philosophers have recognized the importance and gravity of this problem. This is because the ultimate aim of all living beings is nothing else than achieving happiness. Let us examine the opinions of a select few philosophers of 19th and 20th centuries.

According to Bertrand Russell Happiness does not come on own nor can arrive automatically. It would always be an outcome of our zest, properly directed efforts and discipline. Whatever appeals to us, with regard to that our attention must be directed outward than merely entertaining the thought in the mind or inwards. Generally, our own mood fires us down and consequently makes us dull. Therefore, unless we activate our mind and become outgoing, happiness cannot be expected. Overcoming pessimistic approach, negative thinking and envy is essential or rather a basic necessity.

‘One of the causes of unhappiness among intellectuals in the present day is that so many of them, especially those whose skill is literary, find no opportunity for the independent exercise of their talents, but have to hire themselves out to rich corporations directed by Philistines, who insist upon their producing what they themselves regard as pernicious nonsense’¹.

Søren Kierkegaard, the existentialist felt genuine happiness cannot be expected from our temporary emotions or chasing pleasure. It would result only when we strengthen our faith. This faith has to be erected through virtues like accepting self with its limitations, courage and of course everything to be accompanied by authenticity. Most of the people, Kierkegaard thinks easily get trapped into the negative qualities of personality and especially ‘despair’. It becomes a habit to tolerate and justify the despair. Therefore, unless this tendency is tackled within our personality, ‘happiness’ cannot arrive. Kierkegaard concentrated more on meaningful life because his ultimate aim was to catch the path leading to Spirituality or Spiritual Joy/Tranquillity.

“Faith is a marvel, and yet no human being is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is united is passion, and faith is a passion.... For he who loved himself became great through himself, and who he loved others became great through his devotion, but he who loved God became greater than all of these.....”²

Arthur Schopenhauer the pessimist somehow is not expecting ‘happiness’ to arrive as the majority philosophers thought. He felt ‘happiness’ is merely a state of partial-satisfaction. He has even gone to the extent of calling it as a negative state, unlike the general opinion that happiness is a positive state. Everything in life has an antonym but absence of one entity does not mean the presence of the other. Therefore, he thinks we generally mistake the temporary absence of unhappiness means presence of happiness. Our life is always in a dynamic form touches the extremes or swings between suffering and boredom. Much owing to this happiness is improbable or illusory. Therefore, reducing desires, practising solitude, holding on to detachment and art can be a way out. In this vein removal of negativity in life can be a guaranteed path to happiness. He thinks ‘will’ factor as very important and controlling the same by reducing its intensity we can get satisfaction to a certain extent. He even strongly suggested ‘solitary life’ as the solution to all these problems, taking us close to happiness by being an intellectual.

Arthur Schopenhauer’s concept of happiness was not restricted to self. It was a liberal and rather a practical idea. ‘.... Does anyone believe he can enjoy his pleasure while his neighbour suffers pain? On the contrary, he who seeks for himself a happy life in a world which is tempestuous sea of evil is like a beggar dreaming he is a king. This is the law of eternal justice. There is no gulf between mine and thine, my happiness and your happiness, my will and the general will of mankind. Let the wise men proclaim this transcendent truth – that each and every one of us must bear all the suffering of the world as his own.’³

Simone de Beauvoir was a French philosopher and writer. She was very popular as an Existentialist and Feminist activist too. She was highly influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Mary Wollstonecraft etc. She had been very famous because of her book, ‘The Second Sex’. In her multivolume autobiography she has documented her upbringing right from the Catholic training to later on turning to Objectivism and Feminist Philosopher full of existential intellectualism. The four volumes are *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958), *The Prime of Life* (1960), *Force of Circumstance* (1963) and *All Said All Done* (1972). She thinks of happiness as an active state. One can never expect happiness to arrive in an idle or passive state. Dullness cannot be equated to happiness. When we hold on to our commitments, freedom and never deviating from ethical path while getting connected to social norms, we can reach the state of happiness. Genuine happiness, according to her, emerges only by evenly facing life challenges without shirking from duties and holding on to the ethical values.

While replying to one of the questions asked by Simone De Beauvoir during their conversation rather a lengthy discussion Sartre replied, “.... As long as it is not I who am playing. At a concert or when I am listening to a record, I sometimes have feelings of that kind. They might be called connections with happiness. It is not exactly happiness itself since these are moments that are going to disappear, but they are the elements that make up happiness.”⁴

Albert Camus was a French philosopher, journalist, novelist, and a political activist. At an age of 44, he was the recipient of Nobel Award in Literature. Camus many times spoke of love and happiness almost in parallel. He began with the description of the world that we live in. Everything, according to him, is absolutely meaningless and even absurd completely. Happiness and love too are passionately fleeing acts. They are merely rebellious acts in a worthless universe where no goal can be set or achieved. As everything is effervescent relying on illusory ideas is clearly stupid. Therefore, holding on to the present moment and nothing wrong in

finding joy in sensory experiences can take us close to the much desirable state of 'happiness'. However, he cautioned that in case we start analysing what happiness means then it would be lost.

It is, therefore, wise to experience it than define. We are responsible for creating our own joy and consequently happiness. There is no sense in chasing it. On the other hand, grabbing it in the present existing moment is wise.

Viktor Emil Frankl was the founder of logotherapy. An Austrian Neurologist, Holocaust survivor worked in detail on Psychotherapy as well as Philosophy. Logotherapy is a school of Psychotherapy which thoroughly gets into the details for knowing the real meaning of life, purpose and trying to fix some sense in it. His name is reckoned along with Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler for his notable contribution to the Psychotherapy. He felt it is a faulty idea trying to discover happiness directly. As we march on righteous path with a dutiful mind, happiness does arrive on own. Chasing happiness is not at all a correct deal. Our aim and purpose have to be sublime so that happiness emerges on own. Just as we have to reference to 'Will' factor in the philosophies of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Frankl too thinks about 'Will' but recommends 'Will to meaning'. Unless we have a clarity, purpose and clear intention we cannot expect happiness in any measure.

"Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning. The great task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning in work, in love, and in courage in difficult times. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it"⁵

Carl Jung's name needs no introduction. He was a very popular Psychiatrist, Psychotherapist and also Psychologist. His contributions to analytical psychology were immense. He was a Swiss, a very prolific writer, having to his credit twenty books. It is very interesting to see his proposal about gaining happiness through five different sources. He thinks they are Health, Relationships, Beauty, Work and Philosophy. According to him Health is to be considered and cared for, on both physical and mental planes. Both are essential. Nothing can be undermined or overlooked. In fact, both these aspects of health are intertwined and absolutely essential. Man, as we all know is a social animal. He cannot easily survive in isolation. At any stage of life companionship is essential for all. Enduring life alone is extremely difficult and cannot produce happiness. Similarly discovering and working for the aesthetic sense is absolutely essential. Devoid of the beauty or aesthetic sense takes us away from happiness. Choice of work is very important. The one which produces satisfaction at the end decides its genuine worthiness. A work causing drudgery can never take us even near the zone of happiness. Lastly our philosophical outlook matters most. We need to foster a living philosophy than struggling with academic acrobatics handling abstract ideas. According to him to be happy is to be capable of gaining resilience. For this, even if we have a religious philosophical affiliation, it definitely promotes happiness on own. Therefore, Jung's suggestions about the resources may be viewed as Five pillars for gaining happiness.

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) was a French philosopher. He is famous because of his efforts to club Phenomenology with Hermeneutics. Phenomenology is a philosophical doctrine which was, in fact, proposed by Edmund Husserl, based on the study of human experience. However, this does not take into account the objective reality. In science there is a lot of emphasis laid down on experiments or this tries to bridge a gap between theoretical models and experimental data. On the other hand, Hermeneutics is considered as a branch of Theology which is involved in the principals of textual interpretation, generally connected to religious texts and also to a certain extent philosophy. Paul Ricoeur wants everyone to accept the fact that unlike many other entities, happiness does not belong to a particular and permanent state. This is because our desires are also temporary. Therefore, it is a fragile experience. Once we acknowledge the existence of the true nature of happiness which indicates its limitations, more possibility of unhappiness and only as an accidental chance, everything becomes an approach. We cannot deny the antonym of happiness which is more clear. Therefore, expecting both happiness and unhappiness together can clarify everything. In this context he often alludes to the term 'optative' which brings in hope rather than striving for happiness as a right. In this viewpoint the hedonistic approach does not qualify to be a guaranteed pathway.

II. Conclusion

By the turn of every decade, we do find new challenges owing to the revival of social structure, norms and values. Every generation would differ with the preceding generation. Obviously, a new viewpoint or outlook dominates and partially at least dislodges the earlier one. It is extremely difficult to bracket certain ideas as universal and lasting or granting eternity to the values. We need to be sportive in accepting the possibility of variations. Nietzsche who is more popular for advocating the 'Will to Power' and supporting manliness to the core defined happiness as the feeling enhancing power to nullify the resistance. In this regard he felt suffering and hardship as the fundamental and necessary components for our growth. Happiness arrives when we overcome these obstacles. He did not agree with the spirit of Utilitarianism.

Happiness should not be held as any target in life. It would surface in a natural way when we increase our Will to Power. Our cheerful disposition is always required throughout work. On an average we can draw an

agreeable conclusion by forming certain postulates so that it would cover the important facets of happiness at least for a common man.

The middle path or philosophically 'Golden Mean Path' is an ideal widely known in Buddhism especially in Thailand. It suggests focussing on our inner peace. For this simplicity in all formats is required. Many times, we romanticize our ideas which instead of assisting, complicate the matter leading to confusion and at times irrevocable despair.

Practicing empathy

Mostly we fail to read others' feelings and therefore intentions. This eventually opens the doors to unhappiness. Our conclusions are in haste and never liberal. We force our expectations more theoretically and therefore suffer in practical life. It is indeed necessary to stop imposing our idealism over others so that much of the unhappiness can be averted.

The art of Letting go

This is easily said than done. If this art could be mastered then surely the burden of past and unwanted memories can be at least reduced sizeably. In a Stoic way, we should know that many things are to be left out as we cannot control them. There are a very few things which are under our custody and in our concise arena.

Self-temperance

This is rather the most important aspect of our personality as this is totally within our reach. Human mind is quick in responding to any of the eventualities. At times, it is felt and experienced too, that if integrity of mind is managed with no fluctuations in the mood many things fall on the right path. Letting loose our desires would bring in more unhappiness than complacency in its genuine sense. Complacency in its own capacity leads to satisfaction and happiness too. In brief, everything begins with our mind which has to be maintained as unwavering and in a steady manner.

To conclude in the words of Walt Whitman,

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained

I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,

They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,

Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,

Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,

Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

-Walt Whitman

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