John Dewey on Happiness: Going Against the Grain of Contemporary Thought

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Dewey’s theory of happiness goes against the grain of much contemporary psychologic and popular thought by identifying the highest form of human happiness with moral behavior. Such happiness, according to Dewey, avoids being at the mercy of circumstances because it is independent of the pleasures and successes we take from experience and, instead, is dependent upon the disposition we bring to experience. It accompanies a disposition characterized by an abiding interest in objects in which all can share, one founded upon a dynamic inner harmony and evolving adjustment to the world. The marks of such an expansive disposition are “stability of character, braveness of soul, and equanimity of soul,” and the key to the development of these traits is what Dewey calls “ethical love.” We conclude with consideration of three potential criticisms of Dewey’s view of happiness and possible Deweyan rejoinders.

The final happiness of an individual resides in the supremacy of certain interests in the make-up of character; namely, alert, sincere, enduring interests in the objects in which all can share. It is found in such interests rather than in the accomplishment of definite external results because this happiness alone is not at the mercy of circumstances.

John Dewey, Ethics, 1932 (LW 7: 302)

There is currently a vast amount of material on happiness being published by both academic and popular writers.¹ We add the voice of John Dewey to current conversations because his theory goes against the grain of much contemporary psychologic and popular thinking by identifying the highest form of human happiness with ethical behavior.² More than pleasure or personal success, humans desire harmony within themselves, with others in society, and with their environment (1932, LW 7: 197).³ Satisfaction of this desire requires an expansive disposition, one marked by the character traits of stability, braveness, and equanimity of soul (1932, LW 7: 198). Further, according to Dewey, such a disposition is accompanied by the highest possible human happiness.
With regard to the development of these character traits, the key, for Dewey, is what he calls “ethical love.” It is not because we will ourselves to live in ways that reflect “the supremacy of certain interests” that we develop “stability of character.” It is not because we will ourselves to so fully identify with the interests of others that we develop “braveness of soul.” And it is not because we will ourselves to pursue “objects in which all can share” that we develop “equanimity of soul” (1925, LW 1: 314). Instead, for Dewey, these traits are a consequence of ethical love where a person’s will, like a lover’s will is “possessed,” “vanquished,” or called by an ideal to whose actualization the person devotes him or herself (1934a, LW 9: 10–15; 1932, LW 7: 259). In sum, the fullest happiness, for Dewey, is the accompaniment of a stable, brave, and equable disposition, a disposition that is promoted by ethical love.

1. Going Against The Grain of Contemporary Thinking

In taking this stance, Dewey is at odds, as we have indicated, with the position taken by many current writers, including most contemporary psychologists. These writers maintain that happiness, in all its varieties, is a combination of positive affect and satisfaction with one’s life (see, for example, Argyle 2001, 2–3). Psychologists who identify happiness with positive mood and satisfaction also refer to this state as “subjective well-being,” a perception that “this time of one’s life, or even life as a whole, is fulfilling, meaningful, and pleasant” (Myers 1992, 23–24). The conditions under which an individual achieves such states and feelings of satisfaction are, according to these psychologists, irrelevant. That is, people’s happiness is not dependent upon their sensitivity to the social consequences of their behavior or upon the moral approbation and disapprobation of others.

1.1 Current Psychologists Who Deny a Necessary Connection between Ethical Behavior and Happiness

Daniel Nettle, a Reader in Psychology at the University of Newcastle, is representative of psychologists who divorce their study of happiness from consideration of morality. Nettle defends his view that the question of moral behavior has no place in discussions of the psychology of happiness by arguing that there are no criteria for determining who is fit to evaluate someone’s life. He writes, “If the judge is a psychologist, or society, imposing some external standard of what one should do with life, then the concept has become a moralizing one; an ideology, in fact. But, at least within any liberal tradition of thought, happiness should not be moralized” (2005, 20).

We find an interesting example of the attempt, and difficulty, of discussing happiness without “moralizing” in the contemporary school of “positive psychology.” Martin E. P. Seligman, the originator of positive psychology, seeks to identify what he calls “authentic happiness” with virtuous