

Symposium:
Christine Vitrano's *The Nature and Value of Happiness*

Human Happiness and Virtue: Are they Related and, If So, How?

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When invited to comment on Christine Vitrano's book,¹ I indicated that I would be happy to do so, but that the proposed date was inconvenient. Happily, the date was changed.

As I hope my opening sentences indicate, I do not think that there is a univocal concept of happiness, even though I believe that different concepts (or, better, conceptions²) of happiness are linked in certain ways.³ So, one of my underlying contentions is that Vitrano offers us one account of happiness—maybe a widely distributed, even populist, account—but not the only account, and not even the only widely understood account of happiness.⁴ Let me put it in another, and somewhat more provocative way: if it is

¹ Christine Vitrano, *The Nature and Value of Happiness* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2013).

² I have in mind the distinction emphasized by Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls; see "Concepts and Conceptions," available online at: <http://legaltheorylexicon.blogspot.com.au/2004/03/legal-theory-lexicon-028-concepts-and.html>.

³ Vitrano disputes that these are evidence of multivocity (pp. 110 ff.), though I challenge that a bit later.

⁴ Not that this is a simple matter of numbers—though sometimes Vitrano speaks (incorrectly, I believe) as though only philosophers would hold the views she criticizes.

arguable that what Vitrano proposes has become *a* or even *the* prevalent concept of happiness—and one that (conceptually) *should* be given precedence over other widely available or widely appealed to accounts of happiness—then I believe that it has become degraded in certain important ways. To the extent that this is so, happiness will have become a little like friendship, a concept that, along with Facebook friends—but even much earlier, as Aristotle recognizes—has acquired a diversity of understandings, some of which are richer and better worth articulating *and promoting* than others. To the extent that we see happiness as an end of human life—as I think many of us, and not just philosophers, still do—then we need a richer conception of happiness than the one that Vitrano offers us, a richer one in which, as with most human endeavors, *the means as well as the end* will play a significant role. Just as Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) gives us the wrong view about friendship and its cultivation, so happiness as mere life satisfaction gives us the wrong picture of happiness. I am not saying that Vitrano’s account is incoherent but inappropriate. In other words, when people say, “I want you to be happy,”⁵ they don’t deny the importance of life satisfaction, but they have in mind something more than mere life satisfaction.

So let my primary argument be not that Vitrano has failed to provide an account of happiness, but that the account of happiness she has provided is unlikely to satisfy those of us who think that happiness is not just something that can be replicated on a Nozickian experience machine,⁶ but an achievement⁷—what Aristotle spoke of as *eudaimonia* or well-being or life lived well.⁸ That some of us may now wish to evacuate what Aristotle characterized as *eudaimonia* of some of its trappings does not show very

⁵ I’m thinking of this as a comment on another’s life and not on another’s purchase.

⁶ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42-45.

⁷ It’s not my view that happiness is something that we need to seek directly; it may well be something that we achieve as the result of accomplishing other goals.

⁸ Two points here: there is a question about whether what Aristotle speaks of as *eudaimonia* is best translated as “happiness” (possibly not). Nevertheless, I think it counts against Vitrano’s sense that she has captured the contemporary essence of happiness that the influential promoters of what is called the Happiness Project (Martin Seligman and Jonathan Haidt, for example), think of happiness as “living well” (itself a pretty Aristotelian conception). See, e.g., Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002); and esp. Gretchen Rubin, *The Happiness Project* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

much beyond what is shown by the fashionability of Facebook friends.⁹ What we want to know about happiness is not only what it is but how it is to be achieved. Indeed, it is quite likely that our evaluation of it as an end will be in part a function of how it is to be achieved. Given her account of happiness, it does not surprise me that Vitrano is unmoved by Robert Nozick's experience-machine critique, but that, I think, is a symptom of her failure rather than an achievement of her account.

As something of an aside, though not irrelevant to my contentions, I doubt whether Vitrano has in fact offered us a single account of happiness. Near the end of the book she considers and resists the possibility of multivocity, but in the end, despite herself, she provides two related but nevertheless differing accounts of happiness. In order to accommodate certain objections she offers an even more accommodating account of happiness as a state of satisfaction in a human subject (p. 110) before switching back to happiness as a state of satisfaction with one's life (p. 113)—satisfactions that have quite different ranges and that may sometimes conflict.¹⁰ There are other instances as well when I think she overextends her account (e.g., p. 64) in pursuit of what I think is probably the futile search for a single all-encompassing account. As wide as Vitrano's Procrustean bed is, it will not do for all that she wants to accommodate.

My own general view is (1) that the search for a single account is wrongheaded and futile, but that that is no problem in itself; (2) that the search for such an account leads Vitrano to develop an excessively thin one; and (3) that if we make our focus happiness as "an end of life"¹¹ (not necessarily the only end or even the most important end), then we must provide more than she does.

To make good on these claims—at least in outline—I want first to make some very general remarks on conceptualization, relating some of those remarks to the conceptualization of happiness, and then to offer some reasons why, if our interest is in human happiness, we are likely to connect it very closely with living virtuously and why, therefore, Fred the Immoralist does not really provide a good counterexample to classical claims to link happiness with virtue.¹²

⁹ See Dean Cocking and Steve Mathews, "Unreal Friends," *Ethics and Information Technology* 2 (2000), pp. 223–31; Christine Rosen, "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism," *The New Atlantis* (Summer 2007), pp. 15–31.

¹⁰ I may be happy with certain proposals you make while being desperately unhappy overall.

¹¹ The sort of thing that makes The Happiness Project influential.

¹² Fred the Immoralist is the subject of a brief, provocative article by Steven M. Cahn, "The Happy Immoralist," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2004), p. 1. At best Fred provides a counterexample to certain ways of stating that connection.

So, then, let me begin with a few general and slightly gnostic remarks about conceptualization.¹³ *First*, I don't want to deny that concepts change over time, or that meanings may become obsolete, or that what may have started off as a relatively univocal concept couldn't have multiplied into a variously characterizable one, or even that philosophers may sometimes live in little conceptual worlds of their own. There is a historical dimension to conceptualization, and Vitrano's interest in providing a contemporary understanding of happiness does not require that it conform to some ancient conception. So, it's altogether possible that there are different concepts/conceptions of happiness out there, that some are more prevalent than others, and even that philosophers have lost touch with the world in which they live. What I don't think is disputed is that we—human beings—still take happiness pretty seriously as an end of life. True, there are certain ways of thinking about it—of happiness as pleasurable contentment, for example—that we might not consider of great importance or something to be strongly desired. Nevertheless, I think we (and I mean a sizable number of human beings) consider happiness to be in some sense an important human end and an accomplishment or achievement. We may differ in our appreciation of what it consists in and how to achieve it. But we (a broad we) want it like we want health—it is considered an important human good.

Second, I think that conceptual branching is very common in the case of complex concepts. Each element within such concepts can develop in directions that lead to distinctions among different users of that concept. If, for example, you take a concept such as loyalty, you may find that some people use it in a way that emphasizes the perseverance with which it is associated (to the point of absoluteness or blind commitment); others use it in a way that emphasizes the cost associated with it (to the point of self-sacrifice); others emphasize its associational dimensions (to the point of mutuality or of denying its applicability to principles); others will focus on its conservatism (to the point of using it to affirm a status quo); and so on. Happiness is susceptible to the same conceptual branching, and I think that Vitrano's several lead-up chapters do not establish that there is (now?) a single notion of happiness so much as that there are several dimensions to happiness and that her book is largely an explication of and emphasis on one of these—happiness as a subjective experience.¹⁴ Perhaps Vitrano could accept this but then argue for the priority of one of these accounts. But I think priority is more than a matter of numbers or ubiquity. The question is not: Is this how most twenty-

¹³ They are gnostic because they really require a lot more spelling out than I can provide in this space.

¹⁴ We might, I believe, do much the same with pleasure—one of the classic options that Vitrano considers. The pleasure I receive from having an itchy back scratched is conceptually distinct from the pleasure I receive from learning my child's exam results.

first century people understand the concept? Instead, it is: *To do the work we want of it, how do we best understand it?*

Third, and relatedly, I think it is very rare to find a social concept such as happiness (in contradistinction to a technical or scientific concept) that can be characterized in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. What we will usually find is that what is *necessarily* related to a concept will under-characterize it, and that its adequate characterization will involve reference to a range of other conditions, only some of which will need to be present for its *sufficient* characterization.¹⁵ Insofar as Vitrano seeks to provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, she is likely to come up with an account that is too spare. Beyond what Vitrano provides as necessary (and sufficient) conditions for happiness, there will usually be included such things as endurance or lastingness, well-groundedness or rationality, and a richness or depth that takes it beyond mere satisfaction. What tends to happen here is that different people—as well as different writers—focus on one or more of these additional features, leading to somewhat different though related conceptions of happiness. The important thing is that we recognize that different accounts are available and consider their respective merits rather than reducing them to a lowest common denominator—if, indeed, such is available. I think that Vitrano has argued for a lowest common denominator (though, as I indicated above, I am not even sure that her account of happiness as life satisfaction has succeeded in providing that).

And *fourth*, I think we need to consider the challenge offered in and by W. B. Gallie's account of "essentially contested concepts"—a description that tends to encompass almost all social concepts and especially those to which we give some importance.¹⁶ This of course is connected to the previous point and leads us to consider the merits of various extensions that give particular conceptions their distinctiveness. When the ancient Solon says, "Call no man happy until he is dead," he works with an account of happiness that focuses on endurance—on ending life well, and thus recognizes the ways in which happiness may be a function of luck as well as virtue. This is not to deny virtue a role in happiness, but only its sufficiency, and assumes (much more controversially) that happiness is not something that can come and go. The point is this: even as an end of life, there is no one way of construing happiness, and what we value may lead us to construe it one way rather than

¹⁵ See Michael Scriven, "The Logic of Criteria," *Journal of Philosophy* 56 (1959), pp. 857-68.

¹⁶ W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955-56), pp. 167-98 (also in W. B. Gallie, *Essentially Contested Concepts and the Historical Understanding* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1964], chap. 8). For a review of some of the subsequent literature, see David Collier, Fernando Daniel Hidalgo, and Andra Olivia Maciuceanu, "Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11, no. 3 (2006), pp. 211-46.

another. Most of us don't take Solon's route, but we can understand why he does, and the fact that he takes the route he does forces us to consider how important to our understanding of human happiness we wish endurance (and a particular kind of endurance) to be.

Let me move on, then, to offer some more substantive reasons why we should go beyond Vitrano's account to something that is thicker.

One reason is to be found in the breadth of Vitrano's account—that is, with how little important work it does besides referring to an immediate state of overall contentment (or life satisfaction, as she refers to it). I say “a state of overall contentment” rather than “life satisfaction” because the latter tends to conflate her view with one in which judgments of happiness are *appraisals* (which I think they are). Vitrano wishes to characterize happiness as a feeling or emotion rather than an appraisal (p. 106). Leaving aside what I think is a conflation of feeling with emotion,¹⁷ what Vitrano's account allows is—as she herself says at one point—the characterization of one's baby as a happy one (p. 64), and, I might also suggest, a happy puppy, both of which almost certainly *express*, even if they do not, because of a lack of conceptual development, *report* their happiness (in her sense). Although I do not wish to deny such appellations, or the same to those who are on alcohol, drugs, or mentally defective (the happy Down-syndrome child), some of us would see such uses as casual (like “friending” in Facebook) and perhaps prefer other terminology such as merry, high, contented, fun-loving, or . . . : we have a rich vocabulary to refer to such states of enjoyment or satisfaction, and don't need to resort to the time-honored and I believe weightier language of happiness. That friendship has been cheapened by Facebook is no reason not to decry such cheapening any more than the cheapening of happiness by reference to the soma-induced state of *Brave New World* is a reason not to decry its cheapening.¹⁸

As broad as Vitrano's conception of happiness is, it doesn't really encompass every contemporary appeal to it, as a check of the *Oxford English Dictionary* will show. And consider the following locutions—one from a modern translation of the New Testament beatitudes: “Happy are those who

¹⁷ There is a cognitive dimension to the emotions that is not essential to feelings. I grant, though, that there is a longstanding debate about whether the emotions can be reduced to feelings.

¹⁸ Let me just say here that, contrary to Vitrano's statements about not being able to be mistaken about one's state of happiness, the examples she provides of the manipulation of one's statements about one's happiness do go to show that one can be mistaken or at least misled about how it is with one's life. Even if these are generally short-lived assertions about happiness, they show either the thinness of assertions about one's happiness, or, more likely, how there is more substance to assertions of happiness than what can be evoked through manipulative experiments. After all, what experimenters do is not much more than introduce control into the contingencies that must often affect judgments of happiness in her sense.

are sad, for they will be comforted . . .”; in older translations the word used was “blessed.” The point is simply to remind us of the diverse conceptions of happiness that are—and are still—available to us.

A second—and my primary—reason for not being satisfied with Vitrano’s account is that we generally have a specific interest in happiness—happiness as an *end* and, in particular, *human* happiness, not the happiness of whatever it may be attributed to. And when I say *human* happiness I have in mind human *qua* human, and not the happiness of campers or customers, and probably not the happiness of mental defectives or babies or the inebriated.¹⁹ This is central to John Stuart Mill’s understanding of happiness (which Vitrano criticizes). In *On Liberty* (1859), where Mill makes much of our human powers of individuality and of the nobility that attaches to self-chosen human endeavor, he makes it clear that although he hews to the utilitarian doctrine that he was later to develop at length in his essay *Utilitarianism* (1861/1863), it is “utilitarianism in the widest sense” as applying to “man as a progressive being.”²⁰ In so doing, he is alluding to his departures from Jeremy Bentham and what he sees as Bentham’s merely quantitatively differentiated conception of happiness, and the possibility that it allows for piggish pleasures to count equally with more refined ones—and also for the pleasures of pushpin to count for the same as the pleasures of poetry.²¹

We may of course wish to take issue with Mill’s qualitative assessments of pleasures or sources of happiness, seeing them as class- or culture-based,²² but what he is trying to do is, I think, very important. He attempts to give an account of happiness that is *appropriate to the kinds of beings that humans are*. It is human happiness—its nature, value, and sources—that concerns the moralists, not just any life satisfaction or contentment. That humans *can* settle for less is not the point. The point is to promote a happiness that we can acknowledge as an appropriate end for the kinds of beings we are, and although that may be open to a wide range of possibilities (and endless disagreement), it is not contentless. It has an

¹⁹ My point is not that we can’t call them happy, but that when we are thinking of happiness as a human end we have in mind something more specific—human *qua* human.

²⁰ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1978), chap. 1.

²¹ See John Stuart Mill, “Bentham” (1838), in *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Alan Ryan (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 132-76; cf. Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward* (London: John and H. L. Hunt, 1825).

²² Vitrano takes issue with Mill, though what she finds unacceptable about Mill’s account is that it introduces an “objective” element into what she takes to be a “subjective” phenomenon. It is precisely that objective element, no matter the difficulties of specifying it, that unacceptably thins out her account.

objective dimension, and I think that is what the ancients were getting at in linking happiness with virtue. For it is virtue that is not only distinctive of humans but, by virtue of its *social orientation*, is also the glue for human flourishing.

The point I think is this: We who reflect on human happiness—its nature *and* value (not just its nature)—are not only centers of feeling or sources of activity, but also appraisers of our lives, and those appraisals are not separate from our conception of what we are. That's why we are interested in the *sources* of our happiness and not simply our experience, why we think that certain activities are likely, given what we are, to yield more satisfying and enduring kinds of human happiness than others, and why certain sources of happiness are more appropriate to the kinds of beings we are than others.

It is not without significance that Vitrano dedicates her book to “Julian and Gabriel who have made me happier than I ever could have imagined.” There are some sources of *human* satisfaction that we recognize as special and which we seek to preserve in various ways (albeit, sometimes, at unfortunate cost). Even in a liberal society, where we might wish to interfere with families far more than we do for the sake of the well-being of their younger members, we nevertheless (for the most part) resist interfering with them, lest we disrupt *one of the great sources of human happiness (a happiness that is greater than we ever could have imagined)*. The point is not that happiness is to be found only in marriage or children or that family life cannot sometimes be dysfunctional, but that familial relations offer opportunities for happiness that are not otherwise available to us, *because of the humans we are*.

And so we might argue for other things. The underlying point is in fact a broader one, relating to the fact that, as humans, we are social beings and the main sources of our satisfactions are achieved through our varied relations with others. It is these relations that are ordinarily sustained through the cultivation of virtue and the virtues.

Mill's somewhat unsatisfactory test of what makes for the higher pleasures of human life and hence for human happiness—the judgment of those who have experienced whatever pleasures are being compared—at least gestures in the direction of what can be considered happiness for those who are aware of the possibilities inherent in their humanity. What the issue becomes, then, is not: What is happiness?, but: What is the nature and value of human happiness?, where a fair bit of work is being done by the adjective as well as the noun. Indeed, it is the adjective that provides a good deal of input into the content of the noun.

Now, that does not leave us in any very easy place. It does not leave us in any very easy place because what it is to be human is an issue over which we have been conflicted ever since we started reflecting on ourselves and our condition. It is, nevertheless, a question we cannot dodge, and I do not believe it satisfactory to try to dodge it by thinning our conception of happiness.

Suppose that a partner and I produce a child which we then proceed to treat simply as a pet. We do not teach it a language or send it to school or do any of the normal things we do for our children. We keep it in a large cage, feed it as it needs to be fed, and otherwise care for its basic physical and other needs. The child grows up to be a contented pet. It does not tell us that it is happy, but it expresses its feelings and we do what we need to do to keep it contented. Is it happy? We can believe so, at least in Vitrano's sense of happy, and yet we may wish to resist the view that it is happy as a *human being*, for it has not been enabled to engage and find satisfaction in the usual, or even unusual, sources of human happiness.

The distinctiveness of human experience can be brought out via Vitrano's reference to James Griffin's reaction to Nozick's experience machine. Whereas Nozick focuses on the importance of engagement, Griffin indicates his own penchant for the person who "prefers the bitter truth to comfortable delusion."²³ The point that Griffin is making goes back to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, in which we are presented with a choice between the carefully crafted "human clones," who may ingest *soma* whenever a cloud arises in their consciousness, and "John the Savage," who has missed out on the great cloning experiment. John experiences the full range of human emotions—ups and downs—and the reader is left with a choice between two options, that of the soma-calmed clones and the *Sturm und Drang* of John. It is Huxley's graphic contention that John's life is to be preferred, because it is a genuinely *human* life, even though it is not contented in the way experienced by the soma-taking clones. On Huxley's view, it is better to be an unhappy John than a happy clone, which is Huxley's twenty-first century version of Mill's claim that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. It's not simply that Vitrano's kind of happiness is passive, but that it is evacuated of the distinctive features that make us human. I think that helps us to understand why she has no great problem with Nozick's experience machine.

One of the reasons I was invited to comment on Vitrano's book is that she critiques my response to Steven Cahn's brief sketch of "The Happy Immoralist" (pp. 124-25).²⁴ I think I've now provided enough background to indicate why I disagree with Cahn and why Vitrano's response does not persuade me.

Let me first note that although I cast some doubts on the quality of Fred's happiness, I did not categorically deny that Fred the immoralist could be called happy. I did, nevertheless, express some doubts about the character of his happiness. As Vitrano notes, I say explicitly that "at one important level Fred's happiness is chimerical," and I do contrast his happiness with

²³ Cited in Vitrano, *The Nature and Value of Happiness*, pp. 140-41.

²⁴ Commenting on John Kleinig, "Happiness and Virtue," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2004), p. 2.

what I refer to as “real happiness.”²⁵ I was attempting in a very brief space to make two claims about Fred, as follows.

First, I wanted to argue that Fred’s happiness was likely to be extremely fragile, for the general reason that some means to happiness are likely to make it more perilous than others. And that is so, even if we build luck into our calculations. In other words, the path that Fred has taken to achieve the kind of happiness he affirms is a treacherous one and likely to unravel at any time. The odds of being found out are pretty high. Moreover, I suggested that because of Fred’s desire for a “reputation for probity,” there is something chimerical about his happiness, since the appearance of a good reputation depends on his ability to maintain a lie, a lie that is likely to be difficult to maintain in the face of his treachery and dishonesty. But there is something more to it than that, although I did not state this. The currently satisfied desire for a reputation for probity is for perpetuity; it is not extinguished by death; it constitutes part of what one considers to be one’s legacy. It would not do for Fred to say: “I care only for a good reputation while I am alive—I don’t give a damn about what they will think of me after I’m gone.” Unless Fred changes his mind about the importance of a reputation for probity, Fred will go to his death wishing to maintain that reputation.

Second, there is something else about Fred’s happiness that makes it chimerical, something that makes it less than “real happiness.” Fred is a human being, and though human happiness may be achieved in many different ways, it has some distinctive qualities *qua* human happiness, qualities that emerge from our character as social beings and from the way in which we engage with the social world. This I take it is one of the considerations that informs Jeffrie Murphy’s pity for Fred.²⁶ Fred sells himself short. Like Mill’s pig, he has a cheap understanding of what makes for a satisfying human life. He gets a certain kind of satisfaction, to be sure, and we can call it happiness if we wish, but just as—I suspect—Vitrano would not wish Fred’s type of life satisfaction for herself or wish to recommend it to others, we should think it sad that this is the way Fred wants his life to be. This is no life for a *human being*. Would Vitrano, in indicating to her children the different ways in which they might have happy lives, include Fred’s example among them?

I suspect not. But what if she replies, as I think she would: a happy life is not everything. It is also important that one has a moral life, and Fred’s life is not a recommendable option because it is not a moral life. There is more to life than happiness. That is true. Some human ends may be more important than happiness. To simplify a little: Should Vitrano set before her children only those ways of being happy that are also moral? And if so, why? Is it not that one of the conditions of a happy life fit for humans is that it also hews to

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jeffrie G. Murphy, “The Unhappy Immoralist,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (Spring, 2004), pp. 11-13.

certain moral constraints? And if that is so, how different is that from what is being claimed by those who wish to connect human happiness with virtue?

To the extent, then, that we see happiness as a human end, something that we wish for ourselves; to the extent that we see a genuinely human happiness as bound up with, even if not exhausted by, social relations (families, friends, and so forth); to the extent that we see virtue or morality as a condition of those relations (at least insofar as they are stable); then we will see a strong connection between the end of happiness and virtue as a means. This is not to confuse happiness and virtue, that is, to reduce one to the other, but it is nevertheless to recognize why moralists, ancient and modern, have sought to make the latter integral to the former, and why Fred is not only an outlier (to the extent that we want to call what he has “happiness”), but also something of an anomaly. To see happiness and virtue as closely connected is not to be confused with an unwillingness to tolerate moral difference. We might think that so long as their judgments of life satisfactoriness cohere with their own moral values, humans can be genuinely happy. This is not the case with Fred. He knows that he is a moral wretch, but thinks it an acceptable trade-off for what he has: fame, wealth, and (currently) a reputation for probity. That is the problem and why we are unlikely to see the kind of happiness, or life satisfaction, that Fred experiences as appropriate to what we are as human beings. The point, as Mill recognizes it, even though it involves “compromising” his utilitarianism, is that there is a normative component to characterizing something as human.

