

Response to My Critics

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1. Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking both of my commentators: first, for taking the time to read my book; second and more importantly, for providing such thoughtful comments and criticism. Given the different challenges each raises, I'll offer a separate reply to each.¹

2. Reply to Christopher Rice

Chris Rice begins with my claim that happiness involves a more global attitude that we have toward our lives, an attitude that takes into consideration how our immediate experiences fit into our lives as a whole. He suggests that this account is too narrow, because it cannot account for certain immediate experiences of pleasure that are enough to “constitute happiness, even if they do not involve a more global attitude toward one’s life.”²

First let me explain what I mean by *global attitude*, because I do agree that some instances of pleasure contribute to happiness. On my view, one is happy when one is in a state of satisfaction with one’s life, meaning that one has a favorable impression of how one’s life is going and views it positively. One objection I raise against hedonism is that it cannot make sense of instances of pleasure that are (in and of themselves) enjoyable experiences, yet fail to make one happy, because they violate a person’s ideals or conflict with her values.

I see happiness as a more nuanced concept than is reflected in hedonism, which typically equates happiness with the summation of a person’s pleasant experiences minus her experiences of pain. In contrast, I believe that a person’s happiness also reflects the importance or significance of these episodes, such that some pleasant experiences may fail to contribute to happiness (and some pains may not detract from it). The global attitude involved in happiness will reflect a person’s goals, values, and ideals, which

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

² Christopher Rice, “Happiness, Pleasure, and Satisfaction,” *Reason Papers* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 20-25, quotation at p. 21.

then determine how particular episodes of pleasure or pain affect her happiness.

The diet case is a trivial illustration of this problem with hedonism, but there are also more realistic examples, such as cases of marital infidelity. For example, suppose you value your relationship with your spouse, whom you respect and admire. But while you are away at a conference, you are tempted to have an extramarital affair with a colleague you find attractive. Given the chemistry you both share, it is likely the affair will be quite pleasurable. But the ramifications of this indulgence, as in the chocolate cake example, will probably cause you intense regret, resulting in dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

Now I'd like to return to Rice's examples of pleasant experiences that fill the better part of a person's consciousness, such as a child opening birthday presents or parents who enjoy watching their child open presents.³ Rice offers additional examples of happiness that he suggests do not involve a global attitude toward one's life, such as the pleasure one takes in golfing, going to the movies, or playing with one's children. I agree with Rice in describing these as cases of happiness, but I believe that the life-satisfaction view can accommodate all of them.

Starting with the child opening her presents, I believe that the happiness of children can be explained in the same way as for adults. That is, happiness is a state of satisfaction with one's life, but given that the lives of children are so much shorter than those of adults, and their cognitive capacity to understand the future is limited, their satisfaction will be mainly a function of their present experiences. Young children aren't in a position to think about their lives as a whole or plan for the future. They also don't have that many past experiences to draw upon. So for children, happiness will largely be a function of the satisfaction they experience in the present moment. Perhaps the very recent past and the soon-to-be future might play a small role, but in general, the child is happy opening her presents, because opening presents is a satisfying, positive experience for her.

I would explain the happiness of parents watching their child open presents differently, however. Insofar as I love my child, his happiness is going to be very important to me; it will probably be one of my biggest priorities. So when my child is happy, I am happy as well. But my satisfaction is a function of my values and what's important to me, namely, my child's happiness. Of course, things get more complicated when the child gets older and his happiness no longer arises from simple things like opening presents, but instead arises from sources his parents find morally objectionable. In this case, the child's happiness might not make his parents very happy, but that is because it violates their own values or what they view as important.

I believe that the same reasoning applies to the other cases Rice mentions. He says, "these kinds of pleasant experiences are different from the

³ Ibid.

way people feel when they reflect on their lives as a whole.”⁴ But Rice may be misunderstanding what I mean by life satisfaction. Being happy just *is* having a positive, global attitude toward one’s life. But that attitude is formed in virtue of *all* of the satisfying episodes one experiences, including small, trivial pleasures and enjoyments. Surely, if someone never did anything she enjoyed, it would be very unlikely (perhaps even impossible) for her to say, “But I’m completely satisfied with my life.”

Although happiness is often directly affected by the presence or absence of important goods, such as health, success at one’s career, and the well-being of our loved ones, satisfaction is also affected by things that are less important, such as having time to pursue one’s hobbies or being able to relax, as one might on a golf course or while watching a movie. Thus, my view can accommodate the idea that doing things we enjoy can contribute to happiness.

I view playing with one’s children differently, however, because I don’t see this as a mindless escape (akin to going to the movies or golfing), but instead as something that is important to one as a parent. For example, there are days when I am exhausted from teaching, and the last thing I want to do when I finally get home is read *Llama Llama Red Pajama* for the thousandth time to my children. But I know that reading to them is important (as we are told by “the experts”) and my sons look forward to hearing these stories at bedtime. So I read to them, even when I’d rather not, and I do feel satisfied afterward, because I’ve lived up to my parental obligations and I’ve made my sons happy, both of which are important to me.

I’d like to move to Rice’s suggestion about broadening the life-satisfaction view to “include some other kinds of satisfaction, where people feel good about the way others’ lives are going or about states of the world that they care about.”⁵ I am comfortable with this suggestion, for I do not endorse a narrow conception of the life-satisfaction view, which would imply that only things directly connected with one’s own life affect happiness.

Rather, I believe satisfaction or dissatisfaction with many things outside one’s own life will have an impact on a person’s happiness, and perhaps the most obvious cases involve the well-being of people one cares about. Thus, my satisfaction with my life will encompass everything (and everyone) that is important to me. I may not become unhappy when I read about tragic events in the newspaper, because they are too far away or do not involve anyone I know. But insofar as an event does affect a person’s emotions, it is likely to have an impact on her happiness.

Incidentally, I fully agree with Rice’s observation about the connection between the happiness of parents and their children. When our first son was born, my husband and I quickly realized that if Julian was not happy,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

the whole family was unhappy. I suspect the reason that children have such a powerful effect on us is simply because we love them so much (and so much more than everything else). So when they are suffering, as a parent, one suffers along with them. Their happiness and well-being are so important, that everything else, including other things you value, simply pale in comparison.

In the end, I agree with much of what Rice says about happiness, including the idea that there are many sources of satisfaction not directly connected with our own lives. From the people we love to the causes we care about, when something is important to us, it will affect our overall life satisfaction, which is to say, our happiness.

3. Reply to John Kleinig

The first issue raised by John Kleinig that I would like to address is his reference to Facebook's impact on friendship. Kleinig begins with the provocative claim that the life-satisfaction view degrades happiness in the same way that Facebook "cheapens" friendship.⁶ Kleinig objects to Facebook friendships, because they enable one to have thousands of "friends" simply by clicking a button, and he believes that this dilutes the idea of friendship. Similarly, by removing the objective constraints on happiness, including its connection with virtue, the life-satisfaction view degrades happiness by enabling one to achieve it by doing whatever one finds satisfying, including taking the right combination of pills.

Although it's possible to have thousands friendships with perfect strangers, just as it's possible to medicate yourself into a satisfied stupor, most of us choose other means of attaining both friendships and happiness. Even Aristotle recognized that there were different kinds of friendships,⁷ and he viewed perfect friendships based on virtue as the most durable and best. The value of perfect friendships is not "diluted" by the existence of friendships based on utility or pleasure. So why should Facebook friendships present a unique problem? Similarly, the life-satisfaction view leaves open myriad possibilities for attaining happiness; however, that does not mean we must view all of these means as equally preferable.

Kleinig views happiness as "an important human end and an accomplishment or achievement," which implies that one has lived her life well, and he draws a comparison with another important good: health.⁸ I agree that happiness is an important good, but on my view, it is merely one good among many others, and these goods can (and often do) come into direct

⁶ John Kleinig, "Human Happiness and Virtue: Are They Related and, If So, How?" *Reason Papers* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 9-19, quotation at p. 10.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Bk. VIII.

⁸ Kleinig, "Human Happiness and Virtue," p. 12.

conflict with each other. I do not wish to deny that, for some people, happiness will arise through the pursuit of morally and intellectually virtuous activities; however, I do not believe that must be the case for everyone.

Here, I believe that the comparison with health is instructive. What must one do to be healthy? The obvious answers include seeing a physician, eating healthy food, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep. But what else should one do? And how much of a person's lifestyle should be compromised in the pursuit of this important human good? Many physicians will suggest eating less meat, and some advocate giving it up altogether. So, should we all become vegetarians? As a vegetarian, I am comfortable with this, but I suspect that many people, even those who care about their health, would find it unreasonable.

Now, someone might argue that if one *really* cares about her health, she would change her lifestyle dramatically. No more eating out at restaurants, where the food has too much fat and salt; and no more desserts, which have too much sugar and little nutritional value. I wonder how many people would be willing to sacrifice so much pleasure and enjoyment, even for as important a good as health.

The same reasoning applies to happiness: it too is an important human good, but its pursuit must be balanced against all of the other things we also value. Very often, our commitments come into direct conflict with each other, and we are forced to compromise. For example, one may face the challenge of balancing a career against meeting the obligations of family life. There is no easy way to make this compromise work; sometimes you sacrifice time with your kids; other times, you ignore your obligations at work.

But just as I cannot tell you how much pleasure you ought to give up in the pursuit of health, I cannot tell you what you ought to do in order to achieve satisfaction with your life. I believe that our individual values and commitments put a constraint on our happiness by limiting the means we are willing to take in order to achieve satisfaction. Insofar as I value being a good parent, I will be willing to sacrifice other things I care about in order to realize this good. But I don't believe we can tell people how they ought to achieve this balance.

I am also unconvinced by the suggestion that happiness *must* be connected with achievement and accomplishment, for that omits some very important sources of happiness, such as pleasant surprises, lucky breaks, and simple good fortune. These are not things we anticipate, and more importantly, they are not earned, but they do make us happy nonetheless.

Julia Annas also argues for the connection between happiness and achievement, and rejects what she calls "smiley faced happiness," because it equates being happy with simply feeling good about one's life. She agrees with Kleinig that happiness should be seen as an accomplishment, earned over the course of one's life.⁹

⁹ Julia Annas, "Happiness and Achievement," in *Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Christine Vitano

Annas discusses an informal experiment performed by one of her colleagues, who asked his undergraduate business students, "What are the components of a happy life?" Her colleague reports that his students listed material goods, such as money, cars, and a large home. The students were then told that a rich relative had died, leaving them everything on their list. Now, they are asked whether they are happy, and Annas reports that the students overwhelmingly said, "No." Annas interprets this response as evidence for the connection between happiness and achievement.

I agree that how we achieve satisfaction matters, but that actually helps further to explain why equating happiness with satisfaction does not degrade the concept, for it shows that not all means of attaining happiness are equally preferable. The results suggest that, for many people, happiness will be connected with precisely those ideals espoused by Aristotle and Kleinig. That is, in seeking happiness (or satisfaction with their lives), many people *will not* turn to pharmaceutical options; nor will they blindly pursue wealth in order to amass huge amounts of material goods. But whatever means one takes to achieve satisfaction, they will reflect that person's values and what is important to her.

Next, I'd like to focus on the question of whether happiness allows for conceptual branching. In a footnote,¹⁰ Kleinig draws a parallel with pleasure, suggesting that 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. I'm not sure I agree with his analysis. The pleasure one receives from both must have *something* in common in virtue of which we call both pleasures; otherwise, we wouldn't classify both *as* pleasures. Clearly, they feel different, but they must have something in common.

Without wading too far into the vast literature on pleasure, the dominant view (which I believe originates with Henry Sidgwick,¹¹ but has since been adopted by many others¹²) is that we refer to both experiences as pleasures, because both are states that we enjoy (for themselves) and wish to prolong. Although the states may feel different from each other, they are all counted as pleasures because of the attitude we take toward them.

I believe that happiness is similar, for it is a state of satisfaction, but there are many different sources that contribute to our satisfaction, and they

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 238-45.

¹⁰ Kleinig, "Human Happiness and Virtue," p. 12 n. 14.

¹¹ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), chap. IV.

¹² Richard Brandt, *Ethical Theory: The Problems of Normative and Critical Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1959). See also Fred Feldman, "On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasure," *Ethics* 107 (1993), pp. 448-66, who refers to Sidgwick's view of pleasure as the dominant one within the literature (p. 452).

may not all feel the same. For instance, the satisfaction I experience after running six miles feels different from the satisfaction I experience when I am notified that an article I wrote is being published. Both contribute positively to how I view my life, though perhaps not equally.

I prefer to associate satisfaction more with feelings, rather than with judgments or appraisals, because I believe that the feelings matter most (as opposed to what is “actually” happening in reality). This is another problem with adopting the objective view of happiness so admired by Kleinig. Objectivists (like Aristotle) identify happiness with living up to certain standards, such as the achievement of moral and intellectual virtue. But if the subject fails to feel positively about her accomplishments, if she is unable to appreciate what she has achieved, I believe she will be unhappy. She may be a successful scholar, a good friend, and a devoted parent, but if the positive feelings are absent (for whatever reason), these accomplishments simply will not matter.

Kleinig suggests that we need to go beyond the life-satisfaction view of happiness to “something thicker,” in part because this account allows for the characterization of one’s baby or puppy as happy. He prefers to describe their states of enjoyment using other vocabulary, reserving the time-honored and weightier language of happiness for other cases.¹³ But that makes me wonder: What other cases does he have in mind? Clearly, animals, children, and the mentally challenged all fail to meet Aristotle’s requirements for happiness. But on this view, who *does* qualify as happy? I suspect that most teenagers’ satisfaction would also be insufficient, as would the satisfaction of many college students, because they lack a clear vision of what they wish to achieve, of what kind of people they will become, and of what is important to them.

Yet, if we exclude babies and children, teenagers and most young adults, who is worthy of happiness? Are we to reserve the term for the middle aged and elderly? Must we limit this concept only to people who can prove their worth by pointing to their virtuous accomplishments? Which accomplishments should count, and how many should one obtain in order to be deemed happy? And who’s going to make this final judgment? I see no benefit in restricting our usage of happiness in this way, especially when it so clearly deviates from the way ordinary people use the word. On this view, most people would never qualify as happy, and the word would be rendered useless.

This brings me to the final issue I wish to discuss, which is the case of Fred, our happy (or perhaps not-so-happy) immoralist. Kleinig questions Fred’s happiness, which he describes as “extremely fragile,”¹⁴ and his concern

¹³ Kleinig, “Human Happiness and Virtue,” p. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

was echoed by many philosophers responding to Steven Cahn,¹⁵ who first posed the fictitious story of Fred. I am not persuaded by these doubts for precisely the reason offered by Cahn: in cases of truly successful immoralists, such as the perfectly unjust man described in Plato's *Republic*, what bothers us most is the injustice of their happiness. Cahn suggests that it is really *we* who are unhappy at the thought of a thriving immoralist; but our unhappiness is due precisely to the fact that the immoralist *is* happy, and that he attains this important good.

The reason I would not recommend Fred's life to my children is because I find it morally objectionable, not because I believe Fred is not really happy. Fred's happiness is actually part of the reason I find his life so reprehensible, for he endorses values that enable him to be satisfied with such an awful life.

I believe that people are happy under an extremely broad, really diverse range of circumstances. Given my moral values, I would not be happy under many of them, but my values are irrelevant to the question of other people's happiness. The life-satisfaction view implies that one can be happy as long as she is satisfied, and that satisfaction will reflect her values and what is important to her. We can still criticize the choices of others, but this discussion takes place at the level of our values, and here, happiness is merely one value among many others.

¹⁵ Steven M. Cahn, "The Happy Immoralist," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 35 (2004), p.1.

