



The Philosophy of Happiness: Eastern Vs. Western Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the philosophical understandings of happiness as conceptualized in Eastern and Western traditions. It delves into their historical trajectories, key tenets, and cultural underpinnings. While Western philosophy often associates happiness with virtues, rationality, and individual autonomy, rooted in ancient Greece and Enlightenment ideals, Eastern traditions emphasize holistic well-being, interconnectedness, and spiritual enlightenment as seen in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Through a comparative analysis, the study highlights how these perspectives converge and diverge in addressing the human pursuit of happiness. Finally, it reflects on the contemporary relevance of these philosophies, proposing an integrated view that bridges cultural divides and enriches the understanding of happiness in an interconnected world.

Keywords: Happiness, Eastern Philosophy, Western Philosophy, Virtue Ethics, Enlightenment, Interconnectedness.

INTRODUCTION

Happiness is perhaps one of the oldest philosophical problems, located at the intersection of nature and values in human existence. There is a group of philosophers who believe that the most important value of life lies in happiness and that all struggles and pursuits ultimately contribute towards establishing a joyful life. To solve this problem, the East and the West have different philosophical perspectives and wisdom. Each cultural and philosophical tradition tells a unique story about happiness, as it is a central topic of Asian philosophical traditions. This paper sets out to compare and contrast conceptions of happiness in the world's two most populous cultural contexts: the Western philosophical tradition, which developed in ancient Greece and continues to be practiced in contemporary Europe and the Americas, and the Eastern philosophical tradition, which arose and developed on the Asian continent and has been disseminated around the world by various missionaries and scholars. The paper consists of three main sections: 'An Ancient Division', which traces these philosophies to their origin stories; 'Happiness in the Eastern Tradition', which unpacks key concepts in Indic and Chinese thought and explores their historical development; and 'Happy Together', which includes a comparative analysis of the philosophical elements discussed in the two previous sections. This paper suggests the ways that reflection on these understandings can alter how we think about happiness. While doing so does not exhaust the world's philosophical traditions or approach all of the nuance and variety within each of them, I hope it can provide a starting point for making the joy of true living a possibility [1, 2].

Historical Background

Happiness: A Historical Background Can ancient wisdom on happiness help us today? The East and the West have long represented two dichotomous streams of thought, each possessing its distinctive trajectory and history. However, the thoughts and spiritual teachings conceptualized by thought leaders in the East and West are not easy to categorize as antithetical to each other except for the reason that they germinated from different cultures, and hence their historical development was distinct. Eastern philosophy traces its roots back to the changes in political and spiritual thought of the Eastern tradition,

which were taking place in the Indian subcontinent when new cities were on the verge of emerging from the decay of these once flourishing civilizations. The Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita were a radical break from the practices of innocent human sacrifices to the gods, who were beseeched to give them energy, particle forces, harmony, and light. The Western ethical traditions, no less than Eastern philosophy, have developed over a long historical trajectory, which was governed by different political conditions and, no less, different ontological and epistemological developments. Moral philosophy in the West took its roots in ancient Greece over the 5th century B.C. and developed in the city-states of Athens and Sparta. It was in the remit of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It marks the basis of modern Western ethics and is related to the nature of the cosmos and what was the place and role of man in it. Medieval moral philosophy's study took its roots in the philosophy of ancient Greco-Roman philosophies and was regarded as the auxiliary of theology but obtained great interest of its own. In conclusion, it can be best said that philosophical streams of thought are the product of their historical conditions, both ontological, epistemic, and no less social, political, and economic. In that sense, they can only develop in so far as how much their social conditions have been shaped by their material conditions, i.e., their cultures unmistakably become the product of their material lives; hence their broader philosophies represent that culture. The same connection can be made between happiness and the historical conditions of our social, emotional, moral, and technologically changing world. Hence, happiness cannot be separated from this historically developed philosophy of human relationships and the social structure that is governed by dynamic changes that are constantly challenging our species [3, 4].

Development of Eastern Philosophies

In Indian traditions, the goal of life is to achieve success not only for personal happiness but also for the welfare of all creatures. No work can be more important or morally better than assisting those activities that contribute to the well-being of all. The pursuit of selfish desires is not a worthy goal of human actions. The idea is extended beyond ritual to other kinds of sacrifice or good actions. It has fundamentally the joy in heaven and the birth of a worthy son as the two ultimate desires of human beings in the ancient period [5, 6]. In China, there have been two major philosophical schools in ancient Confucianism and Mohism that emphasized the need for a harmonious society and care for the welfare of those in one's close vicinity. The legendary founder of Taoism said that to me, flowing in harmony is the way to behave; where the flow of life is, a person should feel at home. Eastern thoughts seem to aim at taking care of the peace and harmony available in the distant past, well before the historical divisions. This indicates a significant difference in the view of the development of the Eastern mind compared to the West. Eastern consciousness begins to arrive at the level of happiness that began with me and is beginning to shift towards compassion, moving from tears to cheer. In contrast to the ancient view of happiness in Western classical thought, where moral and intellectual virtue are considered more important than the acquisition of fulfilling desires, in the East, competencies such as balance, care, friendship, spirituality, and scientific understanding stand out [7, 8].

Development of Western Philosophies

As happiness is one of the translated ideas that has existed almost as long as the history of thought, there are various theories about the nature of happiness, ways to attain it, criteria to measure it, types of happiness, and determinants of happiness. Two main philosophical traditions have struggled for more than 200 years on the locus of happiness. This section and the section following it will focus on two dominant traditions: the Western idea and the Eastern idea. In ancient Greece, happiness, considered related to ethics, was viewed in the context of virtues, and virtues were pursued in the process of achieving happiness. Plato predicted that the aim of human beings would be the realization of the essence of a person through a hierarchy of knowledge. Greek philosophers, who suggested virtues based on the principle of imitation of nature, criticized these tendencies and said that ideal forms are beyond reality and stressed that virtues must be adapted to human nature. Aristotle, who sees the ultimate good in happiness and regards all other goods as a means for happiness, lands on the definition of *Ethiké Nicomacheía* and offers the most systematic philosophy of happiness. Epicurus recommends the pursuit of happiness as the pursuit of tranquility and pleasure. Stoics gave precedence to honor and virtue in happiness. The Christian tradition sees happiness in the context of self-realization. In his work, St. Thomas Aquinas spoke in a similar vein, emphasizing that the possession of an object, which is the realization of a person's potential, makes him happy. The Enlighteners interpret happiness as self-realization and regard positive activity and a rational attitude as one of the standards for evaluating happiness. Hobbes claimed that true and steady happiness consists in the surcease of man's most pressing fears. Locke defined happiness as an inward state of man consisting of the silence of his passions. Rousseau defined happiness as the moral state required for people to be happy. Kant said, "The principle of happiness does not move people to be

moral." Hegel describes the concept of true happiness as spiritual happiness to overcome contradictions [9, 10].

Key Concepts in The Eastern Philosophy of Happiness

Eastern philosophy has been concerned with happiness in terms of cultivating holistic well-being. Fundamental to all of the Eastern philosophies is the idea that we humans are interconnected to all things. Therefore, our happiness is also interconnected to the happiness of all things. To begin this understanding, we need to cultivate in ourselves an enlightened form of love and compassion. We therefore cultivate two principles that are always present in these Eastern philosophies: love and compassion. Central to the Eastern idea of enlightenment is the notion that things are not what they seem to be. This concept, expressed in different ways, upholds that the transience of all things is the source of human despair, for it can only produce disappointment when we crave the permanence of those things around us. We must instead strive to live our lives moment by moment in full awareness. This will not only increase our chances of happiness, but it will eventually transform us into the Buddha consciousness that transcends all personal suffering [11, 12]. The most important product of enlightenment for both Hinduism and Buddhism is ethical living. The ethical life, in this context, involves the act of living with respect for all other beings on earth. We must be conscious of the law of karma, for if we are not, we will experience dissatisfaction. In this respect, karma has come to be both the action we choose and the suffering that is the effect of life lived in unconsciousness. For both Hindus and Buddhists, then, happiness is only for those who are conscious of their motives and act in such a way as to bring about the welfare of all [13, 14]. Hindu and Buddhist philosophies also emphasize the principle of detachment as a key to happiness. To detach from everything is not to reject it in terms of an action principle. It is to fully accept reality for what it is by not craving things to be other than they are. We must learn to accept our lot and live out our lives with tranquility. Hinduism and Buddhism also emphasize the importance of meditation and contemplation. For many Eastern thinkers, the person who spends numerous years in contemplation will eventually become enlightened about the nature of things. He or she would naturally find that the path to happiness requires both the cultivation of an ethical life and a life of reflection. A kind of happiness can be cultivated through virtue and through reflecting upon the transience of things in life [15, 16]. In sum, in the East, happiness is not just about feeling good and peaceful. It is also about being connected to or having knowledge of, the interconnectedness of all things. Happiness in this light is holistic, including physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Also, to find happiness, an ethical life is essential. Personal happiness itself is not the end. Rather, happiness results from a life spent in the service of the community and other beings. Finally, spiritual reflection on the nature of reality is helpful and can lead to a deep, lasting state of satisfying happiness. In short, for Eastern philosophies, happiness is not seen as a state but rather as a process [17, 18].

Key Concepts in Western Philosophy of Happiness

Happiness is a key philosophical and ethical concern for the Western world. Modern Western society, in particular, is constituted around values that closely relate to and endorse certain ideas of what it means to be happy and to have 'made something of ourselves.' Key concepts that have become familiar in the Western philosophy of happiness across history include: individuality or agency, rooted particularly in Hellenistic and Enlightenment thought; personal autonomy, closely related to individuality, largely influenced by Hellenistic and modern ideas of freedom; the quest for pleasure as energy and for the minimization of pain, dating from the ancient Greeks; the crucial role of reason in determining how the good-life happiness should be approached; and strong connections between happiness, the self-reflective, and the critical potential of a person [19, 20]. Many of the ancient Greek dramatic myths are recognizable in the stories we tell in the West, and though for the most part, we might not know who first told such stories, or even the precise details of what they were, the arguments of the likes of Plato and Aristotle have a great deal to do with making these ancient conceits into the kinds of discussions that one would talk about when discussing life. Many of the central philosophical concerns of Western life and society, therefore, are fastened to the values set up during life's philosophical beginnings and are closely connected to the dramas familiar to us at an unconscious level. For example, it has been claimed that our modern, liberal way of understanding a life worth living is traceable back to the ancient Hellenic world, filtered most importantly through the lens of Aristotle and his concept of eudaimonia. Central to this idea is that a life worth living concerns the personal development and acting out of an individual character through the commitment to some important personal values, and in some cases carried out in connection with others. Typically, such individuals resonate a sense of 'vigor' and 'activity.' This conception translates into 'the individualism' of the Western liberal tradition [21, 22].

Comparison Of Eastern and Western Perspectives on Happiness

This paper aims to examine philosophy from a cross-cultural and comparative perspective as a response to globalization and intense communication between Eastern and Western cultures. In introducing both traditions, the philosophical significance is related to various aspects such as mythology, history, folklore, literature, art, and problems concerning communication between the cultures. Within this framework, the topic of discussion in this section is the central theme of both traditions, i.e., happiness, as emerging from the domain of practical philosophy [20, 23]. On the one hand, Western culture is rooted in ancient Greece, centered around rational analysis of ethical phenomena. On the other hand, are the philosophical traditions of various Eastern countries grounded in the mystical insights of Hinduism, Confucianism, Daoism, and especially Buddhism, none of which are religious traditions in the Western sense of the word. However, in contrast to the Western tradition, the former philosophy is above all spiritual wisdom and all-inclusive, and its ethical and political reflections are only relevant as useful guides to the attainment of the highest spiritual or religious objective, that is, cosmic happiness or release from the karmic wheel of birth, life, death, and rebirth in this duality of life itself and immortality. Hence, in principle, Eastern practical philosophy, unlike the Western, does not pose problems concerning the relationship between private and public life or the meaning of words like virtue, morality, justice, democratic ideology, good, salvation, equality, freedom, or the nature of law, state, society, ethics, sinful action, punishment, or justice, for Eastern philosophy is above all a philosophy of happiness. Complete happiness, which is inclusive of life and truth itself... the only perceptible difference is that while Western philosophical traditions ask what happiness is from the collectivity's perspective and what the road to happiness is, the Eastern tradition, above all, asks the basic question, "What is happiness?" both from the individual's and collectivity's predicament and studies human attitude to it [24, 25].

CONCLUSION

The Eastern and Western philosophies of happiness provide profound insights into human well-being, albeit from distinct vantage points. Western traditions often emphasize individual autonomy, rationality, and the cultivation of virtues as pathways to eudaimonia—a flourishing life. In contrast, Eastern traditions highlight interconnectedness, spiritual reflection, and ethical living as foundations of holistic happiness. Despite their differences, both traditions underscore the significance of intentional living, ethical conduct, and self-awareness. In an increasingly interconnected world, a synthesis of these perspectives offers an opportunity to approach happiness in a nuanced and inclusive manner. By blending the Western focus on individuality with the Eastern emphasis on harmony and spirituality, humanity can cultivate a richer, more comprehensive understanding of happiness that transcends cultural boundaries. This comparative reflection not only enhances personal growth but also fosters a collective vision of well-being for a globalized society.

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