

"HAPPY HOUR" WAS NOT WHAT ARISTOTLE HAD IN MIND

By Nick Gier

Those only are happy who have their minds fixed . . .
on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit.
Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.
--John Stuart Mill

There has been much in the press these days about happiness. Since the 1950s, those who interview us have found little change in the number of us who say we're happy. This means that 50 years of more leisure time, consuming more material goods, and the institution of "happy hour" have not raised our feelings of well being.

The lack of progress in our pursuit of happiness may be due to confusing happiness with pleasure. *Webster=s* defines pleasure as the "state of sensual gratification" that comes from a good massage, a drink of fresh water, and a sandwich to quell our hunger pangs.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle would have agreed with Webster's definition of happiness as "well being and contentment." Aristotle chose an absolutely beautiful Greek word for this state: *eudaimonia*, which literally means "having a good spirit or soul." As opposed to pleasure, having a good soul has a moral to it. Aristotle believes that a person must have a full complement of the virtues to be happy. Some of these virtues are wisdom, moderation, generosity, and truthfulness, integrity, and courage.

Pleasure is transitory because our thirst can be slaked and our stomachs can be filled. Indeed, we can be so sated with a pleasurable activity that it becomes joyless and meaningless. But for Aristotle true happiness is a constant companion, and it would really be absurd to say that we can have too much happiness. Great misfortune can undermine happiness, but those who recover can experience joy in practicing the virtues that give us that deep feeling of well being and contentment.

It is not only important to distinguish happiness from pleasure, but we must recognize that joy is a unique experience as well. We say that our hearts are filled with joy, indicating that the location of this feeling is not from any of the sense organs. We would never say that our hearts are overflowing with pleasure, and we never jump with pleasure, but of course we jump with joy. Sometimes we are so overwhelmed that we cry with joy. "Crying with pleasure" sounds very odd, doesn't it?

Let us now look at pleasure, joy, and happiness and test them according to various criteria. With regard to duration it is quite clear that if we take happiness to be Aristotle's contentment, then both joy and pleasure are momentary and happiness, except for in cases of great misfortune, lasts for a life time.

With regard to the related issue of their location, pleasure is situated in the sense organs, while joy and happiness are states of the "heart-mind," a beautiful and useful phrase that I borrow from Confucianism. Many Western philosophers were wrong to think that we can separate our emotional and thinking lives so neatly.

If we think of the causes of the pleasure, joy, and happiness, we have already noted that the cause of pleasure is stimulating the sense organs. The cause of happiness, following Aristotle, is developing the virtues plus sufficient health and material goods to meet life's needs.

The joy that we take in our loved ones and our own successes are not necessarily preceded by pleasant sensations. The joy I experience in finishing my columns sometimes comes out of great mental anguish and frustration. We must also recognize that much joy is triggered by memory and not sensation. Memories of my daughter as a young girl give me incredible bursts of joy, just as memories of times that I might have lost her give me great distress. *Webster=s* (7th ed.) is right in distinguishing joy from both pleasure and delight, because joy Amay imply a more deep-rooted rapturous emotion than either.@

Pleasure is distinct from joy and happiness in yet another way. We never regret joy or happiness, but we may very well regret the initial pleasures of overeating, drinking too much, taking drugs, and recreational sex. On the other hand, most of us would never regret the times we have fallen in love or the joys that we have experienced with our family and friends and our own personal successes. With regard to regretting happiness, it seems utterly absurd for one, who after years of moral development, regrets the well being and contentment that result from such an achievement.

As John Stuart Mill indicates in the epigraph above, there is a way in which happiness differs significantly from joy and pleasure. If I want pleasure, all that I have to do is stimulate the sense organs; if I want a moment of joy, and I will hug my partner, harass my cat, or hold the nearest baby. But there is something Zen-like about happiness: if I aim for it, I cannot have it. There is no specific stimulus for happiness; one cannot turn it off and on; rather, one must develop the life of virtue that brings it about ineluctably.

Aristotle would have jumped with joy on reading psychologist Martin Seligman's new book *Authentic Happiness*. Seligman confirms the ancient Greek connection between happiness and the virtues. Seligman's list of six—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and spirituality—match Aristotle's virtues quite nicely.

The ancient Greeks loved their wine and Aristotle enjoyed a "happy hour" with his friends and students every day. (His most famous student, Alexander the Great, and his Macedonian warriors were far too fond of drink.) But from those bliss-filled Elysian Fields Aristotle reminds us that it is easy to gratify our senses, but it is difficult to develop the virtues necessary for true happiness.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. This column was adapted from a section in his book [*The Virtue of Non-Violence*](#), which is now available in paperback from State University of New York Press.