Kitkat Dambeck

Professor Jacqueline McDaniel

Expository Writing

3 March 2023

Mindfulness for Hedonists

Hedonism asserts that human motivation is driven by the desire for happiness, and generally asserts maximizing one’s own happiness as the goal of life. Often, hedonism is rejected for being self destructive, even “sinful.” However such assertion only applies to the drive for pleasure, and not the drive for true happiness, which accounts for avoidance of pain, and for when pain is pleasurable. American Psychologist Daniel Gilbert has spent many years studying the often counter intuitive cognitive biases that affect emotions, and reports many of their findings in their book *Stumbling Into Happiness*. American Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, author of *Love* 2.0, studies the cultivation of “Love” and its role as a precursor to happiness. Distinct from the earthly pleasures that may or may not accompany it, true happiness is the result of an understanding oneself and emotional flexibility. Therefor, increasing happiness necessitates the cultivation of this qualities.

Pleasurable moments are fleeting. Thusly it is emotional flexibility that leads to happiness, for with it, the best can be made out of any scenario. In a famous study, students in a collage photo course were less satisfied with their photos when they were given time to change their mind about which one they kept. When students are asked which version of the course they would like to participate in, Gilbert writes that “the vast majority preferred to have that opportunity– that is the vast majority of students preferred to enroll in a photography course in which they wo ultimately be dissatisfied with the photograph they produced. Why would anyone prefer less satisfaction to more? No one does, of course, but most people do seem to prefer more freedom to less” (Gilbert 151). This demonstrates that a lab number representing a single emotional vector, is not a good predictor of how people will act. There are two approaches to interpret this. Either, the participants are victim to some bias or stupidity which harms their long term pleasure. Or, they have higher aspirations than pleasure. In the former case, one could argue that the participants lack self understanding, and choose against their best interests. However this assumes that participants are indeed misunderstanding despite the explanation of the experimenters, and their best interests and long term pleasures are in line with each other. In the latter case, one needs to differentiate the kind of satisfaction or pleasure a participant may feel from a committed decision from the kind of happiness or desire they feel for freedom. Having made a commitment, such as to take a particular photo, places the committer in an inescapable environment, which impacts, even impairs, their judgment. The brain seeks an equilibrium of contentedness. However this equilibrium is disrupted by choosing freedom. Although equilibrium may minimize discomfort, true happiness is being flexible outside of equilibrium. Event though commitment represents a level of pleasure, even a level of happiness, a committed hedonist denies themselves certain opportunities in the future. Therefore the intelligent hedonist must consider the virtue of their commitment against the weight of its inflexibility. Fredrickson observes that people with a toned vagus nerve, have higher mood and health outcomes. Fredrickson says “the agility of the conduit between their brains and hearts-as reflected in their high vagal tone--allows them to be exquisitely agile, attuned, and flexible as they navigate the ups and downs of day-to-day life and social exchanges” (Fredrickson 131). The vagus nerve is a major biological factor in determining psychological flexibility, and that having that flexibility increases many factors of life. People with a greater flexibility are more able to respond to and feel happy about the changing circumstances of life. Therefore it is not the moments of pleasure, but the ability to move between them that constitutes happiness. Once again, being a hedonist is not just about choosing the most pleasurable option, but rather about being flexible enough to find happiness in all options.

There are many ways in which human brains are not logical or rational. They are products of nature and often behave in counterintuitive ways. Understanding them is the only way to reach true happiness. Gilbert writes that ignorance of ones psychological biases “causes us to mispredict the circumstances under which we will blame others, but it also causes us to is predict the circumstances under which we will blame ourselves“ (Gilbert 146). When one makes a prediction, they become attached to that outcome. They take actions based on that prediction, and may become upset when another outcome happens. This upsetting typically manifests as blaming ones self. The opportunistic hedonist will want to avoid this outcome, however making predictions about the future is an essential strategy, both of human physiology, and of the intelligent person. The straight forward solution is for once correct: simply studying about how the brain works, and how one’s specific brain works, one can better predict and adapt to how they will feel. If a participant in the photography study chooses to switch their photo, they are likely to feel doubt and other unpleasant emotions. However the explanation of how their brain is merely responding to the circumstances can alleviate the weight of that emotion. In this way, one uses their understanding of their own psychology to maintain their freedom, and avoid the pain that might come with it. The oldest and most developed method of understanding is meditation. In a study about maitrī, or loving-kindness, mediation, Fredrickson discovered participants who practiced the mediation had “their vagus nerves [begin] to respond more readily to the rhythms of their breathing, emitting more of that healthy arrhythmia that is the fingerprint of high vagal tone” (Fredrickson 131-2). There is empirical evidence that practicing meditation cultivates the kind of flexibility and understanding that is the foundation of true happiness. Earthly pleasures decrease with time. Always the foolish hedonist finds themselves needing more and newer and bigger stimuli to feel the same result. Pleasure is a chaotic and almost random occurrence. On the contrary, the results of meditation are inevitable. When the absence of pleasure is an accident, the foolish hedonist is upset and confused. When it is a surprise, the flexible hedonist can adapt to it. When it is understood, the hedonist can grow from it. The wise hedonist therefore cultivates their understanding and flexibility. Meditation is advisable even for hedonists.

Stimuli come and go, always effecting ones emotions. However, the internal circumstances of the observer effect the result as much as, if not more than, the stimuli. Some stimuli may instill pleasure, others pain. However deriving happiness from any stimuli is a matter of cultivating the internal world, rather than the external. Though learning, understanding, and meditation, true happiness can be reached from any stimuli. Thusly, being a successful hedonist means attaining a mastery over these aspects of the self.

Works Cited

Fredrickson, Barbara, Love 2.0, 2023. New York: Hudson Street Press. pp.117-140.

Gilbert, Daniel, Stumbling On Happiness, 2006. New York: New York. pp 141-159