

Does Happiness Require a Non-Epicurean Decision Procedure?

Post by “JAWS” of January 12, 2019 at 10:27 AM

Framing a question is important because the frame limits the conclusions that one can reach. I read the original post and I realized that the way the question is framed does not fit with how I think about happiness. So I'd like to offer my frame as an alternative.

“But what if in striving solely for happiness as the ultimate goal, we end up not truly achieving it?” This frames happiness as the peak of some mountain that we are climbing and if the ultimate goal is to reach the top, then any means by which we can get there is fair game. A helicopter would be more efficient than climbing.

When we view happiness as the peak of a mountain we set ourselves up for failure. There is no such summit that can be reached that would mean lasting happiness simply because we got to the top, imho.

If instead, climbing is the goal, because we enjoy the climb, then our lives are complete even as we are climbing. In this frame, it doesn't matter whether one reaches the top or not, the pleasure of the journey is what we are after. Our friends etc. are not means to an end, but part of what makes the climb enjoyable. The Epicurean would argue that not only do friends make the climb enjoyable, but that they are necessary for us to be able to enjoy the climb at all.

I think the second way of thinking about it also prevents us from thinking that happiness is something that we can achieve and then not move away from once it has been achieved - just sitting on top of that mountain for the rest of our lives. It removes the idea that just a little more money, or the next big achievement at work or something is going to be enough to get us to that peak and bring us lasting happiness. It won't.

The way I approach happiness is not to find a goal or something that I think will make me happy if I achieve it/acquire it, but rather to ask myself what makes the everyday enjoyable.

My analogy is not perfect, and I'm sure you can poke holes in it, but it is sufficient for my happiness. I also do not have any reason to think this is an Epicurean stance, it is just my opinion.

In the example of Elon Musk, I would argue that anyone who works so hard for the sake of the end goal is not a happy person. Achieving the end goal rarely, if ever, provides lasting happiness. BUT, if Elon Musk does what he does because he loves the challenge of figuring out how to make these things happen and enjoys the process, then he is focused on the climbing and not the end goal and is likely a very happy person.