

Truth & Charity  
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## Two Kinds of Happiness: How a New Study Confirms Old Truths

I'm always intrigued when I happen upon a clinical study—like the one showcased here<sup>1</sup>—that implicates important philosophical truths.

### The science:

Principal investigators Professor Barbara L. Fredrickson<sup>2</sup> and Dr. Stephen Cole<sup>3</sup> set out to test how feelings of happiness (good psychological health) impact the human immune system (bodily health). Their guiding referent was the hypothesis of a previous investigation in which a group of psychologically unhappy participants—all suffering from chronic stress or *poor psychological health*—uniformly exhibited negative immune system effects or *compromised bodily health*: an increased expression of genes that cause a greater susceptibility to inflammatory diseases and a decreased expression of genes that cause a greater vulnerability to infectious diseases.

With this thesis as backdrop, Fredrickson and Cole were eager to explore two related questions: Are all kinds of happiness—like all kinds of unhappiness—created equal? Do all persons who describe themselves as “happy” enjoy uniformly positive cellular effects that boost their immune system and overall health? To get answers, the researchers recruited 80 participants and tested them for *hedonic* [he-DON-ic] versus *eudaimonic* [u-DY-moh-nick] well-being. Out of the 80 participants, sixty-three attributed their feelings of happiness primarily to the short-term, self-gratifying pleasures from activities like eating, drinking, having sex, or amassing power, fame, and fortune.

The remaining 17 participants credited their sense of well-being predominantly to the long-term happiness that comes from self-sacrificial, altruistic activities such as building a good marriage, raising children, helping the poor, feeding the hungry, constructing homes for the homeless.

When both groups of ostensibly equally-happy people were tested for genetic correlates in their immune system cells, they exhibited unequally-positive health results:

- (1) The group of 17 participants, primarily experiencing the long-term happiness of virtuous well-being or *perceived good psychological health*, showed *positive* immune system effects—less vulnerability to inflammatory and infectious diseases—or *good immunological health*.
- (2) The group of 63 participants, primarily experiencing feelings of well-being from pleasurable pursuits or *perceived good psychological health*, evidenced *negative* immune system results or *compromised bodily health*—mirroring that of the chronically-stressed, *unhappy* folks in the study cited above.

What to make of these disparate results?

### The philosophy:

Two insights of classical moral philosophy help us evaluate these findings.

First, happiness comes in two forms: The transient sort of well-being that people enjoy from the pursuit of *hedone* or pleasure and the lasting type of psychosomatic flourishing that humans experience from *eudaimon* or living well.

Second, the enduring form of happiness originates in the wellspring of a virtuous life. The depth of one's “river” of happiness, though perceived to be comprehensively satisfying, is necessarily limited by the volume and quality of the water that feeds it. So, in this study, when the hedonist participants described their river of happiness in terms of “total wellbeing,” it's essential to compare those optimistic descriptions against their shallow feeder-springs.

I would argue that the hedonists' lack of virtue—intellectual and moral—compromised their ability to properly estimate the size and depth of their pathetically small river of well-being. Their *actions* were informed by mistaken views of what real happiness consists. Such opinions might have stemmed from intellectual errors—ignorance or ill-formed practical deliberation. More likely, though, the hedonists' wrongheaded perspective on human fulfillment arose from disordered appetites—lawless

passions and desires that clouded their conception of what is *truly* good and what will *truly* make them happy.

So how do hedonists get out of this maze? How do they break out of the slavery of concupiscence into the freedom of self-mastery? Only one way that I can see: acquire the cardinal moral virtues, those perfections of mind and will that integrate bodily inclinations into the rational order of a reason-guided will. Only in this integrated state will hedonists possess the habitual capacity to freely choose the *true* good, in a way consistent with that deeper river of holistic, long-term fulfillment.

To put a fine point on my directive: Hedonists need to be perfected by the virtue of *prudence* so they can habitually form good judgments about how, in the concrete circumstances of their life, they ought to pursue the variety of basic human goods in a moderated, humanly fulfilling way.

Similarly, they need the perfected direction of the virtue of *temperance* so they can consistently, readily, and joyfully experience the goods of food, drink, sex, fame and fortune in accord with right reason—which means in the right way, at the right time and place, in the right amount, and in a manner conducive to their ultimate well-being.

Additionally, hedonists need the guiding excellence of the virtue of *justice* so they can habitually choose human goods—whether pleasurable or spiritual—in a way that comports with the welfare of those with whom they live and work.

Finally, hedonists need the rock-solid power of the virtue of *courage*—a way to readily and consistently combat the fear, discouragement, and frustration that are bound to set in whenever life's circumstances require them to sacrifice a baser good for the sake of a higher one.

Having placed *all of their actions* under the virtuous mastery of their reason-guided will, former hedonists will become—you guessed it!—neo-eudaimonists! And, should they be baptized, these virtuous individuals will be securely positioned to pursue their *complete* human fulfillment. The kind that is only realized with Divine assistance: where infused supernatural virtues, in transformative sync with the natural, order their rational and appetitive powers to God, the absolute source of their happiness.

#### **A Post-Script:**

Does anybody see the irony here? Of course! These former hedonists will not only enjoy the *pleasurable side effect* of actions done well—but they'll anticipate the *ultimate pleasure* of seeing God face-to-face.

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<sup>1</sup> B. L. Fredrickson, S.W. Cole et al. A functional genomic perspective on human well-being. (July, 2013) *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

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