

Book Review: *Happiness and Goodness: Philosophical Reflections on Living Well*

by Christine Vitrano, and Steven M. Cahn (Foreword by Robert Talisse).

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The book *Happiness and Goodness: Philosophical Reflections on Living Well* was written by Christine Vitrano and Steven M. Cahn. Both are philosophy professors and have published other philosophical works such as this. Steven Cahn has written or edited some fifty books and Christine Vitrano has a smaller publication list with a focus in happiness. The book itself is written in a very clear, logical, analytical pattern. Each chapter focuses on one subject from at most two sources (such as previous philosophers, religious texts, and academic thinkers) in which the authors question and critically assess popular arguments and positions held on morality, ethical behavior, and happiness. They also tear apart arguments such as what activities are more worthy than others and expose why people may hold such positions (Example: Plato's idea of Eudaimonia set the stage for philosophers to determine what is the good life and ideas branched off from there). At the beginning of each chapter they present the argument in plain language and explain it. Afterwards, they present counterexamples, look towards how the words being used are defined, and expose tautologies to help support their main ideas presented in the book. The end of each chapter eases into another question or topic allowing for a nice flow for the reader. How do we assess the success of each life and how happy a person is or was? The stance in the book is that happiness, morality and satisfaction is essentially up to the individual. The author's central thesis is that morality is not necessary for happiness. They describe that an immoral person may be completely happy and a person who is a moral saint may be completely miserable. However, they do not support the immoralist conclusion that no one has a reason to be moral. Instead, they argue that morality is

independent of human happiness. In regards to happiness, the authors state that no one person can say that another is happy or unhappy. That judgment is left up to that individual alone. The book further postulates that although happiness and morality are separate, both morality and happiness must be present in order to “live well.” In conclusion, the authors postulate that “living well” is up to each person due to the fact that “happiness is within [their own] power, as is the decision to act morally. To them, “living well is sensible, admirable and preferable.”[1] To be put in a more succinct manner: happiness is subjective and acting morally is dependent upon the person’s preference to do so or not. They are independent concepts.

However, in order to “live well” (seeking pleasure or tranquility in an ethical manner to bring about satisfaction or a favorable impression of one’s own life) as the authors describe, a person must find their own happiness and act within some sort of moral boundaries. There were many topics and ideas touched upon, so I cannot go into great detail. However, several chapters stood out to me.

In Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 the authors look at activities and how they are assessed to being more worthy than others. These activities are what make a life worth living. They assess the arguments of several academics and philosophers (Wolf, Dworkin, and Darwall among others) and claim that no one activity is worth more on face value. It is up to the person which activities are worthy and lead to happiness. A person who is a successful academic can be miserable, just as a person who lives on a beach surfing can be extremely happy with their life. Again, the author suggests a subjective take on happiness.

In Chapter 9 the authors argue it is not so much “being moral” as it is “appearing to be moral” that matters. They give four examples in which you can see how appearing to be moral would benefit a person greatly even though they are not acting morally in reality. These 4 examples are: “(1) a moral person who appears to be moral; (2) an immoral person who appears to be moral; (3) a moral person who appears to be immoral; (4) an immoral person who appears to be immoral.”[2] They argue that number two would be ideal because you have all of the advantages a moral person has while avoiding the disadvantages that always being moral present. Suppose you make a promise to help someone move, but later you find out

that it is on the same day that your favorite band is performing their very last concert in your area. They are never performing again. Do you lie and say that something major came up without mentioning the concert? Do you just break the promise? The moral saint cannot do this, but the one who only appears to be moral while actually being immoral can. This can increase the amount of happiness. However, if everyone did this, it would be expected behavior and no one would believe the “mask.” It is up to the individual to make their own choice. You can still be happy as a moral person who appears to be moral without taking the risk of being a fraud.

Satisfaction, according to the authors, is not dependent upon the accomplishments one makes in life. They look at the example of an obituary. Would a person rather die unhappy with a lot of credits or happily with very few? Sometimes success and happiness go hand in hand, but that is not always the case necessarily. They believe that satisfaction also lies within the self, because it is not possible to control events outside one’s self. A person should not depend on whether or not others praise them. If one person does not find an activity or lifetime spent one way satisfactory, it does not make that activity (or way of life) less satisfactory to another person who does partake in it.

The thing that I enjoyed most about this book was the ease of reading it. It was written clearly in order to expose the average reader to philosophical texts without getting bogged down with all of the details. The chapters were short enough that I could read a chapter in ten or fifteen minutes and easily put it down and pick up right where I left off. I also rather enjoyed the analytical viewpoints they developed against philosophical stances on what they deemed to be worthy activities in life. Their idea that happiness is subjective leaves room for many to debate, but I stand by their idea that both morality and happiness are independent of concepts.

The thing that I disliked about the book is that the authors seemed to dislike creating special meanings for words and emphasized using the plain meaning in a few instances. However, they deem “living well” as a term to represent overall satisfaction with life. In order to obtain this, one must live in an ethical manner

and find their happiness. Is an immoral person who is seen as moral and finds happiness not “living well?” Does the person who “lives well” depend on the views of society or others around them? Although I agree with many of the arguments of this book, this “living well” definition has me a bit perplexed. They spoke of Epicurus and then suddenly morality matters again.

Overall I would recommend this book to people as an introduction to the philosophical concepts about happiness. The book itself is not dense with language that requires a vast background in philosophy to begin with (although it makes it much more enjoyable). It does not go into the psychology of happiness (whether that is a strength or not, I have yet to decide), but it is easy to follow for someone who is looking for a non-self help book about happiness without getting bogged down with too many details. It immerses the reader into a collection of noteworthy stances on the subject while raising questions against them.

Bibliography

Viltrano, Christine, Cahn Steven M., *Happiness and Goodness: Philosophical Reflections on Living Well*, First Edition, (Columbia University Press, 2015) ebook.

[1] Christine Viltrano, Steven M Cahn., *Happiness and Goodness: Philosophical Reflections on Living Well*, First Edition, (Columbia University Press, 2015) ebook p. 118.

[2] Ibid. p. 50.