Research Article

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The Role and Value of Happiness in the Work of Paul Ricoeur

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Abstract: The role and value of happiness in the work of Paul Ricoeur remains an understudied theme. It is especially Ricoeur’s unique dialectical understanding of happiness, unhappiness, and chance which brings a crucial and much-needed insight and correction with regard to the understanding of happiness in our contemporary culture. For Ricoeur, happiness is always in relation to unhappiness, and it appreciates chance within the striving–receiving tension that remains characteristic of happiness. This understanding of happiness provides an alternative to the destructive notions of happiness that leave us trapped in the hedonistic treadmill, the endless unsatiable desires of our existence, the narcistic satisfaction of our needs, and the infinite unhappy pursuit of happiness.

Keywords: Paul Ricoeur, happiness, unhappiness, chance, luck, negation, affirmation

1 Introduction

Paul Ricoeur’s (1913–2005) academic oeuvre is immense, and his influence is ongoing in philosophy, theology, and languages. He is, however, not known as someone who wrote about happiness, although this played a huge role in his philosophy.¹ He says, for example, in an interview about his book History, Memory, Forgetting (2004),² “I would say that happiness is the continuous bass note to my book.”³ The theme happiness is very prominent in his philosophical anthropology, and he wrote two specific essays on happiness late in his life. Furthermore, in secondary sources on Ricoeur, there is only one book that discusses the notion of happiness in his work, namely Alison Scott-Baumann’s Ricoeur and the Negation of Happiness (2013). The role and value of happiness in the work of Ricoeur thus remain an understudied theme, but a hugely important one to explore, as I will indicate in this article.

I will first indicate the role happiness played in the work of Ricoeur. I will focus predominantly on his philosophical anthropology and his two essays on happiness, but other relevant work, like his ethics, will also be discussed in this regard. The complexity and difficulty of defining happiness will be explicated in this

¹ In the Preface of The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (Edited by L.E. Hahn, Chicago: Open Court, 1995), the broad range of philosophical topics of Ricoeur is, for example, described by Hahn as covering “topics from the history of philosophy, literary criticism, and aesthetics to metaphysics, ethics and morals, religion and theology, semiotics, linguistic structuralism, the humanistic sciences, Freud and psychoanalysis, Marxism, action theory and suffering human beings, biblical narrative, analytic ordinary language theory, meditation on guilt an evil, and conflict of interpretations” (1995: xvii). Happiness is noticeably not on this list, although suffering, evil and guilt are.
² Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting.
³ Ricoeur, “Interview by Jean Blain,” 50.

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discussion. In the second part of this article, I will critically discuss the potential value of Ricoeur’s understanding of happiness. It is especially Ricoeur’s unique dialectical understanding of happiness, unhappiness, and chance which makes this a crucial and much-needed insight and correction with regard to the understanding of happiness in our contemporary culture. This is, however, more than just a theoretical or abstract new insight, but something life-giving, something dynamic, and something with concrete relevance for our lives and world. This will be the focus of the third part, where I will argue for the importance to rethink the obsessive and naïve presentation of happiness in different ways, especially in a consumerist packaging. I will conclude that Ricoeur’s understanding of happiness can help us escape the destructive notions of happiness that leave us trapped in the hedonistic treadmill, the endless unsatiable desires of our existence, the narcissistic satisfaction of our needs, and the infinite unhappy pursuit of happiness.

2 The Role of Happiness in Ricoeur’s Work

One of the biggest problems regarding happiness is to define it. In the analytic tradition, it is defined as something psychological, a state of mind like joy, and well-being, or human flourishing. A prominent figure in this tradition, Daniel Haybron, argues that happiness should be restricted to the psychological aspect, while this can be further analysed as hedonistic and life-satisfaction theories. For example, the emotional state theory says “happiness consists in a person’s overall emotional condition ... understood as the sum of the individual’s moods and emotions. To be happy, in this view, is to have predominantly positive, versus negative, moods and emotions.”

Hedonist theories of happiness will look at the balance of pleasant over unpleasant experiences. Life satisfaction theories identify happiness “with having a favourable attitude toward one’s life as a whole.” Happiness should therefore not be understood as well-being, and one should rather refer to well-being as a concept in itself. This may include aspects like an ethical way of living and meaning in life.

The continental tradition has a much more inclusive understanding of happiness. It includes aspects of joy, the psychological part of happiness, but also well-being, an ethical life, meaning, fulfilment, affirmation, love, justice, inter-relatedness, transcendence, mystery, contemplation, and even sacrifice. The list is longer, but the point is that in the continental tradition, happiness is not reduced to something specific. Continental philosophers (Nietzsche, Ricoeur, Badiou, and others) rather seek to bring out the obscure, latent, and hidden meanings of the term and to link it to all our other notions of being, truth, ethics, justice, subjectification, identity, and agency. The attempt is to open the meaning of happiness and explore its complexity in its fullness. A good example is found in Alain Badiou’s notion of happiness as

not the possibility of the satisfaction of everyone. Happiness is not the abstract idea of a good society in which everyone is satisfied. Happiness is the subjectivity of a difficult task: coping with the consequences of an event and discovering, beneath the dull and dreary existence of our world, the luminous possibilities offered by the affirmative real [...]

Ricoeur’s understanding of happiness fits firmly within the continental tradition’s approach and understanding of happiness as described by Badiou. Ricoeur deliberately does not reduce happiness to a thing, a feeling, an experience, or an aspect of our lives. He posits happiness as something open, dynamic, and inclusive. It is something that needs to be defined in this way because it thereby fulfils a crucial role in our ability to be human beings. This is the unique accent of Ricoeur within the Continental approaches to happiness. This becomes clear in his philosophical anthropology, in Fallible Man (1960), where he describes what it means to be human on three levels, namely to create knowledge, to act, and to feel. All three of these levels are described as tensions between two poles where we need to find a fragile synthesis. These poles, with the

4 Haybron, The Pursuit of Unhappiness, 125.
6 Badiou, Happiness, 67.
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consequent tension on each level, are based on the more fundamental pathetic of misery that underlies our existence, according to Ricoeur.

The pathetic of misery has to do with the fact that we as humans are aware of the finiteness of our existence, our limited views, limited knowledge, limited self-awareness, and limited lifetime, while at the same time, we are aware of the infiniteness of our lives, our imagination, our creativeness, our language, our aspirations, and our dreams. It is within this fundamental tension of our being that we need to mediate our existence as knowledge, acts, and feelings. This does not mean there is something negative at the core of our being for Ricoeur, but rather that to be, is to affirm these opposing poles in our lives. There is a fundamental affirmation in Ricoeur’s philosophy, while he does not negate negation. It is rather a joyful “yes” for life, with the awareness of the complexities and sadness of it. Ricoeur says, “Man (sic) is the Joy of Yes in the sadness of the infinite.”

The first level of our existence is then described by Ricoeur as our effort to create knowledge. Here, we find ourselves between the finite pole of our limited perspective and the infinite pole of our unlimited language. It is between the “finite perspective” and the “infinite verb” that we manage to create a transcendental synthesis through our imagination to create knowledge – to name something that might be understood by others as well. On this level, there is not yet a reference to happiness by Ricoeur, but on the next two levels of our existence, happiness plays a crucial part as the infinite pole according to him.

The second level of our existence as human beings has to do with our ability to act in this world. As humans, we live through each deed as a mediation between the finite pole of our limited desires, our “finite character” as Ricoeur calls it, and the infinite pole of the happiness of all people. A practical synthesis takes place when we act through respect for the happiness of others. This, according to Ricoeur, is the “project of the person,” with the implication that we miss what it means to be a person if we only live according to our own limited desires. This will be an animal-like, selfish, and destructive way of living. Only with the awareness of happiness – as the total aim and fulfillment of all humanity as the horizon also for one’s own limited aspirations and life, as the task (ergon) or goal (telos) as the good life for everyone – one may be able to find a fragile practical synthesis. The influence of the Aristotelian happiness as the good life, something that needs to be aimed for and achieved through a virtuous life, is clear here. Ricoeur follows this understanding of happiness to a large extent in his earlier works, with the influence of Kant (the transcendental synthesis for knowledge, the ergon as happiness, and the role of respect), which is also visible.

The third level of being human is the affective. Here, we find ourselves within the limited passions for our own bodily (bios) desires which can easily become powerfully dominant, and our infinite passions for happiness. Here, happiness is the infinite pole as the completion and fulfillment of our intellectual and spiritual passions. Ricoeur describes it as the “Spiritual Joy, the Intellectual Love, and the Beatitude.” Happiness is now something different than the ultimate goal of all humanity, but the infinite pole of our spiritual desires (logos). It is through the fragile affective synthesis of the heart (thumos) that we mediate between these poles, but it remains a restless mediation where the heart manages to love (eros) both the bodily and spiritual desires. This restlessness is again part of the underlying pathetic of misery for Ricoeur.

Happiness, as the infinite pole on the practical and affective levels of our existence, thus plays a crucial role in Ricoeur’s philosophical anthropology. This happiness is something transcendent in nature: a horizon, or the ultimate aim of humanity. It is the completion and fulfillment of our intellectual and spiritual desires. It is not just a psychological state of mind, not just well-being, but something elusive, some necessary dream or vision to help us escape from our limited perspectives and desires. It is, however, not something illusional or only abstract, as Ricoeur explains in his later works, but something that helps us to live ethically (through respect) and to balance the passions in our hearts, to help us not to absolutise certain forms of passions, but to love and live within the tensions of our existence.

The theme of happiness is revisited by Ricoeur only later in his life, when he writes his ethics in Oneself as Another (1990). Here, we find the Aristotelian definition of happiness again in Ricoeur’s work, as he defines

7 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, 140.
8 Ibid., 106.
happiness as the “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions.”9 This formula is only later translated in more concrete happiness terms, in his 1994 article, “Le Bonheur Hors Lieu” (Happiness is out of place), which was published in the edited book Où est le bonheur? (Where is Happiness?). Ricoeur answers the question in the book’s title by stating that happiness is hors lieu, “out of bounds,” or “off-site,” but not sans lieu – it is not without place; it is not an impossibility.

In “Le Bonheur Hors Lieu,” Ricoeur first makes three general remarks about happiness. The first is that happiness has the unique characteristic that we accept as the wish we all have. This links back to the good life as the ultimate aim that Aristotle posited as happiness, according to Ricoeur. The problem is that we still do not understand what it exactly means. Furthermore, there is an element of luck that is part of happiness, and this undermines our efforts of striving – living a virtuous life as Aristotle prescribed – to obtain happiness. The problem here is how this chance should be considered: is it demonic or something to embrace? Ricoeur asks, for example, “How then can we separate the good from the event, the ethical moment from the demonic moment (and I did not say diabolical) (démoniaque)?”10 We cannot even determine if what happens through chance should be interpreted as something good or bad for us. For Ricoeur, this illustrates how “out of bounds” and complex happiness is by nature.

Ricoeur’s second general remark is that we also do not know what unhappiness means. It is a double for happiness, but its landscape is just as vast and unexplored. Furthermore, to praise happiness might be “scandalous” in the face of unhappiness, as Ricoeur says. How can we dream about happiness if there is so much suffering and pain in the world? Ricoeur notes that this question needs to be returned to (as he later does), and he moves on to the third remark, which is the main focus of his article, namely that happiness is some personal wish, something shared on an intimate level, and something found in the institutions we live in. For Ricoeur, however, all of these “places” of happiness are only places where happiness makes itself visible but cannot be finally located or permanently pinpointed: happiness remains hors lieu.

The first possible place of happiness is to be found within our personal wish for happiness. Ricoeur argues, “happiness is the achievement or the fulfilment we long for as soon as we become an acting entity.”11 Although happiness is characterised by our own desires to be happy on the practical and affective levels of our lives, the problem is that we always find ourselves living with others. Happiness is thus bigger than our own private wish. It includes the “cities and worlds among which the social space is distributed.”12 Happiness is not only about one’s own private satisfactions or achievements but about the “undivided, integral satisfaction, beyond local, topical, partial satisfaction” of one’s own life.13 Our aim of happiness is futile, in the sense that we live with others. Happiness remains hors lieu on the personal level, and Ricoeur therefore asks if happiness is not something that is shared, to be found within our relationships with others, especially those close to us.

The second possible place to find happiness, according to Ricoeur, is in friendship. It is here where we find shared happiness as love, acceptance, joy, fulfillment, and companionship. This is reciprocal happiness where we give and receive at the same time. In this context, happiness moves “away from a private wish for fulfilment towards the exchange based on giving and receiving.”14 This happiness is, however, also hors lieu in the sense that all relationships have the possibility to end. Ricoeur is aware that it is not only within the event of loss and death of a friend that the separation and heartbreak lies, but also in its possibility: “its shadow stretches ahead of time in the shape of unparalleled fear.”15 This uncertainty of happiness with those close to us lets Ricoeur ask if happiness is then not to be found in the more permanent structures we build in our society to generate justice and space for us to be happy.

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9 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, 172.
11 Ibid., 328.
12 Ibid., 329.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 331.
15 Ibid., 332.
The third place Ricoeur looks for happiness is therefore in “just institutions.” Here, Ricoeur returns to the ethical formula of aiming at the good life with and for others in Oneself as Another, but with the focus on just institutions. This has to do with our political life, as Ricoeur explains:

It is indeed a political issue, in the sense that I cannot seek happiness for myself alone without seeking it with others, and friendship relations are too short if they do not include justice, i.e., the relationship with others who are tied to me through institutions. This certainly forms part of the idea of happiness.16

Ricoeur does not equate happiness with justice, however, and argues that while politics have power as an aim, happiness aims at the good, and justice is therefore only part of happiness. Furthermore, this justice is always fragile, which again makes this happiness hors lieu. Any political system that wants to prescribe or enforce its idea of happiness might disregard its citizens’ ideas of happiness and will thereby ironically cause unhappiness. So, while just institutions remain a crucial part of happiness, this is not the place where happiness can be found unreservedly.

Ricoeur argues that we may experience moments of happiness in all three of these places, and these are “welcoming states of happiness as untimely flashes.”17 He calls it transcendental anticipations of happiness or untimely flashes (fulgurances intempestives), which indicates where the direction of happiness or its adumbration is to be found. Happiness is thus not sans lieu or something to be given up on as an impossibility, although it remains difficult to think about it, “place” it, and formulate it sufficiently. Ricoeur concludes his essay with the idea that we need a different kind of language to talk about happiness, and this is what he elaborates on seven years later in his essay, “L’optatif du bonheur” [The optative of happiness (2001)], which was published in the book, Demain L’Église (The church of tomorrow).

The problem of happiness, Ricoeur argues in this essay, is that it is presented in the indicative – described as something, an experience, a place – whilst it remains hors lieu. The problem gets bigger when these elusive kinds of happiness in the indicative are prescribed in the imperative. We then end up with instructions for how to become happy, which puts further stress on us as it results in an endless pursuit that causes more unhappiness. Therefore, we need to speak in the optative mode of language about happiness, where no description or prescription is given; but only a song, a praise, a poem, and a wish of happiness. This will enable us to embrace the potential of happiness as life-giving, as Ricoeur posited it as the crucial infinite pole of our existence in his anthropology. For Ricoeur, the optative mode makes its way through the indicative – stating what is, past the imperative – stating what must be; it aims at what is eminently desirable. In turn, the optative mood winds its way in the lexicon under the terms joy, enthusiasm, jubilation and happiness; as commonplace and debased as it can be, in the appropriate poetic context, it is always possible to maintain the term (happiness) on a par promoted by the optative mood, on a par with the open.18

An immediate problem arises, however, namely the question about unhappiness. Is this only to be ignored? Can we sing a song and praise happiness in a world that is suffering and where some people are extremely unhappy? These questions are discussed by Ricoeur as the scandal of happiness, and he acknowledges this problem consistently in his thinking about happiness. He asserts that there is something of happiness that should and could embrace even unhappiness. Unhappiness is not to be ignored or to be overcome. Rather, we should acknowledge that there is in unhappiness, sadness, and pain some value and meaning, something that helps us to be complete human beings and not to be only superficially happy. He does not thereby justify or glorify pain and sorrow but argues that this should be included in our understanding of happiness in the comprehensive understanding of it. Happiness cannot ignore unhappiness. Unhappiness, on the other hand, cannot negate our praise of happiness. It is true that there is some unbearable unhappiness in the world, but there is always happiness to be found as well, and for Ricoeur, happiness is the dominant voice about life. It is

16 Ibid., 341.
17 Ibid., 330.
part of his fundamental affirmation of life, where he does not negate negation, but affirms it within his affirmation of life. For him, life remains a joyful “yes” within the finitude of sadness.

The song about happiness should thus be heard, and also sang by the unhappy ones, because they are the ones who could sing it exactly as a wish, as a praise, and as that is what they long for. The optative allows for such an affirmation of life and happiness that seems otherwise impossible. To explain this, Ricoeur uses the biblical example of the beatitudes as found in Matthew 5. Each beatitude begins with a description of those who are suffering (the meek, the persecuted), and then, the order is reversed, and the celebration of them as those who will be happy takes place in the present tense. They will be comforted, and they will receive the Kingdom of heaven. Their happiness, or blessing, is within their unhappiness. It is something to be received, an impossibility that inspires and that gives joy and life. It is a happiness that acknowledges that there is an element of just receiving, of being blessed, and of luck that befalls one. Ricoeur thus allows for chance to be celebrated as part of happiness in the optative mode of language, but this acceptance of chance takes one back to an age-old question about happiness: Is it something to be received, something given by the gods or nature, or is it something we should work for, for example through a virtuous life?

Ricoeur answers this question by referring to the different traditions about this issue. Since the ancient Greeks, the divide has existed between Aristotle who argued that we should strive for happiness through living ethically, and the Stoics who argued that we cannot control the forces of nature and that we should simply accept what happens to us. To align ourselves with these forces and to accept them are the best way to be happy, according to the Stoics. These two options have been presented in different philosophical traditions and religions through variations on the same themes. In Christianity, there is often a cynical approach to happiness as something that only God can give, and we should not pursue it. In the modern happiness sciences, however, happiness is prescribed as something we should strive to find at all costs, and we should control more and more of our lives to eliminate chance. Ricoeur argued that we should accept chance – but does this mean that we should stop striving towards happiness; what about the ethical consequences of such a way of living where we no longer take moral responsibility?

Typical of Ricoeur, he does not choose either the receiving of happiness or the striving for happiness, but combines them in a dialectic manner. We should live within this tension of receiving–striving of happiness, and again, it is in the optative mode of language where we find an example of how to do it, according to Ricoeur. He explains this by first exploring the Jewish text of Franz Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption (1921)\textsuperscript{19}. In his thinking about happiness, Ricoeur considers the three tenses – past, present, and future – as discussed by Rosenzweig. The first, creation, is presented as that we exist, and this is given to us. This is the starting point for happiness because it is in awe and amazement about the wonder of creation and our existence that we can sing about happiness. Second, we find ourselves in the present, “a moment of revelation,” as Rosenzweig argues. The potential happiness of the present lies in the revelation of an intimate word addressed to one that affects one’s soul and heart. The first words spoken between Adam and Eve are given as an example of words which reveal the wonder that someone is recognised as one’s soulmate and someone that one loves. To hear that one is loved, are words of revelation that bring the wonder, and song, of happiness, into the present. The third part of happiness is found in the future, in redemption. It is the wish that God’s kingdom will be established on this earth, and that justice will reign, and not corruptness and evil. It is a longing for and aspiration towards happiness that is still to come. But how can this aspiration of happiness not be another form of striving? Is it to be received or achieved by us?

With this question, Ricoeur returns full circle to the original dilemma, but now, with the past and present of happiness acknowledged, he uses another biblical example to explain how the optative mode of language can keep the tension of striving–receiving intact with happiness as aspiration. He refers to the song of love that is found in 1 Corinthians 13. The song of love is happiness celebrated in the optative mode. It celebrates the joy and receiving of love that we receive undeservedly. The gift of love is celebrated as happiness as receiving, but this song is embedded in the verb “covet” that appears at the end of the previous article and again at the beginning of the next one. It is within the context of our striving for this love that this love is celebrated as a

\textsuperscript{19} Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption [Der Stern Der Erlosung].
The tension of striving–receiving is present here and Ricoeur observes that it should be maintained, because any attempt to translate this back to the indicative or imperative will reduce happiness and turn it into something less, something potentially oppressive.

It is within the optative mode of language where Ricoeur argues for the dialectic of happiness and unhappiness, and the incorporation of chance within this happiness. This acceptance of chance leads to the second dialectic of happiness: between striving and receiving. Both these dialectics should be kept intact, according to Ricoeur, and both are based on his strong affirmation. It is an affirmation that includes unhappiness as part of our lives, and chance as those things over which we do not have control. Neither is destructive for happiness, and they should not be overcome in order to be happy. They should rather be part of happiness as they are part of our lives. It is this life in its fullness that is affirmed by Ricoeur. For Ricoeur, there is the consistent belief that the complexity of negation may be “more productive than existential nothingness or nihilism”\(^\text{20}\) and negation is not a mistake, but “the vitally important counterweight to balance the creative powers that allow us to describe and understand our world.”\(^\text{21}\) Ricoeur says:

> The idea of nothingness is an inexhaustible source of error. As it is, negation already has an important place in fundamental ontology: lack or need … the negativity of finitude, the impotence indicated by death and even birth itself. But this negation must be set apart from the Nothing of vanity, which complicates and pervert it.\(^\text{22}\)

Ricoeur does not return to happiness in his writings after these essays, but in his posthumous work, *Living up to Death* (2007), he confirms this dialectics of happiness with unhappiness and chance, and also about the affirmation of life. He writes, for example, that death is not a massive loss, but part of the experiences of life and of chance:

> The make-believe of Death whose meaning I'm trying to exegete starting from extermination up to the massa Perdita is so anchored in the vivencia that it becomes indiscernible from the ‘bare anxiety of living’ in its aspect of ‘chance’.\(^\text{23}\)

Happiness remains fundamentally based on the affirmation of life for him. Life is a gift, and Ricoeur argues that there is “the simple happiness of still being alive and, above all, the love of life, shared with those I love, so long as it is given to me to do so. Is not life the first, the inaugural gift?”\(^\text{24}\)

### 3 The Value of Ricoeur’s Understanding of Happiness

Happiness is understood by Ricoeur in a uniquely inclusive way. His philosophical anthropology posits happiness as something transcendent, as the horizon of our complete fulfilment and meaning, as that aim of all humanity, and as the fulfilment or our intellectual and spiritual desires on an affective level. This happiness cannot be equated to a specific thing or desire, and Ricoeur deliberately describes happiness in this way to keep its transcendent nature intact.

This has the benefit that, first, we do not think in a reductive manner of happiness on an indicative level and then present it as an imperative. Such definitions and instructions of happiness already exist, and all of them are prone to the adaption principle (where we adapt our lifestyles to things we obtain and then desire more) and to the hedonic treadmill (where we keep trapped within the effort to satisfy our insatiable and infinite desires).

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 20.
\(^{23}\) Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, 33.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 94.
Second, the transcendent nature of happiness that is described by Ricoeur helps us not to absolutise certain forms of happiness, but to keep it open and dynamic. Ricoeur explains in *Fallible Man* that our natural desires for having, power, and worth (avoir, pouvoir, and valoir), can easily become so overwhelming (not being mediated through the *thumos* in relation to all desires) that it leads to harm to ourselves and other people. We are fragile in this sense, or fallible, as Ricoeur argues, and these extreme forms of immanent and absolutised desires – in the name of happiness – can become something evil and can lead to our fallenness as human beings.

A third advantage of understanding happiness in a transcendent way is that it enables happiness to fulfil the function of the infinite pole of our humanness on the practical and affective level. In other words, if happiness was something finite and something obtainable, it would not be able to function as the infinite pole of the aim of all humanity and as the fulfilment of all spiritual desires; we would then get stuck in the finite pole of our existence in our living and feelings. This notion of happiness as something infinite opens possibilities for our existence that are life-giving and crucial for living with other people in an ethical way.

The concept of happiness as something transcendent also allows Ricoeur to think holistically about what it means to be human and about our experience of life as a whole. Any reductive notion of happiness will take away something from what it means to be human (for example that meaning is crucial for happiness) but it is meaning in a transcendent way that is encompassing, and happiness that excludes this (for instance pleasures) cannot incorporate all aspects of our existence.

To understand happiness as something transcendent thus has significant value and this is one of Ricoeur’s salient contributions towards thinking about happiness. It is, however, not only a happiness that is impossible, evasive, a horizon, an illusion, something abstract and theoretical, universal, empty, vague, or disembodied as transcendental, but a happiness that remains fundamentally connected to the immanent and to the bodily of our existence. We find here another dialectic in Ricoeur’s understanding of happiness, namely that of immanence-transcendence, where he maintains an understanding of our existence in a corporeal and embodied way. He never rejects or ignores the bodily desires, the *bios* passions, and the concreteness of our lives with others and in institutions. He keeps this tension within his understanding of happiness, and therefore, it is possible to experience moments of happiness, to enjoy it, and to long for it. Happiness is not an impossibility in the transcendent understanding thereof, but is always connected to our incarnate existence.

The dialectic of immanence–transcendence in Ricoeur’s understanding of happiness is his first valuable contribution towards our understanding of happiness. His second contribution is his understanding of happiness in two more dialectics: one of happiness–unhappiness, and the other of the striving–receiving of happiness as chance. These two dialectics serve as an invaluable correction to the mostly naïve and common understanding of happiness that has become dominant in our contemporary culture, namely happiness as the increase of pleasure and the minimisation of pain.

The first dialectic, of happiness–unhappiness, should not be understood as finding a balance between happiness and unhappiness in order to be happy in life. This is not what Ricoeur argues for, and it would only mean a return to the indicative and imperative formulation of happiness, as well as an understanding of happiness that is fundamentally still the outcome of overcoming unhappiness, or at least the unfortunate accommodation of unhappiness. Ricoeur’s dialectics incorporate unhappiness in a much stronger way into happiness – not as something that we should overcome, and not as something that we should merely tolerate. Unhappiness is part of our being, part of our pathétique of misery, and part of our fundamental tension of being human. If we reject this, we reject or deny something that is part of us. The implication is that we cannot fully affirm our being and life. It means that there will always be a negative way of perceiving unhappiness, and this is not what Ricoeur’s strong affirmation entails. It is not a negation of negation but an affirmation of negation. It allows us to value those moments of sadness and pain in their own right: to not just desire a psychological state of pleasure and joy, and to not aspire to a type of well-being that is associated with being successful, healthy, wealthy, and privileged only.

The acceptance of chance as part of happiness leads to Ricoeur’s second dialectic, between striving–receiving happiness. This important dialectic finds a middle ground between happiness as something we should achieve (as an ethical way of life or through the prescriptions of various happiness sciences) and happiness that is merely received from gods or nature. The ethical implication in particular is of value here, because
accepting happiness as chance and as something only to be received might lead to a cynical and Stoic approach to life, where everything is simply accepted and where we do not attempt to change the world for the better anymore. On the other hand, if chance is completely ignored with regard to happiness, the striving towards it (especially according to the long lists in many happiness self-help books) can become tiresome and destructive. An obsession with happiness is avoided through this dialectic, and the striving–receiving dialectic allows exactly for this song of happiness, where happiness remains an aspiring concept without being dreadfully exhausting.

### 4 The Importance of Rethinking Happiness with Ricoeur

In the context of our contemporary culture’s definition and obsession with happiness, Ricoeur’s understanding of happiness brings a welcome corrective. We live in an era where everything is increasingly controlled by the media and by algorithms. We are constantly exposed – through our interaction on our cell phones, laptops, televisions, advertisements, social media, and other media – to understand happiness in a certain way. In our consumerist society, happiness is normally described in terms of buying and using a certain product. Happiness is equated to consumption, and the prescription to be happy is to spend our money and time on the items and experiences the market decided on. In the capitalist society of control, we are sold happiness in a can of Coca-Cola and through the promise of certain lifestyles. The crisis of happiness is that it is reduced to something meaningless, but at the same time something we must obtain. It is a promise that cannot deliver, and this leads to more unhappiness, more desperateness, and eventually to cynicism about life.

A happiness that is only the satisfaction of desires, would be a happiness that is nothing else than the death drive about which Freud warns us. In contrast, happiness is

> on the side of affirmation, of creation, of the new, and of genericity. Satisfaction is on the side of what Freud named the death drive, the reduction of subjectivity to objectivity.\(^{25}\)

Ricoeur furthermore does not posit happiness as the satisfaction of desires, but as the life-giving infinite pole of our desires. It is something that needs to be understood as transcendent in nature. It remains hors lieu and we only have moments of experiencing it. The aim of happiness cannot merely be to satisfy our desires because that would only mean that we have the experience and feeling of satisfaction. Such a state of mind is only one aspect of happiness, and Ricoeur points out that there is so much more to happiness. As feelings of satisfaction, happiness will forever be prone to the adaption principle and the hedonic treadmill principle. Ricoeur explains, “Happiness as a fixed state is unattainable; yet, we derive purpose and pleasure from making the effort to find meaning that is ethical and to use that meaning to do good.”\(^{26}\)

Happiness is also not the attempt to escape from unhappiness, but rather the inclusion of unhappiness in a dialectic. Unhappiness should not be overcome, and there is nothing we lack that should be filled with happiness. Ricoeur in effect rejects the emptiness and nihilism of Sartre’s nothingness that is presented as fundamental to our being. This would be a form of negation, but Ricoeur’s strong affirmation rejects this. He does not negate negation but affirms it. Happiness is therefore not an endless and meaningless pursuit, but a way of constructively engaging with the unhappiness in the world.

### 5 Conclusion

Although Ricoeur is not known as a “philosopher of happiness,” I indicated in this article that happiness did play a huge and crucially important role in his philosophy. Although this theme is only directly addressed in his

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26 Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Negation of Happiness*, 133.
philosophical anthropology and the two later essays, it remains a theme that is coherently presented by Ricoeur in relation to the rest of his philosophy. In this regard, his hermeneutical and dialectical approach is perhaps the most recognisable. In an interview about his book *History, Memory, Forgetting* (2004), however, Ricoeur remarked that happiness is the continuous bass note of this book. When he elaborates on this happiness in the interview, he emphasises the capability and goodness of human beings, in which we must always believe and which we must always seek out:

‘You are able to and you could do something other than what you have done, you have not exhausted your resources.’ That is what I call the ‘capable man’ and more and more, this is the core of my philosophy, this sort of credit for the goodness in human beings. I believe that there is a core of goodness that must be sought out.27

This capability of human beings, with its relation to the affirmation of life, is consistent with his broader philosophy and the specific discussions on happiness.

The value of Ricoeur’s understanding of happiness lies in the fact that he presented it in three integrated dialectics which are all fundamentally based on his strong affirmation of life. The first dialectic, of happiness–unhappiness, allows for a complete rethinking of the definition of happiness offered by contemporary happiness studies. Happiness is not only understood in a comprehensive and inclusive way by Ricoeur, but he manages to bring the opposite of happiness into relation to happiness. This is crucial for our thinking about unhappiness and for thinking about our longing to be happy within an unhappy and suffering world.

The second dialectic, of striving–receiving, is also crucial and unique in Ricoeur’s understanding of happiness and manages to resolve some of the age-old debates about the role of chance within happiness. Ricoeur here presents the optative mode of language as an alternative way of thinking, or rather singing, about happiness. This is a challenge to our predominantly rational and cynical formulations and thinking about happiness.

Lastly, his dialectic of immanence–transcendence regarding happiness allows us to appreciate the moments of happiness as real moments, and not to think that happiness is only something spiritual or something for the afterlife. For Ricoeur, happiness remains intrinsically linked to our bodily and spiritual desires, which makes it not disembodied and not esoteric, but also not something we can limit to a specific experience of pleasure.

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**References**


