# The role of moral emotions in happiness

Mutlulukta ahlaki duyguların rolü

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## Abstract

Research on human happiness has traditionally been associated with positive and negative emotions, rather than its foundations in moral emotions. Using concepts of happiness taken the works of Aristotle and the field of moral psychology, this paper investigated how happiness relates to moral emotions and human virtues as a way of explaining the roots of happiness. As a part of this explanation, the paper explores the emotional side of neuroplasticity, that is the brain's ability to learn and adapt to happiness. This is complimented with an investigation of the subjective experience of happiness through moral emotions, which illustrates that being sensitive and acting on moral emotions with reference to virtues can promote human happiness. In the final analysis, this paper suggests that moral emotions not only help to provide a code of conduct they are also provide a guiding mechanism for happiness.

**Keywords:** Happiness, moral emotions, virtues, positive psychology, neuroplasticity

## Özet

İnsan mutluluğuna ilişkin araştırmalar geleneksel olarak, ahlaki duygulardaki temellerinden ziyade olumlu ve olumsuz duygularla ilişkilendirilmiştir. Bu çalışmada, Aristotle'nun çalışmalarını ve ahlaki psikoloji alanını göz önünde bulundurarak mutluluk kavramlarından yararlanmak suretiyle, mutluluğun köklerini açıklamanın bir yolu olarak mutluluğun ahlaki duygularla ve insan erdemleriyle nasıl ilişkili olduğu tartışılmıştır. Bu açıklamanın bir parçası olarak, beynin mutluluğu öğrenme ve ona uyum sağlama becerisi olan nöroplastisitenin duygusal yönü ele alınmıştır. Bu araştırma ahlaki duygularla öznel mutluluk deneyimine ilişkin bir inceleme ile tamamlanmış olup, söz konusu inceleme, hassas olmanın ve erdemlere ilişkin olarak ahlaki duygularla hareket etmenin insan mutluluğunu teşvik ettiğini göstermektedir. Son analizde, ahlaki duyguların yalnızca bir davranış kuralı sağlanmasına yardımcı olmadığı, aynı zamanda mutluluğa yönelik bir kılavuz mekanizması da temin ettiği görüşü ele alınmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Mutluluk, ahlaki duygular, erdemler, pozitif psikoloji, nöroplastisite

## Introduction

Happiness is an emotion that is generally associated with enjoying life (Ness & Ellsworth, 2009) and that positive emotions those associated with happiness, provide mechanisms to lead a happy life (Carver, 2003). Fordyce (1977) argues that the emotional component of happiness is the result of an evaluation of pleasant and unpleasant experiences from the past and potential present. Happiness has been associated with a mental state of wellbeing (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006) and positive emotions in general are thought to provide a buffer to life's difficult situations (Seligman, 2002). The emotional state of happiness is an important source for personal growth, as well as the

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social and economic growth of a society (Gilbert, 2006). Therefore, much of the research (Ness & Ellsworth, 2009; Seligman, 2002) has focussed on the influence of positive and negative emotions on happiness. However, this narrow focus has led to a paucity of research on the influence of moral emotions on happiness. Therefore this paper aims to explore the influence of moral emotions on happiness arguing for the inclusion of a 'moral component' to the mechanisms of happiness.

Happiness has been discussed, debated and researched since ancient times. The recent emergence of positive psychology has resulted in happiness becoming a popular focus of research and indeed, a buzzword among the academic community particularly in the discipline of psychology. Traditionally psychology has concentrated on psychopathology and related issues associated with negative emotions like sadness, anxiety and depression. Positive psychology, in contrast, seeks to readdress the balance in psychology by studying positive emotions, positive personality traits and virtues, and positive intuitions (Seligman, 2002). Much of the thinking in positive psychology was inspired by Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* (Seligman, 2002). In the happiness literature, the role and study of positive emotions has typically taken centre stage, whereas the role and study of virtue has been neglected.

For Aristotle, happiness was impossible without being morally good. In his book *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle notes that "living well and doing well are the same as being happy" (*eudaimonia* translates as happiness or wellbeing) (p. 3). Living well and doing well are specifically associated with the intellectual, moral and physical realms of human life (Spieker, 1999). Kristjansson (2006) explains that Aristotle's interpretation of happiness "consists in the realization of intellectual and moral (including emotional) virtue, as well as in the fulfilment of our other specifically human physical and mental capabilities" (p. 45). Therefore, a good life is the result of acting according to virtues, and habitual virtuous activity eventually moves one towards sustainable happiness.

As implied above, the concept of happiness in positive psychology is philosophically unsophisticated (Kristjansson, 2010), as it is often being associated with positive emotions rather than Aristotelian virtues for example. However, in his 2011 book *Flourish*, Martin Seligman admits that his former emphasis on the concept of authentic happiness was inadequate, partly due to its focus on positive emotion as "the rock-bottom meaning of happiness" (p. 13). In *Flourish* Seligman redefines happiness in terms of the Aristotelian concept of 'flourishing' or 'wellbeing'. There is something missing between the Aristotelian concept of happiness and the notion of happiness in much positive psychology, and seems now that Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, would agree. In contributing to a more philosophically sophisticated understanding of happiness, this paper argues that current research on neuroscience in relation to moral emotions can partially explain this missing link between consequences and determinants. Neuroscience can also help us to understand the roots of the Aristotelian concept of happiness as well as some of the deficiencies in the positive psychological notions of happiness.

## Emotions and Brain

Both the Aristotelian and positive psychological concepts of happiness can be explained by neurological activity occurring in the brain. Davidson et al. (2003) explain the importance of prefrontal cortex fires as an indication of positive and negative emotional states. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) has revealed higher blood flow in the left prefrontal cortex of patients, indicating that they were experiencing positive emotional states and feelings of happiness. The left prefrontal cortex is responsible for positive emotions and hence is normally associated with happiness (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). This reinforces the Aristotelian and positive psychological concepts of happiness as a state of being that is intimately associated with positive emotions as evidenced by some of the findings in neuroscience.

Neuroscience has demonstrated that the prefrontal cortex is activated when people practice compassion. Through cultivating positive emotions such as love, kindness, and compassion, Lutz et al. (2008) found that neurons created an empathetic response to another's pain. This is consistent with previous findings that severe negative emotional experiences lead to functional and structural alterations in the brain (Kolassa & Elbert, 2007). Similarly, compassionate experiences lead to healthy structural and functional alterations in the brain and help to increase immune function (Davidson et al., 2003). Based on this new evidence from neuroscience, this paper argues that focusing on eliciting moral emotions (e.g., compassion) is relevant and perhaps vital to understanding the concept of happiness, and may also shed some light on how people can increase their level of happiness.

## Moral Emotions

As briefly outlined above, understanding and acting on moral emotions is pivotal for increased happiness. Moral emotions are those complex emotions that arise in response to thoughts and actions that concern right and wrong (Kroll, Egan, Erickson, Carey, & Johnson 2004). The ability to understand and control emotions, both in the self and in others is defined as emotional competence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). An empirical study by Athota et al. (2010) showed that the moral component is an integral part of emotional competence. Haidt (2003) also suggests that acting on moral emotions increases emotional wellbeing. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that when individuals fail to act on moral emotions in the face of an ethical demand or a conflict in values, resultant neurological reactions could be experienced as feelings of unhappiness.

Aristotle's view of happiness includes appropriate expression of emotions. He pointed out that it is virtuous to express emotions toward the right objects, at the right time, and to the right degree (Goleman, 1995). Kristjansson (2006) explains that "for Aristotle, the general aim of emotional virtue like another virtue, lies in its connection to the fundamental good of human life: *eudaimonia,* for the sake of which we do all other things" (p. 45). Training emotions to appropriately respond to pleasure and pain leads to *eudaimonia* or flourishing (Spieker, 1999). For Aristotle, emotional regulatory fit (expressing emotions at the right time to the right degree) is associated with virtuous living as well as happiness.

Research suggests that a psychological and moral component is intrinsically associated with emotional regulatory fit. Moral emotional regulatory fit – that what feels right is right and violation feels wrong – has cognitive dissonance effect on human wellbeing (Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003). Generally, individuals seek consistency among moral emotions and behaviour. Lack of consistency among moral emotions and behaviour may cause incongruity, and this incongruity is uncomfortable and individuals will seek to minimize the dissonance to find consistency by responding with empathy. The significant key component of moral emotions is empathy. Others' moral emotions like compassion, anger, gratitude, and disgust can be understood through empathy (Hoffman, 2000). Specifically, morally significant emotions like compassion, empathy, and gratitude can have a significant positive influence on human wellbeing (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Lutz et al. (2008) found that empathy is the source of loving, kind, and compassionate emotions. Therefore, emotional regulatory fit is intrinsically associated with empathy.

Empathy is the ability to experience events and emotions the way another person experiences them. Empathy also enables one to take into consideration others' motives and their need for help (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991; Munro, Bore, & Powis, 2005). The moral component of empathy plays an important role in promoting positive social interaction and others' wellbeing (Eisenberg et al., 1991; Haidt, 2006; Pizzaro, 2000). Responding to empathetic feelings of compassion promotes positive outcomes, and suppressing empathy leads to disastrous and

unhappy consequences (Pizarro & Salovey, 2002). Empathy is a necessary component for social and emotional wellbeing.

An inability to show empathy can have serious negative social and emotional consequences. Psychopaths and sociopaths do not experience empathy; this is reflected in their low experience of happiness and in the lack of activity in their prefrontal cortex (Hare, 1993). Eisenberg (2000) suggests that responding to empathetic emotions plays an important role in moral behaviour. For healthy individuals, empathetic moral emotions act as agents in promoting the wellbeing of others, whereas psychopaths and sociopaths often lack these moral emotions. As Kroll et al. (2004) explain, "moral emotions may be evidence of a healthy character which show that one's moral monitor, one's conscience, is properly operative" (p. 682). For example, remorse for some wrong can lead to confession and the motivation for a constructive approach to set the regretted behaviour right (Eisenberg, 2000). Neuroscience points out that responding to moral emotions influences the amygdale activation in the human brain (Yang et al., 2002). Therefore, it is logical to say that morally significant emotions influence changes in neural brain structure.

As mentioned above, moral emotions create significant emotional experiences that influence the structure of the brain. This can be viewed as neuroplasticity, "the process by which the brain and nervous system produce morphological and structural changes in the brain in response to environmental stimuli" (Vence, Roberson, McGuinnies, & Fazel, 2010, p. 29). The increased activity in the prefrontal cortex leads to neuroplasticity, which may result in the increase in connections and the creation of new neurons (Berger, Kofman, Livneh, & Henik, 2007; Davidson & Lutz, 2008). Moral emotions create internal stimuli that influence neurological structures in the brain. Bingaman (2011) argued that Christian meditative practices can work as powerful stimuli in causing positive structural changes in the brain. Evidence indicates that repeated practice of compassion leads to neuroplasticity in the brain and increased happiness (Davidson & Lutz, 2008). This concept suggests that virtues of living might lead to the same kind of brain activity evident during positive emotional states. Therefore, being sensitive to moral emotions can help stimulate the neuroplasticity mechanism, that is the brain's ability to adapt and learn optimism, which will eventually lead to greater happiness.

Findings in the neuroscience of happiness challenge the traditional set-point theory of happiness. According to Set-point theory, genetics play a large part in determining happiness (Lykken & Tellegen 1996). In the Set-point theory of happiness, Lykken and Tellegen (1996) found in their 10-year longitudinal twin study that genetic factors may account for at least 44–52% of subjective wellbeing. The set-point theory fails to provide enough explanation of the importance of the role of virtues, fulfilment and meaning in happiness (Haidt, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, advanced research in the neuroscience of happiness indicates that human brains have the capacity to form new neurons as a result of repeated virtuous activities (Berger et al., 2007; Davidson & Lutz, 2008). It is important to note that moral emotions can positively influence virtuous activities (Eisenberg, 2000). Based on these new findings, set-point theory may require substantial revision or even total replacement by a new theory that more accurately reflects the latest research. These new findings suggest that one can go beyond set-point theory towards increased happiness with disciplined, mindful practice.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the roots of happiness can be better explained through the understanding of moral emotions. Aristotle's concept of happiness stems from undertaking virtuous activity and regulating one's emotions. In contrast, positive psychology has tended to focus on positive emotional experiences as the foundations of happiness. Expressing the moral emotion of compassion, and perhaps other moral emotions, is virtuous; so the practice of positive moral emotions should contribute to greater happiness as defined by Aristotle. Neuroscience can now demonstrate that

practising compassion, or other positive moral emotions, influences activity in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which gives some indication of the roots of happiness. In other words, the Aristotelian and positive psychological concepts of happiness can be explained by the same kind of neurological activity. Our brains begin to change as we repeatedly engage in compassionate actions. Moral emotions can influence neuroplasticity and help increase the brain's ability to learn and adapt to happiness. Therefore happiness can be increased by being sensitive to moral emotions and engaging in moral activities.

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