

**Is Happiness Overrated?
The Duality of Reasons Behind Our Actions**

Ashkan Farhadi

Ashkan Farhadi MD, MS, FACP, FACG, Associate Professor of Medicine, Section of Gastroenterology and Nutrition, University of California, Irvine

Correspondence and Reprint requests:

A. Farhadi, M.D. M.S. FACP, FACG,
Memorial Care Medical Group, Costa Mesa, CA 92626, USA. Tel: 714-965 9506
Fax: 714-965 9567

Abstract

What is the real motive behind our actions? Aristotle believed happiness to be the ultimate goal of life and the pursuit of happiness is the primary motive for our daily activities. It is not surprising that we all want to have an optimal state of well-being and fulfilling life. Either we are proponent of hedonistic approach in which one finds happiness by attaining pleasure and avoiding painful experiences or eudemonic approach in which happiness is the result of self-realization and proper life functioning, our actions are motivated by a blend of Hedonic and Eudemonic Motives for Activities, or HEMA.

INTRODUCTION

In this manuscript, a new perspective namely “The Duality of Reason” is presented which may better explain the real motives behind our actions. The proposed perspective would allow us to explain several findings which are not easily explained through the current perspectives, in research on topics of social issues in general and happiness in particular. Based on this perspective, our motives are a blend of obligations and options and we prioritize our tasks based on this subjective classification. We may arbitrarily assign or reassign our tasks to either category based on our culture, belief or personal preference. We prioritize and do an obligatory task, which comprises the majority of our daily tasks. In return, we may feel a sense of satisfaction, which is a distinct sentiment from true happiness. In fact, the tasks that make us truly happy are inherently optional.

The duality of reason could explain several observations and help us better understand why happiness may not be the Holy Grail that we are after and that its pursuit is not the prime reason behind our actions. In fact, the majority of things we do in our daily activity have nothing to do with making us happy. Yet, we prioritize our tasks based on our obligations and options. It is also important to understand the possibility and implications of proactive or retroactive reassignment of tasks from obligations to options, and vice versa, which can shape our sense of overall satisfaction and happiness.

Why do we do what we do? Aristotle believed we do things to make ourselves happy. He believed happiness to be the ultimate goal of life. This may resonate with the notion that we all want to have an optimal state of well-being and fulfilling life. Most research on well-being points toward two main schools of thought on this subject: the eudemonic perspective and the hedonistic perspective [1-3]. In the eudemonic approach, happiness is the result of self-realization and proper life functioning. Martin Seligman, a proponent of the eudemonic approach, believes that true happiness is separate from merely feeling good and that true happiness translates into our life as the state of well-being, defining well-being as “a combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships, and accomplishment” [6]. On the other hand, according to the hedonistic approach, one finds happiness by attaining pleasure and avoiding painful experiences.

It seems that some researchers believe that a mixture of these two perspectives could be the main motive behind human action: Hedonic and Eudemonic Motives for Activities, or HEMA. Based on the HEMA proposal, a scale is used to determine if our motives are based on hedonism, eudemonism, or a mixture of the two [4]. Regardless of which perspective is appealing to us and driving our pursuit of happiness in life, the HEMA theory is based on the notion that the pursuit of happiness is the primary motive for our daily activities. Does this mean everything we do aims at bringing us happiness? After all, we do things for the sake of our family, our careers, or simply because they need to be done—without considering if the tasks make us happy. Each of us has experienced situations in which an action that could have made us happy was overridden by an action that needed to be done for other reasons other than immediate happiness. One could explain this from the hedonistic perspective: Such actions were committed to avoid pain from the consequences of inaction. But it seems there is more behind our actions than merely doing things for happiness or to avoid pain. A new idea may better explain the real motives behind our actions: “The Duality of Reason.” This perspective could allow us to shed light from different angle over several findings, which are not easily explained through the established theories in research on topics of social issues in general and happiness in particular.

For years, I was satisfied accepting the eudemonic philosophy of happiness. I believed that everything we want in this life—money, goods, food, and other material things along with nonmaterial things like relationships, love, and religion—are pursued to create happiness for oneself. I thought that happiness is the ultimate goal in life. In other words, we manifest material and nonmaterial things to obtain happiness, as Aristotle suggested 2,000 years ago. At the time, this seemed like the obvious answer.

When our research on the subject of happiness posed a survey question regarding the most important thing in life, I was confident that happiness would be the general consensus. Two of the questions we asked were “What is the most important thing in life?” and “What makes you the happiest?” Much to my surprise, happiness was not the most important thing in life for the majority of the respondents. In fact, it was not even the second or third most important thing according to their survey answers [5]. This blew my mind. My initial thought was that the survey participants did not understand the question. I thought that a brief elaboration on the meaning of

happiness would surely have changed their answer to indicate happiness as the most important thing in life.

But, after some thought, I asked myself: What if they are right? What if happiness is not the Holy Grail that we are after and its pursuit is not the prime motive behind our actions?

Elaborating on the results of the research further make this point. The study showed that the

Overwhelming majority of people considered “family” to be the most important thing in life. That makes sense. There are things in life that take precedence over our happiness. For example, taking care of our family is one of the most highly prioritized obligations that could easily trump the factor of our happiness as the motivation behind our actions. There is no question that other obligations besides family could result in a “must do” in our lives that we have to abide by regardless of whether it makes us happy. If we had an internal happimeter that measures our contentment and happiness we’d easily see that we conveniently neglect it while doing an obligatory task. For example, we might not feel joy and exhilaration when we have to go to work on Monday morning, but it is a “must do.” We do it even if it doesn’t bring us happiness.

Instead, we may feel a sense of satisfaction after doing an obligatory task, but this sentiment is distinct from happiness. Most of the things that make us truly happy are not obligations; in fact, they are usually inherently optional.

The figure below helps to clarify the distinction between optional tasks and obligatory tasks [6].



Figure 1 shows that we can ignore our happimeter while doing many daily activities. For example, we may defend a family member or a political party in a situation in which we know deep down that our defense is not justified and that our allegiance is based on loyalty rather than

reason. However, we feel that it is our obligation to defend them regardless of their actions. We may not feel happy or proud of what we did, but we may feel satisfied since we have met our duty as a loyal family or party member. In those situations, our priority is to fulfill our obligation (or what we believe is our obligation) even though the action itself may not contribute to our happiness. It is not uncommon that after accomplishing a task such as taking an order, we may feel satisfied for accomplishing a task as part of our duty but at the same time, resent ourselves for our action.

This is how the majority of people prioritize family, health, and faith over happiness—by assigning the related tasks to the obligation part of the spectrum and treating them as a “must do” and a “must have.” In our research, a minority of people (1 in 16) preferred happiness to family, health, and faith.

The prime question is: How are tasks defined as either obligations or options? For example, a family-related task, such as taking your parent to a doctor, could be considered a pure obligation for someone, but the same task could be considered completely optional for another person. Assigning tasks as obligation versus option could have practical implications in our life and could explain some commonly observed behaviors.

We have all heard the saying, “Do not take it personally. It is just business.” In this context, we assign a business task to the obligation end of the spectrum and turn it into a “must do.” By viewing the conduct of our business as an obligation, we conveniently neglect our happiness. Thus, we may partake in unethical actions while performing our business-related duty.

Similarly, for a certain individual, having a brand-name item could be considered an obligation or a “must have,” while for another person, having a brand name item could be an option or a “should have.” Because the former individual feels obligated to have this particular item, obtaining it would be simply satisfying the need rather than striking the chord of true joy or happiness.

An inherent quality of obligatory tasks is their status as a priority. The tasks on the obligation end of the spectrum take temporal precedence over the tasks on the optional end. Therefore, if we have many obligations, we may never make enough time to fulfill some of the optional tasks in our lives.

A life full of obligations can deplete our sense of abundance and happiness. If we turn everything in our lives into a “must do” or “must have,” then it’s likely that we seldom are able to exceed our set goals—and even if we do so, we can only reach, at most, a sense of satisfaction, not happiness.

The duality of reason may also explain other interesting research findings [7]. It is common for the wife of a middle-class family in Singapore to kiss her husband’s hand and request forgiveness “every night”. At the same time, most of these Singaporean wives are very pleased

with their status. The “Duality of Reasons” may explain this observation. When we consider a task an obligation, and not an option, we intentionally turn our happimeter off. We do those tasks as part of our duties. By regarding those tasks as obligations, we can spare ourselves from internal judgment and therefore keep our happiness intact.

Are all tasks either an obligation or an option? Beyond the arbitrary nature of classification, it is obvious that many tasks cannot be easily placed into this kind of binary classification. Some tasks are a combination of both obligation and option. In fact, our daily tasks are seldom a pure obligation or pure option, and in the majority of cases, tasks are a graded mixture of an obligation in the form of “must do” or “must have” and an option in the form of “should do” or “should have.” This translates into the notion that the duality of reason is also based on a mixture of the non-exclusive, binary reasons for doing a task.

A task can be assigned by each individual as an obligation or an option based on personal belief, culture, or preference. However, after assignment of the tasks to either category—or a mixture of thereof—the same task could be reassigned to the other category. For example, could an obligatory task become an option or vice versa? It seems that we sometimes consciously or even subconsciously modify the task assignment from one category to the other. But why?

At first glance, it would seem that reassigning tasks from one end to the other could be done in our favor, either to increase happiness or to turn our happimeter off to protect our happiness while doing obligatory tasks. This is particularly true for the proactive assignments of tasks that we plan to do in the future. An extreme example is brainwashing, when someone presents a task to others—or themselves—as an obligation to enable its execution without any thoughtful evaluation or assessment of consequences or mental repercussion. We can also use the retroactive reassignment of the task to our benefit. During rationalization of a past action, we may be able to justify it by considering it an obligation. Not surprisingly, we would be able to live with the consequences of our action without being overwhelmed by our conscience or sensations of guilt.

On the flip side, reassignments of a task’s category can work against us. For example, we have all made a decision when we thought we had to do a task as an obligation. During the process of executing the task, we easily turned off our happimeter gauge and spared ourselves from internal judgment. But, later on, we realized the task was actually a choice we made, an option, and it wasn’t the best one. During the process of reassigning a task, we may reactivate our happimeter retroactively. By doing so, it is not uncommon to experience a sense of guilt and regret from having performed the same task that we did without hesitation.

In summary, the new perspective of the duality of reason could not only allow us to explain several observations but also help us better understand how motives are a blend of obligations and options; the feelings that follow are mixed feelings composed of varying degrees of satisfaction and happiness. In addition, it may help us understand how we prioritize our tasks or

the possibility and implications of proactive or retroactive reassignment of tasks from obligations to options, and vice versa, which can shape our sense of overall satisfaction and happiness.

References:

- Lopes MP, Jardim da Palma P, Garcia BC, and Gomes C. Training for happiness: the impacts of different positive exercises on hedonism and eudaemonia. *Springer Plus* (2016) 5:744
- Oleś P, Jankowski T. Positive Orientation—a Common Base for Hedonistic and Eudemonistic Happiness? *Applied Research Quality Life* (2018) 13:105– 117
- Berridge KC, Kringelbach ML. Building a neuroscience of pleasure and well-being. *Psychol Well Being*. (2011) 1: 1–3.
- Aleksandra Bujacz A, Vitters J, Huta V, Kaczmarek LD. Measuring hedonia and eudaimonia as motives for activities: cross-national investigation through traditional and Bayesian structural equation modeling. *Frontier in Psychology* (2014) 5; 984.
- Farhadi A, Mobarhan S. The Factors Involved in the Sense of Subjective Wellbeing (A Survey of 250 Subjects). *World Journal of Social Science* (2017) 4: 1.
- Marsh, J. Is Happiness Overrated? *Greater Good Magazine*. (2011). https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/is_happiness_overrated
- Buettner D. “Thrive: Finding Happiness the Blue Zones Way,” *National Geographic*, October 19, 2009.