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Joyless Warrior - An Essay on Martha Nussbaum's "Who is the Happy Warrior?"

Inquiry of human happiness is perhaps one of the oldest and most prevalent topics in all of human history; it is certainly not new to philosophy, and there are likewise a multitude of fields that concern themselves with this question. One of said fields is – as one might expect – psychology. The positive psychology movement is a relatively recent development in psychology that attempts to question human happiness, often boiling down its sources into purely sensational terms. That is to say, we are happy so long as we feel good. This claim seems relatively substantial and straightforward at first, but there are certainly those who have taken issue with such an idea. One of the most notable objectors of the positive psychology movement is Martha Nussbaum, an American philosopher who challenges the positive psychology movement from a philosophical standpoint through her essay "Who is the Happy Warrior? Philosophy Poses Questions to Psychology." As the name of the essay suggests, Nussbaum references English poet William Wordsworth's "Character of the Happy Warrior" to assist in her critique. In this essay, I will be using Nussbaum's article to explain her critique on the positive psychology movement, detailing her views on happiness and discussing the conclusions she draws regarding it. I will additionally cover the "happy warrior" – specifically how his nature and mentality supports Nussbaum's ideas on happiness and how it is obtained. Finally, I will disagree with Nussbaum's contention that the happy warrior is, in fact, happy, and will do so on the grounds that a life

without any pleasure is ultimately not a happy life; the happy warrior merely achieves “happiness” through adaptive rationalization, but ultimately feels no joy.

As previously mentioned, Nussbaum largely criticizes the positive psychology movement. This movement, as stated, claims that happiness is derived from what is essentially feeling good. As such, it follows that we may wish to maximize positive feelings in order to achieve and maintain happiness. In order to assess this claim, Nussbaum discusses pleasure and life-satisfaction in an attempt to break down the roots of happiness – ultimately concluding that happiness is not derived from how we feel. Nussbaum addresses the numerous ways to view pleasure, beginning with Jeremy Bentham, who claims that pleasure is a single qualitative experience that varies in intensity and duration (Nussbaum 582). It is also worth noting that Bentham claims that happiness, in essence, is pleasure. Bentham’s idea of a single qualitative pleasure is opposed by John Stuart Mill, who claims that there are qualitatively different types of pleasures (Nussbaum 585), such as high and low pleasures – the former being intellectual pleasures, and the latter being bodily pleasures. Nussbaum also discusses the Aristotelian views of pleasures, namely that pleasure is unimpeded activity, is an enjoyable experience we are aware of, and the fact that an activity is being done in an enjoyable fashion (Nussbaum 584). Naive hedonism additionally states that we may evaluate the positive facets of a life by taking the sum total of one’s pleasures. Nussbaum, along with pleasures, identifies another potential contributing factor to happiness in the form of life-satisfaction. As its designated name signifies, this is contentment with one’s life; it is a judgment that one makes on whether or not their life is going well. Nussbaum does, however, remark that being satisfied may not always be a sign of complete happiness. If one is satisfied, they may not necessarily lead a successful life, much akin to Mill’s example of a satisfied pig versus a dissatisfied human. As such, Nussbaum concludes that we

cannot use pleasure and life-satisfaction as a universal means of measuring happiness. She then furthers her argument against the ideas of the positive psychology movement in the sense that the aforementioned movement does not seem to account for negative emotions – something Nussbaum argues to be necessary and good for the enrichment of human character. Feeling negative emotions helps human beings develop a sense of compassion and empathy for others, which can work to make the world a better place for everyone. Additionally, negative emotions essentially work to validate positive ones to the extent that positive emotions are meaningful when we can identify and differentiate them from negative ones.

In order to expand upon her assessment, Nussbaum brings forth the example of William Wordsworth's "happy warrior." This warrior is said to experience very little pleasures in life, yet he is still happy due to the fact that he is fulfilling his duties as a soldier and living virtuously. This sense of happiness is derived from a form of self-reflection, in which the warrior looks back upon his life and acknowledges that he is upholding his principles and acting in a way that is deemed as morally good. Nussbaum expands upon this notion of self-examination, discussing how it is essential to achieving happiness, considering the fact that the happy warrior attempts to better himself with regards to self-knowledge. The conclusion arrived at here is that self-examination and self-knowledge are incredibly important to living a happy life; knowing oneself allows us to understand what makes us happy, and therefore how we can live our best lives and achieve said happiness. Nussbaum argues in favor of the warrior's happiness, claiming that the happy warrior is happy insofar as that he is self-reflective and capable of living life virtuously (Nussbaum 591-592). Despite seldom feeling pleasure at all, the happy warrior acts dutifully and upholds what he believes is right; through self-examination he has achieved happiness by understanding that he ultimately loves what he does.

Nussbaum's critique of the positive psychology movement is compelling, though I would not say that I entirely agree with all of her claims; I would have to disagree with Nussbaum's assertion that the happy warrior leads a truly happy life in the sense that a life without any pleasure is ultimately not happy. In his particular case, the warrior merely achieves "happiness" through a form of rationalization, yet he never experiences true joy. I should start by saying that while I believe Jeremy Bentham is wrong in asserting that pleasure is equal to happiness, I do hold that there is still a definite relationship between the two. That is not to say, though, that they are synonymous. Likewise, I agree that self-examination is critical to understanding ourselves and figuring out what we enjoy in life, but this is important in understanding our pleasures as well. To use Mill's terminology, I would argue that it is our higher pleasures that lead us to feel truly happy – it is these forms of pleasure that leave a lasting impact on us, as well as our overall happiness and satisfaction with life. One could argue that the happy warrior's virtuous lifestyle could classify as engaging in higher pleasures, yet I disagree on the grounds that it is stated by Nussbaum directly that the happy warrior feels little to no pleasure at all in his life (Nussbaum 589). If the happy warrior cannot feel pleasure through engaging in these higher pleasures, it follows that the entirety of his "happiness" is derived through self-reflection and convincing himself he is happy. In his case, he views his life as good – or "happy" – due to the fact that he lives virtuously. However, he may simply be rationalizing his situation, demonstrating the behavior of adaptation, in which people adjust what brings them satisfaction to fit their own circumstances (Nussbaum 599). Ultimately, a pleasureless life in which one does not feel joy is not indicative of a happy life; the happy warrior is unfortunately only happy insofar as he convinces himself he is just that.

Martha Nussbaum crafts a powerful argument against the positive psychology movement that holds much merit. In all fairness, she is very much correct in that it is necessary to take into account more than merely just positive feelings when attempting to measure human happiness, and her interweaving of the happy warrior into her argument is brilliant in its own right. I only hold that the happy warrior does not, in fact, live a happy life as Nussbaum says he does. A life that is led with no forms of pleasure cannot be one that is enjoyable; happiness must, in part, be derived from joy. Without this, I would argue, one can never truly feel complete.