**Happiness and Suffering**

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**Abstract**

Many in Western culture have viewed happiness as the opposite of suffering. Namely, the desire to attain greater happiness is accompanied by a desire to reduce suffering. This concept stems, inter alia, from the myth of Paradise (Garden of Eden), which is the root of culture. Paradise is a central myth in Judaism and Christianity, representing nostalgia for the past, for abundance and happiness, and reflecting a life of harmony devoid of suffering, but without any self-consciousness.

In this article, we wish to dismantle the principle lying at the basis of the Western myth that links happiness to the absence or reduction of suffering. We will propose instead, that happiness is not the opposite of suffering; the two constantly appear alongside each other. There is no time when one can identify happiness devoid of suffering. Happiness and suffering are twin brothers as Nietzsche calls them (Nietzsche 1967, §221). They appear side by side, and both are by-products of life and its affirmation. The fear of suffering is the fear of life itself. Happiness is the affirmation of life despite everything that happens: troubles, hardships, misgivings and even calamities.

To fear suffering is to be in conflict with life itself, and to reduce life means, in essence, preventing the happiness associated with meaning, action, authenticity, creativity, love, life in a community and the wide range of activities in which the experience related to happiness and suffering is interwoven into all of life’s experiences.

**Full Paper**

**1. Introduction**

Many in Western culture perceive happiness as the opposite of suffering. In other words, the pursuit of greater happiness is complemented by a desire to minimize suffering. This perception is rooted, among other things, in the culture’s religious texts. The culture is governed by fundamental assumptions which are so deeply engrained that they are usually invisible except in retrospect, when observing a past era from the present. We will therefore examine the deep religious foundation of Western culture which postulates that happiness is the opposite of suffering and will attempt to deconstruct this intrinsic causal linkage in this fundamental assumption.

Western Christianity is a prominent feature of Western civilization, and it serves as a distinctive identity marker for this culture. Western culture and Christianity are largely based on the Old Testament, where happiness and suffering are represented as opposites contingent on man’s behaviour. In both Christianity and Judaism, the Old Testament is considered a holy text: the absolute truth, a product of divine revelation. As such, it is still possible to recognize the imprint of myths and narratives originating in the Biblical text as well as in other religious Christian sources in many Western cultural productions.[[1]](#endnote-1) Such myths are an inseparable part of religion as some aspects of reality require mythical conceptualization, such as the domains of happiness and suffering. They are a way of imposing order on a world that does not make sense. For thousands of years, the pursuit of enjoyment, happiness and the avoidance of suffering and pain were presented as the motivation for every action, and the conceptual framework underlying this notion still informs our culture and discourse to this day.

**2. The Garden of Eden Myth: Happiness Without Suffering**

The Garden of Eden is a major origin myth, in both Judaism and Christianity, that is at the very foundation of Western culture. The Garden of Eden represents nostalgia for the past, for abundance and ultimate happiness, and expresses a life of harmony and lack of suffering although without any measure of self-awareness.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man He had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters (Genesis 2:8-10).

With the expulsion from Eden, suffering manifested as punishment and man becomes more aware, human, suffering and longing for the past, for Eden where ultimate happiness prevailed. Happiness, as the story goes, belongs to the righteous and suffering is presented as punishment for the sins committed by man:

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers [...] To the woman He said, I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you. To Adam he said, Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ Cursed is the ground because of you; Through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life [...]. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return (Genesis 3:15-19).

In Western culture, the Garden of Eden represents not only the time and place of the expulsion but also a destination accessible to all righteous persons after their deaths. Happiness without suffering is inherent in the primal, pre-fall state from which point man’s fate is encumbered by suffering, while happiness is promised to the righteous at the end of days.

Despite differences between biblical stories, a unified perception lies at the foundation of most biblical texts[[3]](#endnote-3) due to the direct and continuous linkage between sin and punishment. This direct linkage is portrayed throughout the Bible.

However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country [...] You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out [...] You will build a house, but you will not live in it. You will plant a vineyard, but you will not even begin to enjoy its fruit [...] All these curses will come on you. They will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the Lord your God and observe the commands and decrees he gave you. [...] Just as it pleased the Lord to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you (Deuteronomy 28:15-63).

Israel’s prophets guarantee happiness for the righteous and suffering for the sinner:

Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done (Isaiah 3:10-11).

But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water [...] It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit. [...] I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve (Jeremiah 17:7-10).

But, as Job protested, suffering does not only appear in the context of punishment. Job does not accept the argument that suffering indicates sin; indeed, he is certain that he did not sin. Job is searching for the causal link to his suffering—based on the presumption that suffering manifests as punishment: ‘I say to God: Do not declare me guilty, but tell me what charges you have against me’ (Job 10:2)—but does not find it. Job sees the events around him as arbitrary chaos inflicted by God; God causes multiple injuries without visible cause. God shows Job an ostensibly illogical and immoral world.[[4]](#endnote-4) This approach does not link suffering to sin, but rather contends that suffering is God’s way of testing the righteous (Abraham, Job) and not as punishment for their sins. Most portrayals of happiness in the Bible appear as reward for the righteous, while descriptions of suffering appear in the context of punishment or trial—in terms of a causal connection. Only few depictions communicate a perception of suffering and happiness as a natural part of life that is not related to the individual’s behaviour. Ecclesiastes suggests that we rejoice in our lives, be happy, take from the world what it has to offer and not contemplate the nature of God and his motives. ‘When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labor that is done on earth—people getting no sleep day or night—then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it’ (Eccles. 8:16-17).

**3. Suffering and Happiness in Christianity**

In Christianity, suffering exists in the corporeal world, and happiness in the Kingdom of Heaven (The Garden of Eden). The hope for future happiness is related to the belief in the end of days—‘In the eschaton the light falls from above into our life […] The Christian message […] we already live here and now in anticipation of the eschaton’.[[5]](#endnote-5) Christianity has taught us that in order to be happy in time T2 we must suffer in time T1. ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted [...] Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [...] Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven’ (Matthew 5:3-12). Suffering is the means to happiness and glory: ‘For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal’ (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). Suffering in Christianity is multifaceted: ‘We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed’ (ibid 8-9); suffering in Christianity prepares us to serve God: ‘If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation’ (2 Corinthians 1:6); ‘“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said’ (Acts 14:22). In Christianity, genuine happiness is the yearning for a past time in the Garden of Eden or the longing for a future to come—‘“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death” or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’ (Revelations 21:4)—and as a result, happiness is also manifest in the anguish of longing and in the anticipation to regain lost happiness in life here and now.

**3. Suffering and Happiness: Twin Siblings**

In this paper, we will attempt to deconstruct the linkage—which is at the foundation of Western culture—in terms of which happiness is the absence or reduction of suffering, or conversely, that suffering constitutes preparation for a happy, painless life. There is no wholeness to life without suffering; happiness is not the opposite of suffering and they will always manifest together. There is no historical moment in which we can identify happiness without suffering. Suffering leads us to delve deeper within ourselves.[[6]](#endnote-6) Suffering and pleasure are not opposites. Pain is inherent in every pleasure. The escape from suffering can cause degeneration. The avoidance of suffering not only prevents the intensification of happiness but quite the opposite, it intensifies the suffering. The evasion of experiences, sincerity, the expression of feelings, and greater social involvement, often stems from a fear of harm and suffering. Human beings are afraid of suffering, of the exploitation of their honesty, and thus withdraw from society, in fact, escape reality, build a barrier between themselves and others, and often even increase their suffering by longing for an unattainable ideal reality of happiness instead of experiencing actual reality. The distance between our imagined perception of a happy, painless life and actual reality increases the pain.

Nietzsche calls happiness and suffering twin siblings.[[7]](#endnote-7) They appear together, and both are products of life’s necessities and activities. The fear of suffering is a fear of life itself. Happiness is life’s imperative despite all that it involves—misfortunes, hardships, misgivings, and even calamities.[[8]](#endnote-8) *A priori*, the aspiration for greater happiness, which is accompanied by an aspiration for reduced suffering, has no chance of becoming a reality.[[9]](#endnote-9) Nietzsche argues that every man must create his own life, choose his values, and take risks. ‘To live means to be in a state of danger [...] the lofty human being [...] is fearless and tempts the disaster [...] of sailing toward any danger and for him every daring is permissible, the sea, our sea sprawled before us is open’.[[10]](#endnote-10) Facing danger indicates man’s liberation from his need of God, of comfort and certainty. For Nietzsche, the ability to be happy embodies the ability to desire life in its entirety, and as Wittgenstein claims,[[11]](#endnote-11) to be happy means to live in agreement with the world. The fear of suffering is the unwillingness to comply with life itself and the limitations enforced upon it is in fact the prevention of happiness related to meaning, agency, authenticity, creativity, love, community life, and a variety of actions whose experience involves happiness and suffering intertwined in life itself. Intense life events are experienced as a synergy of happiness and suffering.

The experience of love is a powerful testament to the fact that happiness and suffering can manifest themselves simultaneously and be as closely linked as conjoined twins. There are virtually countless films, novels and poems that proclaim as much. Even the Old Testament contains descriptions of love as a potent mixture of happiness and suffering. The Song of Songs reflects an already widespread trope that views love as containing joy and life force, but also unexpected pain that one is powerless to avoid: ‘Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it’ (Song of Songs 8:6-7). A more comprehensive overview of the Biblical text reveals that passionate and unbridled love towards another person necessarily entails great suffering alongside the great happiness it brings. The message, therefore, that the Old Testament wishes to impart is that only if God is made into the ultimate object of man’s passion, can love fulfil its promise: to be a positive and life-giving force of happiness.

**4. Conclusion: Happiness and Suffering in Life’s Journey**

Suffering, as it turns out, is necessary because it formulates personality and constructs the ability to overcome life’s challenges. A life full of happiness and significance, according to Nietzsche, is related to the term ‘self-overcoming’ and there is no self-overcoming without suffering. In the process of overcoming one experiences the immense joy of discovery, however it is entwined with suffering. ‘But the worst enemy whom you can encounter will always be yourself; you ambush yourself in caves and woods […] You must want to burn yourself up in your own flame: how could you become new if you did not first become ashes!’[[12]](#endnote-12) The hero who overcomes himself, is one who enables himself to face his emotions and to feel his pain and suffering. Individuals who do not enable this, will be inaccessible, rigid, and superficial and will not succeed in embarking on life’s journey. Suffering motivates the individual to embark on a journey of growth and development. To prevail over suffering and contain it, one must be tolerant.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Existential suffering stems from our experiencing ourselves as captives in time.[[14]](#endnote-14) Suffering is caused not only by mental traits and difficult, painful, and harmful life events, but also from the manner in which the individual copes with them. Awareness of the individual’s part in creating his own suffering is the foundation for change.[[15]](#endnote-15) One who finds meaning in suffering and renders it a lever for internal growth, develops the mental qualities of a hero who takes steps toward a journey to the self—a journey that also entails great happiness. Insufferable experiences often incorporate many happy moments, as Viktor Frankl accurately articulated in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl describes the unbearable suffering he experienced in Auschwitz and his attempt to find meaning, hope, and even happiness within ‘hell’: ‘I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved’.[[16]](#endnote-16)

While happiness and suffering are intertwined in life’s journey, the unnecessary pursuit of happiness leads to unnecessary suffering. The Roman philosopher, Seneca, argues that the pursuit of happiness causes the individual’s inability to distinguish between happiness and pleasure. This misconception not only distances the individual from happiness but also causes him or her to suffer.

‘Even those people who declare the highest good to be in the belly, see what a dishonorable position they have assigned to it [...] it is owing to pleasure itself that they are unhappy [...] Virtue is a lofty quality [...] pleasure is low, slavish, weakly, perishable [...] [it] fades away as soon as its first impulse is over’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Like Seneca, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard suggests that we try to enjoy everything that exists in our world without worrying about tomorrow. Worrying about an unknown future in the attempt to ensure future happiness only distances us from simple existence and fills our lives with great suffering. Worry, warns Kierkegaard, is a tell-tale sign of a dangerous worldview, an expression of the desire for control. Instead, Kierkegaard proposes an existence unmotivated by comparison to others. The restless culture of comparison tempts people to imagine themselves in the place of others, or to imagine the other in his or her own place. However, the other is never in my place, nor am I in the place of the other. Comparison only distances people from themselves, from their very existence. Those who experience their existence from inside, from the inside out, hear the invitation to rejoice in their lot. On the other hand, those who experience their existence from the outside in, that is, those who know themselves only through comparison to others, refuse to rejoice and to be happy with their lot. This comparative worry comes at the cost of losing one’s joy in life, suffering jealousy, a feeling of victimhood and self-pity, as well as losing the freedom to live simply.[[18]](#endnote-18)

**Notes**

1. Ran Hacohen, *Mehadshei ha-berit ha-yeshenah: Hitmodedut hokhmat Yisrael ba-Germania im bikoret ha-Mikra ba-meah ha-tisha-asar* (Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible: German-Jewish reception of biblical criticism) (Bnei-Brak: HaKibbutz Hameuhad, 2006), 23; Miriam Eliav-Feldon, *Mahapehat ha-defus* (The print revolution) (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Press, 2000), 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. E. Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gershom Scholem, “Al Het Vaonesh” (On sin and punishment). In *Od Davar* (Explications and implications: Writings on Jewish heritage and renaissance) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992), 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Meir Weiss, *The Story of Job’s Beginning: Job 1-2: A Literary Analysis* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1987), 390. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. by G.T. Thompson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959), 154-155. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Friedrich Nietzsche*, The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kauffman and H. J. Holingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §221. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Yuval Lurie, *Tracking the Meaning of Life: A Philosophical Journey* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Nietzsche, Will, §478. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Eli Elon, *Yitzirah atzmit: Khaim, adam, ve-yetzirah al pi Nietzsche* (Self creation: Life, man, and creation according to Nietzsche) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ruth Netzer, *Masa ha-gibor: Tahalikh hitavut hanefesh ba-mitus, b'maagal ha-haim u be-terapia* (The hero's journey: The becoming of the spirit in myth, life circle, and therapy) (Ben Shemen: Modan, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Jean Paul Sarte, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Existentialism is a humanism) (Paris: Editions Nagel, 1958). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Nezter, *Masa*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logo-Therapy*, trans. Ilse Lasche (New York: Washington Square, 1992), 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Annaeus Seneca, *On the Happy Life*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: George Bell & Sons, 1900), book VII, www.greatbooksojai.com. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Søren Kierkegaard, “The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air,” in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp-pp.

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