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Complementarity between happiness and suffering

O komplementarności szczęścia i cierpienia

ABSTRACT:

The essay focuses on the mutual relations between the experience of happiness and suffering. The purpose of the following analysis is to show that the experience of happiness is in some special cases conditioned by the experience of suffering. By showing this, there has been also rejected the key thesis of hedonism, which claims that one should always avoid suffering at all cost. The article analyzes four cases of complementarity between happiness and suffering. Each of them refers to a particular area of interdependence of both categories: psychological, cognitive, moral and mystical.

KEYWORDS:

happiness, suffering,
formative experience

STRESZCZENIE:

Esej koncentruje się na wzajemnych relacjach między doświadczeniem szczęścia a cierpieniem. Celem poniższych analiz jest wykazanie, że doświadczenie szczęścia jest w niektórych szczególnych przypadkach uwarunkowane doświadczeniem cierpienia. Pokazując to, odpiera się równocześnie kluczową tezę hedonizmu, która twierdzi, że cierpienia należy unikać zawsze i za wszelką cenę. Artykuł analizuje cztery przypadki komplementarności szczęścia a cierpienia. Każda z nich odnosi się do określonego obszaru współzależności obu kategorii: psychologicznej, poznawczej, moralnej i mistycznej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

szczęście, cierpienie,
doświadczenie kształtujące

The priest Jan Twardowski in the poem entitled *When you are saying* states:

...take a breath and look
there are falling from clouds
small great misfortunes necessary for happiness...

The strength of these verses comes first from their counter-intuitive character. While thinking about misfortunes, we do not treat them as gifts from heaven,

nor do we see in them the factors necessary to multiply our happiness. We associate unhappiness rather with the opposite of happiness, with events that stand in our way and make it difficult for us to achieve our desired goal. Guided by this kind of approach, one should assume that if we did not have any vision of happiness, we would not be able to imagine any misfortune. This is what Marcel Proust thinks, saying: "As for happiness, it has only this usefulness that it makes possible misfortune."¹ This is profound pessimism. With this kind of assumption happiness is treated only as a means of stressing possible misfortunes. It can, therefore, be said that the vision of happiness, which is fiction, allows us to perceive the reality of unhappiness. In priest Twardowski, the opposite is true: misfortune is a necessary means to achieve full happiness. Unhappiness is real – the author of the poem does not deny it – but from the perspective of the optimist, who Twardowski is undoubtedly himself, it seems to be small. The greatness, that attracts here particular attention, is imposed on it by happiness, which is the highest and, in a sense, the default reality. At the same time Twardowski is cautious: he is not willing to assign greatness to all misfortunes, only to the small ones, which give us the chance to deal with them and to make them over for our own benefit. The universal theorem – "every suffering is morally great" – would entangle us in this case in unsolvable, ideological debates around the problem of theodicy. Is it really as Saint Paul states in the First Letter to the Corinthians that "God (...) will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." (1 Corinthians, 10:13)? One could have serious doubts about that. So, let us return to these "small mishaps" which we certainly need to experience happiness to a greater extent or to a more intense degree.

1. THE CONCEPT OF HAPPINESS

Happiness has more than one face. Analyzing the concept of happiness, Władysław Tatarkiewicz distinguished four possible understandings of it.² First of all, we

¹ One should not confuse these words with, for example, the second verse of *Tao Te Ching*, where we read that: "When people see some things as beautiful / ugliness is created. / When people see some things as good / evil is created." The essence of these words is the denial of the reality of both beauty and ugliness, both good and evil. They arise only when our vision of the world begins to differentiate on the principle of dualistic thinking.

² W. Tatarkiewicz, *O szczęściu*, Chapter I: *Cztery pojęcia szczęścia* (Four Meanings of Happiness), pp. 15–29.

describe by “happiness” a favorable event or favorable chain of events. In this approach, happiness is neither someone’s emotion nor a distinctive feature of somebody’s character, but refers to a particularly convenient connection of one’s needs or expectations, on the one hand, and of the accompanying circumstances, on the other. In this colloquial – as Tatarkiewicz writes “everyday” – meaning, happiness is the same as a successful fate. However, what is difficult to agree in the given author, is the classification of this form of happiness as objective. Happiness as a fortune is not a part of the objective world. The same event for one person can be an

Podejmując w tym kontekście problem cierpienia, należałoby w pierwszej kolejności postawić pytanie, czy jest ono do pogodzenia z którymkolwiek z wyszczególnionych (...) pojęć szczęścia. Jako, że bez wątplenia jest ono niemożliwe do pogodzenia z rozumieniem szczęścia jako przyjemności i radości, należałoby się zastanowić, czy takie pojęcie szczęścia jest w ogóle do zaakceptowania. Jak się wkrótce przekonamy tego rodzaju hedonistyczna wizja szczęścia stanowi poważne uproszczenie i jako taka nie może być traktowana jako reprezentatywna do analiz tego zjawiska.

instance of happiness, for some other, however, of misfortune. Let us give a simple example: for a thief who stole a woman’s purse, it was a lucky coincidence that the victim of the theft was so absorbed in the situation that she did not pay attention to her property. For the victim, in turn, this was, of course, an extremely unhappy circumstance. If, then, to look for a correct classification in this case, one should define this kind of understanding of happiness as a relational one.

Another understanding of happiness described by Tatarkiewicz is psychological in nature, that is, it refers to the emotional state that at a given time or in a given period of time accompanies us. This kind of happiness is comparable to a feeling of joy, with all the characteristics to this concept baggage of transitoriness, and sometimes even illusiveness. For joy can overcome us for completely fanciful reasons – sometimes even deliberately induced, for example by means of drugs – or by mistake. From the psychological point of view, it does not matter if we experience joy because we have been deceived, for example regarding the fact that we have won a lottery ticket or because something really favorable has happened to us. The difference is visible only to the observer who, in advance, can imagine the anger or sadness which will result from the disappointment. This kind of understanding of happiness does not take into account such classifications like true and false, or authentic and inauthentic happiness. It seems, however, that our colloquial understanding of happiness demands a concept that would be “sensitive” also to this kind of distinctions.

This postulate is met by another concept of happiness discussed by Tatarkiewicz, namely, understanding thereof as a moral category. In this approach, it corresponds to the ancient category of *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία, literally “good spirit”), which refers to the state of having by the human being of all perfections characteristic to them. It is, therefore, not about material goods, but only spiritual and intellectual goods. As a result of attaining all these qualities, man himself becomes quite perfect. Whether this kind of perfection is achievable by the human being in the worldly life on their own, or it can be achieved only after death, thanks to the intervention of the divine instance, has been the subject of many theological debates (to quote only Pelagius’ dispute with Saint Augustine). In this case, Aristotle speaks with the voice of a reasonable mediator, for whom the pursuit of happiness itself is already happiness, and the perseverance of the will to get perfected is perfection. This kind of understanding of happiness does not allow the possibility of false happiness, that is, which is the result of illusion, confusion or manipulation. Eudemonic happiness consists in the actual achievement of personal perfection, in the actual becoming a more complete and richer personality. In such a case, a non-aligned observer may turn out to be a more accurate criterion of happiness than the subject themselves (quite contrary to happiness understood psychologically).³

³ As an apt and witty illustration, one could quote the tale of Hans Christian Andersen *New Robes of the King*.

The last category of happiness specified by the author of the treatise *O szczęściu* (On Happiness) is its existential understanding, which includes satisfaction with life, or, to put it somewhat more precisely, satisfaction with the biographical line left behind.⁴ Life in this approach becomes the subject of aesthetic reflection and is considered in the light of very similar criteria as a work of art: cohesion, narrative continuity, dramaturgy, and range of the means of expression used. This understanding of happiness we can encounter in eminent artists who – maybe a bit immodestly – transpose the prominence of their works onto their entire lives. Thus, the course of their lives becomes, in a way, their greatest artistic achievement. It seems that Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Thomas Mann considered their lives in the similar spirit. The only problem that arises with such understanding of happiness is its paradoxicality. Happiness can never be fully experienced: the only observer who knows all the subtleties of this work of art called life cannot admire it when it gets finally finished.

At these four categories the analysis presented by Władysław Tatarkiewicz comes to its end. One can, however, have doubts whether it covers the whole range of the phenomenon called “happiness.” All forms of happiness specified by him concern the strictly human sphere: they refer to the feeling of pleasure, the experience of personal fulfillment, and satisfaction with one’s whole life. What, however, is missing in this enumeration is happiness, which could result from the elevation of man over human condition and putting them directly in the face of the Absolute. Such an experience of absolute happiness seems to be a characteristic of saints and mystics. Teresa of Avila has in mind this kind of happiness when she writes:

Through the Cross both happiness
And life are given,
For there is no other road
That leads to Heaven.⁵

⁴ Considering that this kind of happiness is verifiable only by the subject of life itself, one can have doubts about the extent to which such understanding of happiness is susceptible to manipulation and self-suggestion (the narration of our life is not something ready and closed, but is subject to constant transformations, depending on the variable dynamics of memory).

⁵ Theresa of Avila, *The Complete Works*, Vol. III, Burns & Oats, London-New York 2002, p. 298.

The fact that the mystical experience may be related to the previously specified forms of happiness does not undermine its uniqueness. Such experience certainly has a unique moral and existential value, though it does not have to be necessarily – what should be remembered – pleasant and joyful. However, what is the main source of joy and fulfillment in this case stands in sharp contrast to what we value so much in the “worldly” forms of happiness. In the case of the latter, the first step is to fill one’s individuality with a specific quality or content, in the case of mystical experience, in turn, it is primarily about the negation of one’s individuality and its unification with some form of absolute being. For Saint Teresa, the happiness of mystical experience is not about satisfaction drawn from this individual experience, or even from the moral perfection that results from it, but above all from the fact that “[it] leads to Heaven.”

2. SUFFERING AS A NECESSARY ELEMENT OF THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE

Taking the question of suffering, one should first ask whether it is compatible with any of the above-mentioned notions of happiness. Since it is undoubtedly incompatible with understanding happiness as pleasure and joy, one should consider whether such a concept of happiness is acceptable at all. As we will soon see, this kind of hedonistic vision of happiness is a serious simplification and as such cannot be regarded as representative enough for the analysis of this phenomenon. Robert Nozick provides an argument for this thesis in the book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. In it, he proposes to carry out a thought experiment, the purpose of which is to diagnose the extent to which pleasure is a criterion determining the quality of human life. This is how Nozick formulates his argument:

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s experiences? (...) Of course, while in the tank you won’t know that you’re there; you’ll think it’s all actually happening. (...) Would you plug in? *What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?*⁶

⁶ R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Blackwell, Oxford, UK – Cambridge, USA 1974, pp. 42–43.

If the basic value deciding about the quality of human life was the inner feeling of pleasure and satisfaction, everyone would agree without hesitation to connect to this kind of device. However, most of us would hesitate to let themselves be plugged into such a machine. There are several arguments that lead us to be skeptical about considering life from this purely subjective perspective. According to Nozick, this results from the fact that, first of all, we want to do certain things, and not just experience doing them. Although it is true that it is impossible to act, without experiencing – in a more or less adequate way – this action, one can experience the action without acting at all. With this kind of case, we are dealing, for example, in dreams or in virtual reality; then our action turns out to be illusory in the sense that it does not leave behind any permanent traces (artifacts). Secondly, what matters to us in life is not just being someone, but first of all becoming someone, or gradually getting to a certain state of perfection, which is the same as our personal development. This argument is essentially a special variation of the previous one. The only difference is that here we ourselves are the substrate on which our action gets imprinted, and not the world around us. According to Nozick, plugging into this type of machine would be synonymous with a very particular case of suicide, not physical, but personal. As people, we would stop developing ourselves. Thirdly, he claims, this type of machine would limit our life experience to what has already been experienced or invented by someone, and then stored in the program's memory. This virtual reality would be entirely human and it would be impossible to experience anything that would actually go beyond the realm of human experience. What I mean here are, first and foremost, religious or mystical experiences. In conclusion, it should be stated that the unattractiveness of the vision of constant experiencing virtual pleasure and satisfaction comes, first of all, from the fact that what we really expect from life is a real and authentic experience. We want our lives to manifest both in the world around us and in ourselves, and our experience of the world to be marked by a mysterious, and sometimes even mystical, unknown.

From Nozick's claim that not only pleasure is important in life, there is still a way to go before saying that suffering is important in our lives because it is an inalienable element of happiness. However, we will get much closer to this goal if we manage to show that what Nozick believes is essential in our lives, that is certain activities and experiences that give us a sense of personal fulfillment and development, are sometimes impossible to imagine without a certain amount of

suffering. This kind of activities and experiences, which I will call “formative” are by nature an expression of or they touch the very core of our personality. As such, they are no longer under our control, because we are not able to dose the level of our involvement in them, nor the degree of their intensity. These experiences, of course, do not involve suffering by necessity, but sometimes suffering is unavoidable, in fact translating itself into their formative character.

3. FORMATIVE EXPERIENCE AND SUFFERING

Although not all formative experiences assume suffering, in some cases the lack of experience of suffering would deprive them of their unique character. Suffering gives these experiences an added value, because (1) it strengthens us (preparing for future difficult experiences), (2) it teaches us something on ourselves (and gives us, thereby, deeper insight into our personality), (3) or it intensifies the level of emotions we experience (which makes them become points of reference for our other experiences).

As for the first case – let us shortly describe it as “psychological” – there is applicable the saying that “what will not kill you will strengthen you.” We can relate it both to the hardships of everyday experience and to decisive life breakthroughs. Research shows that being exposed to life-threatening situations of medium intensity, in conditions where we have the opportunity to deal with them, results in improved self-confidence, in an immunization to the difficulties going to be experienced in the future, and in an increase in life satisfaction. A person who was protected from all kinds of difficulties, or simply did not have the opportunity to be challenged by them, will have problems adjusting to difficult life situations, in particular to face adversities. Of course, similar consequences will result from a situation in which a person is confronted with a difficulty that will overwhelm them, that is, one which they will not be able to deal with or adapt to. As the authors of the extensive metadata write about this issue:

(...) adversity has the potential to foster future resilience. Specifically, without adversity, individuals are not challenged to manage stress, so that the toughness and mastery they might otherwise generate remains undeveloped. High levels of adversity, on the other hand, are more likely to overwhelm individuals’ ability to manage stress, thereby disrupting toughness and mastery. However, low/moderate adversity provides a more manageable challenge than high levels of adversity, thus promoting

the development of toughness and mastery. This toughness and mastery, in turn, should facilitate (a) greater resilience, manifested as a less negative response when coping with subsequent adversity, and (b) better mental health and well-being over time, regardless of exposure to recent adversity.⁷

Therefore, it should be assumed that a greater tendency to satisfaction with life, and consequently to happiness, requires confrontation with adversities, which in turn is associated with the experience of discomfort and suffering.

The second mentioned case – which can be described, in the Heideggerian style, as “aletheic” – refers to experiences which, as a result of their drama, activate in us attitudes – both positive and negative – which in normal everyday life have no chance to manifest. They are therefore a kind of “developer” of fully authentic layers of our personality, which usually remain dormant under the layer of learned moral norms and social principles. Wisława Szymborska wrote about this kind of experience in the poem *Minuta ciszy po Ludwice Wawrzyńskiej* (The Minute of Silence after Ludwika Wawrzyńska). This poem is devoted to a woman who with real heroic sacrifice saved four children from a burning barrack, finally paying for it with her life. Certainly, this deed was a heroic act. Certainly not the sense of her own heroism pushed her to rescue the trapped children. It was rather a sense of duty to help a person in need. Heroism was only the result of this action, because it revealed in this woman the layers of determination and strength that she probably would not have expected for herself. Therefore, Szymborska writes in the final verses of her poem:

We know so much about ourselves,
how much we have been tested.
I say this to you
from my unknown heart.

What deserves to be emphasized are the last words of this stanza: “from my unknown heart.” These are words of the poet, who speaks in the voice of everyone

⁷ M.D. Seery, E. Alison Holman, Roxane Cohen Silver, *Whatever Does Not Kill Us: Cumulative Lifetime Adversity, Vulnerability, and Resilience*, “Journal of Personality and Social Psychology” 99 (6), p. 1026. It is worth noting that the authors, when talking about difficulties or adversities in life, do not only take into account typical traumatic events, but also cumulative difficulties (a lower degree of stress stretched over a longer period of time).

who has not encountered this kind of dramatic situation in life, and, therefore, does not know – because how should they know it – who they would become, how they would behave, if facing a similar kind of challenge. It is difficult to say that we know ourselves, or that we know who we are, if we have not been confronted with any such difficult, painful or tragic situation.

The positive dimension of suffering can, however, have an even deeper, intrinsic character. In each of the above cases, suffering gains value due to some external consequence: a psychological or cognitive one. If these results could be achieved in some other way, it would be perfectly legitimate – also in terms of morality – to choose the option where the suffering would be reduced to the necessary minimum, if not removed at all. However, one can cite examples of situations in which experiencing suffering is desirable in psychological sense and good in moral sense. The desire to remove or avoid it could, therefore, be treated in such cases either as a kind of deviation or as an immoral act. A good example of an experience whose value lies in the pain and suffering it causes is the experience of loss of a loved one and the resulting feeling of sadness, sorrow and grief. An interesting observation confirming this thesis is the content of our moral commitment to someone close to us who is experiencing the pain of mourning. It is our moral duty in this situation to help this person in a material and spiritual sense, and to assure them of our readiness to give ear to their pain. However, our duty is certainly not to eliminate their pain, and to bring them back to their previous state.

Grief is clearly a form of suffering. Yet the duty to eliminate suffering does not apply to it. To say this is not at all to deny the existence of duties to alleviate such suffering in certain ways. When one's friend is grieving, one ought to be there to give comfort and support, and doing so may help make grief bearable, or at least less bad. In many cases such comfort reduces the amount of suffering that occurs. But to require this sort of amelioration is not to require the elimination of the suffering. Indeed, even if this were within our power-if, for instance, I had a pill that I could give my grieving friend that would wipe out her grief-it would, it seems to me, quite likely be wrong for me to offer it.⁸

⁸ T. Jollimore, *Meaningless Happiness and Meaningful Suffering*, "The Southern Journal of Philosophy" Vol. XLII (2004), p. 342.

Measures aimed at radically tearing someone out of the state of mourning would be considered as unemphatic, as deprived of delicacy, or even directly as immoral. We are convinced that this particular type of suffering is important to us in the existential sense, and, therefore, we are required to work it over gradually.

The experiences listed above are common to all people and constitute an important element of life experience of every human being. It would be difficult to call a person who would be spared all kinds of difficulties or suffering, a happy one. We would rather talk about such a person that their life is blissfully carefree. In the concept of happiness, in turn, it is enclosed that it results from a certain psychological, moral or spiritual process that does not run smoothly, because it requires confrontation with some inner and outer challenges (for example, with our own complexes, with our inadequate self-image, or with our own sadness and despair).

4. MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AND SUFFERING

There is still another kind of experience which, though considered to be the highest form of happiness, is very often associated with the feeling of suffering. I did not include this experience in the previous paragraph because it is difficult to properly call it "life experience." What I mean here is mystical experience. Since mystical experience refers to the most abstract level of human experience, where all individualization and identification disappear, it cannot be equated with religious experience, which in its visionary character directly refers to a specific dogmatic order. So, while talking about mystical experience, it is acceptable to rely on both Western and Eastern traditions.

That the experience of divineness does not take place in the atmosphere of joyful ecstasy, but can be peppered with doubt and pain, are indicated by the verses written by Saint John of the Cross. In the song entitled *The Dark Night*, we read:

O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover.⁹

⁹ St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ICS Publications, Washington 1991, p. 114 (*Stanzas*, No. 5).

The act of union with God (the Absolute), which is the essence of mystical experience, is presented here metaphorically as a night, a state that should be associated with loss and loneliness. A similar dramatic confession we encounter in the passion scene, when Christ, in a fit of despair, utters the words: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, King James Version). According to Barbara O'Brien, the vision of a painful loss or loss of hope is a motif that very often repeats in the descriptions of mystical experiences and which, moreover, is an inseparable element of this kind of experience:

(...) mystics of many religious traditions have described the not-at-all blissful "dark night of the soul" experience and recognized it was a necessary phase of their particular spiritual journey, not something to be avoided.¹⁰

However, when we talk about suffering in the context of mystical experience, we must remember that such conceptual qualifications may be highly unreliable in the case of the absolute experience. Although, on the one hand, this experience implies a special type of suffering, on the other hand, it removes all conceptual qualities, thus making the worldly dichotomy of suffering and happiness useless. When we talk about the suffering experienced by Christian martyrs, we have a problem reconciling its brutality with the almost joyful readiness of these early Christ's followers to give witness to their faith. However, it should be remembered that their motivation was based on a perception of suffering distant from ours, because they considered their painful experience as identical with the happiness of salvation. Suffering for them was the ultimate attempt to unite with Christ, a form of imitation of the suffering of the Savior himself, or a participation in the very act of Salvation. The experience of a martyr's death was treated as another act of birth, this time for eternal life. Some even named it "the baptism with blood":

Let us only who, by the Lord's permission, have given the first baptism to believers, also prepare each one for the second; (...) more precious in Honor – a baptism wherein angels baptize – a baptism in which God and His Christ exult – a baptism after which no one sins any more – a baptism which completes the increase of our

¹⁰ B. O'Brien, *Buddhist Meditation and the Dark Night of the Soul*, web source: <https://www.thoughtco.com/buddhist-meditation-and-the-dark-night-449760>, access date: 22.10.2018.

faith – a baptism which, as we withdraw from the world, immediately associates us with God.¹¹

In the case of mystical experience, we can either speak of suffering as an inalienable moment that precedes unification with the Absolute, or the disappearance of all suffering in the face of unification with the Absolute. In both cases,

Rozpatrując różne pojęcia szczęścia, można stwierdzić, że nie sposób go rozumieć na zasadzie opozycji wobec zjawiska cierpienia. Nie można zatem również zaakceptować prostej zasady hedonizmu, że należy unikać każdej formy cierpienia. Okazuje się bowiem, że niektóre postacie cierpienia są czynnikiem sprzyjającym, a niekiedy nawet koniecznym w osiągnięciu szczęścia. Cierpienie bowiem w istotny sposób przyczynia się do zwiększenia naszej umiejętności doświadczania przyjemności i szczęścia, pozwala nam w pełniejszy sposób rozwijać własną osobowość, a w końcu pogłębia również intensywność naszych życiowych doświadczeń.

everyday categories, by means of which we describe the experiences of suffering and happiness, get distorted. The shock that Pyrrho of Elis experienced when witnessing Kalanos's funeral was rooted in the fact that the category of pain and suffering, considered by him as universal, turned out to be relative in the face of this

¹¹ J.N. Abogado, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Early Church. History, Motives and Theology*, "Philippiniana Sacra" Vol. XLX, No. 150 (May-August 2015), p. 243.

act of heroism done by this gymnosofist master. If to believe Cicero, Kalanos also attributed to his death a higher, mystical meaning:

According to Cicero (Divin. 1.47), as he was about to die he proclaimed this to be a glorious death, like that of Herakles, for when "this mortal frame is burned the soul will find the light."¹²

CONCLUSIONS

Considering various concepts of happiness, one can say that it is impossible to understand this concept by contrasting it with the phenomenon of suffering. Therefore, one cannot also accept the simple principle of hedonism which claims that every form of suffering must be avoided. The closer analyses bring us to the conclusion that some forms of suffering are favorable to, and sometimes even necessary to achieve happiness. Suffering significantly contributes to the increase of our ability to experience pleasure and happiness, allows us to develop our own personality in a more complete way, and, finally, deepens the intensity of our life experiences.

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