Happiness, Contentment and the Good Life

by

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This paper is an analysis of the concept of contentment and its relationship to the notions of happiness and the good life. Many philosophers have argued that the concept of happiness can be defined or analyzed simply in terms of “contentment” or “being satisfied (or pleased) with one’s life.” Others have made the more modest claim that being satisfied with one’s life is necessary for being a happy person. Philosophers have also discussed the place of contentment in the good life. Few of them attach any great value to contentment. (The stoics are a notable exception to this.) Nietzsche goes so far as to say that being contented is incompatible with having a good life. I will propose an analysis of the concept of contentment in the first section of the paper. Then, I will consider the relationship between happiness and contentment and argue that being contented (with one’s life) is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a happy person. In the final section of the paper, I will propose and defend a view concerning the normative significance of contentment and its place in the good life.

I

There are at least two distinct senses of the concept of contentment—a positive and a negative one. To say that a person is satisfied or contented with something might mean that he is not dissatisfied with it—that he finds it acceptable (tolerable, satisfactory, etc.) and that he is willing to put up with it as it is. Or, it might mean that he is positively pleased with it. Hereafter, I will use the expression “being contented with something” for being satisfied with something in the negative sense and “being pleased with something” for being satisfied with something in the positive sense.

Being Contented With Something

Let us consider satisfaction in the negative sense first. Being contented with something only requires the absence of dissatisfaction. It does not require that one make or be disposed to make favorable assessments of the thing in question. Nor does it require that one have or be disposed to have positive feelings about it. However, contentment would seem to require the relative absence of negative assessments and feelings about the thing in question. “Being contented with
something” also involves being willing to accept it as it is. To this extent the concept of contentment is tied to various sorts of action tendencies. It is largely in virtue of this that we can say that it’s possible for a person to be mistaken or deceived in thinking that he’s contented with something. Suppose that a man is disposed to assess his marriage favorably and feel satisfied with it. However, he also devotes almost all of his spare time to marriage counseling, group therapy, Masters and Johnson sex therapy, and other activities whose purpose it is to improve his marriage. In that case, I think that we would be inclined to say that he is deceived in thinking that he is satisfied with his marriage. However, a person can be contented with something even if he regards it as less than perfect and even if he would prefer it to be different in certain respects. Suppose that if it were within my power to do so I would bring it about that I make $5 million a year instead of just $4.9 million. It’s still possible that I am contented with my salary. But, in the present case, I could not be said to be “perfectly contented” with it. Contentment admits of various degrees. There would seem to be an upper limit or intrinsic maximum to contentment. A person can be said to be perfectly contented with something iff: 1) he is not disposed to make unfavorable assessments of it, 2) he is not disposed to feel dissatisfied with it, and 3) he would not prefer it to be any different than he believes it to be—where this is to be understood in terms of his action tendencies in various hypothetical situations.

Sometimes facts about how a person is disposed to act can also warrant us in saying that he is contented with something, even though he may claim not to be. Consider the following case. I claim to be displeased or discontented about the suffering of a personal enemy of mine. Suppose also that I am unwilling to do anything to relieve his suffering even though I know that I could easily do so without sacrificing or giving up anything which I value except for whatever pleasure I may derive from the knowledge of his suffering. This would be enough to show that I am mistaken or deceived in thinking that I am displeased or discontented about his suffering. Being discontented with something involves having some kind of willingness to try to change it. This is not to deny that a person can be discontented with something even if he never tries to change or improve it. He may think that nothing can be done to improve it or that doing so wouldn’t be worth the effort. However, at the very least, being discontented with something requires that one would be willing to try to change or improve it if one thought that one could do so without giving up anything which one values.

Being disposed to assess something favorably and/or feel pleased with it is neither necessary nor sufficient for being contented with it. Such dispositions provide a prima facie reason for thinking that one is contented with the thing in question. However, facts about how one acts or is disposed to act may be sufficient to override this presumption. Similarly, the fact that a person is disposed to assess something unfavorably and/or feel dissatisfied with it is a prima facie reason for thinking that he is discontented with it. But, again this presumption can be overriden by facts about how he acts or is disposed to act. I have tried to enumerate the sorts of factors which are relevant to determining whether or not a person is contented with something. The degree to which one is contented
or discontented with something is a function of such things as the strength of one's feelings about it and the extent of the sacrifices which one would be willing to make in order to change it. In view of the extreme vagueness of the concept of contentment (how much less than perfectly contented must a person be before we say that he is discontented with something?) it would be foolish for me to try to make this account any more precise than it is.

A person who is contented with his life could live a thoroughly joyless and ho-hum life. Clearly contentment (in my sense) is not sufficient for happiness. Happiness is a positive state and requires something more than the mere absence of dissatisfaction. If we wish to analyze happiness in terms of satisfaction or any related notions, then we must look to the second general concept which I mentioned earlier—that of being pleased with something.

Being Pleased With Something

In a recent paper, Theodore Benditt draws a distinction between two different senses of satisfaction similar to my distinction between being contented with something and being pleased with it. He proposes an analysis of being satisfied with something in the positive sense. One of the distinctive features of Benditt's account is that he does not take being contented with something to be a necessary condition of one's being pleased with it. I believe that this is mistaken. Benditt defines being satisfied (pleased) with one's life as follows:

\[ N \] is satisfied with his life throughout \( t \) if (and only if) \( N \) is disposed when he considers his life during \( t \), to feel satisfied with his life.\(^3\)

This commits him to the more general claim that to be pleased with something (or to be satisfied with it in the positive sense) is to be disposed to feel pleased or satisfied with it. Feeling pleased or satisfied with something involves having some sort of pleasant feeling or, as Benditt puts it, "some sort of feeling with positive tone."\(^4\) Benditt also notes that feelings of satisfaction are generally diffuse and unlocalized, as opposed to what are commonly called "physical pleasures" and "physical pains" which are felt in particular parts of the body.\(^5\)

Benditt's view implies that it's logically impossible for a person to be mistaken or deceived in thinking that he is pleased with something provided that he has or is disposed to have positive feelings about it. But this is clearly false. To revert to an earlier example, suppose that a man is disposed to feel pleased with his marriage, i.e., he is such that if he were to think about his marriage he would assess it favorably and feel pleased with it. This is a reason for thinking that he is pleased with his marriage. However, this presumption can be overridden by other considerations. For instance, if the man devotes almost all of his available time to trying to change or improve his marriage, then he cannot be said to be pleased with it no matter how he feels. Of course, it's possible that a person who deceives himself about something might cease to be discontented with it as a result. This is perfectly consistent with my argument. For my purposes, it's only essential to claim that a person could succeed in deceiving himself into thinking
that he is satisfied with something (and become such that he is disposed to feel satisfied with it) without thereby ceasing to be dissatisfied with it.6

It is possible for a person to be deceived or mistaken in thinking that he's pleased with something, even if he is generally disposed to feel pleased with it. This could not be the case if being pleased with something were simply a matter of how one feels. What enables us to account for the fallibility of such judgments is the fact that the sorts of action tendencies which count against a person's being contented with something also count against his being pleased with it. Consider the following definition: a person S is pleased with X iff: i) S is disposed to assess X favorably and/or ? feel pleased with it, and ii) S's action tendencies are compatible with his being contented with it. I deliberately leave i) ambiguous. But, clearly we need to require something like i) in order to distinguish between being positively pleased with something and merely being satisfied with it in the negative sense. We need ii) in order to account for the fact that it's possible for someone who is generally disposed to feel pleased with something to be mistaken in thinking that he's pleased with it. The conjunction of i) and ii) entails that S is contented with X. So, our definition is equivalent to the following:

A person, S, is pleased with X iff: 1) S is disposed to assess X favorably and/or ? feel pleased with it, and 2) S is contented with X.

1) and 2) are clearly necessary for being pleased with something. But are they sufficient—does this account leave anything out? I can be said to be pleased (displeased) with something throughout a period of time, even if I never feel pleased (displeased) with it during that time. Right now it may be the case that I am pleased with my life as a whole even if I'm not feeling pleased with it, assessing it favorably, or even thinking about it. However, it might still be argued that the degree to which one is pleased or displeased with something during a particular period of time is at least partly a function of the sorts of actual feelings which one has about it during that time.7

Consider the following case. X and Y are both disposed to feel extremely displeased with their respective childhoods. At almost any given time each of them is such that if he were to think about his childhood he would feel extremely displeased with it. X often broods about his childhood and the things which happened to him as a child. As a result he feels displeased about his childhood much more frequently than Y who rarely, if ever, thinks about the past. Clearly Y's unhappy childhood doesn't "bother" him nearly as much as X's bothers him. But do we want to say that he's any less displeased (dissatisfied) with his childhood than X? Perhaps Y has made more of an effort to avoid thinking about the past. The circumstances of X's life may be such that they are especially liable to give rise to childhood memories—perhaps he is forced to live with his parents and thus constantly reminded of incidents from his past. If the differences between them can be accounted for in these sorts of terms, then there is no reason for thinking that X is any more displeased with his childhood than Y. However, everything else being equal, the fact that X is much more troubled by his childhood than Y is a reason for thinking that he is more displeased with it than Y is
with his. Similarly, the degree to which a person is pleased by something is partly a function of the extent of his positive feelings about it. The following principle seems plausible:

3) All other things being equal, the more frequently and intensely one feels pleased with something, the more pleased one is with it, and, all other things being equal, the more displeased one feels with something the more displeased one is with it.

If we add 3) to our account of being pleased with something, then it becomes a much more hedonistic and less dispositional notion. I see no reason to abandon the definition of being pleased with something which I presented earlier. However, for the purpose of determining the degree to which one is pleased or displeased with something we may wish to supplement this account with something like 3). In the second part of the paper, I will be operating on the assumption that 3) is true. However, my arguments there would be stronger if 3) weren’t true.

II

I would now like to explore the relationship between happiness and contentment. First, I will attempt to show that being pleased with one’s life is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a happy person. I will also argue that happiness cannot be defined in terms of any related notions, e.g., being pleased with the universe as a whole. I take “happiness” in the sense of “being a happy person.” One can be a happy person at various times even if one’s life as a whole is not a happy one. So, what I want to show here amounts to the claim that being pleased with one’s life (as a whole) as t is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a happy person at t.

1) Surely a person’s happiness or unhappiness is at least partly a function of his “balance” of pleasure relative to pain, where “pleasure” and “pain” are construed very broadly to include such things as: enjoyment, “physical pleasure,” and feelings of joy, elation, and satisfaction; “physical pain,” and feelings of sorrow, depression, frustration, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. All other things being equal, a person who enjoys himself, experiences great physical pleasure, and/or “feels good” (happy, joyful, contented) all of the time is more happy than he would have been otherwise. Likewise, a person who always experiences great physical pain and who also always feels sad, anxious and/or dissatisfied is less happy (or more unhappy) than he would have been otherwise.

If 3) (from above) is true, then all pleasures and pains which take as their objects one’s life as a whole (and possibly also any pleasures and pains which take as their objects any of the parts or aspects of one’s life) can either contribute to or detract from one’s satisfaction with one’s life as a whole. It’s not clear that there is any logical connection between a person’s hedonic balance and his satisfaction or dissatisfaction with his life unless 3) is true. In any case, there are a great many sorts of pleasures and pains whose mere occurrence (apart from any of their casual consequences) can neither contribute to nor detract from one’s satisfaction with one’s life. Many ordinary kinds of pleasures and pains, for
example, my feeling pleased about your welfare and my feeling displeased about the economic situation in India have objects other than my life as a whole or any of the parts or aspects of my life. There are also a great number of pleasures and pains which have no objects at all. It's possible to feel contented (or discontented) without feeling contented (or discontented) about anything in particular. Physical pleasures and physical pains which are felt in particular parts of the body also have no objects. To suffer a toothache isn't to feel displeased about anything. (The toothache, itself, may be an object of feelings of dissatisfaction—but that's another matter altogether.) These other kinds of pleasures and pains can contribute to or detract from one's personal happiness, apart from any of their causal consequences. Therefore, a person's happiness or unhappiness is not simply a function of the extent to which he is pleased or displeased with his life. It may be an open question whether all of one's pleasures contribute to one's happiness and whether all of one's pains detract from it. Physical pleasures and physical pains are particularly suspect in this regard. However, for my purposes, it's only essential to claim that some of these other sorts of pleasures and pains can either contribute to or detract from a person's happiness. Clearly, emotional pleasures and pains (feelings of joy, satisfaction, sorrow, depression, and dissatisfaction, etc.) which do not have one's life as a whole or any of the parts or aspects of one's life as their objects can either contribute to or detract from a person's happiness. Being pleased with something is mostly a function of how one is disposed to act and of how one is disposed to feel about various things. One's happiness or unhappiness, on the other hand, is more a function of how one actually feels.

2) The foregoing also constitutes some reason for thinking that being pleased with one's life as a whole is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a happy person. If a person's hedonic balance were sufficiently favorable he might be said to be happy, even if he weren't pleased with his life. A person who rarely broods about the sources of dissatisfaction in his own life and whose primary concerns are directed outside of himself can have an extremely pleasant and joyful life, even if he isn't pleased with it. Consider the case of an extremely altruistic person for whom the welfare of others is a constant source of joy and pleasure. Such a person could be happy even if he weren't satisfied with his own life. Take another example. An old man finally finds joy and happiness in his old age after being thoroughly miserable and unhappy for the first 70 years of his life. He is quite pleased with his present situation in life. However, he still might be displeased with his life as a whole. This is consistent with our calling him a happy person provided that he doesn't brood about the past very much. Here, it might be suggested that we define happiness in terms of being pleased with one's present situation in life. But this will not do, for feeling bad about the past or the future can make a person unhappy (in the present). Similarly, a person who "lives in" the past or the future could be happy, even if he weren't pleased with his present situation in life.

It would be possible for someone who was pleased with his own life to fail to be a happy person if his hedonic balance were sufficiently unfavorable. The following case would be an example of this. S is pleased with his life as a whole and most of its parts or aspects; and he would not prefer his life to be very much
different than he believes it to be. However, he is also an extremely compassionate and sympathetic person. He is constantly angered by things which happen to other people and the general state of the universe. His usual state of mind is similar to that of someone who has just learned of the death of a loved one. S’s life is much too sorrowful and unpleasant for us to call him a happy person. But surely it’s possible for a person to be contented or even pleased with an extremely miserable life. Some people are relatively indifferent to their own hedonic states and their own personal happiness. Such things may have very little influence on how they are disposed to feel about their lives. Or, a person like S may be pleased with his life simply because he thinks himself fortunate in comparison with others.

3) It might be suggested that we define happiness in terms of being pleased with one’s own life and the universe as a whole or the general history of the universe. This is certainly more plausible than the positions which we considered earlier. However, some of the cases which I proposed as counter-examples to the view that happiness can be analyzed simply in terms of being pleased with one’s own life also constitute counter-examples to the present view. If being pleased with one’s own life isn’t necessary for being a happy person, then being pleased with one’s life and the general history of the universe can’t be necessary either.

4) Happiness cannot be defined simply in terms of contentment or any related notions. However, we might want to hold out for a weaker sort of claim about the relationship between happiness and contentment. Consider the following propositions:

1) Being pleased with either one’s own life or the universe as a whole is a necessary condition of one’s being a happy person.
2) Being pleased with one’s own life and the universe as a whole is sufficient for being a happy person.
3) Being displeased with everything is sufficient for being an unhappy person.
4) Being pleased with everything is sufficient for being a happy person.

I take the expression “S is pleased with everything” to mean “for every thing or state of affairs, X, such that S believes that X exists or occurs at some time or other S is pleased with X.” This expression should not be taken to entail that S has a positive attitude about every single thing that would have to be involved in a complete description of the history of the universe. 3) and 4) should be understood in this light. The two strongest and most interesting of these claims, 1) and 2), seem to me to be false. Examples like the one of the old man who finds happiness very late in life which I mentioned earlier, constitute counter-examples to 1). The old man as I described him is not pleased with his life as a whole. Such a person could also be displeased with the general state of the universe, and if he were sufficiently self-centered that would not detract from his personal happiness. A counter-example to 2) I would propose the following sort of case. S lives a thoroughly miserable life. Almost everything that happens to him and those around him grieves him deeply. He is also a very fanatical Leibnizian and believes that this is the “best of all possible worlds.” In spite of his great distress about individual events which he regards as irrational, he is disposed to
different than he believes it to be. However, he is also an extremely compassionate and sympathetic person. He is constantly anguished by things which happen to other people and the general state of the universe. His usual state of mind is similar to that of someone who has just learned of the death of a loved one. S's life is much too sorrowful and unpleasant for us to call him a happy person. But surely it's possible for a person to be contented or even pleased with an extremely miserable life. Some people are relatively indifferent to their own hedonic states and their own personal happiness. Such things may have very little influence on how they are disposed to feel about their lives. Or, a person like S may be pleased with his life simply because he thinks himself fortunate in comparison with others.

3) It might be suggested that we define happiness in terms of being pleased with one's own life and the universe as a whole or the general history of the universe.\(^8\) This is certainly more plausible than the positions which we considered earlier. However, some of the cases which I proposed as counter-examples to the view that happiness can be analyzed simply in terms of being pleased with one's own life also constitute counter-examples to the present view. If being pleased with one's own life isn't necessary for being a happy person, then being pleased with one's life and the general history of the universe can't be necessary either.

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I take the expression "S is pleased with everything" to mean "for every thing or state of affairs, X, such that S believes that X exists or occurs at some time or other S is pleased with X." This expression should not be taken to entail that S has a positive attitude about every single thing that would have to be involved in a complete description of the history of the universe. 3) and 4) should be understood in this light. The two strongest and most interesting of these claims, 1) and 2), seem to me to be false. Examples like the one of the old man who finds happiness very late in life which I mentioned earlier, constitute counter-examples to 1). The old man as I described him is not pleased with his life as a whole. Such a person could also be displeased with the general state of the universe, and if he were sufficiently self-centered that would not detract from his personal happiness.\(^9\) As a counter-example to 2) I would propose the following sort of case. S lives a thoroughly miserable life. Almost everything that happens to him and those around him grieves him deeply. He is also a very fanatical Leibnizian and believes that this is the "best of all possible worlds." In spite of his great distress about individual events which he regards as irrational, he is disposed to
feel pleased with his own life and the universe as a whole and he is not disposed to try to change his own life or anything else. S is clearly not a happy person. However, he is pleased with his own life and the universe as a whole.\textsuperscript{10}

III

This section of the paper considers the place or significance of contentment in the "good life." The expression "good life" is ambiguous. To say that a person has a good life may mean one or both of the following: a) that his life is intrinsically (non-instrumentally) good or b) that he enjoys a high level of personal welfare. I will propose and defend a view concerning the intrinsic value of contentment. My discussion of the relationship between contentment and personal welfare is of a much more sketchy sort.

With the exception of the stoics, few philosophers attach great significance or value to contentment. At the very best, contentment is just one of the things which makes for a good life. There are other things which possess intrinsic value and which can contribute to a person's welfare. Among other things, to deny this would be to commit oneself to the absurd view that if a person were to have a lobotomy and become perfectly contented with his life as a result he would have a better life (in both senses of the term) than almost any human being who has ever lived. This result is of some interest in the present context for it implies that either: i) happiness cannot be defined simply in terms of contentment, or ii) happiness is not a basic normative concept in the way that Aristotle conceived of it. For Aristotle, being a happy person means the same as having an intrinsically good life and a high level of personal welfare. "We have all but defined happiness as a kind of good life and well being."\textsuperscript{11} Aristotle and the classical utilitarians make the concept of happiness the basic normative notion in their theories of value and theories of right action. Clearly, happiness is not capable of bearing this kind of normative burden unless it is plausible to identify happiness, intrinsic value, and personal welfare in the way in which Aristotle does. Although they give a radically different account of the nature of happiness, the classical utilitarians agree with Aristotle in that they take the notions of happiness, personal welfare and the (intrinsically) good life to be extensionally equivalent.

Many moralists, most notably Nietzsche, have disparaged contentment because they think that being contented prevents people from achieving their highest potentials.

I walk among this people . . . and they are becoming smaller and smaller; but this is due to their doctrine of happiness and virtue. For they are modest in virtue too—because they want contentment. But only a modest virtue gets along with contentment.\textsuperscript{12}

Undoubtedly, many people do fail to achieve their full potential as human beings on account of being (overly) contented or pleased with their lives. Nietzsche also seems to make the stronger claim that being contented with one's life is incompatible with one's having a strong desire to change or improve it. This view rests on a misunderstanding of the concept of contentment. A person who has a strong desire to change or improve something \textit{in the future} could still be contented or
even perfectly contented with it. Suppose that I have a strong desire to improve my artistic, intellectual, and athletic abilities throughout my life. It's still possible that I am perfectly contented with my life. For it might still be the case that 1) I would not prefer my past to be any different than I believe it to have been, 2) I would not prefer my present to be any different than I believe it to be, and 3) I would not prefer my future to be any different than I expect it to be. In the present case, this would require that I expect to be able to improve my abilities in the future. A person who wishes that his present level of ability at art or whatever were greater than it is is not perfectly contented with his life. But, in that case, he also desires more than just continual self-improvement in the future. A person who is dissatisfied with his present situation in life is likely to act in the very same way as someone who merely desires to improve his life in the future. We might have to examine their action tendencies in various hypothetical situations in order to distinguish between them.

The foregoing provides a resolution to an important problem in Nietzsche’s philosophy. On the one hand, he disparages contentment and suggests that contentment is incompatible with the full development of human potentials. However, he also says that contentment is an essential feature of the “good life.” The best and most fully developed people would be contented or even perfectly contented with their lives—they would “want nothing to be different.”

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati:* that one wants nothing to be different, nor forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary . . . but *love* it.  

If what I have said here is correct Nietzsche can say everything he wants to say about the “superior” type of person without contradicting himself. The superior individual is perfectly contented with his life and he has a strong desire to improve it. Nietzsche is correct in holding that contentment *may* have the undesirable consequence of causing a person to fail to achieve his highest potentials. However, he is mistaken in saying that contentment *must* have such consequences.

Nietzsche’s criticisms of contentment concern its alleged undesirable *causal consequences* and do not have any obvious bearing on its intrinsic value or the non-instrumental contribution which it can make to a person’s welfare. Causal considerations aside, contentment cannot detract from a person’s welfare. Being pleased or contented with one’s life or various parts of one’s life *can* make a positive contribution to one’s personal welfare. I would venture to make the stronger claim that, for one’s life as a whole or any part or aspect of one’s life, one is “better-off” (has a higher level of welfare) if one is pleased with it rather than not, all other things being equal. Whether being pleased or contented with things outside of one’s own life can contribute to one’s welfare in a question which I will not attempt to answer here.

What shall we say about the intrinsic value of contentment? Being pleased or contented with something *can* be intrinsically good. Surely it is better for a person to be pleased or contented rather than not with a life which is good in all other respects. Contentment can enhance the intrinsic value of a person’s life. However, it would be a mistake to simply say that the state of affairs being pleased or
contented with something is intrinsically good and leave the matter at that. Consider the following:

X) For any thing or state of affairs, it is better that one be pleased or contented with it rather than not, all other things being equal.

According to X), being pleased or contented with something—no matter what sort of thing it happens to be—is always good in and of itself. This is very dubious. For it seems that being pleased or contented is an “incorrect” attitude to hold with respect to a great many things. For instance, suppose that a virtuous person is suffering great pain. The correct attitude to have towards this state of affairs would be to be displeased rather than pleased. Not only would it be incorrect to be pleased about an innocent person’s suffering, it is bad to be pleased or contented with such things. Everything else being equal, it would be better to be displeased rather than pleased about the innocent person’s suffering. To use Moore’s terminology, contentment or the state of affairs someone’s being pleased with something does not contribute to the value of every whole of which it is a part. Chisholm would put this by saying that the state of affairs “someone’s being contented or pleased with something” is not “indefeasibly good.”

There are nine kinds of cases which we need to consider in assessing the intrinsic value of contentment:

1) Being pleased or contented with something which is good.
2) Being pleased or contented with something which is bad.
3) Being pleased or contented with something which is neither good nor bad.
4) Being displeased or discontented with something which is good.
5) Being displeased or discontented with something which is bad.
6) Being displeased or discontented with something which is neither good nor bad.
7) Being indifferent to something which is good.
8) Being indifferent to something which is bad.
9) Being indifferent to something which is neither good nor bad.

I hold that 1), 3) and 5) and intrinsically good; 2), 4), 6), 7), and 8) are bad; and that 9) is neither good nor bad. No one would seriously doubt that 1) and 3) are good, 4) and 6) bad, and that 9) is indifferent. The other aspects of my theory are more problematic and are, or would be, a matter of dispute among philosophers. I don’t think it’s possible to give conclusive arguments about such matters. However, I will say what I think can be said in defense of my assessment of 2), 5), 7) and 8).

First, let us consider 2) and 5). 2) is analogous to or perhaps even an instance of (see fns. 14 and 16) Schadenfreude. 5) is analogous to or an instance of displeasure in the bad. The value of Schadenfreude is an issue which has been much debated by philosophers. I am convinced by the arguments of Brentano and others who hold that Schadenfreude is bad. These arguments also give us a reason for thinking that 2) is bad. Whatever we say about the value of Schadenfreude also applies to contentment in the bad. Given that 2) is bad, we can infer that 5) is good. 2) is bad because being pleased or contented is an incorrect attitude to have with respect to what is bad. This, together with the fact that
indifference to the bad is incorrect (something which I shall argue for shortly), implies that discontentment or displeasure is the correct (and thus also the best) attitude to have with respect to what is bad.

Perhaps the most counter-intuitive feature of my view is my claim that 7) and 8) are bad. One might object that this implies an unduly harsh assessment of the average person's attitude towards the world around him. There are a great many good and bad things about which we feel nothing. I don't feel sorrow or displeasure every time I learn of the latest disaster in the news reports. Nor do I feel joy or pleasure every time I learn of something good. Human beings are incapable of becoming emotionally wrapped up in everything which goes on around them. My view concerning 7) and 8) might seem to imply that this inability is bad and that it is better to suffer in the knowledge of evil than to resign oneself to it. However, this objection ignores the dispositional character of indifference. To say that a person is indifferent to something is not merely to say that he doesn't feel anything. It also implies something about how the person is inclined to act. If I am indifferent to something which is good or bad, then I have absolutely no desire that it exist or not exist. Everything else, being equal, I have no preference between its existing or not existing and its changing or not changing. To say that 7) and 8) are bad is not to say that it's bad not to become emotionally involved in everything that happens or that it is good to make oneself miserable contemplating bad things. It merely implies that it's a bad thing if a person lacks the ceretis paribus desire to promote the good and eliminate evil. It might be reasonable to hold that feeling pain in the bad is not good and that the only element of displeasure or discontentment in the bad which makes it good is the correctness of one's resolve or disposition to remove evil.

I would now like to add several much needed qualifications to the view presented above. Concerning 5), the positive value of discontentment in the bad is contingent on it's being the case that the degree of discontentment is proportional to the badness of the thing in question. Consider a bad state of affairs which is of minor consequence, e.g., my unhappiness over the outcome of a baseball game. All other things being equal, it would be best if you were mildly displeased or discontented about my unhappiness (among other things this would imply that you have some inclination to remove my unhappiness). But it would not be good if my unhappiness about the baseball game became a serious source of discontentment for you or if it made you miserable.

When I say that a person has an attitude about something which is good, bad or indifferent, I mean that the thing in question is such that it would be good, bad or indifferent if it had all of the empirical characteristics which the person believes it to have. (1-9) should be understood in this light. Suppose, for instance, that I am pleased with my friend's moral character believing her to be a kind and generous person. On my view, this attitude is intrinsically good and counts as an instance of contentment in the good, even though my friend may have a perfectly awful character. To take a very different sort of case, suppose that a fanatical Nazi is pleased by the sufferings of the inmates of a concentration camp. He may sincerely believe that their suffering is intrinsically good. But, on my view, his attitude is an instance of contentment in the bad. (I am assuming that suffering of the people in the camp would be intrinsically bad, even if they
had all of the undesirable empirical characteristics which the Nazi attributes to them.)

I should like to conclude by considering the value of contentment in cases which involve self-deception and defending my view against certain objections which arise in this connection. People often attempt to become contented with certain features of their lives or their lives as a whole by deceiving themselves in various ways. There are two main forms which such self-deception may take. First, one may deceive oneself about the empirical features of the thing in question. For example, a man may attempt to deceive himself into thinking that he is well-respected by his friends when in fact he is not. Secondly, a person may attempt to deceive himself into thinking that the thing in question (with the empirical feature which he believes it to have) measures up to his standards for satisfactoriness for things of its kind, when in fact it does not. For instance, a rich man may deceive himself into thinking that money is all that he cares about. I can become genuinely pleased with something by convincing myself that it has certain desirable features which it in fact lacks. The second sort of self-deception may enable a person to believe that he is satisfied with something but it cannot enable him to become contented with it. If I don’t believe that something measures up to my standards for satisfactoriness in things of its kind, then I cannot be said to be contented with it. On the other hand, if I “really” believe that something measures up to my standards, then I am not deceiving myself in the second sort of way.

Let us consider examples of self-deception which enable a person to become contented with something which he would not have been contented with otherwise. As we have seen, such cases will all involve self-deception of the first sort. Suppose that I deceive myself into believing that I have led a virtuous and joyful life, and as a result, I become very pleased with my life. On my view, it follows that my being pleased with my life is intrinsically good. For my life would be good if it had all of the empirical features which I believe it to have. Many would object to this result and say that it would have been better if I hadn’t deceived myself at all and suffered “honest discontentment.” But this is compatible with my position. My view only implies that given that I have deceived myself into thinking that my life is virtuous and joyful, it is a good thing that I am pleased with it. It says nothing about whether, on balance, it was a good thing that I deceived myself. It would be perfectly consistent with my view to hold that the dishonesty and lack of personal integrity which a person exhibits by deceiving himself are of such great disvalue that they outweigh the intrinsic value of the contentment which is achieved as a result. It is doubtless true that sometimes it would be better on balance for a person to be honest with himself and suffer a certain measure of discontentment as a result rather than be contented at the price of deceiving himself. But it would be a mistake to think that this is always so. Suppose that there are certain features of a person’s life, for instance past misfortunes and injustices which he has suffered, which he cannot “face up to” without becoming extremely unhappy and discontented with his life. Only the most callous sort of indifference to human suffering and the value of happiness would lead one to say that it would be better if such an individual did not deceive himself. It may be of significance whether or not the events about which one
deceives oneself cast one’s moral character in a bad light. In this context, it would be helpful to ask the question, “Would it be right for me to dispell this person’s illusions and force him to ‘face the facts?’”

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NOTES

*I am indebted to Diana Ackerman, Dan Brock, Mark Overvold, Mary Prall, and Richard Schmitt for helpful criticisms of earlier versions of this paper.

1For example, Rashdall, (p. 55-57), Benditt, and Montague.

2Cf. Campbell and Smart.

3Benditt, p. 8.

4Benditt, p. 10.

5Benditt, p. 10-11. For a fuller discussion of what it is to feel pleased or satisfied with something, with special attention to the question of intentionality, see Carson.

6For a more extended discussion, see Carson [6].

7Campbell suggests something similar to this, p. 328.

8Tatarkiewicz defends this view, pp. 128-9.
If a person were completely "self-centered," i.e., completely indifferent to everything which doesn't involve him in some way, then his assessment of his own life would, in effect, constitute an assessment of the universe as a whole. Since he doesn't care about anything except himself and his own life these are the only things that he would take into account when he assesses the universe as a whole. Suppose that the old man in my example is completely self-centered. Given that he is displeased with his own life (taken as a whole), it follows that he is displeased with the universe as a whole.

We can also imagine an analogous case which would constitute a counter-example to 1). S believes that this is the worst of all possible worlds, because he accepts an ontological argument for the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly malevolent being. He has an extremely cheerful disposition and lives a very pleasant life. In his rare moments of reflection he reminds himself that the particular events in which he takes pleasure are all parts of some larger diabolical scheme. His peculiar "religious" beliefs don't have much of an effect on the way in which he actually feels about things. However, if such a person were disposed to feel displeased with his own life and the universe as a whole, and if he had the requisite sorts of action tendencies, then he might still be said to be displeased with his life and the universe as a whole.

Nicomachean Ethics, 1095a; also see 1095b and 1097b. Aristotle uses the terms "simply (or absolutely) good" and "good for a particular person" to mark out the distinction between intrinsic value and personal welfare, see Nicomachean Ethics, 1152b 27, 1155b 21 and Eudemian Ethics, 1228b 18-20, 1235b 30-35, and 1237a 13. For an argument against defining "being happy" in terms of "having a good life" see Carson [7].

Nietzsche [12], p. 281. Also see Nietzsche [11], pp. 256 and 498.

Nietzsche [10], p. 258. Also see Nietzsche's discussion of the psychological consequences of accepting the doctrine of "eternal recurrence." "Contentment" or "being pleased with one's life" is far too weak an expression to describe what Nietzsche means by amour faî. I am merely claiming that amour faî involves being pleased and contented with one's life.

For a further discussion of these issues, see Carson [8].

Brentano's moral theory is based upon his theory of "correct" and "incorrect" emotion. For an explanation of these notions and a defense of the claim that emotions may be said to correct or incorrect see Brentano [4], pp. 16-24, and Chisholm [7]. According to Brentano, the correctness and the intrinsic value of an emotional state are functions of the value of its intentional objects. For instance, pleasure (gefallen) in the good is correct and intrinsically good and pleasure in bad is incorrect and intrinsically bad. ([4], pp. 90-91, Cf. Aristotle 1174al-4). The German words gefallen and misgefallen are sometimes translated as "being pleased" and "being displeased. ([4], p. 17). To the best of my knowledge, the german words are as ambiguous between the dispositional and occurrent senses as the English words. I am unable to determine whether Brentano means anything like my dispositional notions of being pleased or displeased with something in his talk about gefallen and misgefallen in good and the bad. In any case, Brentano uses the term "emotion" in the broadest possible sense ([4], p. 16 and Chisholm [7], p. 160). One's action tendencies and being contented or discontented in my sense are among the sorts of "emotions" which Brentano believes may be said to be correct or incorrect.

Cf. Chisholm [8], p. 32.

Brentano considers several cases which are analogous to 1), 2), 4) and 5) respectively: a) pleasure (gefallen) in the good, b) pleasure in the bad, c) displeasure (misfallen) in the good, and d) displeasure in the bad. He holds that a) and c) are good and that b) and d) are bad. See Brentano [4], pp. 90-1, and Chisholm [7].

For an argument to the affect Schadenfreude is good see Smart, pp. 25-26.

According to Brentano, we should strive against eliminable evils. However, he recommends that we adopt an attitude of patient resignation in the face of evils which are beyond our power to do anything about. He is careful to insist that we not deceive ourselves about the existence of these evils [4], pp. 135-6. For an interesting discussion of the question of whether it is objectionable to be happy in spite of the sufferings of the world see Smith, pp. 139-140.

By the same token, one might argue that "excessive" pleasure in the good is not good. Against this, I would urge something which Brentano says in an entirely different context, "the act of love when it is directed upon what is really good can never be too intense," ([4], p. 26). This is not to deny that "excessive" love or pleasure in something which is good can be a great instrumental evil.
Brentano suggests something similar to this [3], p. 172. According to him, pleasures in goods which are merely illusory are good but their value is somewhat diminished by their being based upon false beliefs.

I take it that this sort of thinking often underlies the sort of moralistic scorn which many people have for religious enthusiasts whom they believe to be guilty of self-deception.