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The problem with the pursuit of pleasure and why it isn't the same as joy

One is fleeting and depends on circumstances, the other comes from persevering in what one values and loving others.

Tan Seow Hon

Imagine an “experience machine” that you can plug into, where you can feel a lifetime of pleasure in a simulated environment where you believe you are living your preferred life.

Imagine relating happily with loved ones, engaging in activities you love, having fun – even being the most successful person at work as you exceed all the key performance indicators.

None of this is real. But once you choose to be plugged in, you don't know that what you are feeling isn't from an actual experience, but from neuropsychological input. And the catch is, once you are in, you cannot exit.

Would you choose to plug in for a lifetime of pleasure? Or, would you prefer to live authentically in the real world, where you can flourish by pursuing your freely chosen plans and relating to real people?

Of course, in the real world, you also face the possibility of rejection, heartache, betrayal, unrequited love, failure, pain, suffering and injustice.

American philosopher Robert Nozick formulated this thought experiment in the 1970s to get us to reflect on whether we are content to live for pleasure. Dr Nozick argues that hedonistic pleasure isn't all that matters. Humans want to do certain things, and not just have the sensation of pleasure from experiences.

He argued that we want to be a certain sort of person, not “an indeterminate blob”, “floating in a tank”. And that we want actual contact with “deeper reality”, the real world in which we find ourselves – not a man-made constructed reality of the experience machine.

JOY AS SOMETHING MORE THAN PLEASURE?

In the last few weeks, writers have shared their personal experiences in this column – from the joy of a mundane routine, of persevering through hardship, to the delight of play or friendship. Many have resonated with all of us.

A natural question that arises is



Joy is hard to define, but many of us sense there's something more about joy that is different in nature from the fullest pleasure, the writer says. ST FILE PHOTO

this: What is joy, and how is it different from pleasure? Are they both synonymous with happiness?

Some dictionaries simplistically define joy as feelings of great happiness or pleasure, or a state of great happiness.

Joy is hard to define, but many of us sense there's something more about joy that is different in nature from the fullest pleasure.

Pleasure is a subjective sensation of wellness – how our lives feel from the inside.

Pleasure is a response to circumstances and can be more fleeting, as life is never fully within our control.

Hedonists say pleasure is the ultimate good in life. Psychological hedonists view pleasure as what motivates people to act. Ethical hedonists believe that when an action is done to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, it is right.

But critics of hedonism point

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out that pleasure isn't the most important value that people live for, and that there is more to life than mindlessly following the pursuit of pleasure.

JOY AS HAPPINESS OR FLOURISHING?

Joy is associated with the deeper understanding of “happiness”.

“Happy” is a simple word used by young children to describe their emotional or mental state. It is seen as the opposite of “sad”. In this sense, it may be thought of as

similar to “pleasure”.

However, “happiness” has a deeper meaning.

It appears in national oaths of allegiance including the Singapore National Pledge – that “we, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people... so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation” – and the American Declaration of Independence, which refers to the “pursuit of happiness” as an unalienable right.

“Happiness” is one English translation of the Greek word “eudaimonia”, also translated as flourishing, or well-being.

Flourishing, rather than enjoying a pleasant sensation or experiencing pleasure, is likely the aspiration captured in formal documents and national pledges.

Modern philosophers such as John Finnis regard flourishing as partaking in basic goods of human flourishing – bodily and

cerebral health, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, pursuing a higher order which shapes one's decisions, and practical reasonableness.

Practical reasonableness involves bringing our intelligence to bear effectively on choosing our actions and lifestyle, and shaping our character. Our actions should be the genuine realisation of what we freely decide is worthwhile to pursue.

Living a flourishing life or pursuing a deeper happiness thus requires deciding our personal objectives in life rather than running a rat race to keep up with contemporaries, or acting simply out of the fear of missing out.

SURPRISED BY JOY

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Courageously pursuing what we have determined to be

Living for happiness in the sense of flourishing is different from seeking pleasure. Courageously pursuing what we have determined to be worthwhile and persevering in the face of setbacks can sometimes bring pain instead of pleasure, especially when desired outcomes may not materialise.

worthwhile and persevering in the face of setbacks can sometimes bring pain instead of pleasure, especially when desired outcomes may not materialise.

In loving another, our sincere self-giving may not be reciprocated.

Parents of rebellious teenagers know all too well that sometimes their best efforts can be rejected. It may be many years before someone we love turns from a self-destructive way of life – or in the worst scenario, the person may not turn around at all.

Loving can set us up for pain, as the other remains an individual with free will.

Yet, even in pain, those of us who have persevered in what we regard to be worthwhile find happiness in the deeper sense and grow from our experience.

And as we look back on our persevering in faith for what we believe to be worthwhile, our daring to hope, and our never giving up on love, there is something transcendent in the experience.

That, I believe, is where we glimpse joy.

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• Finding Joy is a new Opinion series about the things that bring us satisfaction, fulfilment and meaning. If you have a submission with pictures or videos to share, e-mail us at stopinion@sph.com.sg