

Clara Carus

### **Émilie Du Châtelet on Happiness as the Purpose of Human Existence**

In Du Châtelet's view happiness is the purpose of human existence and the art of fulfilling one's happiness is the heart of philosophy. She who knows how to make the passions serve her happiness is "an excellent philosopher", she contends. (Discourse, 350) Thus, "wise and happy mean the same" to her. (Discourse, 356/7) This paper argues that the Discourse on Happiness is not, at least not only and not in the first instance, a 'personal' text, as it may appear. The paper shows that the Discourse establishes an intricate philosophical theory concerning the purpose of human existence and the art of fulfilling this purpose. This theory is bifurcated: Along the first branch, which I call the ontology of happiness, Du Châtelet establishes what it is that amounts to happiness and to unhappiness. Along the second branch, Du Châtelet establishes what we should do and what we should avoid in order to achieve happiness. I call this second branch the art of happiness.

In her ontology of happiness, Du Châtelet argues that passions and inclinations are the fundamental prerequisites for happiness. There are two passions Du Châtelet discusses in detail owing to their requisite role for happiness: study (the search for knowledge) and love. Both passions stand in a very different relation to happiness, insofar as the achievement of happiness through study is entirely independent of others, while the achievement of happiness through love is dependent on others. While the independence of study elevates this passion over love (for we can achieve happiness through this passion more securely), love is elevated over study for it can lead to the greatest possible happiness, which elevates the human being to the level of a deity or beyond. Importantly, it is not in the first instance the abundant fulfilment of our passions which leads to happiness, according to Du Châtelet, but a "feeling of vivacity of the soul" through the passions themselves.

Along the second branch of her theory on happiness, the art of happiness, Du Châtelet outlines how happiness can be furthered and achieved. While happiness, in Du Châtelet's theory, is dependent on multiple factors of our nature and our circumstances, which we cannot influence, there are many ways in which our happiness, the fulfilment of our existence, is dependent upon us. In her theory of the art of happiness, Du Châtelet argues that we must cultivate our passions and inclinations; and not suppress or shun them. Importantly, these passions and inclinations are individually different and need to be appreciated and cared for in what they are. By virtue of reason, philosophers in their middle age have learned to reflect on their passions and can decide whether they lead to happiness or to unhappiness. It is by virtue of this decision that an "excellent philosopher" is wise enough to know how to make their passions serve their happiness and how to further their happiness. As human beings and as philosophers, she argues, our only goal

must be intense happiness and “we must open ourselves to pleasure by all the doors leading to our soul, we have no other business.” (Discourse, 365)

Du Châtelet does not consider her theory of passions and happiness, as the purpose of human existence, to be at odds with altruistic virtues and ethics. She argues that we cannot be immoral and happy at the same time, and that the feeling of repentance is the most disagreeable and hopeless feeling our soul can experience. Virtuous actions, on the other hand, give us a “delicious feeling”. The pursuit of happiness is thus the reason and a result of being moral, rather than being immoral, and is not at all in contradiction with moral action.

While Du Châtelet’s Discourse on Happiness tells us of her pain of being excluded from society as a woman, of her ultimately unrequited love for Voltaire, of her own struggle to find happiness in the face of these circumstances, in short, while the Discourse is surely deeply personal, we should not overlook the intriguing theoretical thesis it develops: Happiness, it contends, is a feeling in our soul, the purpose of our existence, which we should reflect on and care for, best of all through the passions of study and love.

Quoted from:

Émilie Du Châtelet. 2009. “Discourse on Happiness”. In: Émilie Du Châtelet. Selected Philosophical and Scientific Writings, ed. Judith Zinsser, trans. Isabelle Bour and Judith Zinsser. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.