

Religious Practice and Jewish Sabbath: How Religion's Promotion of Virtue Can Increase Happiness

Introduction

This essay will argue that religious practice can increase a person's happiness by making them more virtuous, and that it does so through positive mood reinforcement and community building. Lorraine Besser-Jones's (2020) conception of virtue being important to subjective well-being serves as the framework for discussion, along with studies which demonstrate the correlation between religious practice, virtue development, and well-being. In section one, I will outline Besser-Jones's (2020) argument that virtue supports well-being through creating long-term positive mood cycles and building community. Section two examines the link between religious practice and the development of character strengths and concludes that virtue is an important product of religious practice that contributes to subjective well-being. In section three, I will use the Jewish sabbath as an example to demonstrate how practicing members can experience increased well-being and happiness by developing virtue. Whereas philosopher Samuel Flesichacker (2017) defends shabbat as a virtue that can achieve the sort of happiness known as human flourishing, for the purposes of this paper I will argue minimally that shabbat supports subjective well-being through reinforcing positive mood cycles and building community.

Section 1: Relationship between Virtue and Happiness

The groundwork for considering how religious practice increases happiness through the development of virtue consists in first understanding the relationship between happiness and virtue. In the Aristotelian sense, virtues are dispositions to feel the appropriate way in the given circumstances. This ultimately leads the virtuous agent to do good things (Besser-Jones 2020, p. 88). Besser-Jones (2020, p. 90) takes this view of virtue and applies it to happiness understood as subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is about experiencing good feelings and positive emotions. She notes that virtue is connected to happiness in the common sense way that it feels good to perform the right action. In general, people have benevolent desires, and work in psychology confirms that being kind not only puts one in a good mood,

but also reinforces longer-term cycles of positive moods. Positive emotions themselves increase subjective well-being by creating better relationships and promoting health and career progress. Taking action that feels good encourages people to continue to do good things themselves and recognize their relatedness to others in the community. Doing good things for others also encourages reciprocal action from other people. Cooperating with people thus creates a cycle in which kindness and optimism are continuously sought after (Besser-Jones 2020, p. 90-91).

Moreover, Besser-Jones (2020, p. 92-93) argues that virtue ultimately increases long-term happiness even in the times when it does not feel good to do the right thing because it is an intrinsic aspiration. Intrinsic aspirations are listed as affiliation, community feeling, and self-acceptance, and these aspirations fulfill basic psychological necessities. Extrinsic aspirations such as money-making have purely external goals, whereas the benefits of an intrinsic aspiration are internal and a natural part of the activity. Besser-Jones (2020, p. 93) points out that virtuous activities fit under the given categories of intrinsic aspirations or track them very closely. Acting morally, for example exposing immoral behavior within one's place of work, does not immediately create good feelings. However, doing the right thing contributes to aspirations such as community feeling, which includes actions that better one's community. Deeper psychological fulfillment and well-being comes from these intrinsically valuable activities, which Besser-Jones (2020, p. 93) notes are important to long-term happiness. Now that it has been determined that virtue increases subjective well-being, if it can be shown that religious practice aids in the development of virtue there is also a strong case that religious practice helps a person be happier. In the sections that follow, I aim to demonstrate how religious practice ultimately achieves this subjective well-being through the cultivation of virtue, particularly through the fulfillment of psychological necessities like positive mood cycles and building community.

Section 2: Religious Practice and the Cultivation of Virtue and Happiness

Primarily, it must be established that religious practice lends to the advancement of virtue and its related goals. Christian Miller and Angela Knobel (2015, p. 36) note that recent work in the philosophy of religion asserts that religious practice develops moral character and character strengths. Good character traits can be defined as virtues. The various mental states one experiences in response to a certain situation makes up the dispositional character trait they have. If the mental state dispositions which make up the character trait are virtuous, then

the character trait is a virtue (Miller and Knobel 2015, p. 26). In terms of what causes good character, many philosophers and theologians assert it is the individual's responsibility to perform good action which leads to the development of virtue. Others say that God instantiates virtue, mostly notably in the Christian tradition (Miller and Knobel 2015, p. 36). In any case, whether it be encouraged as personal responsibility or hailed as a gift from God, virtuous action is emphasized in major religious traditions.

Where Besser-Jones (2020) notes the evidence for the causal link between exercise of virtue and subjective well-being, there is also empirical evidence for how religious practice specifically facilitates the cultivation of good character traits and as a result, well-being. A study done by Anne Berthold and Willibald Ruch (2014, p. 1) shows that people who actively practice religion are more satisfied with life and achieve higher marks for certain character strengths than non-religious or the religiously affiliated who do not actively practice. These character strengths include kindness, love, gratitude, hope, forgiveness, and spirituality. As character strengths like kindness, love, and gratitude are composed of virtuous mental state dispositions, and the agent is disposed to feel these ways in the appropriate circumstances, they are virtues. Berthold and Ruch (2014, p. 1) cite several studies which demonstrate higher life satisfaction, characterized as more fulfillment and well-being, when virtues such as these are developed and expressed.

Particularly with regard to how religion leads to the development of these virtues, Berthold and Ruch (2014, p. 2) hypothesize and demonstrate that it is the active and regular practice of religion rather than mere affiliation which has the greatest impact on virtues such as gratitude. Contributing factors include but are not limited to involvement with the liturgy, attending religious services and praying. Results of surveying around 20,000 respondents on their religion and happiness levels reveals that for those practicing religion, not only do they score higher on certain character strengths but also achieve greater life of meaning (Berthold and Ruch 2014, p. 4-7). The life of meaning is defined as acting in line with one's virtues, thus allowing the agent to strive for a purpose beyond themselves (Berthold and Ruch 2014, p. 2). Religion's influence on well-being is put down to both direct and indirect factors, virtue being hailed as a direct influence. For example, the virtue of forgiveness is noted for its positive impact on mental health in the actively religious (Berthold and Ruch 2014, p. 4). Although the study does not go into depth about why this virtuous expression leads to greater well-being, the following example of the well-being promoted by the Jewish sabbath will demonstrate that positive mood generation and community building are major players.

Section 3: Case Study of Jewish Shabbat

Utilizing Samuel Fleischacker's (2017) paper about the virtues of the Jewish sabbath (shabbat), I will demonstrate how shabbat observance promotes the pursuit of virtue and achievement of subjective well-being through community building and long-term positive mood cycles. Fleischacker's (2017, p. 125) argument implies that shabbat works towards a robust sort of happiness which can be considered human flourishing. Although my argument builds on aspects of his, I will focus on the more modest claim that practicing shabbat increases basic well-being. Fleischacker (2017, p. 117-119) analyzes the traditional Jewish sabbath, which is practiced by Orthodox Jews. Shabbat is a day of rest that occurs every Friday evening to Saturday evening, in which Jewish people may not carry out work or leisure activities such as driving, cooking, and writing. Instead, people partake in prayer services, meals with friends and family, and may do things such as sing, read and talk. Fleischacker (2017, p. 130) argues that practicing shabbat can be a virtue in itself because it pervades one's whole life to help with living well and encourages one to understand the importance of pursuing their higher end, or *telos*. This is primarily because it allows one to pursue the types of activities which are intrinsically valuable while avoiding ones which have necessity behind them. He ultimately compares practicing shabbat to the development of Aristotelean virtue, cultivating qualities that aid in recognition and pursuit of the good.

Accepting Fleischacker's account of shabbat as a virtue takes the argument for the happiness-promoting qualities of religious practice further than Besser-Jones's (2020) idea of subjective well-being. Besser-Jones (2020, p. 94) does not establish that virtue is necessary to happiness, but that it is nevertheless important to subjective well-being. On the other hand, Aristotle claims that the exercise of virtue is essential to human flourishing. The kind of happiness to do with human flourishing is different from the subjective well-being Besser-Jones focuses on. Human flourishing is about a deeper form of life satisfaction and the achievement of the highest good, whereas subjective well-being can be summed up as feeling happiness and experiencing positive emotions (Besser-Jones 2020, p. 87). To reiterate, Fleischacker (2017, p. 125) argues that shabbat itself is a spiritual practice and virtue. More specifically, shabbat is for realizing our *telos*, the fulfillment of ends which Aristotle argues is achieved only by activities which are valuable in themselves. The pursuit of *telos*, which Fleischacker (2017, p. 123) says shabbat both is representative of and creates space for, is part of human flourishing. In fact, scholars of religion have often argued that religion in general is necessary to human flourishing through its virtue development (Miller and Knobel

2015, p. 36). Although some may take happiness to include human flourishing, arguing for shabbat or other religious practices as promoting this form of happiness is a bigger goal than promoting well-being and is beyond what this paper aims to demonstrate.

Even if one does not go as far as to say shabbat is a virtue, the fact remains that it does encourage the cultivation of virtue and thus subjective well-being within its observers. Specifically, this subjective well-being can be seen through virtuous activities' promotion of long-term positive mood cycles and community building. The traditional shabbat activities promoted in the Jewish community are of the kind that encourage virtue. For example, discussion of the liturgy in synagogue, prayer services, and elaborate blessings are all contributing factors to virtue development as noted by Berthold and Ruch (2014, p. 2). These activities are naturally built into each week and allow for regular and consistent practice. This arguably creates a cycle of positive mood enhancement as the observer looks ahead to the next shabbat. Active practice is emphasized by Berthold and Ruch (2014, p. 1) as important because there is no significant difference in life satisfaction or character strengths between those who are merely religiously affiliated and the non-religious. It may be inferred that the less one practices, the less virtue will be developed and less religion-related well-being will be achieved. Shabbat occurs regularly and members are likely to be encouraged to participate by affiliation in the Jewish community, further supporting the cycle of mood enhancement. Additionally, Fleischacker (2017, p. 121) argues for the phenomenon of shabbat consciousness, which is the idea that shabbat structures one's entire life so holiness is infused even into the normal work week. I argue that this not only increases positive mood in general, but also reinforces long-term positive mood cycles because it becomes a way of life to build virtuous and community-related goals into the week. Even if there are no shabbat-related tasks at hand, the coming shabbat is often in the back of one's mind.

Shabbat is a community focused undertaking, spent with friends and family. From sharing meals, to conversations with one another, to making love, the structure of shabbat is built around fostering relationships and community. Love is arguably a virtue associated with these activities, and this fuels relationship building which Besser-Jones (2020, p. 94) emphasizes as a fundamental tenet of subjective well-being. Additionally, spending time with others who practice the same religion and hold similar values will promote the recognition of relatedness, providing motivation to act virtuously and upholding the cycle of positive moods. Thus, shabbat can be understood as promoting well-being by way of a long-term and reinforcing cycle of virtuous activity.

Another way shabbat promotes well-being through virtue is that it has virtue-related goals that satisfy our basic psychological need for connection. Fleischacker (2017, p. 125) talks about the intrinsic value of specific activities on shabbat, such as friendship, nature, and worshipping God. Using Besser-Jones's (2020, p. 93) idea that virtue-related goals are intrinsic aspirations as discussed in section one, it becomes clear that many shabbat activities can be included under the aspirations of affiliation and community feeling. Making space in life for community can be challenging in modern Western society which emphasizes the extrinsic goals of work and money-making. Even though it might be painful to give up valuable social or work opportunities to participate in shabbat, shabbat encourages shifting focus from material or extrinsically valuable enterprises to activities which have positive internal value and fulfill psychological necessities. Shabbat develops the virtue of love through focusing on love of God and spending plenty of time with loved ones. This fits under the aspiration of affiliation which is about having full and rewarding relationships. The virtues of kindness and supporting others occurs through hosting people for meals, discussing liturgy with one another, and planning shabbat. The aspiration of community feeling is emphasized here in the goal of progressing and bettering one's community. Overall these virtue-related goals promote well-being by satisfying our basic psychological need for connection to others.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that religious practice can increase happiness through virtue and its related endeavors. I took happiness to mean subjective well-being, and used Besser-Jones's (2020) idea that virtue is important to subjective well-being as a framework for this discussion. I also used evidence from Berthold and Ruch's (2014) study that demonstrates how virtue, and ultimately well-being, is cultivated through the active practice of religion. Finally, I used weekly Jewish shabbat as a case study and example of how practicing religion promotes well-being through the benefits of virtue: reinforcing positive mood cycles and fostering community.

Bibliography

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