Whatever Happened to Happiness?

Adam Potkay says there was always much more to happiness than just feelin’ good. He argues that we should once again recognise that the good life is the happy life.

Everyone thinks they know what happiness is. Most people I’ve asked to define it – I’ve tried this with friends as well as my college students – reply at first that it’s a feeling, a mood, a degree of elation. This feeling sometimes has nothing to do with external circumstances, as proved by our ready comprehension of the question “what are you so happy about?” in situations where the expected reply is an “oh, nothing” by the idly smiling party. Of course, that the question gets asked at all proves that we more readily think of happiness as part of a proposition: “My new car makes me happy.” To quote a Peanuts book from the sixties, “Happiness is a warm puppy,” or “Happiness is a thumb and a blanket.” The saccharine, not to mention simple-minded, nature of much of this propositional happiness has occasioned many a sardonic rebuttal, from John Lennon’s “I don’t call him ‘a happy man’?” to the recently released Todd Solondz film titled Happiness, approvingly described by critics as a “mordant” view of sexual relationships in the New Jersey suburbs. Happiness is a term that hipsters mainly use in a sprightly mood, a puckish good humor. Even so, would you agree that the man responsible for the death of three million Cambodians consistently had pep in his step, a millionaire with a ward of children? Would anyone think he was a happy man? It is hard to persuade most people that such a man could have a happy life. So how is it that the ‘good daemon’ or ‘good genius’ that was thought to accompany a successful or flourishing person, but once the Greeks became philosophic they used the term to refer to the sort of human flourishing that, independent of good demons, depends upon an individual’s reason or will. Agreeing that happiness is the natural goal of life, moral philosophers after Plato also agreed that the best way to achieve a happy life was through the rational exercise of virtue – or indeed, that the virtuous life constituted the happy life. The schools of philosophy that arose after Plato disagreed only on what role fortune or accident played in the happy life. For Aristotle, a virtuous life was made happier by the fortunate accidents of good health, moderate wealth, and an untarnished reputation; the Stoics, by contrast – counter-intuitively but with appealing élan – contended that virtue was sufficient for the happy life, and that a person was no less happy for being sick or poor, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes. With evident swagger, Stoics liked to talk about their ability to be happy “on the rack.” But even Stoics spoke of external goods – such as not being on the rack – as “indifferents to be preferred.” Thus the differences between Stoics and Aristotelians may have been no more than verbal quibbles; practically, their shared emphasis on the role of virtue in the happy life far outweighs their wranglings over whether or not those things outweigh their wranglings over whether or not those things.
that lie outside our virtuous agency are ‘goods’ or ‘preferred indifferents.’

The English word ‘happiness’, like the Greek *eudaimonia*, has etymological roots that extend back to a world of chance: the ‘happy’ person simply has (at least at the moment) good ‘hap’ or fortune. Thomas Hardy’s poem ‘Hap’, written in a morose late Victorian mood, complains that happiness is entirely out of anyone’s control, human or divine. All events are merely the effect of “Crass Casualty” and “dicing Time,” whom together Hardy calls the “purblind Doomsters” (a reminder of how fine the line between pathos and bathos can be). However, to most of us most of the time, happiness isn’t apt to appear as pure hap; inasmuch as we think of a happy life as available, we think of it as something for which someone – human, divine, or some combination of the two – is indeed responsible. A reminder that we ourselves are at least partly and perhaps wholly responsible comes in that most American of phrases, “the pursuit of happiness.” And we pursue happiness, first and foremost, through choices and rational activity – however much blood, sweat and tears can help.

The noun ‘happiness’ is a surprisingly recent coinage in English. While it can be found in Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, it doesn’t fully take wing until the eighteenth century. And its rise in the eighteenth century is chiefly through writers who use the term, more or less self-consciously, as a translation of classical *eudaimonia*. ‘Happiness’, in other words, is a neo-classical term, expressing a secular ideal of rational contentment through ethical conduct. Its Enlightenment usage is perfectly captured in a compliment paid to David Hume’s *History of England* by the Comtesse de Boufflers: his history, she writes, “enlightens the mind by showing that true happiness is closely related to virtue, and discovers, by the same light, what is the end, the only end, of every reasonable being.”

Public happiness, private happiness, and the relationship between the two were central concerns to figures as diverse as Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, Butler, and Bentham in Britain; Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Chastellux and Helvetius in France; Adams, Jefferson, and Madison in America. Unnumbered lesser writers played variations on the theme: the Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue of books printed in English includes ‘Happiness’ in no less than 751 titles. The goal of happiness is enshrined in marmoreal utterances from the American Declaration of Independence to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. We may almost believe the buoyant proclamation of the Jacobin leader Antoine Saint-Just: “Happiness is a new idea in Europe.”

We still to some degree retain the Enlightenment’s idea of happiness, although now of course its first flush of novelty is long gone. We might, I would suggest, do well to recuperate it more fully, because whatever ends or aims have come to replace it in the past two hundred years are by comparison either impracticable or invidious.

In the nineteenth century, the idea of happiness fared badly. European Romantics found the notion of happiness either too staid and complacent – as it might appear from the pen of a French comtesse – or too radical and uprooting – as
Wordsworth was more hesitant and reserved, but nonetheless dared believe “that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes”; he hoped it not “a vain belief” that “with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things.” Emblematically, the Schiller poem set to majestic music by Beethoven is an ode not to happiness, but an die freude.

The career of happiness was derailed by historical contingencies: a simple sense of occasion militated against extolling the constancy of settled virtue in an age of heroes and of Revolution, when mankind was busily being cast anew. But the ideal of transfiguring joy is inherently precarious. Elation is not easily maintained. Thus, Coleridge’s most impassioned lines to joy – “Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power, / Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower/ A new Earth and new Heaven” – appear, tellingly, in ‘Dejection: An Ode’.

Coleridge wishes joy on his lady-friend as some recompense for his own desertion of spirit, his “grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear.” The antinomies of joy and dejection, hope and despair, are familiar enough from Christian spiritual autobiography, but there each is ensonced in a larger framework of meaning. When, with Coleridge, “We in ourselves rejoice,” the lows that follow from our unsustainable highs will prove to be not only afflictions, but meaningless ones. This proves true within each individual, and within a sort of historical dialectic as well: the tentative joy of Wordsworth collapses into Byron’s very marketable despair and Hardy’s purblind doomsters. For every Woodstock, there’s an Altamont.

The twentieth century has seen few advocates of joy aside for those golden youths who picked up Blake in the ‘60s and set about cleansing the doors of perception. But, until quite recently, the twentieth century has seen even fewer serious advocates of happiness. There lingers an ascetic Christian suspicion against the worldly values of happiness, as evidenced most plainly in Graham Greene’s The Heart of the Matter: “Point me out the happy man and I will point you out either extreme egotism, evil – or else an absolute ignorance.” Yet one need not be a dour Christian to concur with this sentiment; it is a view of life on earth with which many atheists readily agree. Greene’s view could easily be put in the mouth of Freud, a therapist who distinguished himself from earlier therapeutic philosophers in promising not some image of happiness, but only freedom from delusion or obsession. Through alleviating the burden of neurosis, Freud thought he might enable individuals to lead, as he once phrased it, “normally unhappy lives.”

Still, Freud seems quite old-fashioned – positively Greek! – in his underlying assumptions both that talking can lead to knowledge, and that knowledge can set one free from undue mental suffering. Increasingly, psychological researchers trace mental suffering not to experiential antecedent, but to biochemical happenstance; mind surrenders its pride of place to brain. And insofar as Prozac and other psychopharmaceuticals have helped the seriously depressed or disabled, they seem – at least until their long-term consequences are charted – an admirable thing.

But what happens when we begin to define happiness simply as the absence of mental states considered to be inconvenient? Recently, the study of happiness – and much of its public discussion – has been undertaken by psychologists who present it as the reflex effect of some underlying biochemical cause. Here are several examples: 1.) Happiness is a good night’s sleep. David F. Dinges, “chief of sleep and chronobiology in the psychiatry department” of a major American university, was recently quoted in an Associated Press news release: “some hours of the day, we’re happier than others, and it’s occurring inside us, not just in reaction to the world around us.” The reporter then paraphrases Dinges: “The findings will pave the way for research that one day could help millions of depressed people live happier lives and aid people whose sleep patterns are disrupted by shift work or travel.” 2.) Happiness is Prozac. In his 1993 book Listening to Prozac, Peter Kramer entertained as a possibility – and by the media was largely seen as advocating – what he called ‘cosmetic psychopharmacology’. If Prozac (or drugs like it) can make mentally ill people well, why oughtn’t they be used to make normal people perform – or at least feel – better than well? Why oughtn’t Prozac be used to help millions of modestly happy (or normally unhappy) people lead exuberant lives? 3.) Happiness is Dopamine. According to Jerry Adler’s Newsweek essay, ‘The Happiness Meter’, each of us has a “happiness set point [that] is determined genetically,” related, perhaps, to levels of the brain chemical dopamine. But bio-physical determinants are investigated with the ultimate aim of bio-physical correction, and surely further research will bring us dopamine-regulating drugs. (Such a development is foreseen and parodied by the Canadian comedy troupe, The Boys in the Hall, in their delicious film, Brain Candy.)

The body, we are told, can be fixed, and in the somatized world-view of the medical-industrial establishment, it follows that the mind can be improved. Most who are attracted to enhancing the brain’s chemical make-up seek a happiness of mood, a mental state that often seems an end in itself. Our secular culture at large offers few arguments for why individual mental states may not be the greatest good; most any glossy magazine offers a heap of images suggesting that indeed they are. The advertising executive’s ideal of happiness proceeds from a scent of cologne, a prospect of luxury advertising treat us, ultimately, as matter to be stimulated; the reducio ad absurdum of ads for things superfluous is always, “This is your brain. This is your brain on this product.” Such is our consumer economy – a poor cousin, but nonetheless related, to the precious world of art for art’s sake. But mightn’t we do well, without an essential threat to the arts or the market, to keep in mind Socrates’ observation on the agora the next time we slog through the mall – “How many things are here which I do not need”? What has happened, amidst our world of brain candy, to the philosophers, those who have traditionally reflected on
mind and the good life? What of Plato, who in the *Philebus* proposed that the crudely hedonistic life is suited not to humans, but to shellfish? (Was he anticipating our own droll *sumnum bonum* of being “as happy as a clam”?) In philosophical circles, until quite recently, the career of happiness had all but halted. The philosophical discussion of happiness – which seems to run the opposed risks of inhabiting either a sloppy discourse of subjective response or a disputed discourse of objective aims or final causes – had been neglected in favor of more basic conceptual problems.

Meanwhile, in many college literature departments, the discussion of plays, poems and fiction became unnaturally unhinged from its mooring in classical ethics. We ought to recall that the classic novel, from the eighteenth through at least the mid-nineteenth century, concerns the pursuit of happiness. Henry Fielding, for example, concludes *Tom Jones* with this assessment of the married life of Tom and Sophia: “as there are not to be found a worthier man and woman, than this fond couple, so neither can be imagined more happy.” *Jane Eyre* ends with its protagonist’s announcement: “My Edward and I, then, are happy.” The novels’ end and aim is happiness and its close relation to virtue. Much recent discussion of the novel, however, has been tainted by generalizing theories about literary language. A literary work is not a mirror of life or even a separate reality, but rather a misrepresentation of either the ‘fact’ that we can form no conception of real objects (the crude anti-realism of Paul de Man and his school), or ‘the facts’ about powerful European male elites (the crude historical materialism of some ‘new historicist’ and feminist critics). According to the first model, words are only about words. According to the second, words are an index to things the author invariably leaves unsaid – an oppressive substratum of class, gender, race and empire. Victims – for example, those who identify with Bertha Mason, the Creole madwoman in the attic in *Jane Eyre* – ought to feel rage; oppressors – us, if we sympathize with Rochester or even Jane – ought to feel guilt. Rage and guilt, for as far ahead as we can see, properly define the give and take of human experience. Happiness represents an unwarranted sense of closure.

Things go on being dismal in some classrooms, and in many academic journals. Yet there is a light. The past twenty years have seen a growing revival of discussions of happiness and the good life, themes stemming in large part from a renewed interest in Hellenistic philosophy – chiefly, the Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics – inaugurated in the work of A. A. Long and, more recently, developed in Julia Annas’s *The Morality of Happiness*. A collection of position pieces, *In Pursuit of Happiness*, contains among its learned and thoughtful contributors Charles Griswold, a neo-Stoic; Lawrence Becker’s *A New Stoicism* systematically adapts Stoic teaching to the needs of today’s philosophers and citizens; Aristotelian eudaemonism is of course still a living tradition among Thomistic philosophers such as Deid Hudson and Alasdair MacIntyre.

Most inspiring of all is Martha Nussbaum’s exploration, at once scholarly and personal, of Greek eudaemonism in *The Therapy of Desire*. The book’s first sentence sounds like a clarion: “The idea of a practical and compassionate philosophy – a philosophy that exists for the sake of human beings, in order to address their deepest needs, confront their most urgent perplexities, and bring them from misery to some greater measure of flourishing – this idea makes the study of Hellenistic ethics riveting for a philosopher who wonders what philosophy has to do with the world.” Individual happiness, in turn, lies at the root of social and political stability as well as reform: “For in fact both Aristotle and the Hellenistic thinkers insist that human flourishing cannot be achieved unless desire and thought, as they are usually constructed within society, are considerably transformed. Both hold, for example, that most people learn to value money and status far too highly, and that this corrupts both personal and social relations.” Among professional philosophers seeking relevance in the moral and civic lives of a broad audience, the ancient pursuit of happiness is experiencing a sober, chastened revival.

We can’t hope, and probably shouldn’t want, to revive Saint Just’s first flush of excitement. Happiness is not for us a new idea, nor a heady one. But it is one that might allow us to resist a world increasingly defined by brainiacs and admen. We ought to pursue some positive image of the good, and it ought to be a good that recognizes both our rational independence and our social interdependence. And we ought, with a nod to Plato, Hume and Jefferson, to recognize our good as happiness.

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