

The History of Happiness and Contemporary Happiness Studies

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Well, first of all let me say what an honor it is to be here, speaking to such an illustrious gathering of scholars, and to thank the organizers at Notre Dame for having invited me and indeed for having invited all of us. It occurs to me that we in the academic world like to talk about the importance of interdisciplinary discussions, about the need for cross-fertilization, and the like, but in my experience that is too often, regrettably, more talk than reality. So *chapeau*, as the French say, to Notre Dame for hosting this event around a subject that so clearly demands multiple perspectives.

I've noted that this first panel modestly poses the question "What is happiness?," and modestly let me say that I am singularly unfit to answer it, in large part because of my training as a historian, which makes me, I fear, unduly attentive to the way in which words and concepts change their meanings over time. To be perfectly frank, I'm partial to Immanuel Kant's observation that "the concept of happiness is such an indeterminate one that even though everyone wishes to attain happiness, yet he can never say definitely and consistently what it is what he really wishes and wills."

But clearly that is not really going to be good enough here tonight. So how to answer the question "what is happiness." I might point out, as I do, in my book the strong and stubborn etymological link between happiness and luck in every Indo-European language. The old Norse and Old English root "hap," like the old French *heur* or the Mittelhockdeutsch "Gluck," simply means luck or fortune. We have mis-haps

when bad things *happen* to us. And when good things happen to us—when we are lucky—we are happy, Glücklich, filled with bon-heur.

I might, to take another tack, note the equally long and stubborn connection relating happiness and good fortune to fortune itself—to wealth, prosperity, fertility, and abundance. It is not coincidental that the early Greeks spoke of the gods as *olbios* or *makarios*—as blessed or happy—not least because of their material prosperity. Thus the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* uses a form of *makarios* to describe the cave dwelling of the god Hermes and his mother, which is full of “nectar and lovely ambrosia,” with much “silver and gold, fine clothing, and other things “such as are kept in the sacred houses of the happy.” Nor is it coincidental that the Romans placed the goddess Felicitas on the back of coins, with a horn of plenty in one hand, symbolizing abundance, fecundity, and bounty. Nor is it coincidental that they referred to the destitute as *miser*—wretched, unfortunate, poor—the root, of course, of our modern English term miserable.

Still another tack—less historical and more analytical would be to borrow from the positive psychologists and social scientists—to note the various dimensions of happiness on a synchronic as opposed to a diachronic plane. And here we might, following say Marty Seligman, or the English psychologist Daniel Nettle, among others, to point to a first level set of associations linking happiness to positive emotion and good feeling—feelings of pleasure and joy. A second level order of happiness having to do with the longer term, encompassing a sense of satisfaction and well being, a set of judgments about one’s condition or state. *I am happy* with my marriage, with my work, and so forth. Finally, we might distinguish a third level of happiness—the broadest of all—having to do with quality of life as a whole, with human flourishing, with fulfilling

one's potential, with human excellence, and the good life. In short, use a definition that accounts for some of the distinctions between hedonic and eudemonic conceptions of happiness that Professor Ong will talk about here in a moment.

Now there is much to recommend this latter approach—and for practical purposes it may well be among the most satisfactory. But historians have the luxury of not being practical, as my wife—a practical woman if there ever was one—constantly reminds me. And so let me be myself—impractical, perhaps even something of an annoyance—by taking a page from Wittgenstein to note, as a historian, that no matter how hard we try to pin down happiness—its meaning, or meanings, will always be pregnant with the past and with its past uses. Happiness, like all of us, cannot entirely escape the past. And so it strikes me that it is worthwhile thinking seriously about those past uses before we, in the present, make use of happiness ourselves.

What I'd like to do, in effect, is to repay a debt. I have benefited a great deal from the work that you all do, and so it is clear to me at least what contemporary happiness studies can do for history. But what, you may be asking yourselves, can history do for happiness studies? And here I would hope not just to remind you of some of the past uses of happiness that inevitably bear on those in the present, but also to try to place contemporary happiness studies in a somewhat broader context, to help situate the present moment vis à vis the past. For though it may be true, as William James observed in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* that “How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure,” human beings have never been as preoccupied, never been as obsessed, I would argue, with happiness as they are right now.

Indeed, it is really only in the eighteenth century that considerable numbers of people begin to think of happiness as a this-worldly possibility. Hitherto, happiness, at least in Western societies, had been considered by and large either as a condition of the future (at the millennium, say, or the second coming, or when the children of Israel are fully redeemed in the promised land—next year in Jerusalem). Or in the past (in the Garden of Eden, in a primordial golden age, a Prelapsarian time of innocence). Or, alternatively, in another dimension of space and time altogether (heaven, or those “blessed or happy isles” of the Greeks). Happiness in the here and now—in the normal conditions of life—wasn’t really considered an earthly prospect, or at least wasn’t considered by most as such.

Now of course it is certainly true that one has the tradition of classical philosophy initiated by Socrates towards the end of the 5th century BCE—a tradition that presented happiness or human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) as a function of human virtue. This is a tradition that is developed by a great many Greek and Roman moralists, though none so centrally as Aristotle, for whom *eudaimonia*, as you know, was the goal or end, the telos of human activity.

But the point I want to stress here is that for Aristotle—and in this respect he is perfectly in keeping with virtually every prominent Classical moralist after Socrates—for Aristotle, happiness, though yes an earthly prospect, was not a habitual reward. On the contrary, happiness was a prize to be won over the course of a lifetime only by the virtuous—the happy few—those whose excellence of conduct and character allowed them to rise above normal human conditions, to live what Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as a “god-like” life. To be happy might be within human power,

but it was a power that would only ever be realized by a very small percentage of the human population.

How radically different this is from that goal, first stated in the eighteenth century, to pursue the greatest happiness for the greatest number, to seek to attain, what the French Constitution of the Year 3 during the French Revolution described, in its very first article, as “common happiness,” the happiness of all. “Does not every man have a right to happiness,” asks the author of the article on happiness in Diderot and D’Alembert’s great Encyclopedia, the Bible as it were of the European Enlightenment. A right to happiness! Think about it: This is revolutionary talk! And in that respect, the French revolutionary St. Just was perfectly right to announce, as he did in the National Convention in 1794, that “happiness is a new idea in Europe.” In some real ways it was.

But what was a revolutionary pronouncement in the age of Enlightenment—a right, à la Jefferson, to the pursuit of happiness, or a right à la St. Just and the French revolutionaries to its attainment—has steadily become less and less revolutionary and more and more a part of our received assumptions about the way human life should be. Far from thinking about happiness as a miracle of the universe—or as the attainment of a god-like few—people in the developed world tend to think of happiness, today, I would argue, (however they define it) as the natural human state, the way men and women ought to be if they are not abused, or prone to depressive illness, or unjustly deprived of their natural human endowments.

It is worth stressing that this conviction involves an assumption about human nature and human experience—about the purpose of human lives—about the way we are intended to be here on earth. It something of a teleological assumption—one that is nice

to believe, one that is comforting, one that humane, and which may in fact be true. It is an assumption, nevertheless that can't really be proved. The assumption rests, to some degree, on an article of faith.

I talk quite a bit about this in my book—about the way in which the belief in happiness as what Alexander Pope called in the eighteenth century human “being’s end and aim” not only constituted an article of faith in its own right, but an article of faith that steadily challenged, and gradually replaced, however fitfully and imperfectly, that of the reigning Judeo-Christian belief in individual salvation by God.

To be sure, not all, bowed either immediately or easily to the new faith in earthly happiness. I’m fond of quoting Thomas Carlyle as an example of one such apostate.

That cranky irascible Scot, who could write in the mid 19th century:

Every pitifulest whipster that walks within a skin has had his head filled with the notion that he is, shall be, or by all human and divine laws ought to be, ‘happy.’ His wishes, the pitifulest whipster’s, are to be fulfilled for him; his days, the pitifulest whipster’s, are to flow on in ever-gentle current of enjoyment, impossible even for the gods. The prophets preach to us, Thou shalt be happy; thou shalt love pleasant things, and find them. The people clamour, Why have we not found pleasant things?

Carlyle was perhaps something of an exception in his blunt refusal to countenance the new faith. But others who shared it were at least prepared to acknowledge that it was in part just that, an article of faith. Darwin is interesting on this score, as is John Stuart Mill, as is Freud, who of course was ultimately a skeptic. After parsing the pleasure principle, in his *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur, Civilization and its Discontents*, a work,

revealingly, which was originally titled *Das Unglück in der Kultur, Unhappiness in Civilization*, Freud after parsing the pleasure principle which in his view “decides the purpose of life” ... Freud concluded that the pleasure principle was “at loggerheads with the whole world, with the macrocosm as much as with the microcosm. There is no possibility at all of its being carried through,” he declared, “all the regulations of the universe run counter to it. Threatened always by the suffering of our own bodies which are doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men, Freud concluded that the barriers to sustained happiness were insuperable. Human beings might take happiness to be the “purpose and intention of their lives.” “They strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so.” But they were, according to Freud, mistaken or deceived. “One feels inclined to say,” he concluded, “that the intention that man should be ‘happy’ is not in the plan of ‘Creation.’”

Freud was writing in the aftermath of the First World War and on brink of the Second, just as Hitler was coming to power, and so we might forgive him his pessimism. But it is, I think, an index of how far we have moved since that time that Freud’s tragic view of the inevitable frustrations, conflicts, and irresolvable tensions of the human condition has long been out of favor. The Enlightenment belief in happiness—the Enlightenment faith in happiness—has totally triumphed in the developed world in the second half of the 20th century, commensurate with—it is surely not irrelevant to note—the greatest cumulative economic expansion in human history. If, as we know from our sociologist colleagues’ work on reported subjective well being, men in women in the

United States and Europe have not, it seems, gotten appreciably happier since the 1950s, despite the massive gains in cumulative GNP, it *is* the case, I would argue, that men and women's sense that they *should* be happy, has in fact increased a great deal.

Paradoxically this increase in expectations may actually decrease happiness by increasing disappointment. What I call the unhappiness of not being happy is a phenomenon one can detect in Western culture since the 18th century, but it has probably never been as acute as it is today.

So happiness as our being's end and aim—this Enlightenment creed has triumphed, and in the process it has tended to crowd out, discredit, or co-opt other ways of looking at the world and the human purpose in it. Religion provides an interesting case in point. You would be hard-pressed to find in say, the early part of the 17th century, a Christian religious apologist arguing that religion was *a* means to happiness (at least a means to happiness in this life). Religion—and the salvation that it offered—were considered, rather, ends in themselves. And yet increasingly, beginning in the latter part of the 17th century, religious apologists themselves have tended to genuflect before the new god of human happiness on earth. *True Pleasure, Chearfulness, and Happiness, The Immediate Consequence of Religion* was the way one American author in the 1760s titled his book on the merits of Christianity, while reminding his readers that Christ's first miracle was to create more wine to keep the party going—and there are many Catholic analogues for this too. By the early 19th century, this tendency was considerably developed, prompting Alexis de Tocqueville to observe in *Democracy in America* that

Whereas Old World priests had once spoken “of nothing but the other life,” and “hardly took any trouble to prove that a sincere Christian might be happy here below,” preachers in America were “continually coming down to earth.”

Indeed they find it difficult to take their eyes off it. The better to touch their hearers, they are forever pointing out how religious beliefs favor freedom and public order, and it is often difficult to be sure when listening to them whether the main object of religion is to procure eternal felicity in the next world or prosperity in this.

Living, as I now do in the South, a transplant from New York City, I can tell you that this form of exhortation is very much alive. Get religion, get happy. When the latest Pew Foundation findings linking evangelical Protestantism to subjective well being were released recently, people in my neck of the woods were doubly elated.

So even among those who might be expected to be preaching fire and brimstone, earthly happiness today in effect is the highest good. The French philosopher Pascal Bruckner goes so far as to observe that it (happiness) has become “the sole horizon of our democracies.” Taking into account that general Enlightenment triumph, I think, may help us to situate contemporary happiness studies in a somewhat broader context than you might get simply from studying its place in the history of psychology, say, or economics, or social science. And that is a reflection that I hope will give you a slightly better appreciation for the extraordinary contemporary appeal of your work, for it is in many respects the culmination and perfect expression of precisely that dynamic I have traced briefly for you here. Happiness, we might say, is all that many have left, and so it is only

natural to conclude that we should do everything in our power to figure out how to secure it. Notwithstanding the brilliance of practitioners such as yourselves, this larger dynamic I think helps to account in part for the field's extraordinary contemporary appeal.

Let me make one more reflection—or series of reflections—based on my observation about the USES to which happiness has been put in the past and how that bears on the present. I think one needs to recognize that when happiness began to occupy the space formally occupied by religion—when it became, to quote a letter from Voltaire in 1726, "the great and only concern," there was born a concept of extraordinary power and allure. For what had for so long resided on the horizon of human experience, outside our temporal bounds, the source and repository of all our hopes and longings and dreams, had now been pulled down from heaven to earth, and dangled before us, every one of us, as a legitimate prospect in the here and now. With the result that those who could marshal those hopes, who could claim to lead us towards the coveted promised land of happiness on earth were necessarily vested with extraordinary power. At the very time that St. Just was proclaiming happiness as a new idea in Europe, his Jacobin colleagues were preaching secular sermons in former Catholic churches about happiness on earth—"real" happiness, as opposed, they claimed, to the false kind that came surrounded by angels—real happiness, while the guillotine did its work. "The overcoming of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real happiness*," Marx would later write in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the Right*. It is one of those terrible ironies of history that in taking up this injunction, Stalin liked to describe himself as the Constructor of Happiness.

So what am I implying with these ominous allusions? That those of us gathered here—authorities on happiness—are somehow dangerous, despite our best intentions? That the search for earthly happiness must end in blood? Of course not. And yet I would enter a humble plea as a historian and scholar of the humanities for a certain humility as we approach our subject, pointing out the un-nerving tendency of happiness to frustrate and circumvent those who would try to grasp it in pursuit.

...Fortune's wheel turns treacherously
And out of happiness brings men to sorrow

the monk observes, in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. We risk missing something in today's post-Enlightenment world, I would argue, when we fail to acknowledge that un-nerving tendency, and when we fail pay heed to those traditions of knowledge—be they Classical (think of Greek Tragedy), or Jewish (think of the tale of Job), or Christian (think of the account of original sin)—which emphasized the elusive nature of happiness and its quest, the difficulty of ever fully securing it in our grasp, the little piece of us that, however happy we might seem, always seems to cry out for more. These are insights that one finds again and again in Western history. From Horace's lapidary reflection:

"Nihil est ab omni parte beatum." Nothing is completely happy.

Or Rousseau's frank avowal: "I doubt whether any of us knows the meaning of lasting happiness." "Happiness leaves us, or we leave it." [↓](#) Or John Stuart Mill's insight that if you "Ask yourself whether you are happy, you cease to be so." And there are many other such poignant reflections. I like to point out that something of this same elusive quality is creeping about in the phrase the "pursuit of happiness" itself. We focus, rightly, on the word happiness, but pursuit is interesting too. In the 18th century it had a somewhat harder meaning that it does today, closely related, in fact, to its cognates,

"prosecute" and "persecute," If you look, for example in Samuel Johnson's great eighteenth-century Dictionary of the English Language, you'll find

To Pursue... 1. To chase; to follow in hostility.

Pursuit... 1. The act of following with hostile intention.

[Johnson being the one who observed that a man may be happy in the future or in the past, but in the present, never, except when drunk]. But this harder sense of "pursuit" is interesting. The French talk about *la chasse au bonheur*, the hunt for happiness, as if one were in the process of stalking a wild, and potentially dangerous, beast. A beast, presumably, that one has to kill when it is finally cornered and can't flee anymore.

So all this by way of registering a reminder that the pursuit of happiness and the uses to which happiness has been put have not always been happy. A reminder that no matter how hard we try to fix its meaning, the word and concept will always come to us charged with its religious and metaphysical past as the ultimate human end, the final place of rest, the solution and salvation to human dissatisfaction, the answer to the riddle of the existence. In the early middle ages, Boethius could observe that "God is happiness itself." I don't think it is entirely an exaggeration to say that for many, today, Happiness has become a sort of god. Which means that that we, as its interpreters and perhaps prescribers, share in something of a priestly craft—at the very least share a moral responsibility that is greater than we might always appreciate at first glance. In this respect, the Oxford Don and Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately, was certainly right when he said in the nineteenth century that happiness is no laughing matter.