

Happiness Down the Ages: Theory and Philosophy

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Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white: do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given to you under the sun.
Ecclesiastes 9:7–9. (Bible, New Revised Version)

Abstract This chapter describes the intermittent interest in human happiness throughout time: higher during relative peace and prosperity than in periods of war and turmoil, and it explores the elusive nature of happiness, Eudaimonia, Hedonism, and Stoicism from Greek and Roman civilizations into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the development of English Utilitarianism, to Moore and Russell in the twentieth century, and the emergence of Positive Psychology in 1998. Academic study and public awareness of happiness has since increased,

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coincidentally with equality and economic progress, but will this continue—was the period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 2008 financial crisis a peak in Western civilization? Will there be a return to the general trend of philosophers and psychologists focusing more on human misery and disorder?

Keywords Philosophy of happiness · Hedonia · Eudaimonia(Epicurus) Utilitarianism · Positive psychology

The search for happiness is a normal human, or even, stretching the point, a normal animal action. The smallest amoeba, if placed between a drop of vinegar (which presumably makes it unhappy) and a drop of sugar solution (which it presumably enjoys), will shrink to one side and stretch out to the other. Long before the days of Ecclesiastes, people must have been trying to work out what happiness is and how to achieve it.

Happiness is a very elusive concept. It is significant that Jefferson proposed the concepts of life and liberty as unqualified basic “inalienable rights” but, rather than straightforwardly putting happiness as the third right, he chose its pursuit. There was apparently, some discussion before Jefferson’s final wording in the *Declaration of Independence* (United States 1776) was accepted. None of us can clearly define happiness or can guarantee that any particular situation will make us happy, but looking for it—the “pursuit” of happiness is perfectly understandable as an inalienable right.

This elusiveness has probably discouraged some philosophers from taking an interest in the concept. Most of those who have taken it on have agreed that happiness is an important part of human life, but have disagreed wildly on exactly what it is. Pawelski (2013) found an extraordinary range of definitions. Care must be taken when studying the use of the word as its meaning has subtly altered over the years. In mediaeval English, and even up to Shakespeare’s day “happiness” mainly meant good hap—good luck; something good that happens to you, rather than your feelings when it happens:

Wish me partaker in thy happiness
When thou dost meet good hap
(Two Gentlemen of Verona)

It was only in the seventeenth century that the term began to denote a harmonious or exalted frame of mind rather than merely an outwardly

prosperous condition. We still use the phrase “a happy chance” to mean a stroke of good luck. Alexander Pope saw the double meaning:

Oh Happiness! Our being's end and aim!
 Good, Pleasure, Ease, Content! Whate'er thy name
 That something still which prompts th'eternal sigh,
 For which we bear to live, or dare to die
 Which still so near us, yet beyond us lies
 O'er-looked, seen double, by the fool and wise
(*Essay on Man*. Epistle IV)

Even at the end of the eighteenth century Dr. Johnson, although he gave “Felicity; state in which the desires are satisfied” as his first definition of happiness, gave “Good luck; good fortune” as the second and “Fortuitous elegance, unstudied grace” as the third meaning (*Dictionary* 1755). His fellow-drudge across the Atlantic, Webster, writing a generation later, contented himself with the modern definition. Johnson was, of course, a backward-looking lexicographer, interested in the historical development of the language, while Webster saw himself as one of the creators of a new society (Guha 2011). Johnson was most definitely pre-Rousseau or even anti-Rousseau and pre-French Revolution in his ideas. Webster, on the other hand, was very strongly influenced by Rousseau and passed this enthusiasm on in his writings. Rousseau and the subsequent French revolutionaries that followed him made an enormous change in modern ways of thinking. Quennell (1988), searching for the origins of the phrase “the pursuit of happiness”, suggests that Jefferson took the idea directly from St Just. This seems odd, considering that St Just is mainly remembered for having orchestrated some of the most horrible massacres of the Reign of Terror, but, apparently, shortly before his own trial and execution, he had started propounding new ideas—“la révolution est l'ouvrage du peuple; il est temps qu'il en jouisse”.

Aristotle held that “the activity of the divine which surpasses all others must be contemplative” and that of all human beings the philosopher who “exercises his reason and cultivates it” must be the most godlike and therefore must be the happiest (*Nicomachean Ethics*). Those of us who have had the opportunity to observe modern philosophers in the flesh may be permitted to doubt Aristotle's conclusion. Certainly, it is hard to look back on examples such as Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer or Carlyle as happy people (Samuel Butler said that it was very good of God

to let the Carlyles marry each other, because that only made two people unhappy instead of four, *Letters* 1884). Most philosophers, and, indeed, most people who have written about happiness seem to have led fairly sad lives. It seems quite plausible that Eeyore was the only animal in the Enchanted Forest who actually thought about happiness. Pooh certainly did not. Philosophers of happiness in general never seem to have been festive or luxurious. Epicurus himself led a remarkably ascetic life—his “food and drink was mainly bread and water”. One of his surviving letters to a follower says “please send me some cheese, that when I like I may have a feast”—scarcely the modern image of an epicure, and he “suffered all his life from bad health, but learnt to endure it with great fortitude. It was he, not a Stoic, who first maintained that a man could be happy on the rack” (Russell 1946, Chap. XXVII).

Even the most serious thinkers do get the occasional break, however. Turgenev told the Goncourt brothers (1896 reprinted 2007) that his happiest moment came at a time when, as a moody 15-year-old boy, he was wandering around the garden in the rain when a young maidservant, his mother’s serf, came up to him, put her arms round his neck, and said “come”. “Just the memory of that gentle touch”, he said, “still makes me happy”. A century earlier, Dr. Johnson recollected, to the very end of his days, his happiest moment which was when he “spent an evening tete-a-tete with Molly Aston”. The meeting between the poverty-stricken scrofulous and depressive son of a bankrupt Tory tradesman and the pretty, vivacious nineteen-year-old daughter of a rich Whig baronet was almost certainly much more chaste than the encounter between a master’s son and a serf-girl, but it is hard to begrudge either author their recollection of a brief moment’s happiness. Johnson, indeed, maintained that all happiness is recollected or proposed—either retrospective or prospective: “The present... was never a happy state to any human being”. On being pressed by Boswell if he was really of the opinion that, although happiness is very rare, a man is not sometimes happy in the present, he answered: “Never, but when he is drunk”. John Stuart Mill supported this view (excluding the drunk aspect), saying “Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so”. Epicurus would certainly have disagreed with both Mill and Johnson, though Aristotle might have concurred with them.

The term which Aristotle used was “Eudaimonia” which has been variously translated as happiness, or as good living, or as human flourishing (Hursthouse 2007). The Greeks had a number of other terms for different

aspects of happiness, ranging from “hedone” to “epicharma”—English and French are much more limited in their vocabularies. Aristotle’s main emphasis was on the active application of “virtue” (arête) as a cause of happiness. He noted that there were other factors involved, such as health, wealth and personal beauty, but felt that the importance of these was overemphasised by shallow thinkers—“the many do not give the same account as the wise” (Nichomachean Ethics 21:1095). This emphasis on active application forms the chief distinction between Aristotle’s teaching and that of Epicurus, who saw happiness as the result of passive virtue—“ataraxia”.

The classic Greek philosophers were, of course, entirely concerned with Eudaimonia as a social concept. The Romantic idea of solitary happiness did not enter their discussions to any great extent. They would have found the argument as to whether Robinson Crusoe was happy on his island difficult to grasp. The sophist Thrasymachus is said by Plato (his own writings, if any, have not survived, so his ideas only exist in their refutations) to have claimed that conventional morality, the ideal of justice, prevents strong men from achieving happiness. The first part of *The Republic* is largely a refutation by Plato of this dangerous idea, which keeps on recurring through the ages, from Hobbes to Nietzsche to Donald Trump.

Philosophers have usually tended to concentrate on the more depressing aspects of the human condition. Tove Jansson was quite justified in making her fictional muskrat philosopher claim to be stoically indifferent while, in fact, fussing about absolutely anything, and studying his favourite book “*On the Uselessness of Everything*” (Jansson 1946). Burnet (1892) summarised the beliefs of the earliest recorded Greek philosophers as “We are strangers in this world, and the body is the tomb of the soul, and yet we must not seek to escape by self-murder; for we are the chattels of God who is our herdsman, and without his command we have no right to make our escape”. As psychology slowly disentangled itself from philosophy to become a separate discipline, psychologists found themselves tarred with the same brush, even though Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) well understood the role of law and community in restricting and controlling the pleasure principle to create a focus for happiness. All newly qualified psychologists speedily learn that, if they are introduced to strangers, it will be taken for granted that their interests lie in various aspects of human misery or mental disorder.

Amidst this sea of doom and gloom however, the subject of human happiness has intermittently bobbed up to the surface. In his foreword to the *Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology* (Lopez 2009), Seligman makes the interesting suggestion that “when nations are at war, in famine, poor and in civil turmoil it is quite natural that the endeavours they support will be about defence and damage. When nations are... peaceful, sated, wealthy and harmonious they ask, not just about removing the disabling conditions of life but about creating and ennobling conditions of life. Cosimo the Great’s Florence decided to devote its surplus to beauty and gave us what was later called ‘The Renaissance’. The wealthy world of the late twentieth century met these conditions, and the call for... a psychology which was not just about suffering, trauma, depression, victims, irrationality, madness and crime did not fall on deaf ears”. It is hard to see George W. Bush as a latter-day Cosimo de Medici, or *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology* as the modern equivalent of the Uffizi Gallery, but the general idea does seem sound (Guha and Carson 2014). The very first philosopher who is known to have based his theories on the idea of happiness was, after all, Epicurus, who flourished under the rule of Alexander the Great, at a time when Greece was the most powerful nation in the world and had become peaceful, sated, wealthy and harmonious, having gradually recovered from the Corinthian war which had left it most definitely “in famine, poor and in civil turmoil” (Wilson 2006).

Epicurean ideas have continued to affect philosophers through the years—it was only when writing this chapter that we were reminded that Karl Marx’s doctoral thesis was on Epicurus! Epicureanism probably reached the height of its influence in the early Roman Empire. As the Empire recovered from the toils and tribulations of the civil wars “the rich and polite Italians... had almost universally embraced the philosophy of Epicurus” (Gibbon 1776, 1910 edition, Chap. III). Epicureanism continued to dominate philosophical thinking throughout the peaceful, sated, wealthy and harmonious reigns of Hadrian and the Antonine Emperors—a time of which Gibbon said “if a man was called to fix the period during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus”. It was only in the reign of Marcus Aurelius—the first emperor to have had to spend almost the whole of his reign combatting the invading tribes that ultimately brought the Empire down, that Stoicism, which had always

been an undercurrent in Roman thought, really came to the fore. The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (2004 edition) continue to have an influence on European thought, with stoicism rising in interest during times of trouble and distress, just as ideas derived from Epicureanism bubble up in more positive periods.

Epicurus based his teaching on the principle that all good and evil derive from the sensations of pleasure and pain. In a balanced life, we enter into the state of *ataraxia*—usually translated as tranquil or passive happiness. He is said to have taught in the garden of his house, which was entered by a door bearing the sign “Stranger, you will do well to tarry here. Our highest good is pleasure”. This idea does not satisfactorily explain the existence of evil. He said that “It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living well and justly” which is arguably true and should form the core of any philosophical discussion of happiness, but went on to say “It is impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living pleasantly” (Russell 1946, Chap. XXVII). There were, just for example, plenty of Jews in Central Europe at the time of the original Mass Observation study of Worktown, who lived as wisely and as well and as justly as they could, but who soon found life most unpleasant. Aquinas attempts to address this problem in the *Summa Theologica* (English trans. 2000) by saying “Since God is the highest good he would not allow any evil to exist... unless his omnipotence were such as to bring good out of evil”. This may or may not seem satisfactory, depending on your religious beliefs. This argument that “this is the best of all possible worlds” was restated by Leibnitz in (1710) and parodied by Voltaire in *Candide* (1759). Voltaire was inspired to distrust the argument that God will bring good out of evil by the awful effects of the Lisbon earthquake, just as we might be by the existence of Nazism.

Even these two writers lend some support to Seligman’s hypothesis. Germany had been left exhausted, in poverty and distress, by the Thirty Years War, but Leibnitz was a courtier in peace-time Hanover during its astonishingly rapid rise from a broken petty dukedom to an affluent and powerful electorate to, ultimately, the succession to the English throne. Similarly, Voltaire wrote of Dr. Pangloss at a time when France was the most powerful nation in Europe—temporarily at peace, sated, wealthy and harmonious.

The same can most certainly be said of the English Utilitarians, who rose to prominence in Early Victorian times, with a philosophy based on the ideal of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” at a time

when Europe was recovering from the horrors of the Napoleonic wars, and Britain had achieved a moment of internal calm following the safety valve of the Reform Act and had become the most powerful nation in the world—peaceful, sated, wealthy and harmonious.

As with other writers on happiness, the nineteenth-century British Utilitarians were a noticeably joyless bunch:

John Stuart Mill
By a great effort of will
Forgot his natural bonhomie
And wrote the Principles of Political Economy

In spite of holding that an action is morally right if it has consequences which lead to happiness and wrong if it brings about the reverse, so society should aim for the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This theory, as was pointed out even at the time, could logically be extended to justify murder: if five people are unhappily in need of organ transplants then sentencing one person to an unhappy death for spare parts would increase the happiness of the greater number (see, e.g. Macaulay's formidable attacks on Mill and Bentham, republished 1889).

Utilitarianism faded in popularity towards the end of the nineteenth century. It is interesting and possibly relevant that there was a sudden revival of interest in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, at a time when the collapse of the Soviet Union had left America at peace, the most powerful nation in the world—sated, wealthy and harmonious. More books on utilitarianism were published during that decade or so than had been published for practically a century previously (Guha 2014). This curious twenty-first century revival of interest in utilitarianism as a positive philosophy coincided quite noticeably with the rise of positive psychology. The *Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology* was by no means the only major upbeat reference book published in that period. We have looked at such sources as *The World Book of Happiness* (Bormans 2011), *Wellbeing: a Complete Reference Guide* (Cooper 2014) in six massive volumes and the *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Utilitarianism* (Crimmins 2013), and there had been a host of other relevant reference sources, all dated to the same short period. It is even noticeable that in 2013, it was found worthwhile reprinting the *Encyclopedia of Health & Home*—a guide to health, wealth and happiness originally compiled at the end of the last peak of utilitarian ideas (Wood 1881, reprinted 2013).

The massive *Oxford Handbook of Happiness* (David et al. 2012) more or less coincided with the Springer *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (Michalos 2014). Oxford University Press, for example, went to town on positive psychology, following up the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Lopez and Snyder 2011) with a whole string of titles such as the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology & Work* (Linley and Harrington 2013), the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology & Disability* (Wehmeyer 2015) and the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (Cameron and Spreitzer 2011).

Both the academic study of happiness and public awareness of the importance of happiness have thus been clearly on the up in the past decade or so. This public interest is supported by an increasing body of evidence which suggests, not merely that people are happy in more egalitarian societies but also that the general incidence of disorder is lower in happier societies (Diener and Chan 2011; Equalities Review 2007; Jane-Llopis et al. 2014). Economists have tended to measure a country's success by its gross national product (GNP) but the philosophical view that GNP is not an accurate measure of health or happiness that has increasingly been accepted by far-sighted politicians—as far back as 1968 Robert Kennedy said “GNP... measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile” (<http://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/portraits/Robert-f-kennedy> sampled April 2014), and more recently even the most inequalitarian of modern British prime ministers brought himself to say that “We should be thinking not just what is good for putting money in people's pockets. but what is good for putting joy in people's hearts” (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/happiness_formula/4809828.stm).

Building up such a level of interest takes time. Ideas that are floated by obscure philosophers only gradually move into the mainstream. In universities and in medical practice, suggestions absorbed by undergraduates naturally ferment for years before, as postgraduates and junior academics they even start to publish, and for even more years until they reach senior positions where they can exert serious influence. Thus, for example, Jahoda (1958) first noted the term “positive mental health”, and that “psychologists have started emphasising the importance of promoting health rather than simply preventing ill-health”. The actual term “positive psychology” for a distinct movement seems to have been coined by Abraham Maslow in *Motivation and Personality* (1954). Martin Seligman was in his teens when those two books were published,

and the positive psychology movement did not really become a mainstream in psychology until he made it the central theme of his stint as president of the American Psychology Society in 1998. The *Journal of Happiness Studies* started publication in 1999, and the tide of interest has gradually risen, though it has to be said that much of the emphasis in psychological research is still on suffering, trauma, distress, etc. One would expect, just for example, that a journal whose title expresses an interest in “mental health” rather than in mental illness, would overflow with papers related to happiness. In fact however, a cursory search in the *Journal of Mental Health* brought up 98 uses of the word “happiness”—many of only marginal relevance [and several of the more relevant uses being by the authors of this chapter,] as compared with 299 hits on “suicide”, most of them grimly relevant (sampled April, 2014). That particular journal had published papers on well-being (e.g. Lal et al. 2014), on the ways in which people have found benefit through their struggle with adversity (e.g. Chiba et al. 2014) and the occasional book review (e.g. Carson 2013) but that is about all. Clearly, the contributors to the *Journal of Mental Health* have not yet come to regard their clients’ happiness as a major topic of interest, but the quantity of research is growing. The distinction between the active, Aristotelean conception of Eudaimonia and the more passive Epicurean hedonic happiness is being brought out both implicitly (e.g. Ryff 1989) and explicitly (e.g. Joshanloo 2015). There has even been some research suggesting that there is an identifiable genetic component—that some people are predisposed to be happier than others (Archontaki et al. 2013).

Turgenev’s experience is not completely atypical. Adolescence is a time of emotional upheaval and a time for formative emotional experiences. It seems slightly odd, therefore, that most of the recent psychological research on happiness seems to concentrate on adults. Coatsworth and Sharp (2013) found comparatively few studies related to adolescent happiness. Research on youth development still seems to concentrate on its more negative aspects. This forms a curious contrast with, for example, research on reading fiction for relaxation and recuperation, which concentrates almost entirely on adolescents. Guha and Seale (2015) found that “Reading quite clearly can be a way of relieving emotional difficulties in adults, but therapists obviously do not think this a subject worthy of study in anyone much over the age of fifteen”. Perhaps the present study will help trigger off more of an interest (see Watson

and Withey, this volume). Nevertheless, the study of happiness is clearly a growth area, so this book is arriving on the crest of a wave.

The question then arises as to whether this volume indicates a point where the furthestmost lapping of the tide has finally reached the beaches of Bolton, a high-water mark from which psychological and philosophical interest will inevitably recede, or whether it indicates a further step in an inexorable rise. Hobsbawm (1994) did not think highly of the period in which the original Bolton study was made—"the decades from the outbreak of the First World War to the outbreak of the Second were an Age of Catastrophe...". Studying happiness in Bolton in 1938 might therefore seem to have gone against Seligman's theory that "when nations are at war, in famine, poor and in civil turmoil it is quite natural that the endeavours they support will be about defence and damage rather than about happiness". It should be noted, however, that the results of the Mass Observation survey were not analysed at the time but merely put into store and were only resuscitated in 2012 (McHugh, this volume). Certainly very little was published on happiness during the 1930s. Bertrand Russell's *Conquest of Happiness* (1930) was, both in terms of sales and in terms of scholarly acceptance, one of his least successful books, and now seems irritatingly anodyne in its suggestions. GE Moore's *Principia Ethica*, published in (1903), was perhaps the last influential philosophical text from before the Age of Catastrophe, "often considered a revolutionary work that set a new agenda for 20th-Century ethics" according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005). It continued to have an influence on the ideas of Maynard Keynes and other members of the Bloomsbury Group into the interwar period and would have been a standard philosophy text at the time when Tom Harrisson was a student, as well as its indirect influence on him and the other founders of Mass Observation through Keynes etc.

Moore is concerned to demonstrate the fallacy of Mill's declaration that "Happiness is the only thing desirable as an end" by examining the Utilitarians' confusion between the "cause" and the "object" of desire. If "pleasure" can be distinguished from "consciousness of pleasure" (i.e. if there is a difference between the ways of thinking of Pooh and Eeyore) then, Moore claims, both the utilitarian argument and the hedonistic argument ultimately derived from Epicurus fall to the ground (Moore, *op cit*, esp. Chap. III paras. 58–64). This sour conclusion perhaps forms the philosophical basis for the general view of happiness in the interwar period.

Hobsbawm in discussing this Age of Catastrophe claims that it was followed by “some twenty-five or thirty years of extraordinary economic growth and social transformation.... The Short Twentieth Century passed through a brief Golden Age, on the way from one era of crisis to another”. This period might be extended; it may well be that future historians will look back on the era between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the financial crisis of 2008 as a period “When nations are... peaceful, sated, wealthy and harmonious” and could “ask, not just about removing the disabling conditions of life but about creating and ennobling conditions of life”. If this period forms a peak, from which civilisation will gradually revert to a trough of war, famine, poverty and civil turmoil, then the recovery of the original Worktown study in 2012, and the publication of this volume might sadly mark a high point in the study of happiness, before philosophers and psychologists revert to their more normal study of various aspects of human misery or mental disorder.

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