The Idea of Happiness

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The idea of happiness has changed. It has emerged as a measurable, autonomous, manageable, psychological variable in the global middle-class culture. The self-conscious, determined search for happiness has gradually transformed the idea of happiness from a mental state to an objectified quality of life that can be attained the way an athlete after training under specialists and going through a strict regimen of exercises and diet wins a medal in a track meet. Might it be that the sense of well-being of a mentally healthy person shows its robustness by being able to live with some amount of unhappiness and what is commonly seen as ill-health?

This is based on the 13th Kappen Memorial Lecture, delivered at Bangalore on 22 September 2011.
It has grown out of a trialogue among Tamotsu Aoki, Nur Yalman, and the author, organised some years ago by Iwanami Shoten at Tokyo. The discussion spilled into a conference on "Culture and Hegemony: Politics of Culture in the Age of Globalisation", organised by GRIPS project of the University of Tokyo and by the Institut fur Ethnologie, Ruprecht-Karls-Universit, Heidelberg, and into a small article published in Spanish in an Yearbook.

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> What good is happiness if it cannot buy you money?
>
> – Attributed to Zsa Zsa Gabor

1

In 2007, one of Britain's leading schools, Wellington College at Crowthorne, announced that it would offer classes on happiness to combat materialism and celebrity obsession.[1] The following year, *New Scientist* summarised the results of a 65-country survey to show that the highest proportion of happy persons lived in, of all places, Nigeria, followed by Mexico, Venezuela, El Salvador and Puerto Rico. It is true that happiness surveys differ in their findings. According to some, happiness has much to do with prosperity, levels of development and healthcare; according to others, these things do not matter. It is the second set that has produced countries like Vanuatu, a former happiest country in the world that most have not heard of, and last year's world champion in happiness, Bangladesh, which many believe could well qualify as one of the world's unhappiest countries.[2] In comparison, some of the richest nations languish near the bottom of the list.

However, I am not concerned here with comparative happiness or the methodology of studying happiness. I am concerned with the emergence of happiness as a measurable, autonomous, manageable, psychological variable in the global middle-class culture. And the two events can be read as parts of the same story. If the first factoid – discovery of happiness as a teachable discipline – suggests that in some parts of the world happiness is becoming a realm of training, guidance and expertise, the second reaffirms the ancient "self-consoling" "naïve" belief that you cannot always be happy just by virtue of being wealthy, secure or occupied. You have to learn to be happy.

Together they partly explain why clenched-teeth pursuit of happiness has become a major feature and a discovery of our times. The other explanations possibly are the growing confidence in some sections of the globe in the power of human volition and the developing technology of human self-engineering as by-products of the ideology of individualism. These changes have pushed many to believe that it is up to them, individually, to do something about their happiness, that happiness cannot happen, nor can it be given. It has to be earned or acquired. This self-conscious, determined search for happiness has gradually transformed the idea of happiness from a mental state to an objectified quality of life that can be attained the way an athlete – after training under specialists and going through a strict regimen of exercises and diet – wins a medal in a track meet.

I am tempted to trace this change in the idea of happiness to the special style of death-denial encouraged by late 20th century capitalism. But that would be a simplification. I agree with Ernest Becker that there *is* an element of death denial in all societies – indeed, societies can be seen as systems of death denial – but under fully secular, successful capitalist societies that denial takes a special form.[3] In these societies a tacit, gnawing fear of death throws into relief a form of denial that rejects the traditional belief in many societies that the philosophically minded must think of nothing less than death as the starting point of all philosophy. In a fully secularised society, fear of death cannot but be a constant presence in everyday life and the idea of an afterlife a fragile defence. We shall briefly return to this issue again.

This is a reversal. At one stage, Protestant ethics, sired by Puritanism and widely seen as the engine of industrial capitalism, sought to purge happiness as a major goal of life. Puritanism tended to equate the search for happiness with hedonism. Max Weber emphasised the first part of the story, Karl Marx the second. Marx called political economy a "science of wealth" and "a science of marvellous industry" that was "simultaneously the science of denial, of want, of thrift, of saving. …the science of asceticism. The discipline's true ideal is the ascetic but extortionate miser and the ascetic but productive slave." The later part of the 20th century, perhaps as a consequence of the spectacular death dance in the form of the two world wars, saw the collapse of that ideal.

The determined pursuit of happiness is now seen as a response to a disease called unhappiness. In the second post-world war period, unhappiness in some parts of the world has been systematically medicalised. It is now the domain of professionals, where the laity by itself cannot do much except co-operate with the experts. To acquire normal happiness, one now requires therapy, counselling or expert guidance – from a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst or professional counsellor or, alternatively, from a personal philosopher, wise man or woman, or a guru. In the post-war era, there were a number of best-sellers by respected scholars, such as Bertrand Russell, Erich Fromm and Eric Berne, which sought to guide us through this troublesome, unhealthy state called unhappiness and to help us "conquer happiness", as Russell put it.[4] I am not surprised that such an over-planned, aggressively rational search for happiness produced as its side-effect some rather determined efforts to escape its clutches. To judge by Russell's daughter's memoirs, her schizophrenic brother's illness might have been a direct defiance of her father's "mechanomorphic" concept of happiness. She in effect wishes that her father had been more open to the less "scientific", but perhaps more humane school of psychology pioneered by Sigmund Freud and less in awe of the hard, ultra-positivist behaviourism of J B Watson.

The trend continues. Only recent guides to happiness are less magisterial. However, they are by no means less popular, whether written by such space-age sages like Deepak Chopra and the intrepid author of the *Chicken Soup* series, Jack Canfield or by their less ambitious siblings in the form of agony aunts and quick-fix, week-end advisers in newspapers and tabloids. Recently, psychoanalyst Avner Falk sent me the following apocryphal exchange from Jerusalem:

> Dear Walter,
> The other day I set off for work leaving my husband in the house watching the TV as usual. I hadn't gone more than a mile down the road when my engine conked out and the car shuddered to a halt. I walked back home to get my husband's help. When I got home I couldn't believe my eyes. My husband was in the bedroom with a neighbour, making passionate love to her. I was floored. ... I love him very much.... I feel like my whole life is in ruins and I want to kill him and myself.
> Can you please help?
> Sincerely,
> Sheila
>
> Dear Sheila,
> A car stalling after being driven a short distance can be caused by a variety of faults with the engine. Start by checking that there is no debris in the fuel line. If it is clear, check the jubilee clips holding the vacuum pipes onto the inlet manifold. If none of these approaches solves the problem, it could be that the fuel pump itself is faulty, causing low delivery pressure to the carburettor float chamber, in which case it must be replaced.
> I hope this helps.
> Walter

2

Both the disease called unhappiness and its adjunct, the determined search for happiness, seem to afflict more the developed, prosperous, modern societies. Certainly these societies do not usually come off very well in many happiness surveys – one is tempted to guess that only after one's basic needs have been met, following the likes of Abraham Maslow, one can afford to have the luxury of worrying about vague, subjective states like happiness and unhappiness. Alternatively, following Ivan Illich, one can

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hazard the guess that only those who have lost their moorings in conviviality and the normal algorithm of community life can hope to learn to be happy from professionals.

This conscious pursuit of happiness, though it came into its own in the 20th century, is mostly a contribution of the Enlightenment. The belief that one can scientifically fashion a happy life, despite hostile environmental factors and what we call random interventions of probability or chance – our ill-educated forefathers called them conspiracies of fate – requires confidence in human agency, rationality and individual will. Indeed, the search for happiness consolidated itself as a legitimate yearning only in the late 18th century, by when the Enlightenment values had made inroads into the European middle class. The constitution of the United States (US) was the first constitution to sanction the demand for and the pursuit of happiness. But it was a very specific kind of happiness that Thomas Jefferson had in mind. Hanna Arendt says that in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson personally substituted the term happiness for property. She adds that American usage, especially in the 18th century, spoke of "public happiness" where the French spoke of "public freedom".[5]

This marked a break. Before the 18th century, the predominant mode of seeking happiness was aligned to, and intertwined with, theories of transcendence. And outside Europe that alignment continued. Both the Buddhist concept of ananda, which later seeped into the Vedantic world view, and the Christian concept of bliss had little to do with the new idea of happiness in the modernising west, buffeted by institutional forces on the one side, and internalised social norms on the other. Ananda or bliss happened. It rarely came to those who searched for happiness. You could, of course, hasten or precipitate it, without actually striving for it, through correct rites and rituals, mystic experiences, meditation or other forms of exercises in self-transcendence. Happiness of the kind we now associate with individualism and the juridical self has an uncertain status in the non-modern world, more so because some of the major civilisations of the world, such as the Chinese and the Indian, locate their utopias in the past.[6] Given their non-linear concept of time, the past in these civilisations do have the prerogative and the potentiality to become the future. But, for all practical purposes, one has to be reconciled to live in this imperfect world with what Freud once called the normal unhappiness to which we are heir. The past like the future often serves as a social and moral critique of the present.

Indeed, in some Indian texts, the search for happiness is seen as slightly déclassé. Valmiki's *Ramayana* – others mention other texts – tells us that the benefits of reading the epic are different for different castes. The brahmins who read it get *gyana* (knowledge), the martial kshatriyas *kirti* (fame/glory), the business-minded vaishyas money, and the lowly shudras get – Chopra and Canfield may be mortified by this – happiness.

3

The expanding sense of human omnipotence and the growing confidence in social and psychological engineering after Renaissance brought a different concept of human agency into play in social affairs. New theologies of the State, history and science began to talk of building from scratch a "new man" better suited to human potentialities according to their competing dogmas. A parallel process in psychology firmed up the trend in the late 19th century. Almost all of the emerging models of human personality and society promised a this-worldly, non-transcendental version of happiness and were confident that, through proper retooling of social institutions, it could be ensured in the short run. Not surprisingly, once the idea of cultivable and learnt or achieved happiness entered the scene, many authoritarian regimes in our times, unlike earlier despotisms, began to claim that they were pushing their subjects into the best of all possible worlds and began to demand that their subjects be happy.

In such regimes, if anyone claimed to be unhappy, it became a confession of delinquency and his or her normal place remained, officially, outside society. Happiness, like school uniforms, became compulsory. For, not to be happy in a utopia is, by definition, a criticism of the utopia and unforgivable dissent. In the 20th century, in many societies such dissenters have filled psychiatric clinics and jails. The Soviet Union, for instance, was never secretive about this tacit component of its ideology of the state. The Soviet psychiatrists were mobilised to give teeth to the state's official vision of an ideal society. Nazi Germany did even better. It liquidated such delinquents as enemies of the state.

In Lin Yutang's interpretation of Confucius, for anyone seeking happiness it is important to find a good chair to sit.[7] The gifted Indian philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi discovered this independently. For the last 20 years of his life he was known by his chair at the India International Centre at New Delhi, on which he spent long hours under the portico of the centre. *Panchatantra*, the ancient Indian collection of folk tales, is only slightly more ambitious. The way to happiness, it claims, is finding one or two good friends. Such modest prescriptions for happiness – a version of the small happiness that cultural anthropologist Tamotsu Aoki commends – are possible only in societies where grander versions of happiness are usually seen as mostly outside the reach of human volition and individual effort. In such societies people are socialised to be happy with odd bits of happiness that come their way. General Eustace D'Souza, an Indian officer in the British Indian Army, who saw action in second world war, was accidentally posted both at Italy and Japan when these two countries surrendered to nations occupied by the Allied forces. He recalled for a now-defunct popular magazine *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, the different responses of the two defeated peoples. While in Italy there were scrambles for rations and other goodies being distributed by the victorious Allied army and undignified fights to get larger shares, in Japan even the obviously starving never rushed for food and there was no jostling for rations.

One doubts if this can be read as a comment on the relative merits of the two cultures or their capacity to withstand deprivation. The difference perhaps indicates that, in some cultures, happiness – or, at least, reduction of unhappiness – is less a matter of personal attainments or gains and more a state of mind associated with community affiliations and social behaviour. Most individuals in these cultures tend to believe that happiness cannot come to one when one functions only as an individual competing aggressively with everyone else and, hence, it is probably pointless to ignore the codes of social conduct to run for individual gains only. One must learn to wait for such gains. Which is probably another way of saying that happiness comes mostly from within a form of intersubjectivity that has something to do with, what Illich calls conviviality in addition to accumulating, possessing or becoming.[8]

Appropriately, Aoki pleads that we give up the grand idea of happiness and opt for small ideas of happiness, the kinds that one finds strewn around in everyday life. The smallness, I presume he believes itself ensures that the ideas of large, dramatic, organised, expert-guided happiness get a lesser run in our lives and are not allowed to overwhelm entire societies by democratic consent, manufactured or otherwise. Such small forms of happiness can even serve as oases within overwhelming unhappiness. In the genocidal battle of Kurukshetra in the epic *Mahabharata*, which lasted for days, convention demanded that the battle begin everyday at sunrise and stop at sunset. At the end of the day, the warriors of the two sides visited each other's camps, exchanged pleasantries and talked of happier days they had spent together earlier.

The presently dominant idea of happiness, being subject to individual volition and effort, ensures that the search for happiness has a linear trajectory. In that idea, there is always a hope for perfection. Perfect happiness comes when one eliminates, one by one, all unhappiness. This is not an easy task. You cannot, for instance, eliminate death, old age and many forms of illness and chances of catastrophes. But at least you can live a happy life, the presumption goes, by forgetting them or by denying their existence. All societies institutionalise an element of death denial. Only in modern societies does that denial take the form of a panicky repudiation of the idea of death itself. Not only because, in the mythos of modernity, there is no genuine place for the idea of a life after death but also because in that mythos there is no admission of a natural limit to individual consumption through death. Death denial and a debilitating fear of pain are the obverse of the modern idea of happiness.

The changing culture of modern medicine and the contemporary idea of healing have begun to faithfully reflect this connection. As a result, the formulations of Ivan Illich, Manu Kothari and Lopa Mehta are at long last showing signs of seeping into professional consciousness within the discipline. Surveying recent literature on the subject, Toby Miller and Pal Ahluwalia draw attention to the way the *British Medical Journal* derides modern medicine for fighting "…an unwinnable battle against death, pain and sickness" at the price of adequate education, culture, food, and travel, in a world where the more you pay for health, the sicker you feel, and "social construction of illness is being replaced by the corporate construction of disease".[9]

4

There survives another concept of happiness, more nuanced and yet, at the same time, more down-to-earth. It affirms that healthy, robust, authentic happiness – "authentic" in the sense existential psychoanalysis deploys the term – must have a place for unhappiness. Aoki talks about the sadness of unrealised hope and the struggle to acquire a language in which to talk about happiness. In such instances, the presence of the unpleasant does not necessarily mean the diminution of happiness. It becomes part of a happy life that oscillates between the pleasant and the unpleasant, achievement and failure, being and becoming, work and play. In such a life, work becomes vocation and leisure need not be reinvented as the antithesis of work. Vocation includes leisure, exactly as a pleasurable pastime may comprise some amount of work. The idea of perfect happiness is consigned either to the domain of the momentary or the transient or to the mythic or the legendary. It cannot be achieved in life, but may be realised in exceptional moments.

Years ago, philosopher K J Shah, simultaneously an admirer of Wittgenstein and Gandhi, found, on reading Erik Erikson's celebrated book *Gandhi's Truth,* the author's concept of a happy marriage problematic. Erikson seemed to believe, Shah said, that Gandhi's relationship with his wife was ambivalent and his marriage less than happy, because the two of them constantly quarrelled. Shah found this concept of marriage strange. According to him, the strength of a human relationship should be measured not by the absence of quarrels, but by how much quarrel the relationship could take. This argument, too, has a parallel definition of happiness built into it – a happy person should be able to bear larger doses of unhappiness. This is not oriental wisdom, for Erikson's guru Sigmund Freud's Dostoevskian, tragic vision of life can easily accommodate Shah's definition of happiness. To the first psychoanalyst too, the sense of well-being of a mentally healthy person shows its robustness by being able to live with some amount of unhappiness and what is commonly seen as ill-health. This is probably what Freud meant in his famous letter to a patient's mother, in which the intrepid healer advised the worried mother to reconcile herself to the "normal" unhappiness in her son's life.

NOTES

1 www.wellingtoncollege.org.uk.

2 http://www.thehappinessshow.com/HappiestCountries.htm. This is only an example. The internet is now flush with surveys of happiness. They use different measures and arrive at different results, but I have not come across serious efforts to examine what these differences mean culturally and psychologically.

3 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Collier-Mac, 1973). This is one of the very few works that seem to see death denial as a crucial building block of cultures and societies.

4 Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930); Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (1976), *The Art of Being* (1993) and *On Being Human* (New York: 1997); Eric Berne, *Games People Play* (New York: Grove, 1964). It is unfair to bunch together these diverse scholars, especially the mechanomorphic, soulless concept of happiness in Russell with the now-unfashionable Fromm who probably supplied the first serious social criticism of "prefabricated happiness", but I am merely speaking here of the rediscovery of happiness as an achievable individual goal and a matter of individual and social engineering.

5 Hanna Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p 115. See particularly Chapter 3: "The Pursuit of Happiness".

6 The idea of utopias-in-the-past was not unknown to the Judea-Christian and Islamic traditions. The garden of Eden was utopic in many ways, but it had to be rejected in post-medieval Europe as an appropriate utopian vision. It had to learn to survive in an attenuated form and a metaphor the way the idea of primitive communism survives in Marxism – a somewhat tattered, Rousseau-esque, child-like and childish construct fit for the premoderns and non-moderns.

7 Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living* (New York: William Morrow, 1996).

8 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973). This still remains a powerful plea for a robust scepticism towards the reign of professionalism and expertise apart from being an early, if indirect critiques of the happiness industry.

9 Toby Miller and Pal Ahluwalia, "Editorial: Psychocivilised?", *Social Identities*, March 2008, 14(2), pp 143-44; see p 143. The quotes are from R Moynihan and R Smith, "Too Much Medicine?", *British Medical Journal*, 2002, 324, pp 859-60, see p 859; and R Moynihan, I Heath and D Henry, "Selling Sickness: The Pharmaceutical Industry and Disease Mongering", *British Medical Journal*, 2002, 324, 886-90, see p 886.