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# THE ULTIMATE GOAL: REFLECTIONS ON THE PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE OF THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

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## **The Ultimate Goal: Reflections on the Philosophy and Science of the Pursuit of Happiness**

### **Synopsis:**

This essay synthesizes some contemporary cognitive studies on the topic, liberally referencing what classical philosophers have said about it. I also sprinkle the scholarship with personal reflections. Schematically, the essay discusses social factors of happiness, such as money, marriage, and children, and then psychological factors, such as personal values and religious beliefs. Then it explores more philosophical issues, such as how best to define and measure happiness; should we conflate it with virtue (as classical philosophers do); what is its relationship to melancholy and to the perception of beauty; and is it something we should even attempt to pursue--that is, is there any value in thinking of it as a goal, especially given that our cognitive habits make it so elusive.

**The Ultimate Goal:  
Reflections on the Philosophy and Science of the Pursuit of Happiness**

Samuel Beckett's friend on a beautiful spring morning:  
"Doesn't a day like this make you glad to be alive?"  
Beckett: "I wouldn't go as far as that."

When was your happiest time? Now, always.  
Edward Albee

This essay covers a lot of current cognitive studies on the topic, reflects on its political component throughout, and liberally references what classical philosophers have said about it. It also includes a good deal of personal reflection. Schematically, it discusses social factors of happiness first, such as money, marriage, and children, and then psychological factors, such as personal values and religious beliefs and some cognitive habits that prevent happiness. It then explores more philosophical issues: how best to define and measure happiness (should we conflate it with virtue as classical philosophers do); what is its relationship to melancholy and to the perception of beauty; and, finally, is it something we should even pursue—that is, is there any value in thinking of it as a goal. The piece comes from my many years studying the topic and teaching courses on its history and philosophy.

The concept of happiness has preoccupied me for several years now. Middle age invites reflection and in particular I've wanted to figure out what has motivated me to make the choices I've made. The philosopher William James wrote that happiness is "the secret motive of all that we do, and of all that we are willing to endure" (78). *All that we are willing to endure* seems apt to me because happiness is—notoriously—a devilishly deceptive object of pursuit. One minute we think we're safely seeking it and the next we're in the deepest pit of misery we could imagine. What led us astray? Dead-end careers, bankruptcies, affairs, years of denial about what's in front of our noses, truths about ourselves we failed to see, missed opportunities, failed marriages, estranged children, the list could go on and on—what mode of thinking or train of thought steered us to make the choices we've made? How could we have been so easily duped? And were the choices strictly personal? How influenced were they by culture or, more broadly, by evolution? Can a study of happiness yield answers to these questions? I suffered low-grade depression earlier in my adult life—I'm sure partly by isolating myself, not understanding my own psychology and how it was formed by certain innate tendencies and by my upbringing—so maybe I hoped studying happiness would reveal a secret that could make me less depressed. Or maybe I just enjoy trying to solve puzzles, and it's no mystery that the puzzle of happiness is a big one, maybe the biggest there is.

My preoccupation with my own psychology is not the only reason to write about the pursuit of happiness. Happiness is perhaps the most universal of all pursuits, and given how much we know about what makes us happy, one could argue that it's our moral responsibility to use the findings from the discipline to maximize the happiness of as many people as we can.<sup>1</sup> That's an Enlightenment ideal, promoted most famously by the eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and it continues to be an ideal today and a driving force behind a great deal of psychology and sociology research. The contemporary economist Richard Layard continues this Enlightenment tradition in his book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, in which he cites recent research arguing that generally what makes us happy is good for us and has therefore helped to perpetuate the species. "This applies not only to our love of food and sex, but also to our instinctive capacity for cooperation," says Layard. It then becomes self-evident that the best society is the happiest:

Hence the greatest happiness ideal has two functions. It can help us think dispassionately about how to organize society. And it can also inspire us with a passionate commitment to the common good. Modern society desperately needs a concept of the common good around which to unite the efforts of its members. Here is the right concept (224-25).

Perhaps the concept of happiness has been a preoccupation of mine because it combines my personal and intellectual interests with a societal one. I may have been seeking a way to pull myself out of a self-imposed solipsism while reconnecting myself with others by way of a social cause. It may be true, as Layard strongly implies, that people's happiness is indistinct from that of the family and community in which they live. Let me elaborate on that ideal and synthesize it with some tentative projections on what this essay may offer readers.

An insight that appears often in these pages—emerging from a myriad of cognitive studies—is that happiness is a moving target, because of a phenomenon known in cognitive

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<sup>1</sup> see Lyubomirsky, p. 14

psychology as hedonic adaptation. We buy things or maneuver ourselves into circumstances that we think will make us happy for at least an extended period of time, but then find that before long we've habituated to that possession or circumstance, and in response we move on to pursuits we think will have more lasting effects. The corollary to this phenomenon that works more in our favor is that we tend to adjust well to setbacks that we thought would devastate us. So a primary value of this kind of study is that it can reveal to us certain myths about happiness that, once we become skilled at recognizing them in our own thinking, will cease to have the surprising effects on us they otherwise would. If I know I will quickly acclimate to the pleasure I'll get from a new car that I can't really afford but am about to buy anyway, then maybe I am less likely to make that purchasing mistake. And if I know I will recover relatively quickly from, say, my spouse abandoning me, then I'm less likely to live in fear of that event happening. That is, if we can learn to apply these insights about our cognitive habits to our own thinking and behavior, then maybe we can think and behave in ways that can allay the problems created by expectations the myths create.

This ideal becomes not just a self-centered goal, but also a social one when we deconstruct the distinction between individual and cultural happiness, a deconstruction manifested in the claim that the happier or less unhappy we are, the better citizens we will be and the more likely we are to devote ourselves to the welfare of those less fortunate. Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, in her book *The Myths of Happiness*, points out that "... doing good for others has been shown in numerous studies to boost positive mood and overall well-being, likely as a result of strengthened social bonds and enhanced feelings of self-efficacy and optimism" (44). This deconstruction of the self/community dichotomy functions in these pages epistemologically as well, in that my personal reflections can contribute to our knowledge of what makes us happy or less unhappy because the responses to my experiences are similar to those of others. Perhaps readers will recognize in one of my reflections a feeling they themselves have had, or recognize in one of my analyses an insight that resonates with them. Perhaps as a result they will feel less isolated than they would otherwise and thus happier, or less unhappy.

These individual and social goals are somewhat utopian, and as you will see in my conclusion I express some misgivings about these "frontal lobe demands," as they are sometimes referred to in philosophy. One of my favorite bits of wisdom we have about the pursuit of happiness is from the ancient Greek sage Solon, quoted by Aristotle and Herodotus: "Solon answered kynge Cresus, that no man could be named happy, tyl he had happily and prosperously passed the course of his lyfe." Call no one happy until they're dead; that is, we can't predict that the conditions for one's happiness will sustain themselves. Even events made known to the dying—death-bed events—could dramatically affect a person's sense of his or her life's overall happiness.

There's an element of absurdity to this idea in that it blocks any and all claims to happiness, but nonetheless some may find it, as I do, consoling because it allows for a humbling, respectful acknowledgement of the unpredictability of life. And if our unhappiness is exacerbated by a guilt and self-consciousness caused by thinking we're heaping our unhappiness on ourselves, then at least one layer of our misery can be mitigated by this notion that *no living person* can lay claim to happiness. And this isn't just a case of misery loving company; rather, it's an acknowledgement that it's not necessarily our fault that we're unhappy. The word happiness is, after all, from the Middle English hap, meaning "chance" or "good luck" (we can see the remnants of this in *perhaps* and *happenstance*), an etymology that can confer on us the consoling thought that perhaps our unhappiness has been thrust upon us. And if we're lucky enough to be happy, the etymology can remind us

that much of what we have that gives us pleasure, satisfaction, a sense that we belong where we are, a sense that our needs are met and that we need not worry about losing them, is provided for us not by any particular deed or effort on our part, not by some virtuous quality in our character, but from the fortunate circumstances we were born into. This seems a healthy attitude, as it's likely to foster gratitude, humility, and a sense of solidarity with and empathy for others less fortunate.

## Organizing Schema

I'm not sure a schema is the right way to go about studying the pursuit of happiness, but happiness *is* a topic complex enough to overwhelm us. To structure this exploration of the historical approaches to its pursuit, I'll borrow a couple of categories from Layard and supplement them with some of my own. The first is his *social factors*, such as financial situations, community, friends, employment, personal freedom, and family relationships (including marriage and by implication romantic love—at least in the West). The second category is his *psychological factors*, such as personal values and religious beliefs and, I add, the effects of certain mild or severe psychological maladies such as self-consciousness, anxiety, and shame.

The third category is a catchall I've added that I'll call *philosophical issues*—such as whether we should conflate happiness with virtue. And within this category is the meta-issue of whether happiness should be pursued at all, which includes a discussion of the pursuit's relationship to the perception of beauty—it being possibly a kind of compensation for the impossibility of happiness—and then a discussion of the ironic relationship between happiness and melancholy. Nietzsche felt the pursuit of happiness is a kind of ruse that people blindly follow and that it is an unnatural pursuit. He also felt that we've only recently adopted a lifestyle that makes happiness even imaginable. The cognitive psychologist Mark Leary puts it in an evolutionary context in the introduction to his book *The Curse of the Self*:

As prehistoric hominids, we would have had no long-term aspirations to succeed, achieve, or accumulate possessions. We might have owned a few things that could be easily carried, but we certainly had no reason to acquire extra belongings. We would have met few other people in our nomadic wanderings, but they would have been living just like us, so we wouldn't have gotten new ideas about what else we might need to be happy. With no desire to accumulate wealth or possessions, we would not have been oriented toward long-term achievement and success as people are today (22).

Instead of happiness, Nietzsche preferred that we pursue ambitions and expect a great deal of strife in the process. People living to their full potential are those whose “preying lion” has emerged from its cultural constraints: they are brimming with confidence and do not doubt their right to happiness, by being ashamed in the face of “too much misery.” They know no guilt or resentment and are burdened by no pity or regret (25).

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Social and psychological factors comprise a schema that, broadly speaking, can be politically aligned with liberals on the one hand, who emphasize social factors, and on the other hand conservatives, who emphasize individualistic, psychological factors. The conservative position appears to have been adopted by a group of academics who are a part of the “positive psychology” movement, which has gained traction in the last twenty years or so in the academy and the corporate world. The initial rationale for the movement was to compensate for a century-long focus in psychology on pathology. “Both psychological researchers and mental health professionals,” writes Leary,

have tended to focus on the myriad ways people fail to function optimally. Doing so has shed much more light on why things go wrong than on how things can go right.... Positive psychology involves the study of the sunny side of human experience, such as the capacity for love, courage, compassion, resilience, creativity, integrity, self-control, and wisdom (43, 44).

These human capacities form a general category we could label *attitude*, the research on which has proven very popular in the press. The public apparently finds “attitude research” much more palatable than research on social factors, I would guess because a positive correlation between attitude and happiness puts us in control of our lives, and we tend to like being in control, or thinking that we are.

Taking control of our lives is exactly what Lyubomirsky argues for in her book *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. She’s devised a pie chart that divides the major factors of happiness into three sections, of which “circumstances” (probably analogous to Layard’s “social factors”) comprise only 10%. A whopping 50% is what she calls “set point” (genetic makeup), and most importantly, in terms of the control we have over our lives, is the 40% slice of the pie that she labels “intentional activity” (analogous perhaps to Layard’s “psychological factors,” though surely a segment of psychological factors is genetic). In reference to the low 10% attributed to social factors, she writes that a great deal of science backs up this conclusion and that her finding that 40% can be attributed to intentional activity is a good argument for engaging in those activities that have shown to make people happier. “What makes up this 40%?” she asks. “... our behavior. The key to happiness lies *not* in changing our genetic makeup (which is impossible) and *not* in changing our circumstances (i.e., seeking wealth or attractiveness or better colleagues, which is usually impractical), but in our daily intentional activities” (22). She expresses high hopes that we can increase our happiness by behaving in specific ways.

Though I share with her some of those high hopes, I think I have a greater skepticism of the value of the pursuit than she does, and a greater respect for the role social factors play in our happiness. While the body of research in happiness studies appears to be on her side, my sense is that studying happiness empirically creates its own conceptual bubble. A person can be happy and yet uninteresting, as Woody Allen implicitly argues in *Annie Hall*, in the scene in which the couple on the street are asked how they’ve made themselves so happy and reply that it’s because they’re “shallow and empty, and have no ideas and nothing interesting to say.” I don’t abide by that extreme characterization—that happy people are vapid—but I’m nonetheless suspicious of Lyubomirsky’s claims for the great benefits of its pursuit, implied in this list of correlations:

Compared with their less happy peers, happier people are more sociable and energetic, more charitable and cooperative, and better liked by others. Not

surprisingly then, happier people are more likely to get married and to stay married and to have richer networks of friends and social support. Furthermore ... they actually show more flexibility and ingenuity in their thinking and are more productive in their jobs. They are better leaders and negotiators and earn more money. They are more resilient in the face of hardship, have stronger immune systems, and are physically healthier. Happy people even live longer (25).

These are powerful correlations. And her claim of correlations grows into a claim of causes and effects:

In becoming happier, we not only boost experiences of joy, contentment, love, pride, and awe but also improve other aspects of our lives: our energy levels, our immune systems, our engagement with work and with other people, and our physical and mental health. In becoming happier, we bolster as well our feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem; we come to believe that we are worthy human beings, deserving of respect (26).

What makes me skeptical about Lyubomirsky's prescriptions here is that it seems almost impossible to distinguish between the attributes that she's correlating to happiness and the social conditions that provide the context for those attributes to flourish. And it seems then almost irresponsible, as some liberals argue, to emphasize psychological factors and minimize social factors because doing so can dis-incentivize politicians and the public to adopt progressive policies that might increase our overall happiness, such as those that promote wealth distribution, access to health care, affordable housing, education, public transportation, and clean air and water. Social critic Barbara Ehrenreich argues that, in fact, much of the positive psychologists' research findings are null—they don't make any solid empirical conclusions—and points out that the findings are nonetheless often promoted in the press as evidence that a positive attitude will bring us health, employment, and love, that one's attitude is much more important than social factors, which are trivial in comparison. These deceptions with the research are self-serving, she argues, as they promote the positive psychology movement to the academy and corporations. She points out that at stake are many new academic jobs and lucrative inspirational speaking gigs to the corporate sector (chapter 6). Without this ideological structure, the financial support for these jobs and gigs could disappear.

But I'm reticent to argue that an unhappy person shouldn't take Lyubomirsky's prescriptions to heart to possibly gain some of the attributes on her lists. I wouldn't want to impose my contrarianism on anyone, especially if that imposition is possibly at their expense. If someone desires to be happier or less unhappy and feels that following Lyubomirsky's prescriptions might help them, then I would happily cheer them on in their efforts. Being "interesting" or "admirable" may in the end, I must admit, be less important than mitigating someone's unhappiness. I'm no Nietzschean radical, after all.

## **Social Factors**

I start with social factors because most of them are easily understood and easily studied, so the discipline of happiness studies has a lot to say about them. Here is Layard's list, slightly amended by me (63):

- Family Relationships—Love, Marriage, Sex, & Children
- Money, which can't buy Love
- Work
- Community and Friends and reflecting with them
- Intelligence
- Health
- Personal Freedom and Peace<sup>2</sup>

### **Family Relationships—Marriage, Love, Sex, & Children**

The primary factor affecting happiness in this category is marriage. Layard reports that people become increasingly happier the closer they get to being married, then the first year of marriage is bliss, and even though the happiness level dips after that first year married people in general are happier than unmarried. This phenomenon is also supported by studies of divorced couples: we are less and less happy the closer we get to divorce and the divorce year itself is the nadir, and then men after a year appear to return to their base happiness level but not women, who remain more miserable after divorce than men. Married people are generally happier than the unmarried, most likely because in marriage they get emotional and financial support from each other and they generally help one another. They also in general have happier sex lives: they report having more of it and that it's more satisfying than unmarried sex (66).

Lyubomirsky, however, cites evidence that marital happiness is susceptible to hedonic adaptation (the term in happiness studies, which I refer to in the introduction, for our tendency to quickly acclimate to new acquisitions or conditions and return to our base happiness level). "It appears," writes Lyubomirsky, "that after the wedding husband and wife get a happiness boost for about two years and then simply return to their baseline in happiness, their set point." She nonetheless goes on to discuss evidence that this tendency to adapt can be thwarted by proactive efforts (49, 65).

I would argue that when thinking about the potential for happiness from the institution of marriage we should factor in the risk we take, even in the courting stage, that the relationship may fail and, as we all know, possibly cause pain and heartache. Helen Fisher, a neurologist and prominent scholar of love and sex, reports that though men and women respond to rejection differently it can be devastating for both:

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<sup>2</sup> To "Family Relationships I've added Sex and Children—I'm adding in this section a discussion of sex because the research reveals that it has an important role in making us happy in marriage. Layard's category for money he labels simply "Financial Situation." To Layard's category of "Community and Friends" I've added "and reflecting with them." "Intelligence" is a category I've created. I've left out here Layard's category of "Personal Values," which was his last item, because I discuss it in the section on Psychological Factors.

Though many cloak their sorrow, interviews with rejected men ... often reveal that they are ill—psychologically and physically. Men also show their sorrow in the most dramatic way one can: men are three to four times more likely than women to commit suicide after a love affair has decayed.... Women often suffer differently. In cultures around the world, women are twice as likely as men to experience major depression. They become depressed for many reasons of course, but a common one is abandonment by a lover. And in studies of romantic rejection, women report more severe feelings of depression, particularly hopelessness (169).

And yet romantic love is ubiquitously touted as a source of happiness in both popular culture and the psychology literature, marriage perhaps only slightly less so. Movies, pop songs, and TV shows are rife with messages of the joys of love, romance, and the “inevitable” union that it’s all leading up to. All this expectation-boosting does us a great disservice, for, as the British philosopher Alain de Botton explains, marriage is the most beautiful recipe for disaster ever created, precisely because we are so ill equipped for it. We jump into marriage with absurdly high hopes without the foggiest notion of what we’re doing, assuming that we’ll establish these complex relationships—best friend, ideal lover, great roommate, and possibly co-parent—all with one other person. And we assume we’ll do all this without any formal training and without having attained even the most pedestrian knowledge of ourselves. And we haven’t gained the requisite knowledge of ourselves precisely because that knowledge can only be attained, in this beautifully tragic equation, in a marriage.

It took many years for me to understand my own psychology in this context. As the youngest of five, I think I came to resent feeling as a child and young adult that I didn’t have much control over what I did with my time. And because we tend to gravitate toward those romantic partners whose personalities we’re familiar with from childhood, I tended to be attracted to women who were willing to fulfill the controlling role I was “asking of them,” so to speak, a compliance I both appreciated and resented. I spent a lot of my adult life, I think, frustrated and angry at others and the world, and at myself, for creating in my romantic relationships the conditions that perpetuated my childhood frustrations. Could I have expected to understand this dynamic before it manifested? When was I to gain that understanding and how was I to have gained it before marriage?

Botton advises us to lower our expectations of marriage. And yet the silver lining in these dark clouds, he argues (he gets this idea of the benefits of lower expectations from Seneca, by the way), is that out of it comes a readjustment to reality that ultimately serves our interest: “In love, darkness is a real friend, because so many problems of love come from unwarranted expectations.” The most apt emotional response, he argues, is sober melancholy (a prescription that fits well with his self-professed dour British temperament): “A good partnership, is not so much between two healthy people—there aren’t many of those on the planet—it’s one between two demented people who have had the skill and the luck to find a non-threatening conscious accommodation between their relative insanities.”<sup>3</sup>

Psychologist Harville Hendrix offers a view of marriage that is also forthcoming about its challenges, but more detailed in its prescriptions and more optimistic in general. In his book *Getting the Love You Want*, he argues that no other cultural institution offers as rich

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/590/choosing-wrong?act=0#play>

an opportunity to work out unresolved childhood issues than marriage (32, 33). In an interesting modern and somewhat Freudian interpretation of Socrates's creation myth—in which the androgynous creatures that we were originally are cut in two by the gods and are forever looking to reunite with their other halves—Hendrix argues that we choose our partners precisely because we detect in them characteristics that both comfort and disturb us. They do so, Hendrix says, because they resemble a parent with whom we have issues we yearn to resolve (32, 39-44).

The primary impediment to the resolution of childhood problems—as Hendrix and other cognitive psychologists point out—is our penchant for a narcissistic worldview, skewing the reality we perceive to exalt our own insecure and wounded psyches (Hendrix, 85-99). Leary provides a long list of problems caused by our narcissism, resulting merely from having a self:

Having a self was presumably beneficial to our prehistoric ancestors or else it would have not evolved ... [and yet it is] single-handedly responsible for many, if not most of the problems that human beings face as individuals and as a species.... The capacity to reflect distorts our perceptions of the world, leads us to draw inaccurate conclusions about ourselves [and others], and thus prompts us to make bad decisions based on faulty information. The self conjures up a great deal of personal suffering in the form of depression, anxiety, anger, jealousy, and other negative emotions by allowing us to ruminate about the past or imagine what might befall us in the future. The inherently egocentric and egotistical manner in which the self processes information can blind us to our own shortcomings and undermine our relationships with others (21).

To help couples overcome these constrictions, and to confront the subconscious yearning to resolve the conflict with one or more parent, Hendrix devised a tool he dubbed the “Imago method” by which couples learn how to listen to one another. He argues that if we can understand the role we play in our spouses' psyches and learn to respond to their needs accordingly, and if our spouses likewise learn to respond to our needs according to the history of our own upbringing, then we have an opportunity to heal the wounds we each incurred in childhood. These wounds were inflicted when our parents were unable to provide the complex blend of freedom and security that as children we all needed to flourish (131-156). We can also learn in the process, I would argue, to forgive those parents for their failures, from an understanding that our needs as children went unmet simply because our parents were as psychologically limited in their parenting capabilities as we ourselves are as has been practically every other adult who's ever lived. According to Hendrix and many other psychotherapists, no other type of relationship—neither friendship nor familial—offers as great an opportunity for psychic healing as marriage does.

Working within the confines of one's own behavior, and being shown how that behavior originates in one's own skewed attitudes—and no one is in a greater position to observe those attitudes than a spouse—one can perhaps for the first time in their life see oneself somewhat objectively, to gaze into a mirror held up to one's own psyche. And if this process can be done in a safe, loving relationship, then marriage can indeed be a blessing by which one can begin to heal. And though this self-revealing process can be arduous and even deeply painful—as everyone knows who's been married for more than a few months—the rewards of this enlightenment can also be profound. In fact, if we take to heart Hendrix's marital prescriptions, we can go quite far in attaining the three ingredients for a happy life as

denoted by the fourth century Greek philosopher Epicurus: friends, freedom, and an analyzed life.

It would nonetheless be wise to qualify this optimism with a couple of points. One is that, as Layard reminds us,

... it is the quality and stability of relationships that matter more than their form. We need other people, and we need to be needed. ... research confirms the dominating importance of love. People who are in loving relationships with another adult have better hormonal balance and better health, and are of course happier (66).

And elsewhere he points out that a culture that promotes narcissistic thinking and behavior may not be one that nurtures successful marriages:

Unfortunately, the growth of individualism has encouraged a short-term version of *contractarian* thinking, where more and more decisions are conducted on the basis of a short-term quid pro quo. Even in marriage people increasingly think of bargaining as the way to make short-term decisions. ... In this environment of continuous re-optimisation, it is not surprising that, as we have seen, people are less satisfied with their marriages. There is clear evidence that when spouses arrange the details of their lives on the basis of quid pro quo, they are less satisfied with the marriage than when it is based on the concept of giving. ... giving confers satisfaction, and can confer more satisfaction than taking (104, 105).

He goes on to discuss research that suggests that good behavior elicits good behavior by others, implying that marriages are not immune to the emotional benefits of the golden rule when applied to them.

## Sex

Can sex *per se* yield happiness? In a frequently anthologized and exhaustive comparison of the arguments for sex without love and sex with love, philosopher Russell Vannoy argues that although it might be rash to claim that sex without love is *always* superior to sex with love, we can nonetheless make a decent case that sex without love, given the right conditions, can be superior, more pleasurable and more existentially satisfying. If we're convinced by his argument, and if empirical research reveals that love and marriage tend to make us happy partly because of the frequency and quality of the sex, then we have to respect the claim, I would argue, that in some cases sex *per se* can make us happy.

Rebutting the typical arguments that sex without love suffers from the objectification of the partner, Vannoy points out that that can be the case as well with insensitive spouses (or lovers), and that in fact when it comes to having sex there's a point when the sensory intensity of the act eclipses all loving feelings, such that one can claim that *all* sex involves the objectification of the sex partner whether the two are in love or not. And anyway, nothing precludes partners engaging in sex without love to extend to their partners the respect many lovers fail to confer upon their lovers, such that, given how much sexual pleasure can be had among both partners, and given the status pleasure has in classical

philosophy as an element of happiness, we can claim that sex alone can yield a significant degree of happiness whether the partners love each other or not (7-17, 20-29, 74, 83).

One caveat to this view is that it's difficult to control what effect sex has on a person, such that the happiness one may believe he or she is gaining from the loveless sex may turn out to be not so innocuous. Of course, this is more likely a problem if the loveless sex occurs within a relationship. If two people are "friends with benefits" and one begins to develop loving feelings for the other, but the other does not share those feelings, then the happiness the one got from the relationship (indeed, that both partners got) is enjoyed at the cost of some emotional unpleasantness, even pain perhaps, either of which (unpleasantness or pain) can undermine the happiness of both, and perhaps even retroactively.<sup>4</sup>

In her book *Why We Love*, Helen Fisher discusses the neurology of the frequent occurrence of sex giving birth to love:

Can lust stimulate amour? ... It can. ... "*Naso pasyo, maya basyo.*" Women in rural western Nepal use this off-color saying to express the same phenomenon. It means, "The penis entered and love arrived." ... I think biology contributes to this spontaneous love for a sex partner. Sexual activity can increase brain levels of dopamine and norepinephrine in male rats. Even without sexual activity, increasing levels of testosterone can elevate levels of dopamine and norepinephrine as well as suppress levels of serotonin. In short, the hormone of sexual desire can trigger the release of the brain's elixirs for romantic passion (85,86).

If the romantic passion is not mutual, then the scaffolding that had supported the happiness derived from the sex will likely come tumbling down. One winces to see arguments for happiness built on such weak presumptions.

## Children

In numerous studies, parents claim that children are an impediment to happiness. As Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert explains:

When parents look back on parenthood, they remember feeling what those who are looking forward to it expect to feel. Few of us are immune to these cheery contemplations.... Yet if we measure the *actual* satisfaction of people who have children, a very different story emerges. ... couples generally start out quite happy in their marriages and then become progressively less satisfied over the course of their

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<sup>4</sup> One of my favorite John Ashbery poems is entitled "I Had Thought Things Were Going Along Well"—and the poem reads, "But I was mistaken." The extreme version of my disclaimer would lead us to the somewhat absurdist conclusion that we can't assess someone's happiness *at any time in their life*, because we can't predict that the conditions for the happiness will sustain themselves (I mention this bit of ancient wisdom in the opening pages).

lives together, getting close to their original levels of satisfaction only when their children leave home (242, 243).<sup>5</sup>

He notes that these conclusions describe women's experiences (usually the primary caretakers of children) more than men:

Careful studies of how women feel as they go about their daily activities show that they are less happy when taking care of their children than when eating, exercising, shopping, napping, or watching television. Indeed, looking after the kids appears to be only slightly more pleasant than doing housework.

He goes on to explain that the myth that children make us happy is what's termed in cognitive and social psychology a "super-replicator," a belief transmission network that continuously supplies the people by which, in turn, the myth is transmitted:

...thus the belief that children are a source of happiness becomes a part of our cultural wisdom simply because the opposite belief unravels the fabric of any society that holds it. Indeed, people who believed that children bring misery and despair—and who thus stopped having them—would put their belief-transmission network out of business in around fifty years, hence terminating the belief that terminated them (244).

That is, the belief is considered true only because if it weren't, then both the belief and the culture that perpetuates it would die out. Super-replicating beliefs don't have to be true to stay prevalent in a culture; they just have to sustain the mechanism by which they are transmitted. As an example of a meme that resulted in its own demise, Gilbert cites the nineteenth century utopian farming community of Shakers, who believed that children are okay, but celibacy is better, and today there are only a few Shakers left. A more successful example of a super-replicator is the one that holds that more income makes us happier. Just as the belief that children will make us happy keeps us producing children, the belief that more income will make us happy keeps us striving for more income far past the point at which we have maximized, or nearly maximized, our capacity for gleaning happiness from it, and the working environment, working behavior, and their monetary rewards, are the mechanism by which the belief is transmitted.

I have a reputation for being a "dream-crusher," as my friends teasingly call me, because I like to tell people of these findings that children do not typically make parents happy. I especially like to enlighten newlyweds on this point. It's interesting to me that the reaction to these findings is to poke fun at the messenger. I'm not offended in any way by the teasing—I laugh along with everyone else—but in my mind the teasing is a function of the denial inherent in the replicating system. Even my more reflective friends upon hearing of these findings work very hard to reason against them. They'll argue, for example, that the studies must not be considering certain aspects of parenting that are immeasurable, such as the *meaning* that children provide one's life, a meaning that escapes measurements of "mere"

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert cites four different studies from C. Walker, "Some Variations in Marital Satisfaction," in *Equalities and Inequalities in Family Life*, ed. R. Chester and J. Peel (London: Academic Press, 1977), 127-139.

happiness. The studies must be measuring more trivial aspects of well-being, these friends argue, such as freedom from worry or the enjoyment of leisure time. There may be some truth to these critiques, but to me they serve less to rebut the findings than to highlight the power of super-replicators to compel us to defensively rationalize choices that have made us unhappy. I liken super-replicators to Chinese finger traps: the more you struggle against them the tighter they become and the more they reveal their restrictive powers.

There's a story in my family that when my mother discovered she was pregnant with me—an unplanned pregnancy and I was to be her fifth child—she sat down and cried: an understandable reaction from a parent of four young children, and it's the kind of parental behavior that therapists find useful because it offers clear evidence that the patient sustained some psychological damage from the parents. I'll confess, it may have served to sustain my feelings as an adult of having been ignored as a child. In my mother's defense, though, the story is usually followed by a narrative twist: "yes, I cried when I discovered I was pregnant, but when I saw how adorable he was I was filled with love." But I want to defend my mother's *initial* reaction: if we were all to share her sentiment that day that she discovered she was pregnant, then yes it may cost us a reduction in population growth (not a tragedy, I would add), but much more importantly it would disrupt the damage done by the false expectations created by the myth that children bring happiness. Accepting the truth of the matter would of course not call for us to stop loving the children we *do* have—did I even need to write that?—but it would at least give us permission to reconsider having more children if the desire for them is driven by the belief that they will make us happier.

I've written elsewhere of my emotional responses to my current estrangement from my three grown children, so I don't want to rehearse them here, but I do feel I would be remiss for not acknowledging it here since I've just prescribed accepting the truth that children don't make us happy.<sup>6</sup> I am not exactly immune from the myth myself; there are few feelings in the world as pleasant as the frail little arms around your neck of someone who adores you. I have very fond memories of my own children's young lives, at least the younger two. I didn't spend much time with the oldest one because I lived across the country from him and his mother. I sacrificed living with him to raise the younger two, and then when they were six and eight their mother and I divorced, and though I continued after the divorce to raise the younger two with their mother and with the help of my current wife, I didn't get along well with their mother and it made for difficult co-parenting. I think I would've enjoyed my children more had their mother and I had a more amicable relationship. From what I've gathered, my children with her eventually came to resent my intrusion into their lives with their mother and her two new young children, their half-siblings, though I didn't know they felt that way. My oldest child, 31, now wants to cut me out of his life as well, a delayed angry reaction to my having abandoned him and his mother when she was pregnant with him.

Do these estrangements influence my feelings about the findings in happiness studies? Am I projecting my own parental difficulties onto this analysis? Perhaps. But given that the findings are from empirical studies and are not just my personal hunches, I think it's more interesting to ask how *all* of us should respond to the findings. It's an interesting quagmire, confronting our belief that children make us happy with the truth that flies in the

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<sup>6</sup> See "Dancing Modernity: an epilogue," in *Narrative Global Politics: Theory, History and the Personal in International Relations*. Edited by Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphinee. New York: Routledge. 2016.

face of that belief. I still argue that it's healthier, for parents and children both, to acknowledge that having children makes us less happy. If people acknowledge that truth when deciding to have a child or not, then they are more likely to enjoy the pleasures that a child *can* provide without the resentments that so often accompany denial.

### **Money (which can't buy you love)**

The traditional modern view of the role finances play in happiness—held for the most part by economists—is that the higher one's purchasing power the greater the happiness. But more recently the main insight from happiness studies, and this appears to be a well-established conclusion, is that, yes, poverty causes misery and a middle-class income makes us much less unhappy than before, but that once people reach middle-income a greater income has diminishing effects on happiness. It's an insight first articulated by Epicurus and supported now by empirical studies: the richer you are, the less the increasing wealth makes you happier.

Some recent happiness researchers have used this finding to support socialism, or at least high taxation. The reasoning is that since rich people aren't gaining more happiness with their extra money, and poor people would be much happier with just a little more, the money should be spread around, that is, if we're interested in spreading happiness. Taxation can also be used to offset a natural phenomenon that I mention above: hedonic adaptation, or the hedonic treadmill—"the repeatedly painful pursuit of pleasure." Darrin McMahon, author of the book *Happiness: A History*, explains its evolutionary origin:

... although natural selection has conditioned us to experience pleasure in activities that contribute to our survival, it disposes us to quickly adapt to them and then to strive for a little more. In this view, enduring satisfaction or permanent contentment would not be conducive to survival. It is in our interest—and so in our genes—always to be slightly wanting, restlessly searching for further satisfaction (422, 423).

Layard explains that taxation could help mitigate the negative effects of this behavior:

We habituate more rapidly to things that money can buy than to things it cannot buy—more to goods than to relationships.... Since most people do not foresee the addictive effects of income and spending, taxation has again a useful role, just as it has with other forms of addiction like smoking. Taxes discourage us from overwork, from running on a treadmill that brings less advance in happiness than we expected (229).

Here in the West, Layard continues, we're not any happier in the twenty-first century than we were in the mid-twentieth, although we're many times richer, because income is addictive. Of course, taxing our income to dis-incentivize excessive working interferes with a core American value, the right to work as hard as we want to make as much money as we want, i.e., the freedom to be rich workaholics. That impulse may have its roots in the Protestant work ethic, which tells us that work is not only our god-ordained duty, but that the financial success is an indication of god's favoritism toward you. In spite of the Vietnam-era disillusionment in all values American, this one proves to be difficult to shake.

It's also possible that we're less happy now than two hundred years ago because during that time our culture has nurtured individual freedom to such an extent that we are now more likely than before to abandon each other. As historian Yuval Noah Harari explains, in his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*,

Repeated studies have found that there is a very close correlation between good marriages and high subjective well-being, and between bad marriages and misery. This holds true irrespective of economic or even physical conditions.... This raises the possibility that the immense improvement in material conditions over the last two centuries are offset by the collapse of the family and the community. If so, the average person might well be no happier today than in 1800. Even the freedom we value so highly may be working against us. We can choose our spouses, friends and neighbours, but they can choose to leave us. With the individual wielding unprecedented power to decide her own path in life, we find it ever harder to make commitments. We thus live in an increasingly lonely world of unraveling communities and families (428).<sup>7</sup>

As I grew up, my family was middle- to lower-middle class. I never went hungry and I don't remember going without anything I wanted, though I also don't remember having many purchasing desires, a model airplane now and then maybe, a football, and miniature plastic soldiers. When I turned sixteen, my father bought me a new mini-pickup truck, which mostly served my needs for cattle-raising chores. When I left home for college—a state school with an open admission and cheap tuition—I had very little money, though again my needs were few. Graduate school brought the same low-income lifestyle, though by then I was beginning to tire of it. When I got a good paying job and my income began to climb toward middle-class, my life became easier. But since then my experience matches the research: the more I make, the more I think I need to be comfortable. Over the last twenty-

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<sup>7</sup> After typing out that paragraph I sat down and jotted down the names of all the women I've been in romantic relationships with longer than, say, two years. There have been eight of them, it turns out, and I have to confess that I abandoned each of them at some point in the relationship, and four of them abandoned me at some point in the relationship. I think my pattern until recently was to abandon my loved one before she abandons me: I thought so little of myself as to subconsciously reason that I needed to make a preemptive strike, assuming that if I didn't leave her she would surely beat me to the punch. In his novel *On Love*, Botton refers to this phenomenon as "Marxism," after the Groucho Marx joke that he could never join a club that would have him as a member.

We fall in love because we long to escape from ourselves, with someone as ideal as we are corrupt. But what if such a being were one day to turn around and love us back? We can only be shocked. How could they be as divine as we had hoped when they have the bad taste to approve of someone like us (40)?

Thinking back to all those abandonments makes me a little sad, but just a little—life is too magical to dwell on the past, as long as moving on doesn't constitute a denial.

five years my income has tripled. I'm still a little in debt—*little* if you don't count the mortgage on my house—and I still think that if only I made a little more money my life would be a lot easier. The research suggests that I will likely always think this, but that I'd be happier if I could break the habit.

In another respect in this area of the study, my behavior *does* follow the prescription of happiness studies. The research prescribes that we'd be happier the less attention we pay to our retirement accounts. I tend to ignore mine, checking it maybe once or twice a year. I think my reasoning has been that it never was much to begin with so why remind myself how small it is? Research shows that we are much more sensitive to losses than we are to gains inversely commensurate with those losses—that is, we're made more unhappy by losses than we are made happy by gains of similar amounts, which suggests that we should lay off checking our retirement accounts often (Layard, 141-2). Here's Michaela Pagel, an assistant professor in the division of economics and finance at Columbia Business School, quoted in *The New York Times*:

If you're watching as the markets go down, you are twice as unhappy as you would be happy if they went up by the same amount. So looking at the market is, on average, painful.<sup>8</sup>

I'm happy to see that I tend to follow her prescription, though writing about it has made me want to go check on it.

## Work

To avoid a major source of misery we apparently need to be employed, to feel that we're contributing to society and providing for ourselves and our families. And we don't habituate to unemployment—we're just as unhappy after two years of it as we were after one. It seems to help a little if others around us are unemployed, but unemployment is a major blow to happiness (Layard, 67). The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Bertrand Russell, author of *The Conquest of Happiness*, writes, "Consistent purpose is not enough to make life happy, but it is an almost indispensable condition of a happy life. And consistent purpose embodies itself mainly in work" (169).

When thinking about this factor of happiness I couldn't help but equate in my mind employment and creativity, as creativity is a major component of my own work as a poet. Looking for a consult among the books in my library, I pulled off my shelf Lewis Hyde's 1979 masterpiece *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, in which he analyzes the role creative activity plays in our culture as an antidote to the more mechanistic functions of the market. I was quickly drawn to his chapter "The Labor of Gratitude" because of the significant attention gratitude gets in the literature on the pursuit of happiness, which argues that it is a great catalyst for happiness (Layard, 72, 193). To help explain the relationship between satisfying labor on the one hand and gratitude on the other, Hyde analyzes the old German folk tale "The Shoemaker and the Elves." In the story, the shoemaker and his wife are down on their luck and destitute, but some elves begin sneaking into his shop in the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://nyti.ms/2b77Fck>

middle of the night to make shoes so well-crafted and beautiful that the shop is soon flourishing from all the sales. After a few days, the shoemaker's wife suggests that they stay up that night to see to whom they owe these gifts, and when they see that it's the elves, who themselves have no clothes or shoes, they decide to repay them with some boots and clothing of their own making. When the elves see the gifts, they are pleased and all sing out: "We're sleek, we're fine, we're out the door,/We shan't be cobblers any more!" The elves never return, but the cobbler has flourished long enough to learn from the elves the skills he needs to sustain the shop's success on his own. Hyde argues that this "parable of the gifted person is also a parable for the artist," in that it reveals that only after appreciating the gift of one's skill can one begin to give back to the community what the community has gifted him with, which is the opportunity to learn the skill. "Note that the shoemaker," writes Hyde,

makes his first pair of shoes (within the tale) in order to dress the elves. It's the last act in his labor of gratitude. Now he's a changed man. Now he has worth that can be communicated. The shoes he makes are a return gift, which simultaneously accomplishes his own transformation and frees the elves. ... Now the man is a real shoemaker, as were the elves on the first night (62, 63).

When work is seen as a manifestation of one's participation in the community, it is, I suspect, a source of happiness accordingly, as it is the source by which the self is welcomed into the community and the community welcomes the individual into community life. There is little room for loneliness and alienation. This dynamic is probably an argument, as well, for welcoming workers' creative contributions to a business. The business not only profits from the insights of those working close to the production and exchange, but by providing a measure of happiness to the workers the whole culture benefits. The workers are not only happy in their work, but happy in their lives as well, which is good for business, the workers, and for the culture at large. It's win win win.<sup>9</sup>

Pursuing his book's theme of drawing distinctions between gifts of art and typical commodity exchanges, Hyde distinguishes labor from work:

In speaking of gratitude as a "labor" I mean to distinguish it from "work," and I must digress briefly here to elaborate my distinction. Work is what we do by the hour. It begins and ends at a specific time and, if possible, we do it for money. Welding car bodies on an assembly line is work; washing dishes, computing taxes, walking the rounds in a psychiatric ward, picking asparagus—these are work. Labor, on the other hand sets its own pace. We may get paid for it, but it's hard to quantify (63, 64).

I take issue with Hyde here. Without condoning capitalism's penchant for exploiting workers for profit, I would like to think the differences between work and labor can blur, and that workers even in modern settings—laboring, say, for bottom-line corporatists—could view their wage-earning activities as gifts to the culture. "When I speak of labor, then," writes

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<sup>9</sup>It may go without saying how important it is for this benefit not to be flouted, perhaps even articulated, since the drama inherent in such displays undermine the holistic way by which it functions.

Hyde, “I intend to refer to something dictated by the course of life rather than by society, something that is often urgent but that nevertheless has its own interior rhythm, something more bound up with feeling, more interior, than work” (65). But why, I ask, can’t manual labor have its own “interior rhythm”?

When I was six or seven my father went from tending dairy cows for a county-owned tuberculosis sanitarium to working for himself as a dairy cow auctioneer. Because the transition to auctioneering made him self-employed, I would guess Hyde would consider his new employment “dictated by the course of *life* rather than by *society*.” But I suspect my father felt that taking care of the herd at the sanitarium had provided a service just as important to his *life* as to *society*, and as such was *labor* as much as it was *work*; and accordingly, I would guess he felt that his new auctioneering job provided a service as important to *society* as to *life*, and as such was as much *work* as it was *labor*. I understand why Hyde excludes from his vision of labor more extreme forms of economic subservience or exploitation, but I would argue that work and labor could be measured more accurately on a continuum.

I suspect in Hyde’s schema my dedication to teaching and to poetic achievement, as another example, would be closer to the *life* end of the spectrum than to the *society* end, because creative work is typically associated with callings, and that my work for Taco Bell one summer in 1977 was closer to the *society* end because fast food employment is usually associated with hourly wage work. However, were one to take a prideful attitude toward one’s work, and recognize that no matter what it is, it is likely to be serving the broader society, then it too could function as gratitude. Bertrand Russell has this to say about gratifying or creative labor, what he refers to as “constructive work”:

The satisfaction of constructive work, though it may, as things are, be the privilege of a minority, can nevertheless be the privilege of a quite large minority. Any man who is his own master in his work can feel it; so can any man whose work appears to him useful and requires considerable skill (169).

I grew up in a cattle-raising family and I also raised show steers in my High School’s Future Farmers of America organization, so I started my work life almost exclusively in the agriculture sector, which for good reason is known for being labor intensive. During that time, I built and fixed fences, hauled cattle, chased down strays (day or night), and performed all the necessary duties for grooming and exercising show steers (twice-daily walks, endless brushing, etc.). I also helped my father with his dairy cow auctioneering business: working the herd in preparation for the auction, setting up the tent and portable panels, working the auction itself, taking bids, running errands, etc. As a teenager I drove a combine for several days each year for a local farmer who harvested wheat (we’d cut sometimes twelve hours a day if it was dry enough); in Junior High and High School in addition to those duties I worked for a construction company that built gas stations from the ground up and maintained them: dug ditches, cut pipe, laid the pipe, laid brick and concrete, installed gas tanks and pumps, helped repair the pumps, etc.; I once had a job climbing into oil tanks to clean the inside walls with a hand brush (that must’ve been someone’s practical joke on me); throughout college I had a part-time job as a film projectionist; after college, because I’d been an English and Philosophy major I worked in restaurants, washing dishes, waiting tables (ha); then for years I worked for a small landscaping business, cleared land, shredded trees and brush, worked in the gardens picking weeds, planting, etc.; then for a year I worked as secretary in a government social services office; then in a bookstore for a few

months, then in a liquor store for three years working my way up to manager; then I proofread and edited for a newspaper; then I became an academic.

I'm no Buddhist, but as a longtime martial artist I can't help but draw on a tradition in the East of "menial" work being a respectable contribution to the culture at large and to an individual's spiritual growth. According to this tradition, *any* job—washing dishes, welding car bodies, picking asparagus—can be a venue for practicing "Buddha nature." We can see this attitude in the West—if not necessarily in a religious context—in the current DIY and maker movement, and in my mind it's a welcome and healthy contribution to the culture, infusing into our Western vision of labor a refreshing generosity of spirit. My position on this issue, then, allows even the unemployed—as long as they're engaged in something they love—to feel at least a modicum of happiness by it.

But I'm arguing from a position of privilege. My list of jobs above indicates that I had a lot of choices, and it's easy to stay interested in a job you don't necessarily plan on keeping for long. Many aspects of my work experience go to undermine my argument for one's attitude affecting work satisfaction. What about the importance of matching the type of work with one's temperament, for example? I'd rather dig ditches in the hot sun, as hard as that work is, than make tacos, and yet someone else might rather make tacos. There are a myriad of conditions that are difficult to consider when prescribing that someone should take on a particular attitude toward their work to be happy with it. What about migrant workers with families, for example—I think their jobs are meaningful, but how warranted am I to expect *them* to think so? And it goes without saying that one can find oneself unhappy in a middle-class job, drawn into an inescapable condition, or seemingly so: a family to support, kids' tuitions to pay, an unemployed or underemployed spouse, an elaborate credentialist system that prevents the pursuit of alternatives, etc. With so many contingencies, how can one prescribe for happiness an attitude toward one's work?

Lyubomirsky isn't self-conscious about prescribing that workers adopt a particular attitude toward their work to be happier. In chapter 7 of *The How of Happiness*, she first defines her terms—a "job" describes work that's primarily for support money, a "career" describes work for the pursuit of advancement, and a "calling" describes work with intrinsic value, work that people "find fulfilling and socially useful"—and then cites evidence that argues for the possibility of *any* job being considered a calling:

Artists, teachers, scientists, and neurosurgeons might be relatively more likely to enjoy their work and to believe that it makes the world a better place. However, by no means do these occupations have a monopoly on callings. Indeed, researchers have found that people are remarkably adept at crafting their jobs to derive maximum engagement and meaning (68).

She goes on to describe how those in a study of a hospital cleaning crew who found their work meaningful believed their work was bettering the lives of the hospital community, and they were more likely to be socially interactive with that community. They were also more likely to set tasks for themselves that served others, such as making conditions more comfortable for patients, and they also *added* tasks outside their formal duties, such as rearranging the paintings on the walls or fetching wildflowers. She writes that they were likely to see themselves as part of a larger, integrated whole—as the shoemaker in the parable probably did, I would add. She ends with the prescription that "it's worth considering how your job could benefit from a new perspective" (188,189).

Layard's discussion of the relationship between work and happiness ends with the following insight, which brings us back to the role creativity plays in being happy in our work:

Work is vital .... But it is also important that [it] be fulfilling. Perhaps the most important issue is the extent to which you have control over what you do. There is a creative spark in each of us, and if it finds no outlet, we feel half-dead. This can be literally true: among British civil servants of any given grade, those who do the most routine work experience the most rapid clogging of the arteries (68).

Just as a sense of political freedom makes people happier, as we will see in the section on Personal Freedom below, so too does freedom likely play a role in job satisfaction.

### **Community and Friends, and Reflecting With Them**

Epicurus wrote, "Of all the things that wisdom provides to help one live one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is friendship." He is supported in that assessment by recent studies that also reveal that trust is essential to creating the bond of friendship (Layard, 102-05). Apparently, we're happier the more trusting we are of the people around us, and research shows that this attitude toward trust translates into trusting behavior. In one study, for example, when asked if people can be trusted in general, only 5% of Brazilians said yes, whereas 64% of Norwegians answered yes, and when researchers dropped wallets in public places in various countries Scandinavians scored the highest in returning them to their owners. When we ask people about trust in general, we're learning something about how trustworthy they are (Layard, 69).

Since so many philosophers refer to friendships when discussing the virtues of reflection, I'll combine the two factors here. Does reflection make us happy? Is it more likely to do so when done with friends? Many philosophers have chimed in on this, and their discussion appears to be less a debate than a paean to philosophy, at least until we get to Schopenhauer.

Socrates of course famously said the unexamined life is not worth living, and Aristotle argued that seeking knowledge was the reason for being, the fulfillment of one's human nature. Epicurus felt that philosophizing with friends brings more pleasure than physical indulgences do, and that we need the wisdom reflection provides to help us discern truly pleasurable actions from those merely deceptively so; the most important happiness factor for him is *not* investing in deceptive pleasures, such as costly luxuries and food. The sixteenth century essayist Michel de Montaigne, a disciple of Epicurus, likewise praised philosophical exchanges with friends as one of the most effective and consistent sources of happiness. And he adamantly critiqued book learning, especially at the expense of more practical understanding:

The scholars whose concern it is to pass judgment on books recognize no worth but that of learning and allow no intellectual activity other than that of scholarship and erudition. Mistake one Scipio for the other, and you have nothing left worth saying, have you! According to them, fail to know your Aristotle and you fail to know yourself (II.17.746).

He urged us instead to value our own experience and lamented that he himself didn't have the courage to rely exclusively on his own: "Were I a good scholar, I would find enough in my own experience to make me wise. Whoever recalls to mind his last bout of anger ... sees the ugliness of this passion better than in Aristotle" (III.13.1218). When Montaigne was in his mid-twenties he met a man that he felt was the quintessential friend, someone who accepted him for who he was, someone he did not have to edit himself around and whom he was to consider his best friend for the rest of his life, even though, tragically, they only knew each other for four years; the friend became ill and died prematurely.

In contrast to these ancient philosophers, the nineteenth century German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer apparently valued his own thoughts quite highly, but didn't have much use for friends. At the age of 36, he finished his masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*, and wrote, "A man of genius can hardly be sociable, for what dialogues could indeed be so intelligent and entertaining as his own monologues" (1.50)? At the age of fifty-five he began a series of close relationships with poodles.

Nietzsche was an avid Schopenhauerian, until he had a change of heart. Botton, in his book *Consolations of Philosophy*, analyzes the qualities of character that Nietzsche came to admire most in the world, and though curiosity is among them philosophical introspection *per se* is not. Of Nietzsche's heroes, those whom he felt lived the most fulfilled lives—Montaigne, Stendhal, Galiani, and Goethe—what he admired most about them was their curiosity, sexual vigor, adventurousness, passion for romantic love, and artistic ambition (211-214).

Russell doesn't mention friendship in this context, but he writes this about reflection, siding with the ancients:

Human beings differ profoundly in regard to the tendency to regard their lives as a whole. To some men it is natural to do so, and essential to happiness to be able to do so with some satisfaction. To others life is a series of detached incidents without directed movement and without unity. I think the former sort are more likely to achieve happiness than the latter, since they will gradually build up those circumstances from which they can derive contentment and self-respect, whereas the others will be blown about by the winds of circumstance now this way, now that, without ever arriving at any haven. The habit of viewing life as a whole is an essential part both of wisdom and of true morality, and is one of the things which ought to be encouraged in education (169).

Reflecting on my own life, I've been fortunate to have many friends, but I've never considered them an important part of my learning. My studies and reflections have been solitary ventures for the most part. Then again, I can't believe I just wrote that. I would guess that almost every poem I've ever published, for example—and I've published many—have been the subject of at least some discussion with friends or colleagues. I've apparently in my mind simply taken my friends for granted in that regard.

I grew up in a house with very few books: a bible and a dictionary, that was about it—oh yeah, and a set of encyclopedia stashed away in the closet called "Books of Knowledge." But when I was a pre-teen, my mother also bought me a set of young adult illustrated History of the U.S. books, a multiple-volume set with gaudy illustrations, Patrick Henry on a platform with a noose around his neck and Paul Revere on his horse running through the night. I didn't read them much, but I loved them for existing, and for being in my possession and as a gift from my mother—I remember loving the smell of their pages.

Also, my mother voraciously read *Readers Digest* abridged books, but then she'd box them up and put them in the garage or the attic. There must've been at least one other book in our house along with the Catholic Bible and the dictionary, because I remember reading at home Jack London's short story "To Build a Fire," which impressed me tremendously, mostly by opening up a world of possibilities that I didn't know about, that a story could have an ending in which no one survives, for example. I remember finishing it and not believing what I had just read and having to reread the ending several times to convince myself that that's what the words denoted.<sup>10</sup>

I majored in literature and philosophy in college, though I don't think I even started learning about those disciplines—both the knowledge they impart and the performative skills they require—until I graduated from graduate school many years later and began reading on my own. I think early on, I saw literature and philosophy as a way to escape what I felt were the painful trappings of mundanity. I don't think I had pretensions—I just wanted, perhaps too desperately, to rise above the pedestrian world of getting and spending. Or that's what I sensed my motive was. I'm sure some class yearnings were involved as well: if I couldn't have money and social status, I was going to have what money and social status can't buy, which is knowledge and perhaps wisdom.

But I think the real reason I was indulging in those disciplines—and it seemed at the time like indulgence after growing up in a family in which labor was the god we really worshipped, as opposed to the one we were fed on Sunday mornings—was that I was seeking a way to live in my own skin, not to hate myself for being an accident prone and irresponsible person. I must've sensed that knowledge and intellectualism could somehow be my saviors, but it had to be the deep knowledge of wisdom, which included an appreciation of the beauty of language, and if I was lucky I could maybe gain some skills to create beauty myself—all to abate my own sense of worthlessness. Where did these awful things I thought about myself come from? It didn't take much to give me that sense of myself, being naturally introverted and the youngest of five children in a working class Catholic family of extroverts. I was absent-minded, careless, and passively rebellious. I earned a reputation for carelessness young and from then on that reputation was set in cement. No one is to blame—I just had a hard time toeing the family ethos line. The situation steered me in the direction of escapist musings and yearnings. I felt that if I were to expose to anyone my aesthetic attraction to language, my family would have interpreted it as pure frivolousness, except maybe my mother.<sup>11</sup>

It took me a long time, into my twenties and thirties, for me to catch up to my learning. Not until my second marriage began to break up, around the age of forty, with three young kids, did I discover knowledge as something real, when I discovered psychology. And that's when I began to view knowledge as something that could serve me personally.

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<sup>10</sup> A friend tells me there are two versions of this story, in one of which the dog survives. In my memory, the man cuts the dog open to warm his hands, but I could be misremembering, or confusing the story with another.

<sup>11</sup> Imagine my surprise when we found among my mother's things after she died a manuscript of poetry she'd written as a young adult before and during the war, some of them before she had met my father. Romantic poetry in a Victorian style, lots of rhyming love poems about her yearnings and hopes for genuine romance. I'd been publishing poems for years when she died and she had never mentioned to me this collection.

Do I wish it could've served me sooner? Sure, but less for my own sake than for the sake of the people I've hurt, wives and children.

Not that at forty I was out of the hole, self-realized and fully mature, but at least I was able to look upon knowledge not as something outside of myself, but as something I could draw on to help me feel whole, to help me own myself, something I could nourish myself with. I used to like quoting Plutarch, I think it is, who said, or this is what I remember, "The true fortitude of knowledge is in not letting what you do know be embarrassed by what you don't." But I don't think I understood those words until I quit wanting to quote them.<sup>12</sup>

## Intelligence

Can intelligence *per se* serve us in our efforts to be happy? It's been found that IQ only weakly correlates with happiness, as do physical and mental energy, and though education raises happiness by raising income it has only a small direct effect on happiness (Layard, 62). I agree with Montaigne that intelligence should serve us in practical ways: how to get along with people, how to end relationships, how to handle money, how to stand up for ourselves without hurting other people, etc. Intelligence should serve wisdom, and in that regard I believe our culture holds a wrongheaded opinion about it—and unselfconsciously so, such that it's easy for one to grow up having internalized a very narrow definition of intelligence without being aware that you've done so. An ex father-in-law of mine liked to read *The New York Times* cover-to-cover and considered intelligence, from what I could observe, to be defined by how well one can display information. He once chastised me for not knowing that headlights draw their power from gasoline.<sup>13</sup> "You didn't know that?!" he kept asking me incredulously. I've tried to teach myself to respond to ignorance differently, to respond to a question with a simple explanation to the best of my knowledge; not to be afraid to

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<sup>12</sup> This quote turns out to be from a Montaigne essay—it appears I got it from an essay on him by Emerson in which Emerson is also referencing Plutarch:

Who shall forbid a wise skepticism, seeing that there is no practical question on which anything more than an approximate solution can be had? ... Excellent is culture for a savage; but once let him read in the book, and he is no longer able not to think of Plutarch's heroes. In short, since true fortitude of understanding consists 'in not letting what we know be embarrassed by what we do not know,' we ought to secure those advantages which we can command, and not risk them by clutching after the airy and unattainable. Come, no chimeras! Let us go abroad; let us mix in affairs; let us learn, and get, and have, and climb (356).

<sup>13</sup> The context was a conversation in which my ex-father-in-law was proposing that a new state law that headlights must be on when it's raining was generated by the oil industry, to compel us to burn more gasoline.

admit I don't know, but if I do know, not display surprise to show off that I've known it a long time, implying that I also know a lot more.

I would argue that responding humbly to ignorance is a way of respecting *yourself*, for what *you* don't know, for if you adopt that narrow definition of intelligence—let's call it not intelligence but knowledge, with a small k—then you're just as likely when you discover that you yourself are ignorant of something to turn that denigration on yourself. It's a recipe for shame and low self-esteem, while also ironically for arrogance. The truth is, we are *all* remarkably ignorant about almost everything, *and yet* we're also remarkably knowledgeable about a lot of things. Sure, we get things wrong and have a lot of wrong-headed understandings of natural phenomena, history, and of many aspects of human existence and human thinking, and we're rife with perceptual biases and erroneous opinions about ourselves, why we behave the way we do, but those misunderstandings are usually merely a common consequence of what we've taught each other about our role in the world. Our intelligence has ironically impelled us to adopt a misunderstanding about intelligence. We're smart enough to think we're more intelligent than we are, but not smart enough to understand that error. Rarely is knowledge exhibited for what it truly is, small indeed. As a species, we've learned to control certain aspects of nature to make ourselves comfortable, but the power we think we've won has come at the expense of the real power that follows an understanding of our true place in the world—again, small indeed. We've let our intelligence alienate us from ourselves. Imagine what we could accomplish—what a more beautiful and humane world it would be—were we to behave with a full awareness of the limitations of our own knowledge.

Can intelligence help us on our journey to happiness? Perhaps it's wiser to think of intelligence as merely one means to an end, a particular tool, as opposed to a defining characteristic of the human species or of any one individual. And for it to be useful as such, we'll need to know how to use it. Since Howard Gardner's 1983 book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, a much more expansive definition of intelligence has been adopted by many. I applaud that expansiveness and argue that it supports my plea for a humbler attitude about our general intelligence and its role in our lives. Gardner has taught us that irrespective of traditional modes of intelligence some people have a greater, say, kinaesthetic intelligence (professional athletes, for example) and others have a greater musical intelligence and others logical and others interpersonal. Kirby Edmonds, a human rights advocate and professional mediator based here in the Ithaca, New York area, where I live, advises people working in groups to get into the habit of assuming the person you are talking to is smart. I like that approach: assume everyone is smart and, I would add, assume that as a group we are also profoundly ignorant, thus the great opportunity to solve problems. One problem that clearly evidences our profound ignorance is the environmental crisis we've found ourselves in. In the next few years I suspect our attention will be increasingly devoted to addressing that crisis, and we're going to need some good tools (and meta-tools) with which to work with one another, tools that enable collaboration and compromise.

In the field of intelligence and learning theory, I especially applaud and value the recent work of the well-known sociologist Carol Dweck, who argues for the benefits of what she calls a "growth mindset" as opposed to a "fixed mindset."

In a fixed mindset students believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that's that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb. In a growth mindset

students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it.<sup>14</sup>

I wish I had been exposed to those benefits growing up, as I tended to shut myself off from subjects and activities I felt I had no natural propensity for. In one of the first formal baseball games I participated in, for example, in the seventh grade as I recall, I played third base and during one game early in the season three times in a row I overthrew to first base. I never played organized baseball again. I just assumed I had a poor throwing arm. A growth mindset would've inspired me to keep practicing until my aim improved. It's revolutionary to believe that with a certain attitude *everyone* has at least some propensity to improve in almost any skill. I can't help but think that not only could the *effects* of that belief alone contribute to happiness, but the belief itself could contribute to it, as a sort of meta-belief, a belief about what you let yourself believe in. I wouldn't go so far as to guess that those with a growth mindset are happier than those with a fixed mindset (they might be), but it sure seems that I myself am happier when I'm able to think in terms of growth, probably because it simply reduces the anxiety I feel in having to maintain the identity I had created with the fixed mindset.

It also makes me feel better about myself and my place in the world, and better about a world in which humans are learning, to have in my head that sense of possibility a belief in a growth mindset can provide. I no longer have to settle for what I'm merely capable of. Yes, whatever I want to develop in myself will require a lot of work, but the possibilities are much greater than before. Teachers, too, can feel better about what they do. They don't have to feel that only a fixed percentage of students are capable of being inspired by what they teach. It may be, still, that only a small percentage *are* inspired by what they're taught, but that's not the universe's fault, or genetics. A belief in a growth mindset can expand one's pedagogical vision.

## Health

Health is important for happiness, but the main insight from happiness studies regarding it is that we tend to underestimate how well we can adapt to most illnesses, the only exceptions being chronic pain and mental illness. Gilbert refers to this ability of ours as the hedonic immune system, which is the more fortunate flipside of the hedonic treadmill I refer to in an earlier section. Christopher Reeve believed himself in some ways better off after becoming a quadriplegic, Lance Armstrong claims that he's glad to have had cancer, and most cancer patients in general tend to be more optimistic about the future than healthy people. Gilbert has found that we mis-predict how much ill health affects our happiness and, accordingly, misjudge the effects of ill health on others. We're apparently very skeptical of Christopher Reeve's claims: it's difficult for us to imagine that other people have a hedonic immune system (167). As early as the sixteenth century, Montaigne in his essay *Of Practice* explains it as a typical example of our overactive imagination doing us a disservice:

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<sup>14</sup> <https://onedublin.org/2012/06/19/stanford-universitys-carol-dweck-on-the-growth-mindset-and-education/>

Many things seem to us greater in imagination than in reality. I have spent a good part of my life in perfect and entire health; I mean not merely entire, but even blithe and ebullient. This state, full of verdure and cheer, made me find the thought of illnesses so horrible that when I came to experience them I found their pains mild and easy compared with my fears (II:6).

We imagine the effects of our illness or injury—in ourselves and in others—to be much greater than it turns out to be in reality. As Montaigne suggests, the imagination manifests this way even in those with disabilities themselves. The memoirist Ben Mattin, who has spinal muscular atrophy, a congenital and progressive neuromuscular weakness akin to muscular dystrophy, attests in an article from *The New York Times* that he has found it helpful to think of his disability in positive terms:

I decided long ago that if I'm going to like myself, I have to like the disability that has contributed to who I am. Today, my encroaching decrepitude is frequently a source of emotional strength, a motivator to keep fighting, to exercise my full abilities in whatever way possible. Let's face it, people with disabilities are nothing if not first-class problem-solvers. We find all manner of devices to enable us to raise a fork, drive a car or van, go to the beach. I now control my electric wheelchair with my lips, because my hands no longer function. These very words are being written with a voice-recognition computer. . . . True, it is a hassle having to devise alternative methods for living a normal life. But when it works, Oh, how good it feels! How triumphant and liberating! I'm proud of my persistence and creative coping skills.<sup>15</sup>

This perspective even challenges conceptualizing it as a product of a psychological immune system, as that would imply that it's primarily *reactive*, but it seems to me essentially *pro-active*. The attributes of those with disabilities are ones we all want to have, and not merely as defense mechanisms. Just as the Chukchi Eskimos of Western Chukotka, Russia, view extreme cold and a frozen landscape not as a hostile environment, but as one that makes their region hospitable (they can store significant quantities of meat in the open, for example), and just as the Polynesians think of the open ocean not as hostile but as a hospitable environment that actually defines who they are (we now know that they navigated to South America before the Spanish did), the “disabled” can choose to see their disabilities not as what is to be survived and fought through, but as unique forms of power.

At the age of twenty, I was involved in an auto accident in which I was thrown from a jeep. Along with cracked ribs, several broken transverse processes (those little overlapping bones on either side of the spine), and cracked wrist bones, I sustained a pulverized spleen, a partially pulverized pancreas, a perforated duodenum and, judging from scar tissue in liver biopsies years later, a damaged liver. Over the next three months I underwent four abdominal operations and experienced a few scary incidents—a collapsed lung, a bleed-out that nearly went undetected, some frighteningly rapid weight loss, I suppose what one might consider the usual symptoms in a long-term hospital stay with multiple surgeries. I had a few less dangerous but quirky experiences as well: one day, for example, an abscess drainage tube in my back near my bottom rib had, unbeknownst to anyone, perforated my stomach such that when I drank some grape juice I witnessed purple liquid flowing out the tube in my

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<sup>15</sup> <http://nyti.ms/2dKbGD6>

back. The saddest point during the hospital stay was the day I signed a consent form for an operation that was to prevent further abscesses. It required the removal of the rest of my pancreas, the gall bladder, the duodenum, the bile duct, the antrum of the stomach, jejunum, and lymph nodes. At the time, it had a sixty-five percent mortality rate. I signed the consent form. Fortunately, my doctors reconsidered.

I was young and healthy when the accident happened and that helped with the recovery, but by the end of the three months I had dropped from 170 pounds to 125, and though I did manage to recover and continue my college years in relatively normal health I began to suffer in the next few years painful bouts of pancreatic inflammations and jaundice caused by hepatitis C, which was identified after researchers in 1985 isolated the virus. I had contracted it from one of the many blood transfusions I received during my operations. Over the next twenty-five years, the pancreatic inflammations subsided and the hepatitis stayed relatively asymptomatic—as hepatitis C typically does prior to liver failure—until, in 2005, twenty-eight years after the accident, I underwent a chemotherapy regimen that eradicated the virus.

Pancreatitis and hepatitis C are not minor illnesses, but I've never considered myself debilitated in any way, and in fact have always considered myself healthy. I've exercised regularly for years, even earning at the age of 45 a black belt in karate, and now in my early 60s I don't suffer any serious health effects from the injuries and operations, at least that I know of. I suppose I could die sooner than otherwise as a result of all the stress my body has endured, especially my liver and pancreas, but I doubt doctors would concur, or if they did they would probably couple the prognosis with a prescription that I consider myself lucky to have survived at all.

I sometimes wonder what effect these health issues have had on my outlook on life. It's hard to tell since I can't conduct an experiment to see what my attitude would be without having experienced those events. Despite my view of myself as a healthy person, the whole episode and its health effects have, I think, been the source of some depression both during my hospital stay and in the years afterwards. Part of the dejection may have been from self-pity, but part of it too may have come from a sense, then and afterwards, that I could never live up to a life commensurate with the love and well-wishes I received from family and friends while sick and recovering—perhaps there are issues of shame involved with those feelings. I suspect, though, that the real source of the depression has been an exacerbation of a pre-existing melancholy manifesting in a hyper-sensitivity to the fragility of life. In the years following my hospital stay, I found myself preoccupied with thoughts of a 14-year-old roommate I had while I was there, who suffered from pancreatic cancer, died, and was wheeled out of our room in the middle of the night. Death and dying are prevalent themes in my poetry of those years.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I'll discuss my religious sensibility later in the section on psychological factors, but it seems appropriate here to answer to why I would not have emerged from these events with a gratitude toward god or with some such religious interpretation of my survival. I grew up in a large extended religious family that tended to interpret survival in just such a way, and it never made sense to me that "we" would be chosen when so many others haven't been. It seemed to me the height of self-importance to believe that I or anyone who survived a near-death experience would attribute their survival to a certain theistic favoritism. What has made survivors more deserving than non-survivors? This attitude of mine may be nothing more than a sensibility specific to modernism that I've inherited alongside the pre-modern

And yet, in spite of the low-grade depression, or perhaps paradoxically *because* of it, I seemed also to harbor for many years and even to this day an implicit attitude, an undercurrent like groundwater, that my survival was a gift and that every experience I've ever had has been and still is a gift on top of a gift, icing on the cake, as they say. Seen through the lens of my survival, the world has been the object of perpetual wonder to me, which, even mixed as it has been often with melancholy, has provided me with great joy. The leading academic researcher on gratitude, psychologist Robert Emmons, defines gratitude as “a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life,” and informs us that a great deal of evidence now supports the conclusion that “when people regularly engage in the systematic cultivation of gratitude, they experience a variety of measurable benefits: psychological, physical, and interpersonal” (3).<sup>17</sup>

When I consider my life holistically, though, the accident may also have had some unfortunate psychological and behavioral consequences. As an adult, I've acted out enough to furnish material for several seasons of a soap opera—infidelities, self-serving lies, abandonments—such that I cannot in good conscience conclude that all that love and well-wishing I received for my recovery made me a good person, which I feel it should have. Nor can I claim that I'm a good person from the “love of life” that I've adopted as a result of my survival. In fact, my survival may have contributed to more selfish behavior than not. The logic of this reasoning is pretty straightforward to me: “I'm going to maximize my own pleasures and satisfy my own desires because after almost dying I deserve it or [even worse] life itself deserves it—as if I am some kind of steward for all of life: my love of life is so great that I must maximize my experiences no matter who I hurt in the process. Life is so fragile that if I don't experience all that life offers, it will pass me by.” I wouldn't be surprised if my id frequently reasoned this way. *Experience*, in this ethos, is the Holy Grail, in comparison to which consequences aren't worth the slightest consideration. I think I was in a state of mourning, grieving the loss of certainty and confidence that a pristine body can provide, grieving the loss of a certain existential innocence. “Both Lacan and Freud,” contemporary theorist Marshall Alcorn reminds us, “suggest that we cannot adequately imagine desire if we do not understand its relation to loss and anxiety. Desire is a response to loss and a response to anxiety” (110). When I recently read that, I felt it in my bones to be true.

Throw into this mix the element of shame—the tendency to act in ways that reinforce a pre-existing conception of myself as worthless—and you have a good recipe for some powerfully destructive addictive behavior. And of course all that behavior has been as destructive to myself as to others. My epicureanism has been epicurean only in the popular sense of the word. Epicurus himself preached moderation, for he understood the truth of what I've experienced: excesses are self-destructive, usually leaving one alone and remorseful; they *undermine* one's happiness rather than further it.

The upshot of my own experience in the context of Gilbert's findings may be that my hedonic immune system kicked in very efficiently—I've never considered myself handicapped by my illness—but it may have had an unhealthy effect on my psyche. Then again, my selfish behavior may have originated elsewhere, in an unresolved grief unrelated to

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vision of pre-destined favoritism, and in my case, for whatever reason, the modern sensibility has won out.

<sup>17</sup> I discuss gratitude a bit more in the section on psychological factors.

the accident, for example, or in feelings of abandonment or low self-esteem alone, from early family dynamics. Or, since this is not an either/or dynamic, the near-death experience could have contributed to a pre-existing penchant for narcissistic behavior originating in other factors.

## **Personal Freedom & Peace**

As Layard writes, we in the West take for granted two factors that are lacking in much of the globe, personal freedom and peace. People in countries with political freedom are typically happier than those living under more oppressed governments. The list of factors inducing happiness or unhappiness includes the following:

- rule of law
- stability and lack of violence
- voice and accountability
- the effectiveness of government services
- the absence of corruption
- the efficiency of the system of regulation.

Having a voice is a major factor: in one study of different regions in Switzerland, the difference in happiness level of those living in regions that had the most rights to referendums and those who had the least rights to referendums were equal to what it would be if the first group made twice as much money as the second (Layard, 70).

It goes without saying that the social ill that causes the greatest misery is war. As Harari explains, although it's tempting to believe we're in a state of heightened violence—as much attention as death and mayhem get in our media—the truth is, relative to the last 2,000 years, we're living in a state of worldwide peace:

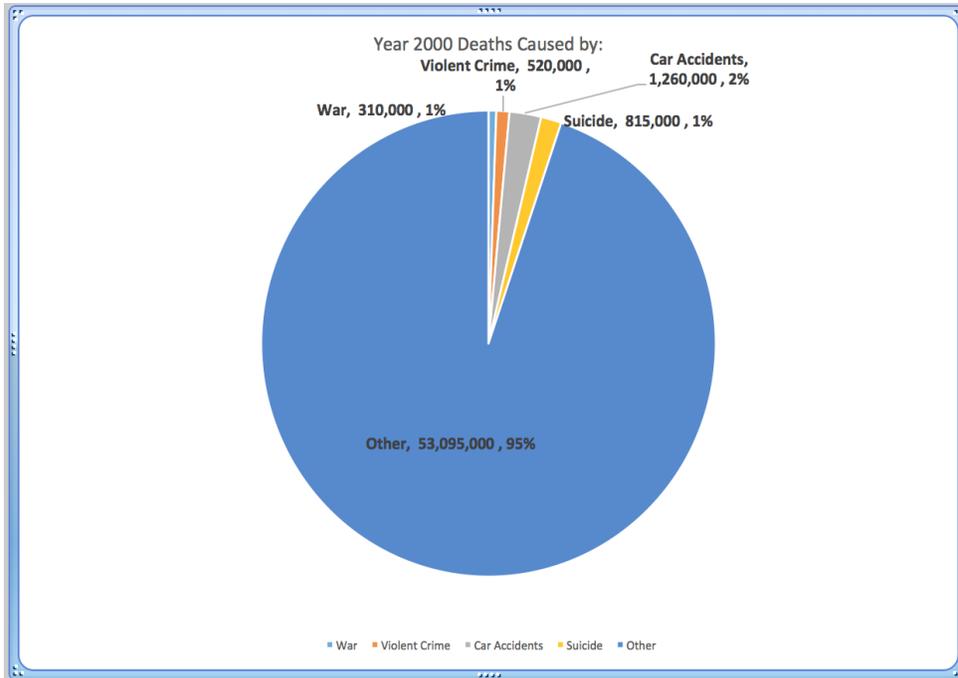
In the year 2000, wars caused the deaths of 310,000 individuals, and violent crime killed another 520,000. ... from a macro perspective these 830,000 victims comprised only 1.5 per cent of the 56 million people who died in 2000. That year 1.26 million people died in car accidents (2.25 per cent of total mortality) and 815,000 people committed suicide (1.45 per cent). ... The figures for 2002 are even more surprising. Out of 57 million dead, only 172,000 people died in war and 569,000 died of violent crime (a total of 741,000 victims of human violence). In contrast 873,000 people committed suicide. It turns out that in the year following the 9/11 attacks, despite all the talk of terrorism and war, the average person was more likely to kill himself than to be killed by a terrorist, a soldier or a drug dealer (410,411).

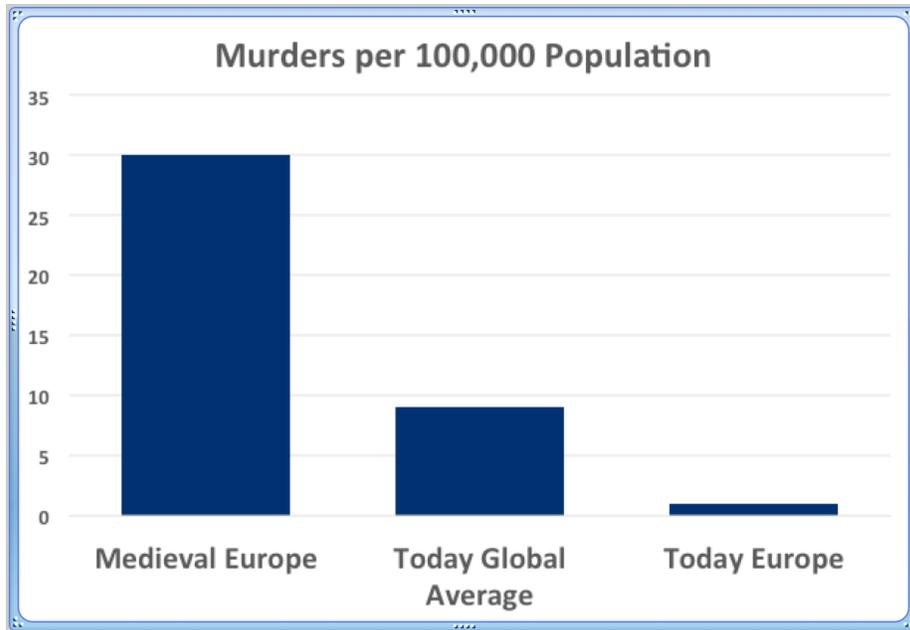
He goes on to explain the reasons for these reductions:

The decline of violence is due largely to the rise of the state. ... As kingdoms and empires became stronger, they reined in communities and the level of violence decreased. In the decentralized kingdoms of medieval Europe, about twenty to forty people were murdered each year for every 100,000 inhabitants. In recent decades,

when states and markets have become all-powerful and communities have vanished, violence rates have dropped even further. Today the global average is only nine murders a year per 100,000 people... In the centralized states of Europe, the average is one murder a year per 100,000 people (411,412).

It appears that, regarding war and peace, we're in one of the most accommodating times for happiness that humans have lived in for decades, perhaps centuries.





The closest we in the U.S. come to war these days is through rare state-side terrorist activities, gang shootouts, or police abuse, such as what people of color experience in this country and what white people who aren't on a police force usually only hear about in the news and witness in video recordings. And yet I would argue that we all suffer an undercurrent of brutality, a brutality that is endemic to modern life. I've written elsewhere of the subtext of violence in our culture, how it erupts in everyday activities, behaviors, and language.<sup>18</sup> We've normalized it. That we consider violent movies and TV shows entertainment, for example, is evidence of how deeply we've internalized the notion that violence is a natural consequence of human existence. That we laugh when it's used for humorous effect evidences even more powerfully just how deeply ingrained the notion is that it's natural. I would suppose that these entertainments function as some sort of coping mechanism in response to the fear of violence, fears probably rooted in its close association with death (surely Zizek has argued this somewhere). The dominant theory of art prior to the eighteenth century was *mimesis*, which argues that art's purpose is to mirror nature, and *mimesis* is still a powerful theoretical force in all forms of creative activity, the motivation often for why we create: the impulse to make something that we feel re-creates the world we experience, the subjective experience itself, or a confluence of the two. Thus, we hear violence in art defended with the argument that since we live in a violent world art must re-create it. This argument is often made with only an occasional rejoinder that it is self-validating, that since humans are profoundly imitative animals violence in art can *cause* us to behave more violently than we would otherwise, behavior that then is pointed to as what inspired the art.

I was recently watching a TV show in which the hero policeman was trying to gain access to a building he believed was the center of some illicit CIA activity, and he couldn't immediately think of an excuse to convince the guard to *let* him into the building so, after a

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<sup>18</sup> See my essay "Brutality of Desire" in *Journal of Narrative Politics*, Volume 3, Number 1, fall 2016 <http://jnp.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/article/view/61/62>

brief shrug, he reared back and punched the man in the face. It was played as a joke, on the par with Indiana Jones pulling out his revolver and shooting the native bull-whip artist after he, the native, had ostentatiously displayed his bull-whipping skills. In that instance, not only is violence normalized, but a crude modern instrument of violence is being arrogantly touted as superior to its pre-modern corollary, as if the *efficiency* of the gun's violence makes the violence it inflicts something to be proud of. The arrogance required of viewers to laugh at that scene probably functions as another coping mechanism. Superior efficiency is being invoked to mitigate the guilt we feel in allowing ourselves to inflict profoundly brutal violence on one another with impersonal weapons: hand guns, attack rifles, incendiary bombs, nuclear bombs. The bare truth is too shameful to face, so we have to deflect it with humor and our humorous responses to it.

We all inflict violence on one another, as we have learned to do through years of indoctrination. That we all participate in this violence is one way the behaviors are normalized. Most of us, for example, either drive motor vehicles or let ourselves be transported by them. About a hundred people die on highways each day in this country alone, which is about the same number killed by handguns (the number of highway deaths just a few years ago was higher by fifteen or so per day, but it's gone down recently and handgun deaths have risen, so the two are about equal now). And anyone who's been a victim of an automobile accident has experienced the shock of its violence.<sup>19</sup> (I can't imagine the violence of a train wreck.) The shock of an automobile accident's violence is perhaps matched only by the shock of the shock of it. We've compartmentalized the violence endemic to modern life to such an extent that we don't bother to *imagine* it beforehand, thus the shock of it when it occurs. We've normalized automobile accidents—reading about them often in newspapers and seeing them recreated in our entertainments—such that when we actually experience one we're stunned by how violent it actually is. I suppose we've worked it out in our heads that since fast-moving vehicles are so common in our lives, and accidents are so often *represented* to us, their collisions must not really hurt that much or have the power to shock us with their brutality, their ugly physical power over our fragile bodies. Harari's figures show that we are experiencing less human-on-human violence in the last two- to five-hundred years, but I would argue that we still experience, more often than we realize, the effects of a form of violence—mostly from high-speed vehicles and weapons—particular to modernity and thus uniquely shocking to our psyches.

To conclude this section, most of us may not live amidst the misery of warfare, or experience the high incidences of murder that occurred in medieval times, but the common impersonal brutality of modern violence certainly has a happiness-depleting effect on all of us, and a devastating effect on its direct victims.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

### Personal Values

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.vpc.org/regulating-the-gun-industry/gun-deaths-compared-to-motor-vehicle-deaths/>

Research shows that people who appreciate what they have, no matter what it is, are happier than those who don't. I've discussed gratitude a bit in the section on health above where I cite Robert Emmons, one of the leading researchers on gratitude, who conceives of it in terms of two stages. First, it is an acknowledgement of goodness in one's life: "The acknowledgement that we've received something gratifies us, either by its presence or by the effort the giver made in choosing it." And second, it is a recognition that the source or sources of this goodness lie at least partially outside the self. In this way, writes Emmons, gratitude differs from other emotional dispositions: "A person can be angry at himself, pleased with herself, proud of himself, or feel guilty about doing wrong, but it would be bizarre to say that a person felt grateful to herself" (4).

Lyubomirsky characterizes gratitude as "a kind of meta-strategy for achieving happiness. ... an antidote to negative emotions, a neutralizer of envy, avarice, hostility, worry, and irritation.... People who are consistently grateful," she writes,

have been found to be relatively happier, more energetic, and more hopeful and to report experiencing more frequent positive emotions. They also tend to be more helpful and empathic, more spiritual and religious, more forgiving, and less materialistic than others who are less predisposed to gratefulness. Furthermore, the more a person is inclined to gratitude, the less likely he or she is to be depressed, anxious, lonely, envious, or neurotic (90).

She devised an experiment in which two groups of graduate students were instructed to keep a "gratitude journal." Compared to the control group that did not keep a journal, all the students who did keep one reported "significantly bigger increases in their happiness levels." Gratitude has also been shown to inhibit invidious comparisons with others, writes Lyubomirsky: "If you are genuinely thankful and appreciate what you have (e.g., family, health, home), you are less likely to pay close attention to or envy what the Joneses have.... You can't be envious and happy at the same time," she writes (93-95,116).

I think of gratitude as almost synonymous with happiness: feeling grateful makes me happy, partly by inducing a reflection on my life, past and present. When I'm grateful, what I'm grateful *for* is my whole life as I've lived it, which includes the years it took for me to be open to happiness no less than the moment in which I'm actually feeling grateful. All the pain, pleasure, all the misspent months and hurtful behavior, both perpetrated and received, all of it feels ... not *necessary* exactly (I don't go in for notions of inevitability), but altogether constitutive of the whole, of where I am at the moment. It's the totality of that sentiment—which is also an understanding—that creates the happiness.

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To discipline our minds and moods against the more depressing aspects of our nature, such as ingratitude and envy, it appears to help to have the relevant skills and resources, such as talk therapy, meditation, or church-going (Layard, 71-72). One finding that appears often in research is that those who believe in a god are happier than those who don't. Lyubomirsky reports that

... a growing body of psychological science is suggesting that religious people are happier, healthier, and recover better after traumas than nonreligious people. In one

study, parents who had lost a baby to sudden infant death syndrome were interviewed three weeks after their loss and then again after eighteen months. Those who attended religious services frequently and who reported religion as being important to them were better able to cope eighteen months after the loss, showing relatively less depression at this time and greater well-being than nonreligious parents (228).

In addition to the psychological benefits are the health benefits of happiness: “Other studies have shown that relative to nonreligious folks, those active in their religions live longer with a variety of diseases and are healthier in general” (228).

These findings are problematic if we believe anti-theists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, who argue that any measurement of well-being caused by a belief in god must take into account the violation to well-being that violent or oppressive religions cause millions of people around the world. So it may be wise to distinguish a belief in god from an adherence to violent religious dogma, though Harris, who promotes empirical studies of meditative practices, argues that a belief in god interferes with the healthier, secular form of spiritual meditation: “There is clearly no greater obstacle to a truly empirical approach to spiritual experience than our current beliefs about God” (214).<sup>20</sup> But in defense of religion, Harris says that there is “nothing irrational about seeking the states of mind that lie at the core of many religions. Compassion, awe, devotion and feelings of oneness are surely among the most valuable experiences a person can have.”<sup>21</sup>

Dawkins’s and Harris’s objections aside, why would those who believe in god be happier than those who don’t? Lyubomirsky conjectures that the findings could be attributed to the healthier lifestyles and the social practices that religious people generally have (which would explain the good health, but not necessarily the happiness), and also to the social aspect of religion. But she suspects, as I do, that the more significant effect of religious faith is that a belief in god presupposes an array of feelings and understandings about one’s place in the world and about the world to which one feels one belongs.

This relationship [to God] is not only a source of comfort in troubled times but a source of self-esteem feeling unconditionally valued, loved, and cared for. ... Second, your sense that God has a purpose in everything helps you find meaning in ordinary life events as well as in traumatic ones. This is critical. Regardless of whether you are involved with a formal religious organization, your health and happiness may benefit simply (or perhaps not so simply) from your having religious faith. This becomes particularly important during challenging times.... The sense of meaning that you derive from your religion can provide hope..., a satisfying explanation via a broader, benign purpose..., and solace.... Indeed, such religious coping is so powerful that during hard times it is the single most frequently used form of coping by older people (230, 231).

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<sup>20</sup> Which is why, when writing his book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James chose to focus on primary religious experience rather than secondary, by which he meant institutional devotion and practice.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/rationalist-sam-harris-believes-god-73859>

For a fuller articulation of the underlying benefits of faith, I went to the classic religious study *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion*, by Mircea Eliade. In his chapter “Human Existence and Sanctified Life,” he analyzes the existential connections religious people of archaic societies experienced in the world:

What we find as soon as we place ourselves in the perspective of religious man ... is that *the world exists because it was created by the gods*, and that the existence of the world itself “means” something, “wants to say” something, that the world is neither mute nor opaque, that it is not an inert thing without purpose or significance. For religious man, the cosmos “lives” and “speaks.” The mere life of the cosmos is proof of its sanctity, since the cosmos was created by the gods and the gods show themselves to men through cosmic life (165).

What does this mean exactly—“the gods show themselves to men through cosmic life”? It means that one perceives oneself as a constitutive element of the universe and vice-versa:

This is why, beginning at a certain stage of culture, man conceives of himself as a microcosm. He forms part of the gods’ creation; ... he finds in himself the same sanctity that he recognizes in the cosmos. It follows that his life is homologized to cosmic life; as a divine work, the cosmos becomes the paradigmatic image of human existence (165).

One homology (something with which one believes they have a shared origin) that serves as an example is earth-woman. Eliade quotes the *Arharva Veda* (XIV, 2, 14): “This woman has come like living soil: sow seed in her, ye men!” And the Koran (II, 225): “Your women are as fields for you.” Then he reminds us that these homologies were not mere ideas, but *experiences*. They conferred upon the believer, I would add, a relation to the world that is perhaps shut off from most modern Western people.

Now, our contemporary sensibility not only resists this homology, but our contemporary *feminist* sensibility is incensed by it, with its references to women as seed bearers. And though this sexist and homology-bearing ideology is still dominant in some parts of the world—as evidenced by the recent murder of Pakistani activist Qandeel Baloch by her brother in what is referred to by traditionalists as an “honor killing”—it is also under attack, as evidenced by the Pakistan government’s refusal to allow the family to exonerate him.<sup>22</sup> This is an ideology that is contested even in conservative Muslim countries. Yes, we may be horrified by this so-called honor killing, but that behavior is nonetheless rooted in the very religiosity whose loss we are tempted to grieve. We are tempted to grieve its loss because it offers a form of identity that we often yearn for as a counter to the alienation we so often experience now. “Clearly,” Eliade writes of this pre-modern man,

his life has an additional dimension; it is not merely human, it is at the same time cosmic, since it has a transhuman structure. It could be termed an open existence, for it is not strictly confined to man’s mode of being.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2016/07/19/world/asia/19reuters-pakistan-honourkillings.html>

A couple of sentences later he refers again to the quality among these believers of “openness”: “The existence of *homo religiosus*, especially of the primitive, is open to the world; in living, religious man is never alone, part of the world lives in him” (166).

I am intrigued by this paradoxical sensibility of ours—to condemn fundamentalist acts while also lamenting the loss of the identity-conferring system that frames those acts. I am particularly intrigued by the claim that *homo religiosus* is more “open” to the world than we are. It’s hard to pin down what that quality of openness is, especially in relation to what it is we’re tempted to mourn, but the ineffability of that quality may be pertinent (we moderns are suspicious of qualities that cannot be articulated). I once wrote in a poem about a medical condition called supination, in which the patient senses that his or her hands are turned up when they are not, and I wrote that that explanation has stuck with me for many years because it reflects something about how I view myself, in particular that I’m not as “open” to the world as I think I am or that I wish I were. Eliade’s analysis suggests to me that, in contrast to a pre-modern vision of the cosmos, our modern rationalism has alienated us from the world, closed us off to it and to something essential in ourselves.

Lyubomirsky addresses the relative “openness” of the believer in her discussion of the stereotype of the closed-minded fundamentalist, in a section titled “Are there Downsides to Religion?”:

Regarding the question of whether religious beliefs can foster prejudice, this has been found in some studies of religious fundamentalists, who sometimes agree with statements like “The reason the Jews have so much trouble is because [*sic*] God is punishing them for rejecting Jesus” and “The AIDS disease currently killing homosexuals is just what they deserve.” However, these findings are fairly weak and the results not very generalizable to today’s diversity of views, indicating that the vast majority of religious and spiritual individuals are likely to be inclusive, compassionate, and open-minded than the reverse (235).

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One of the causes (and effects) of what I’m calling the closed-mindedness of moderns is a self-consciousness that follows from perceiving ourselves as individual. I’ve written elsewhere of the modern phenomenon of hyper-individualism endemic to our culture, a sense that our individual selves do and should take priority over community, a phenomenon that has been growing since the Renaissance and has reached its zenith in contemporary Western cultures.<sup>23</sup> In a discussion of this modern self-consciousness by religious scholar John Pilch, he cites anthropologist Arthur Kleinman’s argument that this attitude is a product of modern Western science:

What is the Western problem? The advent of modern science in about the seventeenth century disrupted the bio-psycho-spiritual unity of human consciousness

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<sup>23</sup> in *Writing on the Edge*:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B73EBMXKTqeJOUsyMkVBV2p5bGgxMzZyUlZyUXpLMzIwMHQ0/view?usp=sharing>

that had existed until then. According to Kleinman, we have developed an ‘acquired consciousness’ whereby we dissociate self and look at self ‘objectively.’ Western culture socializes individuals to develop a metasef, a critical observer who monitors and comments on experience. The metasef does not allow the total absorption in lived experience .... The metasef stands in the way of unreflected, unmediated experience which now becomes distanced ....

In contrast to the condition that has spawned this “metasef,” the believer believes that everything is holy and thus obviates a need for her to abstract herself from the world. Eliade concludes that for the archaic believer,

... the whole of life is capable of being sanctified. The means by which its sanctification is brought about are various, but the result is always the same: life is lived on a twofold plane; it takes its course as human existence and, at the same time, shares in a transhuman life, that of the cosmos or of the gods (167).

This vision of life lived in a twofold plane is what we moderns have lost, and of course there’s no going back, for one of the marks of modernism is a constructed progressive, linear vision of time. We’re all now historical materialists by birth. The age in which we have been born disallows a vision of time that sanctifies existence.<sup>24</sup> Just as modern artists cannot take to heart the Renaissance injunction to emulate the masters—because by having internalized a modern, scientific sense of the past we can’t help but be alienated from those masters—we also can’t take to heart any injunction to turn back the years and homologize ourselves with natural phenomena. We can’t help but historicize that pre-modern, holistic, trans-human, cosmic vision. To *live* by it would require a conscious violation of our modern constructed sense of time.

Non-believers tend to take pride precisely in *not* living by that violation of modern time. They feel that they’d rather live according to this modern scientific materialism, “unencumbered” by the trans-human, pre-modern vision, even if it causes unhappiness, than to live in a fairy tale. There’s both a push and a pull that impels the atheist away from religion and toward modern materialism. The push is *away* from the dark side of the pre-modern delusion, which, as the argument goes, smacks of nostalgia for a time of innocence that never really existed. I’m reminded of James Baldwin’s warning about this kind of yearning, in his essay “Stranger in the Village”: “People who shut their eyes to reality invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster” (90).

Baldwin is alluding to the notion that the homologized world is always necessarily conflated with its political consequences, which historically have been the consequences of imperialism. The same homologized culture that helped people feel securely placed in the cosmos *also*, for example, ordained Francisco Pizarro and his 200 or so cohorts, in November of 1532, to slaughter the Incan Emperor Atahualpa and hundreds of his Incan subjects, in the name of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.

Here is a segment of one of the Spanish soldiers’ journals telling of their first encounter with the Incas at the Peruvian highland town of Cajamarca, which resulted in a massive slaughter:

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<sup>24</sup> See Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 615.

If night had not come on, few out of the more than 40,000 Indian troops would have been left alive. Six or seven thousand Indians lay dead, and many more had their arms cut off and other wounds. Atahualpa himself admitted that we had killed 7,000 of his men in that battle. The man killed in one of the litters was his minister, of whom he was very fond. All those Indians who bore Atahualpa's litter appeared to be high chiefs and councilors. They were all killed, as well as those Indians who were carried in the other litters and hammocks. The lord of Cajamarca was also killed, and others, but their numbers were so great that they could not be counted, for all who came in attendance on Atahualpa were great lords. It was extraordinary to see so powerful a ruler captured in so short a time, when he had come with such a mighty army. Truly, it was not accomplished by our own forces, for there were so few of us. It was by the grace of God, which is great (Diamond, 73).<sup>25</sup>

It is estimated that during the initial Spanish conquest of the Americas eight million indigenous Americans died (Forsythe). This would be the characteristic of pre-modern belief that inspires the argument of Dawkins and Harris that fundamentalist religious belief has been historically destructive, and of course continues to be today, from certain radical factions.

In addition to the push away from pre-modern visions of reality, many atheists feel that their modern sensibility also has *positive* qualities that compensate for the loss of happiness that believers gain from their belief. This is the *pull* complementing the push. The pull, atheists argue, is toward the quality that most compensates that loss, an equanimity that emerges from a philosophically materialistic world view: one need not worry about his or her soul after death, as this reasoning goes, when there is no soul that will live on. This position is beautifully articulated in Lucretius's classical poem *On the Nature of Things*, a Roman articulation of Epicureanism. Lucretius writes in a famous passage that it is pleasant to watch a boat struggling at sea while one is safe on shore, or to look down from one's philosophical height upon armies clashing in the plain below—not because the wise man is a sadist, but because his mind is impassible, and no torment can touch it. The goal of Epicureanism is *ataraxia*, Greek for “not being disturbed.” Thus, Epicureanism serves as a consolation for the anxieties of death, and particularly the anticipated experiences of an afterlife.

On the other hand, Bertrand Russell, a famous atheist himself, implicitly acknowledges that, in contrast to Lucretius's claim, a common symptom of atheism is the opposite of equanimity, either melancholy or anxiety or both, resulting from a feeling that without a deity overseeing us and the universe there isn't much hope for oneself or for humanity in general. He suspects, however, that those who are made dour by their atheism are often misattributing that emotion, that when they blame their views about the universe for their sorrows they are putting the cart before the horse: “The truth is,” Russell writes, “they are unhappy for some reason of which they are not aware and this unhappiness leads them to dwell upon the less agreeable characteristics of the world in which they live” (25). Russell obviously doesn't feel, as some of us do, that the absence of a pre-modern vision of

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<sup>25</sup> Actually, it was by factors more complicated than that; for example, having a lot to do with it were the Spaniards' guns, swords, and horses, against men on foot wearing quilt armor and wielding clubs. For a full discussion of how Pizarro and his fewer-than-200-soldiers were able to kill thousands of Incans, see chapter 3 of Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

reality can in and of itself constitute a loss, with its sanctified life, its homologies, its communitarian ethos. He also argues, accordingly, that a great deal of unhappiness is wrong-headedly derived from a belief that one is living in “sin,” by which he means in battle with one’s own conscience, which was likely indoctrinated by old religious values that one was brought up with. He says we’d be much happier as rational adults to discard those repressive values taught as children:

... even when a man has offended against his own rational code, I doubt whether a sense of sin is the best method of arriving at a better way of life. There is in the sense of sin something abject, something lacking in self-respect. No good was ever done to any one by the loss of self-respect. ... As a matter of fact the sense of sin, so far from being a cause of a good life, is quite the reverse. It makes a man unhappy and it makes him feel inferior (84, 85).

Epicurus too felt that the first of two main sources of unhappiness is the belief that the gods will punish us for our bad actions. The other is the fear of death.<sup>26</sup>

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Russell goes on to explain the feedback loop of feelings of inferiority and unhappiness:

Being unhappy, he is likely to make claims upon other people which are excessive and which prevent him from enjoying happiness in personal relations. Feeling inferior, he will have a grudge against those who seem superior. He will find admiration difficult and envy easy. He will become a generally disagreeable person and will find himself more and more solitary (85).

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<sup>26</sup> The contemporary Biblical scholar Bart Ehrman testifies in one of his blogs that he’s happier now that he’s no longer a believer. His reasoning is one familiar to students of existentialism. Though that philosophy is famous for its dour perspectives on life, I’ve always felt that the emphasis on existence (over essence) can inspire a heightened attention to one’s immediate consciousness, which can in turn have a positive effect on our moods and overall attitude toward life in general. In his blog, Ehrman is answering the question whether he’s now a better person as a result of his conversion to agnosticism:

So I don’t know if I’m a “better” person now. I’m certainly not a worse person. I do feel better about life, about love, about hope, about the future than ever. I am also a happier person. To some that may seem ironic: how can you be happier thinking that “this is all there is”? But for me, since in fact that *is* all there is, and since we won’t live forever, and in fact will not live for long, we should live life to the fullest, as much as we can and for as long as we can. Live in the here and now is not a dry run or a dress rehearsal for something to come. This life is it. And so we should throw ourselves into it with all the gusto we can, and help others do so as well. In fact, I think I’ll head off for a massage this afternoon! (<http://ehrmanblog.org/am-i-a-better-person-as-an-agnostic-a-blast-from-the-past/>)

To overcome this early “unwise education,” he suggests psychotherapy—self-applied being sufficient in most cases—and provides a kind of regimen:

It is quite possible to overcome infantile suggestions of the unconscious, and even to change the contents of the unconscious, by employing the right kind of technique. Whenever you begin to feel remorse for an act which your reason tells you is not wicked, examine the causes of your feeling of remorse, and convince yourself in detail of their absurdity. Let your conscious beliefs be so vivid and emphatic that they make an impression upon your unconscious strong enough to cope with the impressions made by your nurse or your mother when you were an infant. Do not be content with an alternation between moments of rationality and moments of irrationality. Look into the irrationality closely with a determination not to respect it and not to let it dominate you (82, 83).

This prescription goes on for another two hundred words or so and includes a reminder to be persistent in our resistance to the old taboos, for “Most men, when they have thrown off superficially the superstitions of their childhood, think that there is no more to be done. They do not realize that these superstitions are still lurking underground” (84). It’s striking to me that Russell was advocating in 1930 the current trend in psychotherapy known as mindfulness, the practice of focusing one’s attention on the irrationality that often dominates our thinking and reinforces previously adopted mistaken beliefs about ourselves and the world around us, which in turn triggers unpleasant emotions such as anger or low self-esteem.

The problem of shame has received a lot of attention recently in psychology by way of the work of the University of Houston Research Professor Brené Brown, who has written and spoken extensively on the subject. Brown argues that we numb ourselves to avoid feeling vulnerable without realizing that vulnerability is at the “core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness but ... is also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of love.”<sup>27</sup> In the process of numbing ourselves, we undermine our most powerful opportunities for happiness.

As I mention in the health section above, the chain of destructive behavior in my own life stemming from shame has been clear: shame has led to an avoidance of conflict because I typically didn’t want to admit that I’m feeling what I’m feeling—I was ashamed of those feelings—which typically led to unselfconscious passive aggressive feelings that in turn led to passive aggressive, and very hurtful, behavior, behavior that was usually discovered eventually, leading to more shame, and the cycle continued. And it most likely will continue unless it is rooted out or mitigated by some form of diligent practice.

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So Russell might agree that before the atheist looks to the godless universe for the source of his moroseness he should examine his own troubled psyche as a possible source. As an

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<sup>27</sup> ([http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability))

atheist myself, I recognize the variety of emotions that are claimed to result from it, both “Lucretian” and “post-Lucretian.” I do feel that my atheism has gifted me with a certain Epicurean feeling of freedom from what I now believe are meaningless projections, attaching ourselves and our emotions to fairy tales. I’ll admit that those fairy tales are powerful though, and that it is very tempting to lament their demise, but I suspect that I feel that way only because by growing up with them I’ve internalized their significance. I’ll also confess that what has replaced those myths—a Nietzschean belief that all human values are either culturally or evolutionarily constructed, or both—does not sit well with me. And even if I understand the psychological mechanisms of my unease, I nonetheless have to live with it, and sometimes it is so disturbing that I think it too has been the cause of some destructive and self-destructive behavior on my part, though I can’t tell for sure if or how much. Such is the modern condition, it appears: torn between lamenting the loss of a sanctified life—fraught as it is with an indefensible political history—and embracing a modern ethos and metaphysic that are potentially nihilistic.

To conclude this discussion of atheism, although I wouldn’t call the emotion I derive from my atheism *happiness*, I do think the positive feelings I get from the relatively secure understanding that I’m not being duped by fairy tales outweighs the positive feelings I once felt as a believer. Of course I would say that *now*, now that I’m no longer a believer—believers are obviously going to have a different feeling about it. And though I have a hard time understanding how believers of these myths let themselves be treated by modern practitioners of medicine, for example, and in many other aspects of their lives conform to an empirical epistemology, I must remind myself that no one knows really why there is something rather than nothing, an ignorance that in my mind should leave us all slack-jawed and dumbstruck. As a poetry instructor, I often have to explain to students that some poems are attempting to describe or express feelings about the world—the poet’s relationship to reality, to other people, and to themselves—that can’t be articulated lucidly, that the elliptical nature of the expressions are in some sense homages to the strangeness of those relationships. I suppose for some believers, god is their elliptical poem.

## Goals

We apparently need goals to be happy; we can’t simply lower our expectations and, voilà, we’re happy. We need to be challenged, but only somewhat: unrealistic goals merely frustrate us. But we need the goals to keep us from being bored. Bertrand Russell considered boredom a very serious danger (Russell, 48; Layard, 73). Before writing this section, I don’t believe I ever really acknowledged to myself that I’ve paid much attention to goals in my life. I think I’ve always felt that I don’t have goals, that I live life according to what life gifts me, and that a constant *effort* in what I do obviates the need for goals. Goals, I’ve always felt, were actually an impediment to achievement, by distracting me from engaging in the process of the enterprise at hand. I’ve always ignored grades, for example, in my own educational career, and I tend to cringe when students show an inordinate concern for grades, as opposed to what I think is most important, which is attitude and engagement *per se*. An excessive attention to grades displays a certain small-mindedness, I’ve tended to think. Sure, I applied to a graduate degree program, but in my mind the goal wasn’t the degree, it was the program. The diploma was merely an incidental effect of the program that allowed me to engage in the activity I wanted to pursue. You won’t see my diploma on my office wall.

But even if it's true that I've ignored goals—and I may be fooling myself even on that point—upon reflection I believe my attitude toward them exposes a certain social privilege. I could afford to ignore grades because I could rest assured that my position in the world as a white male would carry me through to my desired end. I *do* still believe that an excessive attention to goals can—and probably usually does—impede a more authentic engagement with process, but that fact merely exposes how the benefits of privilege are layered. One of the more prominent mechanisms by which goals are pursued in our culture is our credentialing system, which we hear critiqued by liberal-minded progressives who prescribe to students and prospective employees to follow their passions and not kowtow to the credentialism rampant in our educational and pre-professional training system. While those prescriptions are well-meaning, they are naïve when made to students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, because those students simply can't afford to risk being overlooked by, say, college admissions officers or future employers who, when assessing students and prospective employees, are—let's admit it—looking for traditional credentials. Students or prospective employees thus are *compelled* to abide by the admittance criteria advertised by most colleges and by credentialist-minded employers, because they are simply too dependent on a college education or on “shallow” professional credentials that can provide a ticket to a middle-class life, to adopt a progressive attitude toward traditional credentials. For students of the dominant class or ethnicity, that progressive attitude toward grades and other traditional credentials are no more risky than would be taking a semester or two off to tour Europe. The wisest attitude toward goals, it appears, is relative to one's status.

Then again, is it really true that they are “*compelled* to abide by the admittance criteria advertised by colleges and credentialist-minded employers”? Ultimately it's the choice, I suppose, that is the prize. I shouldn't let my white guilt argue that underprivileged groups should not shun our culture's stoic single-mindedness. As all of us do, they deserve all the privileges available, even the privilege of choosing to refuse a one-dimensional work ethic, in favor of Epicureanism's more counter-cultural ethos.

After reflecting on the larger relationship between goals and happiness, I consulted my wife, a designer and professional project manager, who directed me to a book called *Little Bets*, by Peter Sims, a management book that argues for the virtues of parsing out projects in smaller segments. Sims defines “little bets” as low-risk actions taken to discover, develop, and test ideas. As the general argument goes, if a team engages in a series of small conceptual ideas rather than in one large one, they can better adjust to changes in the concept in response to real-world testing, making the development process much more flexible since making changes at the smaller stages most likely requires fewer resources and involves smaller risks. And when those smaller iterations of a product are tested, then the chances of failure are reduced, since the test results invite incremental adjustments in response to them. If the team had engaged in one big idea, on the other hand, which most likely couldn't have been tested in piecemeal stages, the risk of failure would've been much greater.

How might this managing approach apply to our study of the pursuit of happiness? The process Sims describes sounds analogous to the ideal attitude toward goals and engagement that I describe above. The *real* prize is the consistent engagement, not the achievement at the end. It also sounds a bit like the twelve-step prescription of “one day at a time.” If the larger goal is happiness, this approach then eschews that larger pursuit and condones instead the more modest goal of getting through the day alive without damaging yourself and with a vision to appreciating the day's experiences at hand, which leaves open

the possibility of your having a day relatively free of anxiety and possibly even helping allay the anxiety of others. In the end, this is a much less risky approach than expecting to fly through the day, week, month, or year on a cloud of joy.

This approach may become problematic if we think of the devotion to little bets as the “larger goal”—then we’re saying that this devotion to little bets should always give way to the larger goal of the little bets, and suddenly we’ve stumbled upon a paradox. There’s really no way out of this quagmire except by staying flexible and balancing what you ultimately want with what reality allows, which is simply another way of articulating the problem. There’s no ultimate wise vision to be articulated here, I suppose, except perhaps to recognize the pitfalls inherent in a simplistic view of this problem. Happiness is an abstract concept *and* it can manifest in concrete feelings and sensations. As Edward Albee says in response to the question “when was your happiest moment,” which I quote in one of the epigraphs to this essay: “now, always.” He has collapsed the abstract and the concrete. It may be important to keep in mind one’s capacity to experience happiness, but it’s just as important to let one’s consciousness of that capacity shrink itself to an appreciation of specific (and immediate) sensations.

Perhaps the problem I’m ultimately addressing here is the issue of happiness *per se* as a goal: it creates all kinds of problems, such as hubris, arrogance, smugness and, in the end, a rather blind expectation that the world owes us what most likely has been dropped in our laps (I address this problem further in the conclusion).

## **How Our Own Psychology Impedes Happiness**

Prescriptions about personal values presuppose that we’re rational beings, and that our psychology works according to our will. Dan Gilbert, whom I cite above, has emerged recently as a leading researcher in the field of the cognitive psychology of pursuing happiness. His book *Stumbling on Happiness* charts the various ways that our logical processing errors prevent us from accurately predicting what will make us happy. Another way of putting this is that because of our various “cognitive errors” (mistaken thinking) we often *mis*-predict what will make us happy, which in turn keeps us from making wise choices. I’ll list two or three of these errors and then discuss briefly what he suggests we do to correct them.

First, we tend to have a built-in mechanism for dealing with major setbacks in our lives (the hedonic immune system I refer to above), but we fail to take that immune system into account when making certain choices in our lives (177). An example would be a woman choosing to avoid pregnancy because she feared the pain of childbirth, failing to consider that her hedonic immune system—in this case, a faulty memory—will cause her to forget the pain.

Another phenomenon related to that one is that we mistakenly think we’d rather live with minor annoyances even if they’re persistent and long-lasting than with major setbacks. Studies show that in hindsight people claim that the minor annoyances caused more unhappiness than the major setback. Minor annoyances tend to slip through our hedonic immune system, so although we might think we’d rather have a slight hitch in the knee, for example, as opposed to a broken leg or a knee replacement, in reality we would adjust or even forget the pain we would experience from the broken leg or knee replacement, whereas the annoying hitch, much to our chagrin, would likely continue making us unhappy for a long time.

Gilbert found that we're able to adjust well to the consequences of decisions, but not as much to non-decisions. We appear to need something to work with to rationalize our new condition, which leads Gilbert to conjecture that if the character Elsa in *Casablanca* had chosen to stay with the Humphrey Bogart character, Rick, instead of with the Nazi resistance leader Victor Laslow, whom she did not love, she would've been happier, because she would've rationalized her decision. Her non-decision—Rick decides for her, as you recall—doesn't give her psyche much to work with. This cognitive error appears to be an argument for being bold in our actions, since we're able to rationalize the outcome when it's a result of our acting on a desire, whereas if we remain passive in our choosing, then we have nothing to rationalize and we're left with a lingering unhappiness (197-204).

We also fail to take into account our natural rationalizing talents when we think we'd like more freedom in our choices. We neglect to consider that we're able to rationalize our way to contentment with the limited choices we were given. That is, we are foolishly infatuated with freedom, or with the idea of freedom, blind to the satisfaction that limitations provide (203-204).

And we tend to let our moods overly influence our decision-making. Something that strikes our fancy when we're in one mood is often not as appealing to us when we're in a different mood, and to add injury to insult we seem to easily *forget* how our mood had fooled us into thinking we wanted something, so we tend to make the same mistake again and again.

A pattern emerges here in our behavior: we are able much more than we think to adjust to certain conditions, but we seem unable to learn from this remarkable talent of ours, so we make the same unfortunate choices repeatedly: we either choose the safer action, when the riskier one would make us happier, or we choose not to act at all. Ironically, this ability to adjust to the circumstances also causes us unhappiness when it manifests in cases in which we *do* act on our needs, in cases in which we delude ourselves about what we need. We continue to think, for example, that something we want will make us happy without having learned that once we attain this object of our desire we will adjust to it and return to a "base" happy level. This mistake manifests perhaps most conspicuously in our buying habits. We think we just *have* to have those shoes or book or gadget, forgetting that we felt the same way about a very similar pair of shoes or book or gadget just six weeks ago that's now gathering dust on a shelf. This treadmill thinking seems to be rooted in the delusion that our desires are capable of being sated. We tend to be unable to learn from our experiences that our desires are hydra-headed: however many of them are "beheaded," more tend to emerge and the cycle continues.

These are just a few examples of the various ways we mis-predict what we think will make us happy and fail to learn from those mistakes. Gilbert argues that to overcome these shortcomings we should seek out other people's opinions and follow the advice. He discusses some reasons we typically resist this strategy: one of them is that the highly subjective nature of experience deludes us into thinking that our experiences are like no one else's, and thus no one is in a position to advise us, because they are not *us*. In reality, we actually *do* share with these people similar desires and similar habits of habituations.

Recent neurological studies show that this phenomenon—of thinking ourselves unique—is generated in a certain region in our brain, and exacerbating this delusion is our internalization of a cultural ideology that I call hyper-individualism, which further exalts our subjective selves. Scholars of intellectual history trace the origin of hyper-individualism to the Renaissance and say it reached a tipping point in the eighteenth century. This argument is made convincingly by historian Lynn Hunt in her book *Inventing Human Rights: A History*,

in which she explains that as a result of a confluence of cultural factors, one of them being a heightened sensitivity to people of other classes, Europeans became ripe for the development of what we've come to know as human rights. Though few of us would lament the birth of human rights, it's safe to say that as a result of this development we've come to believe that we are more individualistic than we actually are, which ironically creates problems in the pursuit of happiness. If we can overcome the hyper-individualism, Gilbert argues, we would more likely base important decisions in our lives on the knowledge gained by others' experiences, a practice that, as research shows, is more likely to yield happiness than going it alone typically does.

I've discussed social factors and psychological factors of happiness, some contributing to happiness and others that prevent us from accurately predicting what will make us happy. I'll now turn our attention to some broader philosophical issues concerning the pursuit.

## PHILOSOPHICAL AND META ISSUES

### Defining happiness

The primary difference between the pre-modern and modern definitions of happiness is that pre-moderns conflate happiness with virtue and moderns don't define it at all—they simply measure it with subjective testimony. Pre-moderns argue that we can tell how happy a person is by observing his or her moral behavior, a position articulated in the double meaning of the phrase “the good life,” which implies that if you're living morally, then you're happy. We get this from Socrates and Aristotle. “Happiness,” Aristotle writes, “is an activity of the soul expressing virtue” (1.81). Other classical philosophers besides Aristotle holding this position are the Cynics and some Hellenistic philosophers, such as the Stoics and Epicureans. The good life, according to Aristotle, would include living by certain standards of achievement and refined tastes. For him, pursuing knowledge was the greatest and most worthy enterprise one could engage in because as knowers—what we are essentially—we would be fulfilling our natures, which is the proper objective for everything, to fulfill its nature. Just as an acorn is fulfilling its nature by becoming an oak tree, we are fulfilling our nature by becoming knowers. Thus, it would follow that those who pursued knowledge would be the happiest and most virtuous of humans. Illiterate slaves would *not* be candidates for the good life as they wouldn't have access to the requisite skills and opportunities to pursue knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> David Wolfsdorf, in *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy* interprets this position of Aristotle's as the ideas of intellectualist, rationalist philosophers committed to rejecting or disparaging the animal life, in favor of the “frontal lobe pleasures,” for the sake of the immortality, order, security, guidance, and immutability such intellectual objects suggest. Wolfsdorf says that, for Aristotle, what elicits the ultimate pleasure is the exercise of virtue and the pursuit of knowledge, often up against temptation to do otherwise.

A virtue of this perspective is that it avoids an objection that readers may have anticipated about the enterprise of pursuing happiness. In most versions of this classical perspective, happiness is not a goal, but more a natural consequence of a certain way of living, a certain way of viewing the world and yourself in it. I say this aspect is a virtue because it seems wiser to think of happiness as a consequence of a way of being in the world, an attitude, as opposed to an objective *per se*. When thinking of happiness as a goal to pursue, one can't help but suspect that something about the existential nature of it is being left out, as if happiness were something outside the gritty moment-to-moment reality of life. The contemporary philosopher Robert Nozick, aligning himself with the classical definition, argues that we value what makes life meaningful more than we do happiness *per se*:

We also can show that more matters than pleasure or happiness by considering a life that has these but otherwise is empty, a life of mindless pleasures or bovine contentment or frivolous amusements only, a happy life but a superficial one. ... "It is better," John Stuart Mill wrote, "to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." And although it might be best of all to be Socrates satisfied, having both happiness and depth, we would give up some happiness in order to gain the depth (102).

Some may recognize this debate as it appears implicitly in the science fiction *Matrix* films. Neo is, after all, a Romantic hero in these movies, and what implicitly makes him one is his recognition that we require of happiness that it be more than just a felt feeling, because, as Nozick writes, "We care about things in addition to how our lives *feel* to us from the inside" (104). Nozick stops short of naming this "something else" that we value more than happiness *virtue*, but he would nonetheless object to the modern version of happiness, which essentially pleads the fifth and concerns itself exclusively with subjective claims and the psychological mechanisms that support or impede happiness according to those claims.

Here's Gilbert's argument *for* that modern position, and *against* the classical one:

For two thousand years philosophers have felt compelled to identify happiness with virtue because that is the sort of happiness they think we *ought* to want. And maybe they're right. But if living one's life virtuously is a cause of happiness, it is not happiness itself, and it does us no good to obfuscate a discussion by calling both the cause and the consequence by the same name .... Happiness is a word we generally use to indicate an experience and not the actions that give rise to it (39).

The virtue of *this* perspective—especially for those who study happiness empirically—is that it can be measured simply with self-reports. Its measurement is not obfuscated by issues of morality or any other unquantifiable criteria: you simply ask people if doing this or that makes them happy or unhappy and then record their answers. The tail isn't wagging the dog. The validity of your findings will naturally emerge from the large numbers of people you ask. A *philosophical* virtue of this approach, we might add, is that in contrast to the classical definition of happiness this one is egalitarian. So you've been conjoined with your twin since birth and you nonetheless claim that you're happy? Okay—that's your claim and it will be

duly noted. With our modern egalitarian sensibilities, we like this approach—we like that there are no intellectualisms to interfere with the findings.

In its egalitarianism, this approach also avoids the critique that the classical criteria is arbitrary. Is it really true that the only way to be happy is by, say, contemplating the nature of substance and categorizing plants? Who decided, Dr. Aristotle, what activities are necessary for this “higher” state of being? And what do we do with people who cross the boundaries of our stereotypes, such as the philosopher who also throws a mean horseshoe? Are we not to allow horseshoeing as a source of happiness?

Yes, we moderns like our modern egalitarian definition of happiness, even though, as Gilbert found, we have trouble believing what people claim in the research. We apparently have a hard time believing that conjoined twins are really as happy as they claim to be, as happy as the rest of us are (as their happiness scores indicate). As I mention above, Christopher Reeve claimed he was happier as a quadriplegic than as a movie star, but few of us are able to wholeheartedly believe him: it appears that when it comes to this debate most of us are default classicists, perhaps because, as Gilbert conjectures, we are too close to our own experience to fathom that people can compensate in their lives for significant disabilities. We have a difficult time believing in other people’s hedonic immune system because we assume that we ourselves would be unhappy to be in the throes of what is usually considered misfortune. I suspect that we resist believing in other people’s hedonic immune systems also because we privilege normalcy as a factor of happiness. It’s hard for us to imagine someone who leads an abnormal life being truly happy. Fortunately for happiness empiricists, the credibility of the claim is irrelevant to its measurements—our skepticism plays no role in their studies.

Critics of this modernist vision argue that with subjective standards for happiness we’re letting anyone claim anything as a source of happiness, no matter how deluded that person may be about the true state of affairs. We’re letting ourselves be seduced by the matrix. *That* happiness is a fool’s paradise, classicists argue, enjoyed by zombies whose experiences are not real. That unreality might be promoted by, as the movie itself suggests, certain political ideologies intent on controlling our behaviors, free market consumerist indoctrinations, for example. There might also be a *moral* problem with the modernist position: do we really want to agree that a masochist is happy when he’s torturing someone? Subjective measurements of happiness are vulnerable to a critique of moral relativity.

## **Against Happiness**

Then there are those who argue, as Nietzsche did, that by pursuing happiness we are disregarding the rich nature of human experience, reducing it, as we might add, to an insipid smiley-face, wallowing in a TV sitcom version of life complete with a pre-recorded laugh track. These people argue that life is too rich for a pursuit as insipid as happiness. One version of this position exalts the richly textured contributions melancholia can make to one’s life (more on this later in this section).

Nietzsche did not prescribe melancholia; in fact, he wanted us to be joyfully vivacious. He called himself an Epicurean because he liked Epicurus’s bold materialism—don’t fear death because when you’re dead you no longer exist to experience the fear—but he did not like Epicurus’s passive conception of happiness as merely freedom from anxiety. Nonetheless, Nietzsche was in agreement with Epicurus’s insight, similar to the Buddha’s,

that it's usually our own desires that trip us up: we walk around like the proverbial donkey-with-a-dangling-carrot-contraption strapped to our backs. In my version of this contraption, to accommodate our consumerist tendencies, the carrot isn't even real—it's plastic. Nietzsche felt that instead of happiness we should pursue strife, which he felt makes our lives more authentic.

This perspective on the pursuit of happiness—that its pursuit is a ruse—may give rise, by the way, to a cynical conjecture as to the political motivations of our founding fathers' use of happiness as an incentive in the U.S. Constitution: as the argument goes, they knew the pursuit of happiness is a Sisyphean trick and used it to entice workers to keep their noses to the grindstone, knowing full well how necessary their labor was to the maintenance of the status quo, of which they were members. The founding fathers had all read enlightenment thinkers David Hume and Adam Smith, both of whom wrote on the deceptiveness of the notion that money provides happiness. In defense of our founding fathers, perhaps as Plato and Aristotle did they conflated happiness with virtue and were prescribing the pursuit of happiness as a path to righteousness. They *were* neoclassical thinkers, after all.

One of the strongest voices against the pursuit of happiness in recent years is the social critic Barbara Ehrenreich (whom I cite above), in her book *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America*. An early chapter in her book critiques the positive thinking industry directed at cancer patients. She cites a 2004 study that found no survival benefits for optimism among lung cancer patients, and although she shies away from a definitive stand on that debate she is less shy in arguing that when positive thinking fails to heal patients it can impel them to believe that they themselves are to blame, for not being positive *enough*. She critiques positive thinking guru Deepak Chopra's response to a patient who felt bad because she, the patient, was doing all the right things—meditation, prayer, proper diet, exercise, and supplements—and yet her cancer kept coming back. Chopra advised, "You just have to continue doing them until the cancer is gone for good... sometimes cancer is simply very pernicious and requires the utmost diligence and persistence to overcome it." Ehrenreich argues that this kind of advice can have a damaging psychological effect on a patient: "... the failure to think positively can weigh on a cancer patient like a second disease" (41-43).

Writing about her own experience with breast cancer, Ehrenreich also critiques the claim that cancer is ultimately a gift:

Breast cancer, I can now report, did not make me prettier, stronger, more feminine or spiritual. What it gave me ... was a very personal, agonizing encounter with an ideological force in American culture that I had not been aware of before—one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and blame only ourselves for our fate (44).

She goes on in her book to unveil the dark theological roots of American optimism and then blame the 2008 economic crash at least partly on the optimism endemic in our economic system. She spends much less time in the book explaining what she feels *does* make us happy, but at the end she hints, not surprisingly given the nature of her work, that she gleans happiness from efforts to right wrongs (I actually miswrote "write wrongs" there, which in her case would be apt). At least implicitly, hers is a classical definition of happiness, equating it with virtue.

## Beauty

My philosopher friend Dave and I have a running discussion on the role natural beauty plays in our lives—does play, could play, should play. Dave finds that beauty provides him with something that neither Platonism, with its emphasis on abstract reasoning, nor Epicureanism, as grounded as it is in pleasure, can provide. For him beauty provides a kind of authentic, existential engagement with life, unadulterated by left-brained activity or abstract contextualizing. Sounds a bit Nietzschean to me, and Dave agrees, but there might also be a moral element to it that sounds to me downright Platonic and Wordsworthian, without, that is, Plato's and Wordsworth's ideas about reincarnation. Wordsworth felt that as we grow from childhood, the natural world will, if we attune ourselves to it, provide us with moral instruction that emanates from it by way of a monolithic spirit, and that our earthly growth from childhood to adulthood is a process by which we come to “remember” what we had forgotten in the birthing process, what we had known when we were a part of that spirit, before birth. Without this Platonic, Wordsworthian “remembering,” Dave would like beauty to be a kind of stand-in for morality and even, perhaps, a context for moral behavior, if not the moral teacher that Wordsworth believed it to be.

Speaking of past lives, I in my former life (metaphorically, that is) was a Romantic poet and placed the perception of beauty so high on my scale of values that I thought of it as perhaps the primary source of meaning. My poetry was an attempt to manifest that beauty, and it could be assessed primarily by how close it came to being an iteration of the beauty that inspired it, usually beauty found in the natural world. Twenty some odd years later, however, I think of beauty as a product of evolutionary biology, functioning either as a primary mating tool (the sensitivity displayed by perceptions of beauty being perceived as sexy for a variety of reasons) or as some kind of appendage to a more immediately adaptive quality. As sad as my new outlook is from a Romantic perspective—sad because I've traded in a beautifully aesthetic and spiritually nurturing philosophy for a mechanistic explanation—I will attest that it accounts for a newfound happiness in my life, free as I feel I am now from the confines of a self-imposed loneliness. I now feel that as a young Romantic poet I had been indulging in a self-destructive solipsism, in love with being in love with beauty and half in love with the painful loneliness my infatuation engendered. Although still an introvert and far from being a model for social integration, I now see myself as much more engaged with the world, feeling much more a part of our community and, not incidentally I would argue, much happier.

Nonetheless, though I don't miss venerating aesthetic perception, it might also be true that I still have a relationship to nature that's important to me. It may not be the be-all and end-all that it once was, but I still find myself awed by, say, 150-year-old silver maples, gorgeous thunderheads, and flocks of migrating geese. Furthermore, I must confess that in some recent poems I have *lamented* the loss of Romantic aesthetic idealism, though I don't trust that that lament is for anything real. What I think I'm lamenting in those poems is the intensity of the existential affirmation the idealism provided. That's a real loss, I suppose, even if it was ultimately self-destructive. It's common for ex-smokers to pine for smoke in their lungs even when they know it was killing them.

Dave is no naive Romanticist. He shares with me a Darwinian perspective of the origins of our perception of beauty, but he's still somewhat distressed by my one-dimensional version of it. His is a more complicated Darwinism, a mixed bag of adaptive and mal-adaptive traits that allow for a more nuanced view of our perceptions. One might

believe that as a moral philosopher, which is what he is by profession, he would harbor a Socratic faith in humanity as quintessentially rational, but he agrees with Epicurus that rationality and morality in particular ultimately fails us because its demands of exact thinking imposes on us too many contradictions. Epicurus values wisdom over philosophy and Dave feels that we can think of beauty as a compensation for what rationalism cannot provide.

Lyubomirsky supports Dave's sense of the usefulness of the perception of beauty and cites research that warrants a view of it as a rich source of happiness. "Positive psychologists suggest that people who open themselves to the beauty and excellence around them are more likely to find joy, meaning, and profound connections in their lives" (197). Also, being open to beauty is, in my mind, closely related to two other modes of perception that have been found to promote happiness: being mindful and taking pleasure in the senses. A flurry of recent studies, much of it coming out of the University of Rochester, attests to the benefits of mindfulness, arguing that mindful people are "models of flourishing and positive mental health," Lyubomirsky writes (198). And, regarding the relationship between happiness and taking pleasure in the senses, she writes that "One laboratory experiment revealed that people who focused their attention on the sensory experience of consuming chocolate reported more pleasure than those who were distracted while eating" (199).

I've tried to make it a habit to focus my attention on the food I'm eating when I'm eating it. We all often let our minds wander when we're eating, of course, or get engrossed in conversation or in something we're watching or reading on a screen, but mindless eating and drinking, chewing and swallowing, seems a sad waste of one's being. My wife tells the story of ordering onion with her prosciutto from an East European deli in Queens when she lived there in the late 90s, and in a strong East European accent the man behind the counter shook his head and said, "You insult the prosciut." I would argue that worse than insulting prosciutto with onion is to insult any food with mindlessness, and maybe especially meat, since meat was once a part of something that was sentient and even possibly experienced emotions, as neuroscientists are now telling us.

Poet Sharon Olds has written a poem that could be read as a celebration of small sensuous experiences, though the poem also hints at how these experiences serve to evoke reflections on our connections to others or to the world at large:

### Little Things

After she's gone to camp, in the early  
evening I clear our girl's breakfast dishes  
from the rosewood table, and find a small  
crystallized pool of maple syrup, the  
grains standing there, round, in the night, I  
rub it with my fingertip  
as if I could read it, this raised dot of  
amber sugar, and this time  
when I think of my father, I wonder why  
I think of my father, of the beautiful blood-red  
glass in his hand, or his black hair gleaming like a  
broken-open coal. I think I learned to  
love the little things about him  
because of all the big things  
I could not love, no one could, it would be wrong to.

So when I fix on this tiny image of resin  
or sweep together with the heel of my hand a  
pile of my son's sunburn peels like  
insect wings, where I peeled his back the night before camp,  
I am doing something I learned early to do, I am  
paying attention to small beauties,  
whatever I have—as if it were our duty to  
find things to love, to bind ourselves to this world.

Some may argue that the way the sensuousness of the lump of syrup compels the speaker to consider her love for her father distracts her from the experience itself, the experience *per se*, but the poem speaks to the way these experiences do seem to have those effects on us. It leads me to conjecture whether the source of the happiness of these small moments lies in the sensuousness *per se* or in the sentiments they evoke, sentiments associated with certain memories or events, ones we may not even be aware of. The poem appears to suggest that we have a moral responsibility—“as if it were our duty”—to seek out those small experiences precisely to connect ourselves to loved ones or to the physical world, though some may feel that seeing those moments as duties may distract us from that aspect of the experience that make it pleasurable. I'm inclined to believe, though, that it's those connections that feed the pleasure. Aware or no of the psychological associations that feed that moment, let's not let some constructed sense of obligation to our past disrupt what pleasures those moments can give.

## Melancholia

The relationship between happiness and the perception of beauty takes a peculiar, ironic twist when we consider the relationship between the perception of beauty and melancholy. Melancholy, as the argument goes, should be indulged in as an antidote to our vapid, post-capitalist, consumer-ridden culture. Cut up your credit cards, these curmudgeons argue, turn out your lights, light up the drug of your choice and dwell for a while in the existential mire we've been thrown into. Mankind is nothing to celebrate, or if it is, it's to be celebrated by way of an altered consciousness while listening to Cassandra Wilson, a Chopin nocturne, Joni Mitchell, or Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Only then are you really living, really alive.

Some even argue that melancholy can be a source of happiness. The literary scholar Eric Wilson has a lot to say on this subject in his book *Against Happiness*. Wilson argues that not only does anxiety and melancholy—particularly as they are caused by an acute realization of the inevitability of death—prime us for the perception of beauty, but they are in fact necessary preconditions for it: “Indeed, you can experience beauty only when you have a melancholy foreboding that all things in this world die. The transience of an object makes it beautiful, and its transience is manifested in its fault lines, its expressions of decrepitude” (115). Leaning on Keats's “Ode on Melancholy,” he argues that, peculiarly, it is at this juncture of acute melancholy born from grief that the emotion of happiness rears its head:

The wakeful anguish of sharp melancholia can lead to a shuddering experience, a ‘fit.’ This vital moment grows from an insight into the nature of things: life grows from death; death gives rise to life. This insight animates melancholy, makes it vibrant. ... Appreciating these things, the melancholic enjoys their beauty. In enjoying the

beauty of the world, the melancholic himself wants to create beauty, to become a trophy that commemorates his resplendent experience of earth's transient gorgeousness (113).

Freud would argue that for the melancholic to come to this position of “enjoying the beauty of the world,” they would have to have renounced their attachment to it. He argues that those who haven't made that transition—those melancholics who insist that the transience of everything makes everything worthless—are simply in denial of their own grief; they haven't yet divorced themselves from their attachment to what they're grieving. When they do, he says, their libidos are then free to attach themselves to new interests. Freud would argue that Wilson's “melancholic” hero is actually someone who has successfully moved beyond their melancholy. Here's Freud:

I believe that those who ... seem ready to make a permanent renunciation, because what was precious has proved not to be lasting, are simply in a state of mourning for what is lost. Mourning, as we know, however painful it may be, comes to a spontaneous end. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free ... to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious (216-219).

Wilson goes on to offer a specific definition of beauty, partly by contrasting it with an Americanized, Hallmark version of it.

The beauty I have in mind is something much wilder: the violent ocean roiling under the tepidly peaceful beams or the dark and jagged peaks that bloody the hands or those unforgettable faces, striking because of a disproportionate nose or mouth that somehow brings the whole visage into a uniquely dynamic harmony (114).

I don't believe my friend Dave's version of beauty has quite as dramatic a necessary ingredient as Wilson's portrait of it does—Dave probably does not require the things he perceives as beautiful to have a “dangerous edge.” I think for Dave, beauty needs no sadness, no drama, no Kantian sublimity, but he would probably agree that beautiful things are beautiful for more than their prettiness, and that the happiness their beauty confers on us comes less from any predictable uniformity than from an understanding of the complex relationship that our own states of mind have with them. Dave in fact doesn't believe that such a thing as happiness is possible, let alone that it should be an object of pursuit. He refers to his position as “post-happiness,” which I like. But as I say above, he believes, or hopes, that beauty can compensate somewhat for the litany of life's deflations.

## CONCLUSION

The possibility of attaining happiness with relative ease is a modern concept, as Nietzsche explains, corresponding to the rise of the middle class in the eighteenth century. Ironically, it may be that the same forces that drive us to attain comfort in the modern world—now that middle-class comfort is attainable for millions in our culture—function to prevent happiness, striving and striving as we do. The effort to accumulate capital takes on a life of its own and

distracts us from the goal we presumably set out to achieve with the striving in the first place, which is happiness. And it appears that our default psychology reinforces that tendency of capitalism to value capital as an end in itself. Research shows that the more money we make, the more we think we need to be happy (Layard, 43). Hedonic adaptation again. Happiness expends itself as it is experienced: we come in from the cold and warm ourselves by the fire and declare that this warm fire makes us happy, only to find ourselves a few minutes later backing off from it and walking away. Whatever it is we want, when we get it we habituate to it, become bored by it, and go seek out other sources of it. We can easily be fooled into thinking that happiness is a static state of mind that can, as such, be achieved. But hedonic adaptation makes happiness a moving target. Partly what fools us is that, as Nozick puts it, “other intense positive emotions,” such as sensual pleasures I would add, “have a similar status.” (117) This is why, as I say earlier in these pages, Epicurus believed that reflection was so important: it teaches us to distinguish true happiness-producing desires from delusory ones.

Nozick echoes Aristotle in noting how happiness appears to be determined simply by the “standard of evaluation” we happen to be using at the time. Nozick concludes that there’s an element of arbitrariness to that standard, which could make us question the value of happiness altogether. If your happiness today is dependent merely on how you happen to have felt the day before, then maybe we’d be wiser to pursue something else. “A life cannot just be happy while having nothing else valuable in it,” writes Nozick. “Happiness rides piggyback on other things that are positively evaluated correctly. Without these, the happiness doesn’t get started” (113). Yes, but what are those “other things,” and what does “positively evaluated correctly” mean? In the final paragraph of his essay he feeds us a few of these “other things”:

We want experiences, fitting ones, of profound connection with others, of deep understanding of natural phenomena, of love, of being profoundly moved by music or tragedy, or doing something new and innovative, experiences very different from the bounce and rosiness of the happy moments. What we want, in short, is a life and a self that happiness is a fitting response to—and then to give it that response (117).

Okay, and why can’t we just call whatever those interesting things are that are fitting responses to happiness “sources of happiness”? Why can’t we recognize those horses that pull the happiness cart for what they are? Is he afraid that if we talk about happiness as the goal, then we’re putting the cart before the horse? Perhaps so and I understand that argument. When we speak of “pursuing happiness,” we may be barking up the wrong tree, trying to put our pants on both legs at a time, offering the toast before the champagne’s been uncorked, salivating over the goose before it’s cooked. Perhaps that’s why there are so many psychological traps involved in its pursuit: we’re too eager. As journalist Ruth Whippman puts it, pursuing happiness is like calling someone moments after a first date to ask if they like you.<sup>29</sup>

As I say in my introduction, researchers hope that the psychological traps in pursuing happiness can be avoided by our being made aware of them. But maybe those traps can’t be avoided if we’re thinking of happiness as the goal. Indeed, it’s difficult to claim that studying

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.vox.com/first-person/2016/10/4/13093380/happiness-america-ruth-whippman>

happiness *per se*—being made aware of the common psychological mechanisms involved in its pursuit—would have that enlightening effect. So I think my ultimate position on happiness doesn't allow for the sort of self-help list that was in an earlier draft of this conclusion, a list of some prescriptions drawn from the diagnoses and analyses in these pages. I suppose I'm a cautious optimist. I don't expect to ever be able to step off the hedonic treadmill, but I'm not disheartened by that. And though I can't expect psychological diagnoses to magically transform me, they do give me something to live by, to stand on, a platform from which to see what I'm up against.

For me, it helps to be reminded that in most cases the impediment to happiness—as Epicurus, Lucretius, and Montaigne consistently remind us—is our own fear of death. The pre-Socratic philosopher Thales famously said that life and death are the same thing, and when asked why he isn't dead answered, because they're the same. That vision, humor and all, is uplifting to me because it offers me a way of seeing myself in the world that has deep consequences to how I see everything else in the world. For one, it reduces my anxiety and heightens my gratitude for living. It reminds me that my time breathing on earth is brief and that that's the normal course of life, that death and non-existence were, and continue to be, the preconditions for my existence, and that in turn my existence is the precondition for my death and non-existence. That common sense vision impels me to pay attention to the world and to appreciate it while I can. It may be that most of our dissatisfactions in life are generated by an anger and frustration over loss, an unresolved grief, and that that loss—of what or whoever it may be—prefigures our own deaths, when we will lose everything. That presentiment impels me all the more to want to make the objects of my notice be more than just the natural world—I want to notice other people in that world. I no longer want the natural world and other people to be a dichotomy in my head. Those developments in my psyche that have made me less unhappy—that is, as happy as I can hope to be—are those that have pulled me out of my solipsism and given me a sense of myself *not* as a lone individual but as a part of a group, and as someone loved by others. The less I think of myself as individual, the happier I seem to be. And this ideal coincides with the social goal I articulate in the introduction, that the happier we are as individuals the more likely we'll be to devote ourselves to the welfare of others, especially those less fortunate.

And to return to my disclaimer in the introduction, this ideal still might be driven too much by “frontal lobe demands.” Why not, as my philosopher friend Dave asks in an email to me, “spit in the face of reality and all these frontal lobe demands, snap off the rare good looking piece of life, ignore the context, and enjoy it.” He argues against

misplaced piety ... piety for truth and goodness ... which says we dare not snap off pieces of existence. But frontal lobe piety isn't dominant in life and shouldn't be since it contradicts itself. Sure, we should appease the frontal lobe, I am doing so as we speak, but we should not pretend [that] something so self-inconsistent, so vexed, ought to be the standard by which my animal joy is rightfully crushed.

Okay, I say to Dave, but we're also naturally contemplative human beings and as such can't help but think that thinking can help us out of our unhappiness, and isn't it the case that our unhappiness is more often than not caused by misguided attempts *at* happiness? Didn't Epicurus urge us to reflect in order to distinguish between the myths of happiness and its realities? No one I've ever known thinks about life more deeply and flexibly than my friend Dave. But I like what he's arguing nonetheless. I too am all for animal joy, and I don't like having to be self-conscious about how or if I'm happy, or question whether I'm doing the

right things to *be* happy. I think I can be happy with pieces of happiness, like small chunks of good chocolate. Maybe it's the case—I think it's so in my experience—that pieces of happiness are more likely to arise when we have done the work to reduce our anxieties, while also having acknowledged how fortunate we are for the conditions that accommodate that work.

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