

Café Philosophy June/July 2011



Are You a Pessimist
or an Optimist?

Editorial

Tom McGuire On
Pessimism and
Prozac...



A Dutch acquaintance recently asked me why New Zealand has one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world. At first I was taken aback by this question. Suicide is a grisly issue that New Zealanders don't really like to talk about much. It is discomfiting to think that beneath our clean, green exterior of fun on the beach and barbecues at the bach lies a dark underbelly of depression and hopeless despair.

After discussing a few half-baked theories, neither of us could come to any satisfactory conclusion about why so many young New Zealanders feel like ending it all is the only option left. I am not sure that many people think they know the answer either, despite the enormous amount of effort spent on finding it. Are Kiwis too rich? Too poor? Lacking a challenge and a struggle to give life meaning? Finding life too tough? Opinions are endless, but the true causes of this tragic fact about our country seem to be mysteriously concealed.

Which brings us to pessimism and happiness, two interlinked and timely topics explored in this issue. It is often assumed that pessimism makes you unhappy and may even cause a suicidal mindset, a new book by Joshua Dienstag argues differently. It would seem obvious to many that the taking of one's own life is the ultimate expression of pessimism. However, Dienstag is looking at pessimism as a philosophical perspective in which you accept that the world is chaotic and full of destruction,

and yet seeks to find happiness nonetheless.

Pessimistic philosophers have a wide reputation as curmudgeons, seeking to deprive others of joy by always seeing the worst in everything. Yet thinkers like Schopenhauer probably saw themselves more like wise sages trying to snap those around them out of a zombie-like trance. Such a person wants others to wake up and see what life is really like, not just what they want it to be like. One could argue that the true philosopher should always choose the real over the unreal, no matter how unpleasant the consequences. Once we accept life as it actually is, our efforts to make it better can be much more effective.

I consider myself a long-term optimist, but I can certainly see the downside of false hope, in which we delude ourselves into believing that things are getting better when they are actually getting worse. Perhaps it is this kind of inappropriate optimism which motivates the construction of nuclear plants above fault lines, perhaps in the blind hope that the next rumbling of tectonic plates will not cause a global catastrophe. An old Arab proverb which might be called pessimistic says that you should not only pray, but also tie down your camel if you don't want it stolen during the night. This might also be referred to as common sense.

This issue includes some articles on happiness, and how this elusive state of consciousness can be obtained. These days, happiness seems to be the new wealth. A preponderance of crises, both physical and financial, has brought greater attention to things which matter more than one's tenuous bank balance. The kingdom of Bhutan has for a long time been developing a Gross National Happiness indicator to

rival GDP. The idea seems to be catching on, with prominent individuals in Britain launching an Action for Happiness campaign to make increasing the joy a national priority. Pascal Bruckner seems something fishy about all this, and argues that the modern obsession with 'finding happiness' may be counterproductive. Happiness resists attempts to be precisely measured or forced onto us, and often occurs when we least expect it.

We also have a piece by Bertrand Russell, who believes that happiness occurs when people get away from self-absorption and dedicate themselves to a larger cause. Happiness, says Russell, springs from "a feeling of being part of something greater than ourselves" and an enthusiastic zest for life. If happiness comes from a certain inner orientation, as Russell suggests, then most well intentioned campaigns and government initiatives might be only superficial and thus ineffective.

Perhaps happiness is to be found when we cease being concerned with what has happened, might happen or should happen, and find the elusive joy which stands poised within each moment, shrouded beneath our bustling fears and anxieties. This would mean that, paradoxically, our looking for happiness might be the very thing standing in its way. This embrace of the here and now, in which we stop looking forwards or backwards, is a most difficult task but mastery of it could be worth more than all the self-help books put together. Imagine that: no more Prozac today, I'll just have a dose of life.

Philosophy June/July 2011—Pessimism

"Condemned to Joy?": The search for Happiness

French philosopher Pascal Bruckner believes the cult of happiness is surrounded by anxiety.

Philosopher Michael Bruce is full of praise for Joshua Dienstag's new book *Pessimism Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*.

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Glastonbury Tor, by treehouse 1977.

Photo on Page 5

Author, Kenan Malik reviews Roger Scruton's book *The Uses of Pessimism*.

Kathleen O'Dwyer reviews Bertrand Russell's book 'The Conquest of Happiness.'

Madelein Bunting and Mark Williamson provide their comments about a new activity Action for Happiness that was recently started in the U.K

PASCAL BRUCKNER

THE WESTERN CULT OF HAPPINESS IS A MIRTHLESS ENTERPRISE



Condemned to Joy

On August 21, 1670, Jacques Bossuet, the bishop of Meaux and official preacher to the court of Louis XIV, pronounced the eulogy for Princess Henrietta of England before the Prince of Condé. The Duchess of Orléans had died at 26 after drinking a glass of chicory that may have been poisoned.

At the threshold of death, the young woman had called on priests rather than doctors, embraced the crucifix, asked for the holy sacraments, and cried out to God. The wonder of death, Bossuet exclaimed, citing Saint Anthony, was that;

“for the Christian, it does not put an end to life but rather to the sins and perils to which life is exposed. God abbreviates our temptations along with our days; he thus sets a limit to occasions that might cost us true, eternal life; for this world is nothing but our common exile.” The good death was a door opened on eternity, a passage to that “true, eternal life.”

In this life, by contrast, agony was expected.

Notwithstanding the Jacobin leader Saint-Just’s famous remark, happiness was never “a new idea in Europe.” In fact, it was the oldest of ideas, defended by the ancients and pondered by the great philosophical schools. But Christianity, which inherited the notion from Greek and Latin writers, changed it with a view to transcendence: man’s concern here below must be not joy but salvation. Christ alone redeems us from original sin and puts us on the path to divine truth. All earthly pleasures,

according to the Christian authors, are but phantoms from the point of view of celestial beatitude. To wish for earthly happiness would be a sin against the Spirit; the passing pleasures of mortals are nothing compared with the hell that awaits sinners who pant after them.

This rigorous conception gave way over the centuries to a more accommodating view of life. The eighteenth century saw the rise of new techniques that improved agricultural production; it also saw new medicines—in particular, alkaloids and salicylic acid, an ancestor of aspirin whose curative and analgesic properties worked wonders. Suddenly, this world was no longer condemned to be a vale of tears; man now had the power to reduce hunger, ameliorate illness, and better master his future. People stopped listening to those who justified suffering as the will of God. If I could relieve pain simply by ingesting some substance, there was no need to have recourse to prayer to feel better.

The new conception of happiness was captured in a phrase of Voltaire’s in 1736:

“Earthly paradise is here where I am.”

Voltaire was, of course, pursued by the Church and the monarchy; he was threatened with death, and his writings were burned. But his proposition deserves attention. If paradise is here where I am, then happiness is here and now, not yesterday, in an age for which I might be nostalgic, and even less in some hypothetical future. In this upheaval of temporal perspectives, poverty and distress lose all legitimacy, and the whole work of enlightened nations becomes eliminating them through education and reason, and eventually science and industry. Human misfortune would be rendered an archaic residue.

After the American and French Revolutions (the first of which inscribed the pursuit of happiness in its founding document), the right to a decent life and the privileged status of pleasure became the order of the day for progressive movements across Europe. It is true that in the early twentieth century, the Bolsheviks curiously rehabilitated the Christian ideal of sacrifice by exhorting the proletariat to fight and work until the great coming of the Revolution; ironically, asceticism returned within a doctrine that denounced religion as the opiate of the masses and that relentlessly persecuted priests, pastors, and believers wherever it took power. But overall, throughout the twentieth century, hedonism’s claims grew ever stronger under the influence of



Individualism and Fulfilment

Freudianism, feminism, and the avant-garde in art and politics.

In the 1960s, two major shifts transformed the right to happiness into the duty of happiness. The first was a shift in the nature of capitalism, which had long revolved around production and the deferral of gratification, but now focused on making us all good consumers. Working no longer sufficed; buying was also necessary for the industrial machine to run at full capacity. To make this shift possible, an ingenious invention had appeared not long before, first in America in the 1930s and then in Europe in the 1950s:

credit. In an earlier time, anyone who wanted to buy a car, some furniture, or a house followed a rule that now seems almost unknown: he waited, setting aside his nickels and dimes. But credit changed everything; frustration became intolerable and satisfaction normal; to do without seemed absurd. We would live well in the present and pay back later. Today, we're all aware of the excesses that resulted from this system, since the financial meltdown in the United States was the direct consequence of too many people living on credit, to the point of borrowing hundreds of times the real value of their possessions.

The second shift was the rise of individualism. Since nothing opposed our fulfillment any longer—neither church nor party nor social class—we became solely responsible for what happened to us. It proved an awesome burden: if I don't feel happy, I can blame no one but myself. So it was no surprise that a vast number of fulfillment industries arose, ranging from cosmetic surgery to diet pills to innumerable styles of therapy, all promising reconciliation with ourselves and full realization of our potential.

"Become your own best friend, learn self-esteem, think positive, dare to live in harmony," we were told by so many self-help books, though their very number suggested that these were not such easy tasks. The idea of fulfillment, though the successor to a more demanding ethic, became a demand itself. The dominant order no longer condemns us to privation; it offers us paths to self-realization with a kind of maternal solicitude.

This generosity is by no means a liberation in every respect. In fact, a kind of charitable coercion engenders the malaise from which it then strives to deliver us. The

statistics that it publicizes and the models that it holds up produce a new race of guilty parties, no longer sybarites or libertines but killjoys. Sadness is the disease of a society of obligatory well-being that penalizes those who do not attain it. Happiness is no longer a matter of chance or a heavenly gift, an amazing grace that blesses our monotonous days. We now owe it to ourselves to be happy, and we are expected to display our happiness far and wide.

Thus happiness becomes not only the biggest industry of the age but also a new moral order. We now find ourselves guilty of not being well, a failing for which we must answer to everyone and to our own consciences. Consider the poll, conducted by a French newspaper, in which 90 percent of people questioned reported being happy. Who would dare admit that he is sometimes miserable and expose himself to social opprobrium? This is the strange contradiction of the happiness doctrine when it becomes militant and takes on the power of ancient taboos—though in the opposite direction. To enjoy was once forbidden; from now on, it's obligatory. Whatever method is chosen, whether psychic, somatic, chemical, spiritual, or computer-based, we find the same assumption everywhere: beatitude is within your grasp, and you have only to take advantage of "positive conditioning" (in the Dalai Lama's words) in order to attain it. We have come to

believe that the will can readily establish its power over mental states, regulate moods, and make contentment the fruit of a personal decision.

This belief in our ability to will ourselves happy also lies behind the contemporary obsession with health. What is health, correctly understood, but a kind of permission we receive to live in peace with our bodies and to let ourselves be carefree? These days, though, we are required to resist our mortality as far as possible. The domain of therapy tends to annex everything that once belonged to the art of living well. Food, for example, is divided not into good and bad but into healthy and unhealthy. The appropriate prevails over the tasty, the carefully measured over the irregular. The dinner table becomes a kind of pharmacy



counter where fat and calories are weighed, where one conscientiously chews foods that are hardly more than medications. Wine must be drunk not for its taste, under this regimen, but to strengthen the arteries; whole-grain bread must be eaten to aid digestion; garlic must be bitten off raw for various health reasons.

Duration—holding on as long as possible—becomes an authoritative value, even if it must be achieved at the cost of terrible restrictions, depriving oneself of

some of the best the world has to offer. From this point of view, the hunting down of smokers, now expelled from almost all public places, looks something like a collective exorcism, as if a whole society wished to absolve itself of having once found pleasure in cigarettes. In France, photos of Jean-Paul Sartre and the young Jacques Chirac holding cigarettes have been retouched to eliminate the offending objects—just as the Soviet empire used to do with banished leaders.

Yet by trying to remove every anomaly, every failing, we end up denying what is in fact the main benefit of health: indifference to oneself, what a great surgeon once called “the silence of the organs.” Everyone must today be saved from something—from hypertension, from imperfect digestion, from a tendency to gain weight. One is never thin enough, fit enough, strong enough. Health has its martyrs, its pioneers, its heroes and saints. Sickness and health become harder to distinguish, to the point that we risk creating a society of hypochondriacs.

Now that it has become the horizon of our democracies, a matter of ceaseless work and effort, happiness is surrounded by anxiety. We feel compelled to be saved constantly from what we are, poisoning our own existence with all kinds of impossible commandments. Our hedonism is not wholesome but haunted by failure. However well behaved we are, our bodies continue to betray us. Age leaves its mark, illness finds us one way or another, and pleasures have their way with us, following a rhythm that has nothing to do with our vigilance or our resolution.

What is needed is a renewed humility. We are not the masters of the sources of happiness; they ever elude the appointments we make with them, springing up when we least

expect them and fleeing when we would hold them close. The excessive ambition to expunge all that is weak or broken in body or mind, to control moods and states of soul, sadness, chagrin, moments of emptiness—all this runs up against our finitude, against the inertia of the human species, which we cannot manipulate like some raw material. We have the power to avoid or to heal certain evils, yes, but we cannot order happiness as if it were a meal in a restaurant.

The Western cult of happiness is indeed a strange adventure, something like a collective intoxication. In the guise of emancipation, it transforms a high ideal into its opposite. Condemned to joy, we must be happy or lose all standing in society. It is not a question of knowing whether we are more or less happy than our ancestors; our conception of the thing itself has changed, and we are probably the first society in history to make people unhappy for not being happy.

Pascal Bruckner is a French writer and philosopher. His article was translated by Alexis



Glastonbury Tor, by treehouse 1977.

Pessimism Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit

by Joshua Foa Dienstag

Princeton University Press, 2009

Review by Michael Bruce

With a title and theme like Pessimism, not everyone is going to jump at this book. This is unfortunate, since they will be missing a very unique and engaging narrative that discerns a conceptual history of the ominous worldview entitled pessimism. Professor Dienstag clearly delineates pessimism as a specific stance in relation to time. Opposed to optimism and its confidant progress, pessimism is the position that things may not improve as time passes. It is not that humanity is doomed or even in decline; pessimism holds that progress is an illusion and the human condition is getting worse or at least not better. Dienstag is forthright in making this a technical definition, and acknowledges that pessimism is usually perceived as a disposition rather than a philosophical school of thought. The book wants to show that in the discourse of many dominant figures, from Rousseau, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, to Freud, Camus, and Foucault and others, there is a strand of reasoning that has been pushed aside and its authors written off as stylish cranks. Dienstag argues that there is a positive philosophy, a rich and nuanced position that can be revealed through the "family

resemblances" of philosophers since the early modern period.

Pessimism is set apart from cynicism, skepticism, and nihilism by its relation to time and progress. "Pessimism is a substitute for progress" (5). Pessimism and optimism are both seen in light of linear time, and the author addresses the evolution of various time matrices. Dienstag notes that optimism is often assimilated with progress, with the only remaining choice (incorrectly) being stasis. Pessimism is equally borne out of the modern time consciousness; however, while pessimism maintains a linear account of time and history, it finds no evidence that reason will lead to the melioration of the human condition.

Pessimism is made up of three parts, eight chapters and an afterword. Dienstag begins with "The Anatomy of Pessimism," an introduction and outline/genealogy of his sources. The second part of the book is divided between three modes of pessimism and the writers who express them: "A Philosophy That is Grievous but True": Cultural Pessimism in Rousseau and Leopardi; "The Evils of the World Honestly Admitted": Metaphysical



Pessimism in Schopenhauer and Freud; and "Consciousness Is a Disease": Existential Pessimism in Camus, Unamuno, and Cioran. Part three may be the most exciting section of the book, as it covers "Nietzsche's Dionysian Pessimism" and "Cervantes as Educator: Don Quixote and the Practice of Pessimism." The third part ends with a thought provoking look at the role of aphorisms in the pessimistic worldview, followed by the concluding chapter "Pessimism and Freedom (The Pessimist Speaks)" where Dienstag himself employs the use of aphorisms to convey what he believe to be a distinctive mode of pessimistic freedom.

The author gives an informed and balance presentation of Nietzsche's affirmative philosophy. Dienstag's affinity for Nietzsche comes through to the reader, and the chapter dealing with him ("Dionysian Pessimism") maybe the books finest and most academic. Dienstag's writing style is

smooth, accessible, and carries the narrative along with ease. With the exception of the chapter on Nietzsche, references are kept to a minimum, which is a double edged sword--general readers are able to move through the book quickly, though scholars may desire more citations.

There were two issues that hung over my head while reading this text: the definition of 'pessimism' and the difference between philosophy and political thought. Although the author spells out his definition of pessimism throughout the book, I can't help but feel like the marriage of pessimism with linear time misses the normal meaning and use of the term. There is a sense in which this is a new concept, and thus explains, at least partially, why this problematic has been in the shadows since the enlightenment. A more straight forward approach would seem to begin by understanding what we mean when we say 'pessimism'-- and we do generally understand it as a mood or disposition-- and then move on from there. The second issue is that the author, who is a political science professor, has essentially written a very compelling account of philosophy, but insists on referring to it as "political thought." This struck me as odd each time I encounter it, since the issues are metaphysical (space and time) and existential (absurdity, ennui) par excellence. 'Political philosophy' would have been a closer, though still lacking description. Dienstag goes on to

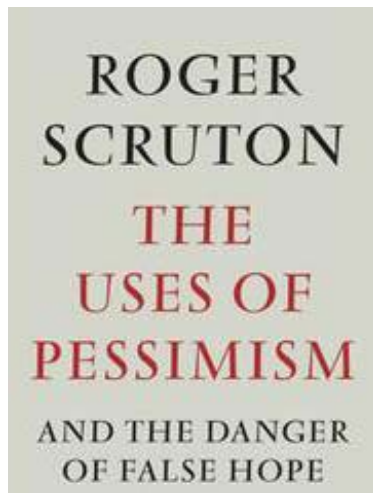
use his political language to frame his account of freedom. In sum, the author argues that pessimism reveals a unique sense of freedom. Where as the optimist will suffer innumerable blows when life fails to improve, become easier, happier, or more intelligent, and therefore always postponing and projecting an idealized conception of life into the future, the pessimism is able to enjoy the present moment as such, a life affirming orientation to life rooted in spontaneity. On one hand the pessimist accepts the world on its own terms, and on the other hand, the optimist seems to devalue the present while fixating on the progress the future will bring. As Dienstag puts it, "Optimism makes up perpetual enemies of those future moments that do not meet our expectations, which means all future moments. It is when we expect nothing from the future that we are free to experience it as it will be, rather than as a disappointment" (247).

Pessimism was a very enjoyable read and I would recommend it to anyone who is remotely interested in the theme. The author's use of aphorisms at the end of the book was especially stirring, as it was clear that the author was enjoying his subject. Dienstag's work is creative and learned, and even with the critical remarks above, is well argued and will hopefully open up a space where more research into this marginalized tradition will arise

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Michael Bruce works with at-risk youth and is the editor of *College Sex - Philosophy for Everyone: Philosophers With Benefits* (with Robert M. Stewart, Wiley-Blackwell) and *Just the Arguments: 100 of the Most Important Arguments in Western Philosophy* (out in August, with Steven Barbone, Wiley-Blackwell). Previously, he taught philosophy and mathematics at the University of Washington's Robinson Center for Young Scholars, and received his Master's degree from San Diego State University, specializing in the history of philosophy. He has published articles and reviews in journals, books, and online.



Two voices echo through Roger Scruton's new book: those of Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott. A nation, wrote Burke, the founder of modern conservatism, 'is a partnership between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born.' For Oakeshott, perhaps the pre-eminent conservative philosopher of the twentieth century, 'To try and do something which is inherently impossible is always a corrupting enterprise.' These two sentiments bind together Scruton's argument in *The Uses of Pessimism*.

The theme at the heart of the book is not so much the idea of pessimism as that of the 'constraints and boundaries', both of human nature and of human custom, that 'remind us of human imperfection and of the fragility of real communities'. Pessimism is the recognition that these constraints and boundaries make impossible any planned, rational transformation of society.

The villain that stalks the book is

the 'unscrupulous optimist', who disdains constraints and believes instead that it is possible to transform the world through human will. French Jacobins, Russian revolutionaries, Nazi stormtroopers, Islamic terrorists, modernist architects, gay rights activists, EU bureaucrats, Sixties educationists, child abuse experts: the optimists constitute a rum bunch. What all have in common is a desire to impose their vision of the world from the top, often with violence, rather than see change slowly and organically develop from below. Scruton spends much of the book dissecting the fallacies that underlie such a desire, including the idea that humans are born free but enchained by social institutions, and the utopian belief in perfectibility. 'The modern pessimist', Scruton writes, 'is urging us to consider what happens to us when old constraints are removed, old limitations are abolished, and an old way of confronting the world replaced by an illusion of mastery.'

Over the past two decades Scruton has emerged from the fringes of rightwing politics to become one of the most significant and subtle philosophers of contemporary conservatism. *The Uses of Pessimism* embodies many of his virtues. The argument is passionate and provocative, yet rendered through exquisitely limpid prose.

But the book also embodies many of Scruton's weaknesses. There is a blinkered character to his vision that enables Scruton to see the problems of utopianism, but never the necessity for it, to understand the importance of tradition but rarely its regressive consequences.

Tradition, Scruton suggests, 'is not part of a plan of action, but arises from the enterprise of social cooperation over time'. Only the constraints it embodies make possible 'the cooperation of strangers to their mutual advantage.'

This is a comforting view for a conservative but it is at best half-true. Tradition is not simply about the accumulated wisdom of humanity. It is also about the maintenance of power. Slavery, the divine right of kings, hostility to miscegenation, the refusal to extend suffrage to women – many of the greatest injustices have historically been defended through an appeal to tradition or to human nature.

Like Burke, Scruton decries the French Revolution for its Jacobin excesses. Yet he never considers why the Revolution happened in the first place. The mob stormed the Bastille because pre-Revolutionary tradition meant the immiseration of the poor, the incarceration of thousands, and the tyranny of an immovable feudal order. It was the refusal of the ancient regime to give up

power that meant that such power had to be wrenched away by force. Even in England, a nation that supposedly embodies compromise and custom, it required a civil war and the beheading of a king to take the first steps towards modern democracy.

Scruton appears equally complacent about the contemporary impact of tradition. The liberalisation of social norms in recent decades - easier divorce, the legalisation of abortion, greater sexual licence - undermines tradition and defies human nature. So why, Scruton wants to know, should the onus be on conservatives to defend the importance of traditional forms of marriage against 'innovations' such as gay partnerships?

The answer is the same as that which would have been given to those who argued against miscegenation, or giving women the vote. The unequal treatment of gays is a moral wrong and no amount of tradition can make it right. It is up to Scruton to defend discrimination, not liberals to have to justify the idea of treating all equally.

Scruton insists that he is averse to optimism only in its 'unscrupulous' form. The trouble is, what makes an optimist unscrupulous is, in his eyes, a belief in the possibility of 'goal-directed politics'. He dismisses as a 'fallacy' the 'belief that we can advance collectively to our goals by adopting a common plan, and by working towards it', insisting instead that people can only be bound together by the invisible bonds either of the market or of custom. The idea that the very act of bettering the world could bring people together in a collective project seems never to occur to him.

The optimist, Scruton claims, thinks only of himself; the pessimist thinks of the

common good. The optimist's selfishness is expressed in his desire for 'change and improvement'. The pessimist who 'seeks stasis and accommodation' puts community before self. It takes a peculiarly blinkered worldview to suggest that accepting inequality and injustice is to act in the common interest, but seeking to overcome such inequality and injustice is to be selfish.

The 'reasonable view', Scruton claims, 'is that we should aim for a social order based on constraints, not on goals'. But how reasonable is it to imagine that great historical changes, especially progressive historical changes, happen by chance? From the overthrow of absolute monarchy to the abolition of slavery, from the banning of torture to the establishment of universal suffrage, history is a narrative of humans rationally and consciously transforming the world. To give up on 'goal directed politics' is to give up possibilities of betterment.

Scruton himself, like Burke, ends up appealing to 'prejudice' to 'act as a barrier against the illusion that we can make everything anew'. Distilled from 'the pooled experiences of absent generations', such prejudice teaches us that 'the only improvement that lies within our control' is not of society but 'of ourselves'.

Burke once complained of the English revolutionary Thomas Paine that he sought 'to destroy in six or seven days' that which 'all the boasted wisdom of our ancestors has laboured to perfection for six or seven centuries'. To which Paine replied, 'I am contending for the rights of the living and against their being willed away, and controlled, and contracted for, by the manuscript-assumed authority of the dead.' Or, to put it another way, too often what is corrupting is not the attempt to do the impossible, but the failure even to attempt it.



Roger Scruton

This article first appeared in the Observer

Kenan Malik is an English writer and presenter whose interests include the philosophy of biology and multiculturalism.

A Review of Joshua Dienstag's Book, Pessimism - Philosophy – Ethic – Spirit

Pessimism (Princeton 2006), by Joshua Foa Dienstag, is excellent on many levels, but its chief value is in the way it locates “pessimism” as an identifiable philosophical position.

In chapter 5; *Nietzsche Dionysian Pessimism* we read that “Time is the destructive power that stands behind any particular cause of suffering in the world. If one accepts the pessimistic assessment of the time bound world as a place of chaos and dissonance, one faces the choice of retreating from it or embracing it and trying to let harmony sound forth from every conflict. Pessimism fortifies us, not against the effects of time itself (death, change, suffering), but against the possible dispiriting that can come from facing time and it’s effects in pessimism’s absence. It looks toward the future, not with the expectation that better things are foreordained, but with a hope founded only on taking joy in the constant process of transformation and destruction that mark out the human condition.”

“the best pessimists have strength of character and a sense of humour”

In quoting Nietzsche the author explains that; his pessimistic form of philosophy will be best suited to those he calls “the most moderate.” Those who do not require any extreme articles of faith, those who can think of man with a considerable reduction in his value without becoming small and weak on that account. These are the humans he considers “the most strongest”—not those who can destroy the most, or



the towering egoists of Ayn Rand’s imagination, but those pessimists who can withstand the most destruction without giving way to pity and resignation. “I assess the power of a will by how much resistance to pain and torture it endures and knows how to turn it to its advantage.” Like Don Quixote, the best pessimists have a strength of character and a sense of humour—for this world both are needed.

The author traces the pessimistic tradition through the Dionysian pre-Socratics, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Camus (as well as some lesser known philosophers). He suggests that the pessimistic tradition has led to two chief responses (an active one, embodied by people like Nietzsche and Camus, and a passive one, embodied by misanthropic quietists like Schopenhauer).

I especially like the way the book meditates, not just on philosophy, but on theatre, art, and literature. The author, for example, spends time addressing some key aspects of Camus’ novels, and Camus’ ideas

about the nature of theatre. The author also devotes time to Nietzsche’s “Birth of Tragedy,” which is a reflection on Greek theatre. There is also a chapter on Don Quixote, and aphorism as a literary genre. The book, in short, is a nutritious and wide-ranging meditation on the “pessimistic” philosophical tradition.

Pessimism, as characterized by the author, is simply looking at the world in an un-blinkered fashion. That is, it is a place where life and consciousness is subject to time and chance, and without apparent purpose or direction. In other words, our wishes frequently do not match what a world in flux can give us. By acknowledging this state of affairs, and not denying it with false optimism, we are free to engage in certain gestures of our own meaning-making (Camus) or withdrawal (Schopenhauer) and spirited activity (Nietzsche).

By Santi Tafarella a teacher at Antelope Valley College in California.

Nietzsche’s Dionysian Pessimism

“That there still could be an altogether different kind of pessimism... this premonition and vision belongs to me as inseparable from me, as my proprium and ipsissimum... I call this pessimism of the future—For it comes! I see it coming!—Dionysian Pessimism
—Friedrich Nietzsche”



man crossing street

sunday morning early on a sunny
brisk

carrying glass cup latte and scent of
bacon

drag of cigarette

across kentish town road

how nice to be a man

who smokes while drinking coffee

cooks and eats bacon

crosses street without looking

certain he will not be harmed.

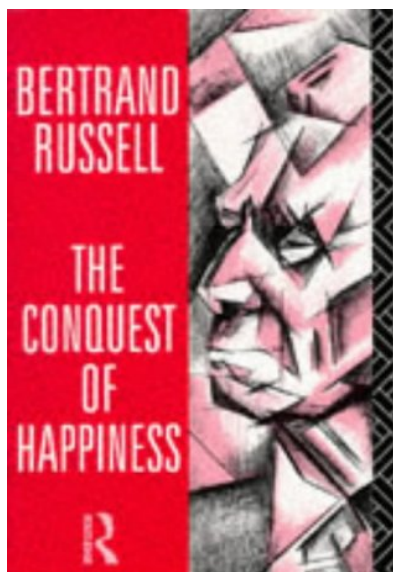
i couldn't do it. not any of it.

C E Amato

A pessimist is a man who looks both
ways when he crosses the street.

Laurence J. Peter

Can We Be Happy?



CAN BEINGS DESIRE TO BE HAPPY! This seemingly simple proposition that may be accepted as definitive and certain. In fact, the desire for happiness seems paramount. Of course, happiness is subjective, and is interpreted differently according to each person's understanding and the external circumstances. For some, the concept of happiness may be based predominantly on self: self-preservation, self-protection, self-satisfaction, self-promotion; for some, it may be focused on others – the well-being, safety, or joy of one's loved ones, or even of mankind in general. Mostly these two elements of focus, self and others, are intertwined, albeit in different proportions at different times: even someone selfish can scarcely be happy if their loved ones are suffering. However, it ultimately comes down to the question: what makes me feel happy? Many if not all of our decisions, thoughts, plans, hopes, desires and actions are propelled by this question on some essential level. In his reflections on the purpose of human life, Sigmund Freud concluded that apart from a religious perspective, life has no intrinsic meaning. However, this

does not mean that individuals don't reveal intentions and purposes through their behaviour. From observing their behaviour, Freud concluded that the pursuit of happiness is the intention of all people: "What do they demand of life and wish to achieve in it? The answer to this can hardly be in doubt. They strive for happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so." (The Freud Reader: 1995, p.729.) However, the fluid and emotional nature of the experience of happiness results in ambiguities concerning the concept which must inspire philosophical reflections which question Freud's tautology.

What is happiness?

Commonly accepted definitions of 'happiness' include:

- A feeling of well-being – physical, emotional, spiritual or psychological
- A feeling or a belief that one's needs are being met – or at least that one has the power to strive towards the satisfaction of the most significant of such needs
- A feeling that one is being authentic in the living of one's life and in one's relations with significant others
- A feeling that one is using one's potential as far as this is possible
- A feeling that one is contributing to life – that one's life is making a difference

It seems that happiness is, above all, a 'feeling'! Also underlying all these interpretations is a sense of 'enjoyment' – a sense that one is joyfully creating and living a good life, however 'the good life' is construed by the subject. These definitions also commonly involve reference to the role of values such

as purpose and service in the attainment of happiness.

The reality of unhappiness is attested to by the ongoing proliferation of books, courses, advice and medication which purport to alleviate the sources of personal unhappiness, therefore enabling a greater capacity for joy and harmony. Whatever the cause of the unhappiness, there is a book out there claiming to 'cure it in twelve easy steps', or some such promise. The success of these enterprises is of course debatable, not least because testimonials to their success are inevitably selective. Yet the demand for happiness persists, and responses to it continually strive to be creative and original while simultaneously claiming reliable and demonstrable efficacy.

Politics of Happiness

As far back as 1930, the eminent philosopher Bertrand Russell put forward his own reflections on the question of happiness, in particular, on how it might be attained and enjoyed. His book "The Conquest of Happiness," contains a clear, logically-constructed argument outlined in two sections: 'Causes of Unhappiness' and 'Causes of Happiness'. The simplicity of this structure is noted by contemporary philosopher A.C. Grayling in his preface to a recent Routledge edition of the book: "Some of the deepest truths are simple." Grayling summarizes the central message of the book as the seemingly obvious but often forgotten dictum that,

- "Happiness is gained by

being outward-looking in work and relationships, and lost by being wrapped-up in oneself, dwelling on anxieties and fears.”

Russell claims that his ‘recipes’ for happiness are inspired by common sense, and he hopes that these recipes may help “many people who are unhappy... become happy.” But he acknowledges the central limitation of this endeavour: that happiness “depends partly upon external circumstances and partly upon oneself” (p.171), and this book doesn’t attempt to deal with the suffering and unhappiness sourced in circumstances beyond the control of the individual. Poverty, illness, cruelty and fear are serious considerations in any analysis of (un)happiness, and Russell reminds us that he has dealt with such issues, in particular considering “the changes in the social system required to promote happiness” in his other works.

The complex relationship between the social system and the well-being of the individual, physical and psychological, is analysed by Freud in his essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, also published in 1930. Freud claims that the demands of civilized society are often in conflict with the desires of the individual. Thus, “the price we pay for cultural progress is a loss of happiness, arising from a heightened sense of guilt” (p.71). More recently, the work of controversial psychoanalyst R.D. Laing focused on the impact of environmental factors on mental health, and on the false dichotomy between sanity and insanity: “Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal” So, like Freud, Laing asserts that society is inimical to individual happiness: “What we call ‘normal’ is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection,

introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience.” (*The Politics of Experience*, pps.27,28, 1967).

Adjustment to the prevailing social norms is considered essential to mental health and human flourishing; but Laing warns us that “social adaptation to a dysfunctional society may be very dangerous” (p.129).

Russell is similarly concerned with “the ordinary day-to-day unhappiness from which most people in civilized countries suffer, and which is all the more unbearable because, having no obvious external cause, it appears inescapable” (*Happiness*, p.5). In

contemporary terms, Russell is perhaps describing a common discontent, a pervasive feeling of dissatisfaction which cannot be easily explained or understood by reference to any direct cause. He considers this unhappiness to be a widespread experience, a general malaise, which in varying ways prevents an enthusiastic and joyful engagement with the adventure of life, and points to an underlying disappointment with one’s life or oneself. This sadness is made all the more paralyzing because of the sense of powerlessness which accompanies it. Russell addresses this sense of powerlessness as a major obstacle to the attainment of happiness. Thus the individual must consider the options which “lie within the power of the individual” and are not dependent on external factors. A belief in the possibility of self-empowerment is the starting point on Russell’s road-map towards happiness and fulfilment.

To understand how to get to

happiness, Russell considers his own experience of depression and anxiety in his early years, and concludes that his use of reason and argument was useless for changing those moods. Rather, he ascribes his success in transcending these painful and restrictive modes of being to two simultaneous changes: “a diminishing preoccupation with myself” and an increasing focus of his attention on external interests (p.6). Like physical energy, mental or emotional energy is of a limited supply, and its concentrated use on one area of attention results in a depletion of resources available for other interests. Thus, excessive self-absorption saps the energy which could otherwise be directed towards more fruitful and more enjoyable experiences. Russell suggests three examples of self-absorption, which he labels ‘the sinner’, ‘the narcissist’ and ‘the megalomaniac’. All three are focused almost exclusively on the self, and all three are committed to a world-view which is narrow and distorted.

The Sinner

‘The sinner’ is someone who is preoccupied with the idea of sinfulness; he sees everywhere the possibility and temptation to do wrong, and he is in perpetual conflict between his natural impulses and the image of moral perfection he’s striving to fulfil. The attempt at perfection is doomed to failure, and so ‘the sinner’ is a constant disappointment to himself. Guilt and resentment are the prevailing conditions of a life so construed – guilt relating to the sense of wrong-doing and failure, resentment at the perceived restrictions which inevitably

preclude enjoyment and pleasure. There is little opportunity for joy in a world which is perceived with such a sense of judgment and such a lack of (self-)compassion and understanding.

The Narcissist

At first glance, 'the narcissist' appears to be at the opposite end of the personality spectrum to that of 'the sinner'. He has an inflated image of himself, his importance, his needs, and his rights. The motive propelling all his pursuits is the desire for admiration. Of course, this desire can never be fully satisfied either, and consequently the narcissist is constantly defeated in his attempts to attain continual praise for his achievements. Furthermore, because the aim of his activities, at work, in relationships, or in creative pursuits, is the admiration of others, his attention is never really focused on the present moment and its experience. Thus he foregoes any enjoyment or fulfilment which could accrue from a passionate engagement with his chosen activity.

The Megalomaniac

Similarly, 'the megalomaniac' is not interested in positive experience for its own sake, but is instead driven by a desire for power. Yet power is always relative and never stable; its pursuit is unending, as its momentary attainment is always vulnerable to fresh threats. Thus megalomania also yields unhappiness.

Russell sees the characteristics, motivations and experiences of these three examples as common to all individuals. We all harbour doubts and resentments regarding our goodness or our enjoyment of life: we are all 'sinners' in some respects. We all enjoy and sometimes crave the admiration of others: we are all 'narcissists' in this regard. We also all strive, openly or secretly, to be in positions of power whereby our values, our needs, or what we consider our rights, are promoted. But Russell is considering an extreme

preoccupation with these concerns which leaves little or no energy for other interests – where the focus on the attainment of one's desire, whether to be good, to be admired, or to be powerful – is maintained at the expense of savouring the experiences of life for themselves. Such obsession sacrifices the pleasures and possibilities of the journey for the sake of an unpredictable and often disappointing destination. Russell warns that "The habit of looking to the future and thinking that the whole meaning of the present lies in what it will bring forth is a pernicious one. There can be no value in the whole unless there is value in the parts." (p.17.) Self-absorption is thus self-defeating, because it closes off an engagement with external sources of fulfilment, and also because it is devoted to the realization of a doomed fantasy.

Russell goes on to point out more specific obstacles to happiness. Many of his examples reflect an obsessive concern with the opinions of others. Competition, envy, comparison and resentment tend to dominate the concerns of an individual who sees life as a contest, where every engagement and activity is part of a test in which they constantly judge themselves in terms of success and failure. This attitude occurs in many areas: career, financial conditions and material possessions are often considered symbols of one's success in life. However, these aspects of one's life are not permanently stable; and this is also true with regard to the fortunes of others. Thus, if one situates oneself in relation to others, one discovers that one's sense of superiority (or inferiority) is built on fragile ground. As Max Ehrmann warns in his classic prescription for a good life, *Desiderata*, "If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter / for always there will be greater and lesser people than

yourself." The logic of Ehrmann's argument is incontestable; but logic is not always triumphant in the minds and hearts of human beings. A major source of our sense of self is the recognition we receive from others. According to Russell, our conscious or unconscious dependence on the reflection of others is the source of the competitiveness and comparison which pervades all areas of our lives, including our personal relationships and leisure activities. The fear of failure, that is, of being negatively perceived by others, is a major obstacle to the conquest of happiness.

Russell believes that underlying all the obstacles to happiness he has outlined is an exclusive concern with self. This self-absorption may be disguised through the expression of attitudes or a commitment to activities which appear to be outwardly focused, although the motives relate back to one's preoccupation with oneself. Therefore Russell advocates the development of genuine interests which are valued for themselves and which involve an immersion that precludes self-preoccupation and negativity: "The secret of happiness is this: let your interests be as wide as possible, and let your reactions to the things and persons that interest you be as far as possible friendly rather than hostile" he says on p.109. This orientation leads to happiness because

it generates a feeling of being part of something greater than ourselves – we feel that we are ‘part of the stream of life’: “The whole antithesis between self and the rest of the world... disappears as soon as we have any genuine interest in persons or things outside ourselves.” (p.175). Russell looks to the experience of young children to support his claim that happiness and engaged interest are interlinked, as young children’s happy engaged interest with everything they encounter has not yet been dulled by familiarity or boredom. However, Russell believes that one can choose to re-ignite that openness and curiosity, to arouse an interest in a wide array of people, activities, ideas or hobbies. He also stresses the need for a variety of interests rather than a narrow preoccupation with a single focus: “The more things a man is interested in, the more opportunities of happiness he has, and the less he is at the mercy of fate, since if he loses one thing he can fall back upon another” (p.112). Roles, careers, material circumstances and personal relationships are never static or secure, and an exclusive emotional investment in any one area of life results in major difficulties in the event of its loss. By contrast, it is a feature of happy people that they find many ordinary experiences and everyday involvements worthwhile and meaningful.

Zest for Life

Russell describes the experience of happiness as a

‘zest’ for life. The word immediately conjures up images of enthusiasm – a healthy appetite for and energized engagement with life. In agreement with many philosophical and psychological analyses, Russell notes the connection between a zestful approach to living and the experience of being loved: “One of the chief causes of lack of zest is the feeling that one is unloved, whereas conversely the feeling of being loved promotes zest more than anything else does.” (p.122.) Acceptance, recognition, respect, mutuality and intimacy foster a life-loving confidence in the individual who feels loved. It is interesting that Russell stresses that it is the individual’s perception or ‘feeling’ of being loved or not loved which determines one’s capacity for zest: our subjective perceptions, of ourselves, of others and of our relationships, strongly influence our capacity for happiness. Yet the lenses through which we view reality are not always reliable. Therefore Russell urges us to take the risks inherent in loving and being loved, risks involving insecurity and vulnerability, because in our search only for certainty and security we may miss the possibility: “Of all forms of caution, caution in love is perhaps the most fatal to true happiness” he warns on p.129.

Acceptance of reality – of self, of others and of life – involves the capacity to live with uncertainty, since life is uncertain. Russell urges this acceptance at work, in relationships and with ourselves. When our plans and projects fail to work out in accordance with our wishes, Russell recommends a resignation to the present failure

and a focus on other areas of possibility. With this approach, our activities are undertaken for their own sake, and are not beset by fear regarding the future outcome. We are thus “emancipated from the empire of worry” (p.168). He differentiates between active acceptance and passive defeatism, and suggests that one’s general approach should involve “the balance between effort and resignation” (p.162). In this sense, one’s effort is the key to satisfaction, not the outcome: happiness flows from an attitude of “doing one’s best while leaving the issue to fate.” (p.166).

A discernment of truth releases energy otherwise squandered in fantasy or denial: “Nothing is more fatiguing, nor, in the long run, more exasperating, than the daily effort to believe things which daily become more incredible.” (p.169). As an antidote to the paralysis of illusion and self-deception, Russell recommends an on-going effort to face the truth about ourselves and our lives. He suggests that an honest awareness of our limitations frees us from the tyranny of perfectionism, whether this is directed towards ourselves or others:

- “Admit to yourself every day at least one painful truth” he says on p.173.

This does not preclude an appreciation of the real successes and achievements in our lives; rather, it ensures that our energy is directed towards the possibility of new opportunities, in the way that a door closed is an invitation to the opening of another. Russell refers to this kind of resignation as an attitude of “unconquerable hope” (p.162). It is a hope which survives in the face of loss or failure because it is based on an understanding that life is made up of diverse areas of fulfilment.

Russell's outline of the obstacles to happiness, and his guide to its attainment, is simple and clear. His focus on the benefits of external sources of interest is echoed in many contemporary explorations of happiness – for example, in Martin Seligman's concept of 'Positive Psychology' with its emphasis on benign emotions such as 'gratitude' and 'appreciation'. In works with 'positive' titles such as

- **LEARNED OPTIMISM: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life (2006)**
- **AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment (2002),**

Seligman outlines the transformation of 'learned helplessness' into 'learned optimism' as the surest route to the attainment of 'authentic' happiness. Like Russell, Seligman proposes that old habits of thought and behaviour can be replaced by more beneficial patterns.

However, questions remain as to whether *The Conquest of Happiness* provides a helpful response to the query, 'how can we be happy?', or whether it is merely another attempt to guide the individual towards a more

rewarding life. Can this guidance really come from outside you, or is it only possible through insight gained from experience? Furthermore, is Russell's idea of happiness and unhappiness universally applicable? Does it address the difficulty pertaining to a definition of happiness, which ranges across a spectrum of experiences such as pleasure, joy, satisfaction, success, virtue, and achievement? Happiness is something we each have a sense of, but which we may find we cannot describe or define logically.

Russell believed that human beings are capable of happiness if they follow his recipes, and he claims a strong ethical value for its attainment: he claims that although being good does not necessarily ensure happiness, individuals who are happy are generally good. Therefore he concludes that "The happy life is to an extraordinary extent the same as the good life." (p.173).

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Kieran (left) and Kelly at the Shaky Isles Café, 22 Customs Street East.

I asked each of them a question; Did they see themselves as either a Pessimist or as an Optimist? Kelly said she was definitely an optimist because she said she, 'prepares for the worst but always hopes for the best.' Kieran believed that he could best be described as

a pessimist and commented, 'I try to live each day as it comes and don't make too many plans for the future.'



Pessimism : Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit

av Joshua Foa Dienstag

Pessimism claims an impressive following - from Rousseau, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, to Freud, Camus, and Foucault. Yet 'pessimist' remains a term of abuse - an accusation of a bad attitude - or the diagnosis of an unhappy psychological state. Pessimism is thought of as an exclusively negative stance that inevitably leads to resignation or despair. Even when pessimism looks like utter truth, we are told that it makes the worst of a bad situation. Bad for the individual, worse for the species - who would actually counsel pessimism? Joshua Foa Dienstag does. In "Pessimism", he challenges the received wisdom about pessimism, arguing that there is an unrecognized yet coherent and vibrant pessimistic philosophical tradition. More than that, he argues that pessimistic thought may provide a critically needed alternative to the increasingly untenable progressivist ideas that have dominated thinking about politics throughout the modern period. Laying out powerful grounds for pessimism's claim that progress is not an enduring feature of human history, Dienstag argues that political theory must begin from this predicament. He persuasively shows that pessimism has been - and can again be - an energizing and even liberating philosophy, an ethic of radical possibility and not just a criticism of faith. The goal - of both the pessimistic spirit and of this fascinating account of pessimism - is not to depress us, but to edify us about our condition and to fortify us for life in a disordered and disenchanting universe.

It seems that with each passing day the faith in progress becomes less sustainable, less believable, whether one consults environmental, social, or political data. The pessimistic tradition, having confronted the human situation without relying upon this faith, affords us a diverse wealth of resources for going on and even for doing worthy things. Dienstag justifies his dramatic claim that we have been ignoring the



Tracy Strong

pessimistic tradition to our own impoverishment. But his articulation of this tradition, as befits the pessimistic spirit, is provisional and an invitation to others to join in its exploration. "There is no other book quite like Dienstag's." -- Melissa A. Orlie, University of Illinois

I think this book is successful in what it sets out to do. It is extremely ambitious: it seeks to recast European political thought over the last 300 years and to make that recasting appealing to contemporary readers. I concur with most of the analyses and in all cases they are creative and enlightening. -- Tracy Strong, University of California, San Diego

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THIS PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS MAKES ME QUEASY

BY MADELEINE BUNTING



Madeleine Bunting

Within the space of an hour, I'd been hugged several times, I'd been led through a short meditation and I'd been bombarded by messages such as "if you can't change it, change the way you feel about it" and "happiness is a decision". It was the launch of Action for Happiness and everyone else looked pretty jolly. So perhaps it works.

You have to hand it to them, Action for Happiness has fantastic chutzpah to launch a mass movement at the nadir of a grim recession. Given the media's need for surprises, they will get a lot of attention. Given the ambition of the trio of sombre intellectuals – Lord Layard, Geoff Mulgan and Anthony Seldon – to make millions of people, first nationally, then globally, happier, they will need all the publicity they can get.

It is spectacularly easy to ridicule it all. No one was doing that at the launch on Tuesday, which felt akin to a happy cult. There was an air of earnest self-improvement, which railed against the twin evils of materialism and selfish individualism. But this is self-improvement that no Victorian would ever recognise; this was about taking that modern obsession of happiness – evident on every billboard – and turning it into a technology.

So there was much talk of "tools" and a lot of numbering for easy-to-memorise information. After two hours, I can now happily recite the 10 keys to happiness or the six ingredients for the happiness model. These derive from extensive new research, and this is where the Action for Happiness claims its credibility: happiness is no longer a mystery, the scientific research now proves what leads to happiness. In the past human

beings pursued it by guesswork or mystical divination, now they can reach for any number of bestsellers that popularise the scientific findings. (The interesting thing is that the science is simply showing up what human wisdom has always known about what creates lasting human contentment, so this says more about our search for authority.)

This technology of happiness was most strikingly evident in Mindapples, a social enterprise that encourages preventative mental health. Their position was that we need a mental health equivalent of the "five a day" fruit and veg portions; they urged visitors to fill out the back of a postcard with five habits that improved their mental health. They want to make "looking after our minds as natural as brushing our teeth".

I find this a pretty intriguing concept, which could really catch on. Just as gyms became a big thing in the 80s, will the 2010s see the arrival of serious preventative mental health? And when you look at the content of what is proposed to improve your mental health, who could object? "To feel good, do good", take exercise, invest time in relationships, spend time appreciating things, trying new experiences. Make other people happy because happiness is contagious; the research says that your happiness affects the happiness of friends of your friends – it ripples out.

These are not new insights but they are important, and they are easily overlooked or drowned out in the noise of competitive consumerism and celebrity gossip, and we can't just assume that people will remember them. Having some good marketing materials about getting such

messages out has to be a good thing.

But why did the whole thing end up making me feel a bit queasy, as if I had eaten much too much apple pie? Perhaps because happiness is the most overused, over-exploited concept of our age; millions of pounds are invested every day in the advertising industry to exploit our desire for happiness and our understanding of what it is. It is now a bankrupt word, the territory of happiness colonised by consumer capitalism. Interestingly Martin Seligman whose book, *Authentic Happiness*, did so much to promote the whole subject, is now reportedly distancing himself from the H word and is bringing out a book in May called *Flourish*.

Perhaps another part of the queasiness was that Action for Happiness seems to suggest that it is simply a matter of providing the information and people will develop the right happy habits – getting to know the neighbours, saying thank you etc. But knowing that smoking is bad for you doesn't mean everyone gives up smoking. There was a naivety alongside the ambition in Action for Happiness which felt a bit like a page out of the 70s plans for global happiness such as the Bhagwan Rajneesh. The only thing I know about happiness is that long ago I was told that it arrives as a by-product to other activities, it doesn't work so well as a goal in itself.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commenti>

Let the happiness in and feel good

by Mark Williamson

Mark Williamson

Action for Happiness – a new mass movement for social change founded by three pioneering thinkers, Richard Layard, Geoff Mulgan and Anthony Seldon was launched in the U.K on 11 April 2011. It is based on one simple idea – that if we want a happier society, we've got to approach our own lives in a way that prioritises the things that really matter, including the happiness of those around us.

With families and communities across the UK facing difficult economic times, uncertain job security and savage spending cuts, it may seem counter-intuitive to talk about happiness. But on the contrary, now more than ever we need to help people build their emotional resilience and create a culture where we are less preoccupied with material wealth and more focused on each other's wellbeing; where people from all walks of life come together to make positive changes in their personal lives, homes, schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods.

Over the last 50 years we've made great progress in terms of living standards and material wealth, reaching a point that previous generations could only have dreamed of – and perhaps one that future generations will look back at longingly. The engine for much of this progress has been economic growth. But if we stop to think about it, most of us recognise that material and financial wealth are just a means to an end, not the end in themselves. We care about them because they are seen as an indicator of how well our lives are going.

But the shocking fact is that, despite massive material progress, people in Britain are no happier than they were over five decades ago. Over that same period our society has become increasingly competitive and selfish, with a culture that encourages us to pursue wealth, appearance, status and possessions above all else. In the 1960s, 60% of adults in Britain said they believed "most people can be trusted". Today the figure is around 30%. Our growing focus on self-centred materialism has also contributed to wider social problems. We've seen huge increases in anxiety and depression in young people, greater inequality, more family breakdown, longer working hours, growing environmental problems and crippling levels of debt.

But it doesn't have to be like this. The good news is that by focusing our time and energy instead on things that

have been shown to consistently bring happiness, we can live rich, rewarding lives. These things include loving families, close friendships, good self-awareness, strong community ties, doing things for others, keeping active, and having some kind of greater purpose to our lives. If we could increase our levels of happiness to those enjoyed in Denmark, Britain would have 2.5 million fewer people suffering from unhappiness and 5 million more people who are very happy.

These ideas are not new and we instinctively know their importance. But this "wisdom of the ages" is now also backed up by a significant body of research which confirms that our relationships and mental health have a much greater impact on our overall wellbeing than our beauty, possessions or income. The evidence linking an upbeat outlook to increased longevity is actually stronger than the evidence linking obesity to reduced longevity. Our happiness in turn influences the happiness of people we know.

Action for Happiness is based on this new science of happiness and the evidence that we can affect our happiness. We have identified 50 practical actions that people can take in their everyday lives that not only help boost their own happiness but contribute to building better, more positive environments in their families, relationships, workplaces and communities. These include simple things like finding things to be grateful for each day, however small; trying out something new or different; and looking for the good in others. They also include skills to be more "mindful" in our thinking.

When people do good, they feel good. By choosing to live in a way that prioritises the things that really matter we can create a vital shift in

Mark
Williamson,
Action for
Happiness





ACTION FOR HAPPINESS is a movement for positive social change. We're bringing together people from all walks of life who want to play a part in creating a happier society for everyone.

For fifty years we've aimed relentlessly at higher incomes. But despite being much wealthier, we're no happier than we were five decades ago. At the same time we've seen an increase in wider social issues, including a worrying rise in anxiety and depression in young people. It's time for a positive change in what we mean by progress.

GREAT DREAM

Ten keys to happier living

- GIVING**  Do things for others
- RELATING**  Connect with people
- EXERCISING**  Take care of your body
- APPRECIATING**  Notice the world around
- TRYING OUT**  Keep learning new things
- DIRECTION**  Have goals to look forward to
- RESILIENCE**  Find ways to bounce back
- EMOTION**  Take a positive approach
- ACCEPTANCE**  Be comfortable with who you are
- MEANING**  Be part of something bigger



The world's first membership organisation dedicated to spreading happiness has been

