

# THE QUEST *for* HAPPINESS

*Down through the ages, philosophers and poets, politicians and theologians, friends and strangers have argued about the nature of happiness. They haven't been able to settle on what happiness is exactly, but that hasn't kept them from chasing it down. In the end, and the beginning, too, happiness may be a lot easier to experience than to define.*

*by Darrin M. McMahon*

**G**erman philosophers are not noted for their lightheartedness. Consider Hegel, who believed that it was the fate of great men like himself to be denied “what is commonly called happiness.” Hegel conceded that “one may contemplate history from the point of view of happiness,” but he saw the task as essentially futile. “History is not the soil in which happiness grows,” he concluded. “The periods of happiness in it are blank pages.”

But what exactly is this thing that Hegel denied himself and so many others? An emotion, perhaps? Many of us today would probably be quick to describe happiness in that way—as a good feeling or positive mood. Yet the very first taxonomist of the emotions, Aristotle, excluded happiness from his classifications. The list of emotions he provides in the *Rhetoric*, the most complete of several such accounts, includes anger, love, enmity, fear, pity, indignation, envy, and contempt. But “happiness” (*eudaimonia*), is apparently something else. A “certain kind of activity of the soul expressing virtue” is how Aristotle defines the term in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Encompassing a full and flourishing life, happiness is nothing so cheap as a fleeting feeling or a passing fancy. For in the same way that “one swallow does not make a summer,” one day “does not make a man happy.” Happiness entails “a complete life,” a life lived according to virtue and measured right up to its end. Until that end, a tragic turn or a cowardly choice might bring





*Die Jagd nach dem Glück (Chasing after Happiness), by Edmund Youngbauer, late 19th century*

shame or misfortune on a life otherwise well spent. Hence the celebrated adage attributed to the Greek statesman Solon, “Call no man happy until he is dead.”

Aristotle’s view of happiness as a universal moral end—the telos of humankind, synonymous with the good life—was widely shared in the ancient world, first among the Greeks and then among the Romans. And though many, including Aristotle himself, were prepared to grant that pleasure and good feeling might have their place in a happy life, the principal element was thought to be virtue, which frequently demanded discipline, sacrifice, and even pain. For Stoic philosophers such as the Roman statesman Cicero, virtue was so indispensable to happiness that if a man possessed it, he could be happy regardless of the circumstances—even, Cicero claimed, while being tortured. That was taking matters to the extreme. But it illustrates nicely how happiness, for these thinkers of the ancient world, was invariably considered a thing apart, neither a sentiment nor a passion nor an emotional state.

But if happiness is not, strictly speaking, an emotion—or, at least, has not always been thought of as one—then what is it? The fact is that it’s difficult, if not impos-

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sible, to say. As Hegel's predecessor Immanuel Kant rightly observed in trying to establish his own hold on the question, "The concept of happiness is such an indeterminate one that even though everyone wishes to attain happiness, yet he can never say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills."

That is a disconcerting realization for any human being. In Kant's case, the slipperiness of happiness meant that it could never be a reliable guide to evaluating moral action. Historians have apparently reasoned along similar lines, concluding that happiness is simply not a useful category of inquiry. But they ignore this great human pursuit at their peril. "How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness," William James observed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure." The contention that the motive was secret, or at least closely guarded, would help account for the intimate nature of the yearning, its deeply personal bent. And that, in turn, would help account for the conclusion of James's contemporary, Sigmund Freud, who maintained that happiness is "something essentially subjective."

Agreeing with James that the desire for happiness is a universal impulse, Freud stressed that this impulse is nonetheless so idiosyncratic and opaque as to be hidden in most cases from the outside observer. "No matter how much we may shrink with horror from certain situations—of a galley-slave in antiquity, of a peasant during the Thirty Years' War, of a victim of the Holy Inquisition, of a Jew awaiting a pogrom—it is nevertheless impossible for us to feel our way into such people" to divine the secrets of their subjective feelings. This was reason enough for Freud to dismiss as a futile endeavor writing the history of happiness. It was simply too difficult "to form an opinion whether and in what degree men of an earlier age felt happier and what part their cultural conditions played in the matter." "It seems to me unprofitable," Freud concluded, "to pursue this aspect of the problem any further."

Few would deny that happiness is most often a subjective proposition, especially if one defines the critical term, as Freud himself did, largely in terms of pleasure and pain. For this reason, the proposed "felicific calculus" of the British utilitarian Jeremy Bentham has never proved a particularly useful mathematics: It is impossible to write equations with unstable variables. As Bentham's predecessor and another close student of happiness, John Locke, had already pointed out in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

The mind has a different relish, as well as the palate; and you will as fruitlessly endeavor to delight all men with riches or glory, (which yet some men place their happiness in) as you would to satisfy all men's hunger with cheese or lobsters; which, though very agreeable and delicious fare to some, are to others extremely nauseous and offensive. . . . For as pleasant tastes depend not on the things themselves but their agreeableness to this or that particular palate, wherein there is great variety: So the greatest happiness consists, in the having those things, which produce the greatest pleasure; and in the absence of

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those, which cause any disturbance, any pain. Now these, to different Men, are very different things.

Though all men “aim at being happy,” Locke concluded sensibly enough, they take “various and contrary ways” in pursuit of that end, down as many paths as there are palates. To follow them all would be an exhausting exercise.

But what if one were to consider happiness not as a private emotion or a universal moral end—neither the subjective relish for pleasure nor the common telos of virtue—but, rather, as an idea? Doing so would allow one to treat this mysterious yearning like any other abstract notion—freedom, or justice, or truth—evaluating ideas of happiness as they have taken shape and evolved over time, tracing their genealogy, and following their representations in different cultural contexts. If we acknowledge that happiness itself is an idea, and a powerful one at that, it should not surprise us, for example, that Marx and Engels considered happiness to be an integral part of their system, nothing less than the solution to the riddle of history. “The overcoming of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people,” Marx observed famously in his “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” “is the demand for their real happiness.” Alas, what “real happiness” might actually entail is never revealed by Marx. But what *is* revealing—at least when it comes to treating happiness as a historical concept—is his insistence that we can attain it on our own, in the space once occupied by God.

True, Marx’s stress on human agency is not in itself without precedent. A similar emphasis had long occupied the Greeks. Indeed, Aristotle’s attempt to locate happiness in virtue was part of a much broader effort to wrest happiness from forces over which we have little or no control: fate, the gods, the movement of the stars. As St. Augustine, an important theoretician of happiness in his own right, once observed, it was actually Socrates who first considered in detail the question that would draw the “sleepless and laborious efforts” of all subsequent classical philosophers: the question of the necessary conditions for happiness. “What being is there who does not desire happiness?” Socrates asks his companions in Plato’s early dialogue *Euthydemus*. “Well, then . . . since we all of us desire happiness, how can we be happy?—that is the next question.”

In exploring the “necessary conditions” of happiness, Socrates ran up against what might be called the “tragic tradition of happiness,” a tradition that achieved its clearest expression on the Athenian stage of the fifth century B.C.E., but that was in fact much older and more widespread. The belief that our happiness is ultimately out of our hands—“tragically” controlled by fortune, fate, or the gods; governed by the movement of the stars, the actions of our ancestors, or the whims of occult forces and spirits—appears to be a common feature of virtually all traditional cultures. Where life is uncertain and the universe inscrutable, existence continually threatens to subvert our actions and frustrate our best-laid plans. That is the lesson of Greek *tragoidia*, in which the pretension to individual

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agency, the hubris of believing that one can *make* oneself happy, is repeatedly sabotaged and undermined. “No man is happy,” the messenger in Euripides’ *Medea* darkly proclaims. The chorus in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* is bleaker still, bemoaning the “unhappy race”

Of mortal man doomed to an endless round  
Of sorrow, and immeasurable woe!

In such a universe, where suffering is inevitable and struggle preordained, the only hope of happiness is through a stroke of good fortune—the miraculous intervention of a god—the *deus ex machina* who whisks down to pluck the tragic hero from peril. To the extent that tragic drama can be said to have a happy ending, that’s it.

It was very much *against* this tragic fatalism (or reliance on the vagaries of chance) that Socrates and his ancient successors directed their own speculations on happiness. Yet they never succeeded in removing entirely the *daimon* from *eudaimonia*—that “demon” or “god” who haunts our every pursuit, that chance, spiritual element threatening always to trip us up or speed us along. Aristotle, for his part, was perfectly candid on this score, admitting that to call happy a man who suffered inordinately at the hands of fortune would be to engage in a “philosopher’s paradox.” The later Stoic attempt to do just that—to argue that the virtuous could be “happy” in even the most horrendous circumstances—would seem precisely such a paradox. It was also a frank admission that Stoics could do relatively little to manage the vagaries of fortune; the best they could do was manage themselves. For most others in the classical world, even those of perfect virtue, happiness retained some connection to what *happened* to them—which, they knew, was something that could never entirely be controlled.

**T**he persistence of this older connection long outlasted the decline of Greece and Rome and is reflected most clearly in the various Indo-European words for “happiness.” Almost all took shape only in the High Middle Ages and early Renaissance, and almost all are directly related linguistically to fortune, chance, or fate. “Happiness” (from the Middle English and Old Norse *happ*, fortune, chance) is thus literally what *happens* to us. When Shakespeare’s Lucentio declares in act 4 of *The Taming of the Shrew* “hap what hap may,” he is paying homage, in a comedy no less, to the endurance of a much older tragic tradition.

Of course, by Shakespeare’s time, all discussion of happiness had been indelibly shaped by another powerful force: Christianity. Jesus of Nazareth’s promise to his disciples—that although “now is your time of grief, I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22)—had been developed over the centuries into an elaborate theology of happiness that promised unending ecstasy as the reward for earthly privation. This theology, in turn, rested on a theology of sin, which taught, as St. Augustine explained in *The City of God*, that because of our first parents’ original transgression in the Garden of Eden, true happiness was “unattainable

in our present life.” God, Boethius later confirmed, was happiness incarnate (“happiness itself”), and because we would be fully reunited with God only in the eternal life of death, it followed that death was the true happiness of the elect. Forever yearning, the living could hope at most on earth for what Thomas Aquinas called *beatitudo imperfecta*, imperfect happiness, a pale imitation of our heavenly reward. That brought new meaning to the saying “Call no man happy until he is dead.”

Christians certainly disputed who most deserved this ultimate happiness and how it could best be achieved (by

human virtue and good works, or solely by the saving grace of God). And they haggled over what signs one might detect in this world of the coming rapture. But not until the 17th and 18th centuries, in that period we now call the Age of Enlightenment, were considerable numbers of men and women exposed to the possibility that they might legitimately hope for happiness everlasting in this life.

The reasons for this monumental transformation were complex, and they were shaped necessarily by multiple factors: developments within the Christian tradition that de-emphasized original sin and reoriented the human gaze in a worldly direction; the general impact of Enlightenment doctrines that stressed happiness and pleasure as human beings’ natural condition and state; and tremendous advances in the technical understanding and mastery of the world. To dance, to sing, to enjoy our food, to delight in our bodies and the company of others—in short, to construct happiness in a place of our own making—was not to defy God’s will but to live as nature intended. This was our earthly purpose, and in a world understood to be governed by natural laws and liberated from the capricious whims of an angry deity or the chaos of fortune, this purpose was eminently realizable. As the English poet Alexander Pope declared,

Oh, happiness, our being’s end and aim!  
Good, pleasure, ease, content! Whate’er thy name:  
That something still which prompts the eternal sigh,  
For which we bear to live, or dare to die.

When, across the Atlantic in 1776, Thomas Jefferson deemed the “pursuit of happiness” a “self-evident” truth, he was merely summarizing a good century of reflection on the subject in Europe and America. By this time, the truth of happiness had been so often and so confidently declared that, for many, it scarcely needed evidence at all. It was indeed, as Jefferson said, self-evident. To secure the “greatest happiness for the greatest number” had become the moral imperative of the century.

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But just how “self-evident” was the pursuit of happiness (to say nothing of its capture)? Was it, in fact, so obvious that happiness was our naturally intended end? To those raised with a classical education, certainly, the idea that all human beings *desired* happiness, and that some, by living exemplary lives of virtue, might actually achieve it, was hardly a novelty. And Christians of all stripes confessed that human beings *pursued* happiness during their earthly pilgrimage; they remained skeptical only about the attainment. For the followers of Jesus, God’s grace was the indispensable criterion, just as a bit of luck was necessary in the reckoning of most ancients. In either case, the elect—the “happy few”—were considered a virtuous elite, blessed by God, favored by fortune, and sanctified through extraordinary conduct.

Resting as it did on the belief that human affairs were not ruled by inscrutable forces (magic, fate, blind chance), and so could be controlled, the doctrine of

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happiness that gained ascendancy in the 18th century intimated something more. Indeed, if the pursuit of happiness was now to be treated as a natural right, applicable in theory to all, was there a right as well to *attain* it? Admittedly, Jefferson said nothing

about a right to attain happiness in the Declaration of Independence; he restricted himself to its pursuit. And elsewhere he could be frankly pessimistic that the chase would ever be brought to a satisfying conclusion. “Perfect happiness . . . was never intended by the Deity to be the lot of one of his creatures,” he specified in a letter of 1763, adding soberly that even “the most fortunate of us, in our journey through life, frequently meet with calamities and misfortunes which may greatly afflict us.” To “fortify our minds” against these attacks, he concluded with a Stoic nod, “should be one of the principal studies and endeavors of our lives.”

Jefferson thus leavened the pursuit of happiness with a healthy measure of tragic realism. But not everyone was so averse to encouraging peoples’ hopes for happiness. Just a month before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Virginia legislature adopted the text of Jefferson’s close friend George Mason in proclaiming its own Virginia Declaration of Rights. Among “the certain inherent natural rights” of all men, apparently, were those of “pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” And when, several years later, James Madison put forth his draft of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the text spoke similarly of a right to “pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” The lines were ultimately abandoned in committee, leaving no trace at all of happiness in the Constitution.

Yet the idea that human beings should be entitled not only to pursue happiness as they saw fit but to attain it was clearly in the air. When the French revolutionaries issued their Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, the preamble included a pledge to work for the “happiness of everyone.” The Jacobin constitution of June 24, 1793, took this promise seriously. “The goal of society is common happiness,” it declared in its very first article. That constitution was never put into effect, and Robespierre’s Reign of Terror made a mockery of





A 1952 postcard from the Soviet Union bears the message, “Glory to the Great Stalin, the Constructor of Happiness!”

its opening promise. But the line was nonetheless indicative of a dramatic shift in the nature of human expectations.

**I**n both the Old World and the New, astute commentators in the succeeding decades drew attention to this shift. After his journey to the United States in 1831–32, Alexis de Tocqueville expressed astonishment at the spectacle of the average American’s “futile pursuit of that complete felicity which always escapes him.” In England, Thomas Carlyle reflected on the novelty of the new ethic of happiness and the impossible hopes it raised, observing in *Past and Present* (1843) that nowadays,

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

Here, as elsewhere, Carlyle was inclined to bemoan the loss of genuine spirituality amongst the people. “God’s Laws are become a Greatest Happiness Principle,” he lamented. “There is no religion; there is no God; man has lost his soul.” But what he did not fully appreciate, though he himself drew attention to the fact, was that throughout the Western world a new god was taking shape. Whereas, in the fifth century, Boethius could claim that “God is happiness itself,” by the middle of the 19th century, the formula could easily be reversed to read



“Happiness is God.” Earthly happiness was emerging as the idol of idols, the locus of meaning in modern life, the source of human aspiration, the purpose of existence, the why and the wherefore.

And yet, as Carlyle did appreciate, this new God was proving to be as mysterious and enigmatic as the old, whether in the form of the “pleasant things” for

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which the people clamored, or the “real happiness” spoken of by Marx. Surely there was nothing “self-evident” about human beings’ ability to achieve lasting happiness on earth, especially as a simple byproduct of existence, a right of living, as distinct from a reward for living well. With regard to the pleasant things of capitalism, Tocqueville observed sharply that Americans “clutch everything but hold nothing fast,

and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight,” enticed always by the possibility of a better life, but never resting content with what they have. What was true of Americans’ beloved equality, it seemed, was true also of happiness: “Every instant they think they will catch it, and each time it slips through their fingers.”

Of course, the pursuit of Marx’s “real happiness” would prove much more elusive, and far more destructive. But in the extremes of Marx’s theoretical aspirations, and in the awful extent of their practical failure, one can perhaps see more clearly than in the case of liberal democracy a dynamic common to both. Belief in happiness, like an older belief in God, is a type of faith, an assumption about the meaning and purpose of human existence that, for all its perennial appeal, is a relatively recent development in human affairs. Only since the 18th century have we come to assume that human beings, by virtue of being human, *ought* to be happy, and that, if they’re not happy, there’s something wrong. Anyone who follows that assumption as it collides with the often-painful realities of post-18th-century existence will see clearly what an article of faith it is.

Freud was one such keen observer. “What do [men] demand of life and wish to achieve in it?” he asked in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. “The answer can hardly be in doubt. They strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so.” This, in Freudian terms, was the program of the “pleasure principle,” the ego’s continual yearning for satisfaction. But it was apparent to Freud that this program was eternally frustrated by “reality”: by the suffering of our own bodies; by the hardness of the external world, “which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction”; and by our ever-complicated relationships with other human beings. Freud’s verdict on the pleasure principle was clear: “There is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all the regulations of the universe run counter to it. One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be ‘happy’ is not included in the plan of ‘Creation.’”

Freud wrote those words in the aftermath of World War I and on the cusp of the rise of Nazi Germany, so he may be forgiven his note of pessimism. But in actuality, his larger point—that a good deal of suffering was natural to human existence, and that it was an illusion to believe otherwise—was pessimistic only when viewed from the perspective of post-Enlightenment faith. That this faith—the view that human beings ought to be happy by virtue of being human—remains our own probably helps account for the decline in Freud’s fortunes. Whereas he vowed only to transform “hysterical misery into ordinary unhappiness,” his successors have promised therapeutic alchemy of a more dazzling sort. In place of the base metal of ordinary unhappiness, they hold out the gold of authentic happiness that lasts forever.

If such happiness is indeed our final end, then this development is to be welcomed. But we should be clear about the pressures it creates. For along with the rapid strides now being made in the scientific understanding of mood, and the tendency to pathologize unhappiness, our post-Enlightenment faith inevitably pushes us in the direction of compensating for nature when nature fails us in the pursuit of our natural end. If happiness is not, as Freud said, “in the plan of ‘Creation,’” there are those ready to alter the handiwork of our maker to put it there.

That, of course, was the great fear of another of Freud’s contemporaries, Aldous Huxley, for whom genetic engineering and psychopharmacology harnessed in the service of happiness constituted two of the most chilling features of the dystopia he created in *Brave New World*. We are, one hopes, still somewhat far from that world, though not far enough. As Leon Kass and the President’s Council on Bioethics reminded us in a timely report, significantly titled *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness* (2003), the science of mood enhancement is upon us and is rapidly outpacing our readiness to think through its ethical implications. The members of the council argue, rightly, for increased moral reflection to help us understand our situation today and discern what might lie ahead. In the service of that same end, I would put forth the complementary goal of pursuing increased *historical* reflection on the pursuit of happiness.

**T**he late American historian Howard Mumford Jones once observed that to write a history of happiness would be to write “not merely a history of mankind, but also a history of ethical, philosophic, and religious thought.” Although it is not at all clear what a “history of mankind” might be—and few today, in any case, would have the audacity to attempt one—a history of happiness as a history of ethical, philosophic, and religious thought is not only conceivable, it is a necessary first step toward understanding the trajectory of this elusive but tremendously powerful concept. From a gift of fortune to an ethical ideal in the mind of Socrates, from the object of the “ceaseless and laborious efforts” of the philosophers to the summum bonum of Christianity—and well beyond—the idea of happiness has occupied a privileged place in Western culture. It continues to do so today. As the philosopher Pascal Bruckner has observed, “Happiness is the sole horizon of our contemporary democracies.” To bring that vision into better focus, we must take up Hegel’s neglected challenge to “contemplate history from the point of view of happiness.” We must conceive the history of all hitherto-existing society as a history of the struggle for happiness. □