

The happiness paradox

Ziyad Marar

Reaktion Books, 2003. PB, 208pp, £12.95, 1 86189 182 2

Better than well: American medicine meets the American dream

Carl Elliott

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The homeostatics of happiness

THE Western world has never been more prosperous than it is now, even if much of its wealth seems the outcome of smoke and mirrors. What to former eras were utopian fantasies (greater productivity, reduced infant mortality, higher life expectancy) are now so taken for granted we hardly notice them. What we notice, in fact, are the shortcomings. These days, in the garden of earthly delights, market forces have even managed to turn hedonism into a kind of militancy. Yet journalists, sociologists, and historians — not to speak of the occasional professional ethicist — are equally of one voice: we are not happy. It is one of the distressing futilities at the heart of modern life, one related to that other contemporary concern: the less real adversity we experience in our lives the more we feel under threat.

But what is happiness anyway? Why do we think we can call upon it for personal usage, when its etymology (the *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies it as an earlier synonym for fortuity) suggests happiness comes unbidden, like a state of grace? Why are we never further from happiness than when we think we are actually enjoying it? And why, in contempt of the Benthamite ‘felicific calculus’ which, refined into the tenets of utilitarianism, has dominated so much of modern British social history, did the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche write: ‘man does not pursue happiness: only the Englishman does that’?

These are some of the questions that the London-based writer Ziyad Marar attempts to answer in his lucid conceptual history of happiness, which he has larded with historical citations, film plots, and personal yarns. He starts with the shift in the term’s freight, circa 1750. No longer did happiness signify a state of being good; for the first time it made a gesture towards feeling good. Happiness was about to lose its public dimension and become a sensation, internalised and subjective, even though acceptance of a given social life had hitherto been the presupposition to there being moral judgements at all. Happiness could now be actively sought, being congruent to middle-class aspirations, perhaps even to the very

rhythm of middle-class life. The radical lawyer Saint-Just called it a new idea on the earth. Soon enough, post-revolutionary writers like Stendhal were wondering why people couldn’t be happy in the modern world. Part of the problem was that the old concept of happiness as a social good had not gone entirely. What Marar calls a paradox attaches to the fact that rather than having to legitimise himself before God, the new individual had to justify himself before other men, which, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau complained at great length, is a kind of secular hell. Being modern means having to compare and be compared. We think ourselves unique and irreplaceable, but that claim is pushed aside by the equal claims of millions of others. So we veer like weathervanes between the absurd notion that we are ‘self-made’ and our abject plagiarism of others, a habit that hints, most uncomfortably, that we hardly exist at all except by the force of our imitations.

‘The modern sensibility both wants to break free and wants to belong’, writes Marar. Acceptance of this paradox, in his view, at least offers the perspective of understanding how going after happiness pulls us from ‘disruption to conformity and back again’: what we cannot hope for is anything like the Aristotelian golden mean. Our societies are too unstable, too dependent on the cycle of appetites and disappointments, to allow that kind of repose. Unlike Aristotle, we’re not very sure what the purpose of a human life is.

The US Constitution guarantees, as Marar observes, the right to pursue happiness: it wisely refrains from saying anything at all about what happiness is. Carl Elliott, an American bioethicist, takes the view, in his tolerant and mildly ironic book, *Better than Well*, that the contemporary eagerness for the technological fixes offered by medicine has less to do with consumerism’s infantile prospects of instant gratification than a kind of evangelism, above all the desire to be fulfilled. If happiness is a duty that emerges, especially after the 1960s, as ‘an obligation to the self’, then the self-obliging individual is bound to get anxious about being authentic when complying so happily with medically-approved recipes for the good

life. Nobody admits to conforming in a society of individualists.

Elliott’s chapters flesh out his theoretical speculations nicely, moving from a consideration of the pioneering American sociologist Thorstein Veblen (who gave us the term ‘conspicuous consumption’ in 1899) to poorly explained phenomena such as the post-war rise of depression as a clinical diagnosis, short-lived psychiatric syndromes like fugue state and repressed memory, the new disorder of ‘apotemnophilia’ (the desire among otherwise healthy people to become an amputee), and the various kinds of surgical and drug-based treatments that offer to transform what would formerly have been thought invariant aspects of human personality and identity. If Americans brood about these treatments, as suggested by the loaded term ‘enhancement technologies’ (which obscures the fact that some of these are treatments in the conventional sense), it is largely because they brood about ‘the good life these technologies serve’. The pursuit of happiness, it would appear, is the same thing as unhappiness.

The main achievement of Elliott’s book, which draws purposefully on literature, history, sociology, and anthropology, is to show just how some trends in society demand to be examined not in the usual quantitative Benthamite mode but in the form of the extended essay. His book can be greatly recommended, even if it neglects to say much about the deeper influences on American ideas of happiness. Rousseau, for instance, is the torchbearer for America’s sense of itself, and his dream of being a new Adam could profitably have been brought into the discussion. Surprisingly, neither book gives much attention to the mechanisms of the market, which are thought to be able to maintain social peace by their ability to come up with the goods — even though they are undisguisedly in the dark about human needs. It is hard to imagine, in our escalating system of wants, that some of the ancient Greek philosophers actually thought the secret of happiness was to have as few needs as possible.

Iain Bamforth