

## Ah, Yes! The Happiness gig.

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In a recent issue of *Time* magazine, I came across a series of articles under the heading of “Mind & Body | Happiness.” I rather enjoyed reading them.

I love these verbose attempts to make us *feel* profound, reflective, scientific, or philosophical, especially when made by otherwise intelligent people who have a genuine skill for writing. (Those other attempts, by beginning writers, to emulate this style provoke an altogether different reaction.)

Blended together in these articles (though perhaps “dumped together” might be a better phrase) are the two major modern views of human nature and their corresponding concepts of human happiness. First we have the believers in biological determinism for whom happiness is a function of the physical body in accordance with pleasure/pain receptors and neurochemical variables evolved over countless millennia. Ah, sadly, our mentor-authors note, these receptors are too easily “fooled” by other stimuli (such as cocaine), thereby short circuiting the more desirable processes produced by Natural Selection—though why anything produced by the natural selection of randomly occurring mutations should be described as desirable or undesirable is a bit of a mystery. If the ability to be fooled is not conducive to survival, it will be rigorously selected out of the gene pool by the very fact that those exhibiting it will produce fewer offspring as a result of early death (from overdose). This is the Natural Order of things, Nature being “whatever is,” without any superstitious appeals to abstract and unnatural values created by those who foolishly assume a moral order in the universe. On the other hand, if drug addiction increases the number of offspring (by, for example, reducing inhibitions about sex and increasing the frequency of impulsive sex without consideration of birth control), then this ability to be fooled by the drugs is an evolutionary advantage and will be retained. Our authors, however, seem intent on making vague value judgments about the undesirability of broken lives, divorce, overdose, lost jobs, damaged property, etc., but wisely stop short of making moral judgments. After all, we really can’t help ourselves; it’s in our genes.

In addition, within these articles we have the whole behaviorist approach that, although not denying the reality of the strictly biochemical causes of happiness, is concerned primarily with the pragmatic aspects of manipulating the variables in order to produce desired behavioral outcomes—though why, in an evolutionary sense one set of behaviors is more desirable than another is unclear. Natural Selection will take care of the problem. In fact, it is clear that belief systems such as behaviorism itself should be understood only as the result of an evolutionary process that has selected the capacity to accept and understand behaviorism (or even to concern oneself with judgments about human behavior to begin with) as an element that for some reason increases one’s chances for passing one’s genes on to the next generation. If that is not the case, interest in behaviorism will eventually be selected out of the gene pool. Nevertheless, we should examine the nature of this biologically determined belief that behavior can be or should be modified for particular purposes (though any discussion of “purpose” does seem to be a teleological and therefore unscientific approach to things). From this view it seems that we are unhappy because we have been improperly or inconsistently conditioned (by the rewards and punishments of the chaotic social system around us) to seek or reject happiness or despair in ever more confusing cycles created by the very success of our oppressive capitalistic, materialistic socio-

economic environment—doomed to sadness by the very fact we are happy with our shallow successes.

Now, I do not wish to denigrate the remarkable fact that both of these modern thought systems have come to the astonishing discovery that (as I recall reading in some old book somewhere) a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions, but it seems to me that both views might have missed something significant, something vaguely hinted at in our authors' attempts to generate in the reader feelings of psychological/philosophical profundity (what rhetoricians call "pathos appeals") through their undeveloped allusions to ancient thought systems such as Hinduism and early Buddhism. I'll discuss the ideas of ancient thought systems a little later, but for the moment I want to focus on that element of appeals to feelings. In both systems, Happiness is postulated as being "feelings" produced by biochemical variables, either directly by such factors as food or sex or indirectly as responses to social stimuli that will trigger those biochemical variables. Happiness is pleasure; unhappiness is either the absence of pleasure or the presence of pain. Having set forth this proposition, the authors then bring out their allusions to ancient thought systems as though these were corroborating testimony. The allusions serve two rhetorical functions. First, they are apparent evidence—testimony of ancient and, therefore, probably expert witnesses. Second, they demonstrate a broad knowledge on the part of the authors and thereby increase our trust of them as experts (what is referred to as "ethos" appeals).

However, a real grasp of any of the world's great thought systems requires a somewhat different approach. Feelings, as wonderful as they are, will not necessarily produce a sufficient understanding of the adherents of these systems as THEY would have us understand them. Genuine respect for others cannot be merely warm feelings toward them if they define themselves as more than feelings. We may have to work at it, in a sense, learning their native language.

This idea may take a bit of work to explain. In fact, it is the need for explanation rather than emotional reaction that is at the crux of the matter. Let's begin with the allusions made in the *Time* articles to "the Founding Fathers." As with most allusions, there is not a specific, documented reference, but clearly the authors are suggesting the words of Jefferson in The Declaration of Independence. Had our authors actually quoted the words, almost certainly they would have said, "...Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness..." ending there, as most people do. Fortunately the original passage does not end there, for if it had, the whole argument justifying the American Revolution would have been reduced to a question of personal preference, rather than being (as it is) a balanced vision of universal human nature, individual happiness, and communal purpose.

Our authors suggest a purposeful wisdom on the part of the Founders in recognizing the creative social function of permitting individuals to pursue their individual pleasure. They, like most people today, equate the "Pursuit of Happiness" with the pursuit of pleasure. Admittedly, there is a good measure of truth in the idea that by seeking personal ends individuals may serve a common good. The personal ends being sought, from this perspective, may be defined hedonistically (food, sex, etc.) or with a more epicurean sophistication (art, music, etc.). In our social contract system, we apparently cooperate with others in their pursuits of pleasure and they reciprocate. Somehow, we all gain more pleasure through this systematic mutual masturbation.

We might do better, however, by trying to understand the Founders as THEY would wish to be understood. What did they have in mind by this word "Happiness"? Jefferson, to state the

obvious, was a very well read person, quite familiar with many ancient thought systems (perhaps, even, in their original languages). Among these ideologies are some that focused systematically on the question of happiness. Aristotle, for example, described happiness as a function of the soul in accordance with “virtue.” The word virtue here is one translation of the Greek term “ἀρετή,” a term that can also be translated as “excellence.” From this perspective, the pursuit of happiness seems to be the pursuit of some vision of human excellence. This is not excellence in a genetic sense as a biologist might use the term (that is, not the pursuit of the Master Race), nor is it an entirely social issue of constructing an orderly society, though Aristotle does seem to see the individual’s proper place as being among others in an orderly “polis.” Man is a being who simultaneously strives for personal fulfillment, social justice, and metaphysical Truth. (One wonders about the evolutionary advantage of the last of these.)

Or perhaps we should consider another famous ancient thinker whose works would have been available to Jefferson, Epictetus the Stoic. Here’s a fellow who maintained that happiness is not dependent upon anything external to ourselves: neither food nor drink (so much for neurotransmitters and pleasure/pain receptors); neither wealth nor jobs nor reputations nor social approval (so much for social conditioning). Pain and pleasure, or rather the fear and desire we feel toward them, are not really the sources of happiness or sadness.

I could go on, but I think the point has been made. Not everyone agrees that happiness and pleasure are synonymous. Some see the pursuit of happiness as a quest for human excellence with an understanding that any genuine excellence must be based on human nature itself, with the key element of humanity being rationality. “Man is a rational animal” Aristotle asserts, not just an animal, not just a bundle of biochemical variables subject to conditioning by desire for pleasure or fear of pain.

Desire and fear, Epictetus tells us, are the two foolish weaknesses that reduce us to something less than our full humanity. A man’s master is whoever can withhold what that man desires or produce what that man fears. Whoever would be truly free must desire nothing, must fear nothing, outside of himself. Pleasure is not synonymous with happiness. In fact, the pursuit of pleasure may well be destructive to happiness.

Nor is this view of humanity merely a Greek or even a Western idea. Our authors alluded to Buddhism. Do they really not understand that this ancient thought system also tells us that we must not limit ourselves by allowing ourselves to be controlled by fear and desire, by pleasure or pain?

But seeing ourselves as biochemical machines does have a tremendous advantage. It relieves us, as Samuel Johnson put it when discussing drunkenness, of the pain of being men. Whatever nasty, brutish things we may do to one another, whatever depression or rage we may feel, are all just the result of poor conditioning or biochemical evolution—“it’s not my fault.”

And it isn’t—it’s all cause-effect in a closed naturalist universe. Even these words I write, like the words of our authors, like all words, have no truth value. They are simply the inevitable conclusion of a chain of events begun by a sudden explosion of quarks billions of years ago. Any attempt to assess their “truth” value is a meaningless, teleological, even superstitious action. After all, it is an absolute truth that there are no absolute truths.

I think I need a drink...