

The Problem with Happiness

Gary Saul Morson

Lawrence B. Dumas Professor of the Arts and Humanities and Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures Northwestern University

A NEW SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS has blossomed. Observing that wealth has not made people happier, some economists have proposed that Western nations should focus on happiness rather than growth. Psychologists, too, have offered formulas for well-being. Jonathan Haidt's ideas about the sources of happiness, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow' and Richard Easterlin's famous paradox (that even though at a given point of time greater income correlates with greater happiness, it does not follow that over time as a society gets richer its people get happier), have offered real insights. More often, we get truisms presented as great scientific discoveries. How can we separate the hype from the wisdom?

Skepticism is evidently in order when *Forbes* magazine runs an article entitled "The Secret of Happiness Revealed by Harvard Study" (May 27, 2015) and *The New York Times* declares that social scientists have at last arrived at "a few simple rules" to make ourselves and others happy ("A Formula for Happiness," December 14, 2013). Do we really understand what happiness is? Should we assume that life is about attaining as much happiness as possible?

Some social scientists have proposed that instead of GDP, we should calculate a country's Gross National Happiness (GNH). Sure enough, since 2012, the United Nations World Happiness Report has ranked countries' happiness mathematically. It is nice to know that someone can scientifically determine how happy a person (or nation) is. In the 2018 UN report, Finland scores highest with a score of 7.632. I like that third decimal point.

To assign numbers as the UN does, one must assume that happiness is a single thing measurable by a single gauge. Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, took it for granted that "utility"—his preferred term—was all of a piece. "By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness (all this in the present case comes to the same thing)." Whatever you call it, you can measure it—Bentham suggested a "felicific calculus"—and compare it with similar measurements taken elsewhere.

The UN report lists five factors contributing to a country's happiness, including "perceptions of corruption" and "social support." Why not "*perceptions of social support*"? As demagogues know, it is a lot easier to create perceptions than reality. Not surprisingly, the European countries ranking worst on "perceptions of corruption" were all former Soviet republics or satellites. Compare Belgium's 0.24 with Russia's 0.025. That makes Russia 10 times as corrupt as Belgium, which sounds like an underestimate. Sometimes data on happiness is gathered by *asking* people to rate their happiness on a numerical scale, so perhaps perceptions of Russian corruption were evaluated this way? Such inquiries raise a nice question: can one trust self-reported data about corruption? Wouldn't one first need an "honesty in reporting index" and adjust all self-reporting accordingly?

Is it really true that everybody's goal in life is to be as happy as possible? To many that seems obvious: what else could we want? If we desire something, it must be because we think it will make us happier. To this assumption, Nietzsche replied, "Man does not strive for happiness. Only the Englishman does." Darwinian theory suggests that human beings must have evolved so that their strongest pull is not to happiness, but to passing on their genes, even if that makes them miserable. Perhaps liberal Western theorists have mistaken their own values for the only possible ones? Can one not imagine a devout Jew, Christian, or Muslim reacting with disgust to the notion that life is about happiness, rather than, let us say, piety? A commonplace of European intellectual history holds that during the Enlightenment many Europeans started asking not "how can I be good?" or "how can I be saved?" but "how can I be happy?" If so, then happiness as the goal of life is a fact of Western modernity, not of human nature.

Even many modern Europeans have placed the highest value not on happiness but on science and art. In her classic memoir *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda Mandelstam recalled that when she complained about the Soviet regime's horrible persecutions, her husband Osip—one of Russia's greatest poets—replied: What made you think life is about being happy? Much more valuable than happiness, in his view, is poetry. What sort of people, Russian thinkers often ask, believe that all that matters is individual contentment? They wonder: Isn't it clear that only shallow people can profess such values? And what happens to a society that believes the only goal of life is individual satisfaction?

As the philosopher John Rawls pointed out, a society of happiness-seekers would have no reason not to borrow heavily and leave the debt to future generations. If there

is nothing larger than us now, why not? *Après nous, la faillite* (After us, bankruptcy.) What's more: if the only reason to have children is to make oneself happier, rather than to fulfill a social or moral duty, a lot fewer people will have children. Mounting national debt and a birthrate well below replacement level: that describes Western Europe today rather well.

Even if one's goal is the best life for the individual, the search for happiness may be a false path. In Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, the hero has lived his life entirely for his own satisfaction. Like everyone around him, he can imagine no other way to live. Then he falls ill, begins to waste away, and discovers that everything that gave him pleasure and contentment has become distasteful. Delicious food leaves, literally as well as figuratively, a bad taste in his mouth. The closer death comes, the more he begins to grasp that in living for contentment rather than meaningfulness, he has wasted the only life he has.

As the end draws nearer, the more horrible it seems to Ivan Ilych that he has lived each moment for gratification in the present, leaving no meaningful residue. It as if his life had been lived by someone else, or by no one in particular. To live for pleasure entails sacrificing one's unique soul. At last Ivan Ilych recognizes that his suffering testifies to the pointlessness of life lived as if nothing higher than personal contentment exists. In his very last instants, he overcomes his former way of looking at things and discovers a way to live, however briefly, for something larger than himself. Only then does he find meaning.

Untroubled by the need for meaningfulness, some happiness theorists respond by simply including it among the criteria for personal happiness. But this response misses the point. If one performs unselfish actions for selfish gain, they are not unselfish actions. Genuinely unselfish

actions may (or may not) result in happiness, but to be unselfish in the first place, personal happiness cannot be their purpose. In much the same way, if one aims for meaningfulness as a source of pleasure, one is aiming for pleasure, not meaningfulness. *There are some things one cannot get by striving for them.*

Tolstoy was not the only great writer to have confronted the idea that life is about happiness, an idea that in ancient philosophy was called Epicureanism and that, in some form, is always with us. Great writers have offered at least three objections to this view of life. First, when it comes right down to it, even the most ardent defenders of Epicureanism do not really believe it. There are circumstances in which one would choose something else over happiness. Recall Nathan Hale's last words (quoted from Addison): "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Hale wasn't *happy* to be hanged. Indeed, sometimes people sacrifice themselves for others and then—oddly enough—rationalize it by telling themselves they were only being selfish, as their theory demands!

Second, happiness itself is much more mysterious than Epicureans, hedonists, utilitarians, or psychologists of happiness usually allow. Finally, life has presented extreme situations that test the philosophy of happiness, and it usually fails the test. What happens when an Epicurean finds himself in the Gulag?

Tolstoy and other Russian writers often elaborated on Voltaire's philosophical parables. In Voltaire's "The Story of the Good Brahmin," a wealthy Brahmin has everything one could wish for, including great intelligence and vast learning, but is miserable. Outside his palace lives an old woman, who is poor, stupid, ignorant—and happy. The Brahmin asks himself whether he would change places with her: would he agree to become stupid if that would make him happy? He realizes he would not, but

cannot say why. After all, if the goal of life is happiness, he should be willing to make the trade without a moment's hesitation. Could it be that other goods are not mere means to happiness, and that one might choose them over happiness?

If one aims for meaningfulness as a source of pleasure, one is aiming for pleasure, not meaningfulness. There are some things one cannot get by striving for them.

The story's narrator reports that he has posed the Brahmin's question to many intelligent people but has discovered no one "willing to accept the bargain to become an imbecile in order to be content." "After having reflected on the matter," the narrator tells us, "it appears to me that to prefer reason to happiness is sheer madness. How can this contradiction be explained?" Like so many other deep questions, he concludes, this is one we cannot answer.

Dostoevsky sharpened Voltaire's insight. He asked: imagine you were offered the opportunity to live in a palace where your every wish would be instantly granted. There is only one catch: you can never leave. Gratifying your every wish: that would be your whole life from now on. Would you take the offer?

A modern philosopher, Robert Nozick, has reformulated Dostoevsky's parable in neurophysiological terms. Suppose that "super-duper neurophysiologists could stimulate your brain" so that you would think you were having experiences while you were actually just "floating in a tank, with

electrodes attached to your brain.” This “experience machine,” as Nozick calls it, would insure you would experience supreme happiness for the rest of your life. Like Dostoevsky, Nozick asks: “Would you plug it in? *What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?*”

If you would not plug it in, then why not? Nozick offers a few interesting answers, which, again, recall some of Dostoevsky’s. “First, we want to *do* certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them. . . it is only because first we want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them or thinking we’ve done them.” Second, we want to *be* a certain sort of person, but someone floating in a tank is an “indeterminate blob. There is no answer to the question of what [such] a person is like... Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving? It’s not merely that it’s difficult to tell; there’s no way [that] he *is*.” Third, such a machine limits us to a man-made reality, “to a world no deeper or more important than that which people can construct. There is no *actual* contact with any deeper reality.... Many persons desire to leave themselves open to such contact and to a plumbing of deeper significance.” Sum it all up, and you see that “what is most disturbing about [these machines] is their living of our lives for us. . . Perhaps what we desire is to live (an active verb) ourselves, in contact with reality. (And this, machines cannot do *for* us.)”

Dostoevsky adds a few more answers. In one sketch, he imagines that some devils have created a socialist paradise, so that, as in the palace of perpetual pleasure, complete prosperity always reigned. Material wealth, inventions, scientific knowledge— all of these would come gratuitously. There would be no obstacles to overcome, no sacrifices to make. Of course, humanity would at first be ecstatic, Dostoevsky opines. But within a generation, the ecstasy would turn to bitterness.

People would suddenly see that they had no more life left, that they had no freedom of spirit, no will, no personality, that someone had stolen all this from them.... People would realize that there is no happiness in inactivity, that the mind which does not labor will wither, that it is not possible to love one’s neighbor without sacrificing something to him of one’s own labor, that it is vile to live at the expense of another, and that happiness lies not in happiness but only in the attempt to achieve it.

But isn’t that a paradox? How could you even strive for something unless you believed that getting it would make you happy? Should you instead strive for the striving? But then the same question arises at one remove: striving for the striving for what?

The modern genre of the dystopia—including works like Eugene Zamiatin’s *We* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*—grew directly, and explicitly, from passages like this in Dostoevsky’s fiction. In Huxley’s novel, the hero escapes from paradise in order to live in a world of risk where choice and effort make a difference. He seeks a world where suffering is an intrinsic part of life. Why?

Dostoevsky argues that life, to be meaningful, must take place in a special kind of *time*. Our efforts must matter, which means that we must live into an *uncertain* future. Effort can make a difference only if the desired outcome is possible but not guaranteed. We value something only if we choose it and work for it. For lives to be meaningful, time must be open: more than one outcome must be possible. Meaning exists in a world with *suspense*.

For Dostoevsky, this fact about human nature explains why capital punishment is so horrible. “Murder by legal sentence is immeasurably more terrible than murder by brigands,” observes Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*.

Anyone murdered by brigands, whose throat is cut in a wood... must surely hope to escape till the very last minute. There have been instances when a man has still hoped to escape, running or begging for mercy after his throat was cut! But in the other case all that last hope, which makes dying ten times as easy is taken away for certain. There is the sentence, and the whole awful torture lies in the fact that there is certainly no escape, and there is no torture in the world more terrible.

For Dostoevsky, this is what socialists fail to understand. Intended as a blessing, socialism offers us a world of absolute security, and so takes away our humanness. In principle, its goal is that experience machine. The UN calculators of happiness also presume that the more security, the better. The less insecurity, the more happiness points a society is awarded.

Not only do we have goals other than happiness, but happiness itself is anything but simple. It is not just immensely complex, but also fundamentally mysterious, and the deeper we probe, the more mysterious it turns out to be. In his story "Happiness," Chekhov, like Voltaire, Dostoevsky, and Nozick, offers a parable on the mysterious nature of happiness and the human quest for it. An old shepherd and a young shepherd converse with an estate overseer about a great fortune that, legend has it, is buried somewhere nearby. In Russian, the words for "fortune" and for "happiness" are the same, so everything said about one applies to the other.

The old man's family has been seeking this fortune for generations, but it is protected by a charm. Without a special talisman, one could be standing right next to it and not see it. "There is fortune," he explains, "but what is the good of it if it is buried in the earth? It is just riches wasted with no profit to anyone, like chaff or sheep's dung, and yet there *are* riches there, lad, fortune enough for all the country round and no one sees it." The overseer agrees: "Yes, your

elbow is near, but you can't bite it." We reflect: if happiness is so close, perhaps it is not hidden in the distance, but hidden in plain view. We need to discern what is right before our eyes.

But that is not the conclusion the old man draws: "Yes," he reflects, "so one dies without knowing what happiness is like." At this point, Chekhov pauses to describe the vegetation and wildlife in the desolate surroundings: "No meaning was to be seen in the boundless expanse of the steppe." Perhaps nature is not just indifferent, but positively spiteful, leading people to seek a happiness that does not exist.

When the overseer leaves, the young shepherd asks: "What will you do with the treasure when you find it?" Strangely enough, this question has never even occurred to the old man. "Judging from the expression on his face, indifferent and uncritical, it did not seem to him important and deserving of consideration." The young peasant puzzles over a mystery: why do old people search for hidden treasure, "and what was the use of earthly happiness to people who might die any day of old age?" We leave the two of them, each pondering to himself, the old man on the treasure's whereabouts and the young one on yet another mystery: "What interested him was not the fortune itself, which he did not want and could not imagine, but the fantastic, fairy-tale character of human happiness."

The Soviet period sharpened these mysteries. The greatest Russian writers realized that totalitarian conditions made the idea that life is about happiness look absurd. Put to the test of extreme conditions, utilitarianism failed. Conditions were certainly extreme. The network of concentration camps known as the Gulag archipelago; the deliberate starvation of millions of peasants during the collectivization of agriculture; the routine

use of torture during investigations: all these extreme situations served as tests for philosophies of life. How did different philosophies measure up?

The plot of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel *In the First Circle* turns on the actions of a professed Epicurean. When Innokenty Volodin, a Bolshevik diplomat, and his wife Dotmara were married, "their outlook on life was identical. No obstacles, no inhibitions must come between wish and fulfillment. 'We are people who behave naturally,' Dotmara used to say. . . . Whatever we want we go all out for it.'" Volodin's friends call him an Epicurean, and his life turns into a test of Epicurean doctrines.

It might seem odd that a Bolshevik should be an Epicurean, but the novel makes clear that these two forms of materialism share a common tenet: there are no values beyond the material world of here and now. Epicureanism applies this insight to the individual, so that the sole standard of good and evil is the individual's pleasure and pain. Bolshevism applies the same idea collectively. In Bolshevik ethics, as in Epicurean, all other standards but getting what one wants—for Bolsheviks, that meant what the Communist Party wants—are illusions.

It is not quite right to say that this doctrine allows the Party, when necessary, to use mass murder, torture, or anything else that works. To phrase the point that way—"when necessary"—is to suggest that before using such measures one must determine whether some more humane method would work as well. But if there are no other sources of value, then there is no need to do so. Compassion, justice, kindness, the sanctity of human life: in Bolshevik philosophy, all these values could only come from religion or its close relative, philosophical idealism. To display compassion, then, was to prove one was not a true materialist and therefore not a proper

Bolshevik. If he knew what was good for him, every Bolshevik tried to show he had no compassion at all. The most brutal methods were *preferred*, and no matter how many people Stalin ordered killed, his secret police asked to kill more.

By the same token, it is obvious to Volodin that for an individual, the only standard for judging an action is whether it achieves personal satisfaction. So it comes as a surprise to him when, six years after his marriage, pleasures begin to disgust him. Volodin stumbles on his mother's letters from before the Revolution and begins to follow her unfamiliar way of thinking. She speaks of staying out all night from love of art, as if art were a value in itself! "Goodness shows itself first in pity," she writes, a doctrine that contradicts Volodin's Bolshevik morals: "Pity? A shameful feeling . . . so he had learned in school and in life." Equally shameful is compassion. "Even the words in which his mother and her women friends expressed themselves were outdated. In all seriousness, they began certain words with capital letters—Truth, Goodness, Beauty, Good and Evil, the Ethical Imperative." Strangest of all, Volodin's mother valued tolerance of other's beliefs. "If I have a correct worldview," her son asks himself, "can I really respect those who disagree with me?"

When Volodin reads about crimes the regime has concealed, his worldview totters. "The great truth for Innokenty used to be that one was given only one life. Now, with the feeling that had ripened in him, he became aware of another law: that we are given one conscience, too." He seeks out his Uncle Avenir, who, he discovers, lives in a remote place. Despite his education in philosophy, Avenir does manual work because "When I empty the slops, it's with a clear conscience. . . . But if you've got a position to hold down . . . you have to be dishonest."

At last Volodin himself is arrested. How does the philosophy of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain stand the test of Bolshevik tortures? Epicurus had said: "You should not fear physical suffering. Prolonged suffering is always insignificant; significant suffering is of short duration." But what if you are deprived for days of sleep in a box without air? What about ten years of solitary confinement in a cell where you cannot stretch your legs? Is that significant or insignificant?

Volodin thinks of Epicurus's words—"Our inner feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction are the highest criteria of good and evil"—and only now does he truly understand them. "Now it was clear: Whatever gives me pleasure is good; what displeases me is bad. Stalin, for instance, enjoyed killing people—so that, for him, was 'good'?" How wise such philosophy seems to a free person! But for Innokenty, good and evil are now distinct entities. "His struggle and suffering had raised him to a height from which the great materialist's wisdom seemed like the prattle of a child." The philosophy of pleasure can be believed only by those sheltered from life.

Solzhenitsyn's history of the Soviet forced labor camp system, *The Gulag Archipelago*, describes conditions so extreme that often the only way to survive was at the expense of someone else. Steal his food, kill him for his shoes. Sooner or later, Solzhenitsyn writes, every Gulag prisoner faced a choice. Should you take a vow "to survive at any price"?

*This is the great fork of camp life.
From this point the roads go to the
right and to the left.... If you go to the
right—you lose your life, and if you go
the left—you lose your conscience.*

If you believe the Bolshevik credo, that only the material result counts, you go to the left. "But that is a lie!" Solzhenitsyn declares. "It is not the result, *but the spirit*." As a prisoner, Solzhenitsyn discovered that choosing spirit transforms your whole life. "Your soul... now ripens from suffering." You learn for the first time to understand genuine friendship. And you recognize "the meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering, but... in the development of the soul." Solzhenitsyn explains: prison taught me "how a human being becomes evil and how good." Suffering gave me a meaningful life that the mere pursuit of happiness never could. He concludes: "Bless you prison, for having been in my life!"

If we are to make our lives meaningful, we must live for values beyond happiness, values that may conflict with happiness. Sometimes suffering can be beneficial, not because it may make us capable of greater pleasures, but because it may deepen the soul. We must live, and we must love, not just on this scrap of earth, not just in the here and now, and not just for our pitiful selves, but for the world of good and evil, of truth and falsehood, and of the great values espoused in Russian literature. A