

THE HAPPINESS TURN

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This special issue represents the first cultural studies collection on the question of happiness and the modalities of its various affects. Happiness has long been at the centre of philosophy, posed as the moral question of what counts as the good life. Different traditions within philosophy have offered very different arguments about happiness, from classical Greek models of *eudaimonia* as a good and virtuous life, to utilitarian models of happiness as the greatest good.¹ The papers in this special issue offer fresh perspectives on this intellectual history of happiness.

Rather than begin with the question ‘what is happiness?’ a cultural studies approach asks: ‘what does happiness do?’ To what do we appeal to when we appeal to happiness? It is certainly the case that happiness is appealing. Happiness is consistently described as the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as what gives meaning and order to human life. As Bruno S. Frye and Alois Stutzer argue in their economics of happiness, ‘Everybody wants to be happy. There is probably no other goal in life that commands such a high degree of consensus’.² Happiness might acquire its hold by being given as an essential truth, as ‘something’ that we have already consented to in the very direction of our wants.

Cultural studies can make an important contribution to debates about happiness precisely given its willingness to refuse to consent to its truth. We might even suspend belief that happiness is what we want, or that happiness is what is good. In this mode of suspension, we can consider not only what makes happiness good, but also how happiness *participates* in making things good. Cultural studies can allow us to explore how happiness can make certain truths ‘true’ and certain goods ‘good’. By analysing appeals to happiness, we can consider what it is that makes happiness appealing. Our task in this special issue is to reflect on the very terms of its appeal.

Our aim is also to respond to happiness as a way of responding to what comes up. Happiness has certainly ‘come up’. In 2006 alone, numerous books were published on the science and economics of happiness.³ The popularity of therapeutic cultures and discourses of self-help have also meant a turn to happiness: many books and courses now exist that provide instructions on how to be happy, drawing on a variety of knowledges, including the field of positive psychology, as well as on readings of Eastern traditions, especially Buddhism.⁴ It is now common to refer to ‘the happiness industry’: happiness is both produced and consumed through these books, accumulating value as a form of capital. As Barbara Gunnell describes: ‘the search for happiness is certainly enriching a lot of people. The feel-good industry is flourishing. Sales of self-help books and CDs that promise a more fulfilling life have never been higher.’⁵

The media is certainly saturated with images and stories of happiness. In the UK, many broadsheet newspapers have included ‘specials’ on happiness⁶ and a BBC programme, ‘The Happiness Formula’ was aired in 2006.⁷ This happiness turn can be described as international; you can visit the ‘happy plant index’ on the World Wide Web and a number of global happiness

surveys and reports that measure happiness within and between nation states have been published.⁸ These reports are often cited in the media when research findings do not correspond to social expectations, that is, when developing countries are shown to be happier than over-developed countries. One article about the ‘shocking’ findings of global happiness research begins with the sentence: ‘Would you believe it, Bangladesh is the happiest nation in the world! The United States, on the other hand, is a sad story: it ranks only 46th in the World Happiness Survey’.⁹ The shock reveals the expectation of where happiness should be found. Happiness and unhappiness become ‘newsworthy’ when they are attached to claims about specific individuals, groups and nations.

The happiness turn can also be witnessed in changing policy and governance frameworks. The government of Bhutan has measured the happiness of its population since 1972, represented as Gross National Happiness (GNH). In the UK, David Cameron, the leader of the Tory party, talked about happiness as a value for government, leading to a debate in the media about New Labour and its happiness and ‘social well-being’ agenda.¹⁰ A number of governments have been reported to be introducing happiness and well-being as measurable assets and explicit goals, supplementing the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with what has become known as the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI).¹¹ Happiness becomes a measure of progress – a performance indicator – as well as a criterion for making decisions about resources. The presumption here is that the happier you are, the better you are doing, whether the ‘you’ is an individual or collective actor.

Unsurprisingly, then, Happiness Studies is now an academic field in its own right: the academic journal *Happiness Studies* is well-established and a number of Professorships in Happiness Studies exist. When we describe such shifts as ‘a happiness turn’, it is important to note that what we turn to when we turn to happiness is not necessarily the same thing. Within academic scholarship, we have witnessed a turn to happiness within a range of academic disciplines, including history, psychology, architecture, social policy and economics. It is important to track what happiness does within these disciplines, which can teach us not only about the history of happiness studies, but also about the history of disciplines. For example, Lisa Blackman’s paper in this special issue begins with the question of whether we can catch happiness from a proximate happy person as a way of returning to the intellectual history of psychology, and its various traditions for thinking through affect, contagion and embodiment. How we theorise happiness shapes how we theorise the individual, language, sociality, even ‘life itself.’

Happiness can be an object of knowledge, and implicated in how we approach our objects of knowledge. It is important to think more about how Happiness Studies constitutes happiness as its own object. We can describe, for convenience, two main trends within Happiness Studies: the first could be thought of as ‘the science of happiness’ (including work in economics, social policy and psychology) and the second as ‘classical happiness’ (including work in philosophy, history and literature).

The new science of happiness offers a revival of the nineteenth-century tradition of English utilitarianism in which the task of government is to maximise happiness. This science of happiness is thus far from new. Richard Layard’s *Happiness: Lessons from the New Science* explicitly

returns us to the work of Jeremy Bentham, who himself drew on David Hume, as well as Beccaria and Helvétius. The roots of the science of happiness take us back to the origins of political economy: just recall Adam Smith's argument in *The Wealth of Nations*, that capitalism advances us from 'miserable equality' to what we could call 'happy inequality', such that 'a workman, even of the lowest and poorest order, if he is frugal and industrious, may enjoy a greater share of the necessaries and conveniences of life than it is possible for any savage to acquire'.¹² Of course, nineteenth-century utilitarianism involves an explicit refutation of such a narrative, in which inequality becomes the measure of advancement and happiness. Bentham, following Wedderburn, describes the principle of utility as dangerous for government: 'a principle, which lays down, as the only *right* and justifiable end of Government, the greatest happiness of the greatest number – how can it be denied to be a dangerous one? dangerous to every Government, which has for its *actual* end or object the greatest happiness of a certain one'.¹³ Despite this belief that every person's happiness should count equally (the happiness of the greatest number is not the happiness of a certain *one*), the utilitarian tradition did uphold the principle that increased levels of happiness function as a measure of human progress. We can recall Émile Durkheim's forceful critique of this principle: 'But in fact, is it true that the happiness of the individual increases as man advances? Nothing is more doubtful'.¹⁴

Within the new science of happiness, which can be understood as a revival of English utilitarianism, it is taken for granted that there is something called happiness; that happiness is good; and that happiness can be known and measured. These systems of measurement have been called 'hedonimeters'¹⁵ and are mostly based on self-reporting: what they actually measure is how happy people say they are, although self-reports have been supplemented by some recent work in neurosciences. Happiness studies proceeds by looking for correlations between reported happiness levels and other social indicators, creating what are called 'happiness indicators'. Marriage has been widely hailed as the 'primary happiness indicator', a fact explored by Heather Love in her contribution to this special issue. Another happiness indicator has been posited as 'stable communities', as I consider in my paper on multiculturalism and happiness. Rather than assuming happiness is where it is found, we could argue that happiness is found where it is expected to be, even when happiness is reported to be missing. Happiness is expected to reside in certain places, those that approximate the taken-for-granted features of normality. Happiness profiles hence profile a certain kind of person, as we can see in the following description:

happy persons are more likely to be found in the economically prosperous countries, where freedom and democracy are held in respect and the political scene is stable. The happy are more likely to be found in majority groups than among minorities and more often at the top of the ladder than at the bottom. They are typically married and get on well with families and friends. In respect of their personal characteristics, the happy appear relatively healthy both physically and mentally. They are active and open minded. They feel they are in control of their lives. Their aspirations concern social and moral matters rather than money making. In matters of politics, the happy tend to the conservative side of middle.¹⁶

The face of happiness, at least in this description, looks very much like the face of privilege.

Rather than assuming happiness is simply found in ‘happy persons,’ we can consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable. Attributions of happiness might be how social norms and ideals become affective, as if relative proximity to those norms and ideals creates happiness. Lauren Berlant has called such a fantasy of happiness a ‘stupid’ form of optimism: ‘the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking will secure one’s happiness’.¹⁷

The science of happiness defines happiness both as ‘the greatest good’ and as ‘feeling good’. The science of happiness hence involves a belief that you can measure feeling. Richard Layard argues that ‘the best society ... is one where the citizens are happiest’ and that ‘happiness is feeling good’.¹⁸ For Layard, we can have confidence in happiness measurements because ‘most people find it easy to say how good they are feeling’.¹⁹ The science of happiness relies on a very specific model of subjectivity, where one knows how one feels, and where the distinction between good and bad feeling is secure, forming the basis of subjective as well as social well-being. The science of happiness hence includes work within psychology most often described as ‘positive psychology,’ as a psychology that not only measures but seeks to maximise the impact of positive feelings on the individual person.²⁰

Cultural theory, as well as psychoanalysis, may have an important role to play in these debates by offering alternative theories of emotion that are *not* based on a subject that is fully present to itself, on a subject that always knows how they feel. Cultural and psychoanalytic approaches can explore how ordinary attachments to the very idea of the good life are also sites of ambivalence, involving the confusion rather than separation of good and bad feelings.²¹ Reading happiness becomes a matter of reading the grammar of this ambivalence.

Other recent books on happiness are written as direct critiques of the new science of happiness, calling for a return to a more classical conception of the good life.²² We could call this literature ‘classical happiness’. One example is Richard Schoch’s *The Secrets of Happiness*, which begins with the following lament:

Unhappy is the story of happiness. More than two thousand years ago, when the ancient Greeks first thought about what constitutes ‘the good life,’ happiness was a civic virtue that demanded a lifetime’s cultivation. Now, it’s everybody’s birthright; swallow a pill, get happy; do yoga, find your bliss; hire a life coach, regain your self-esteem. We have lost contact with the old and rich traditions of happiness, and we have lost the ability to understand their essentially moral nature. Deaf to the wisdom of the ages, we deny ourselves the chance of finding a happiness that is meaningful. We’ve settled, nowadays, for a much weaker, much thinner, happiness; mere enjoyment of pleasure, mere avoidance of pain and suffering. (The so-called ‘new science’ of happiness perpetuates this impoverished notion of the good life).²³

Some of the papers in this issue allow us to ask questions about what exactly is being idealised in this nostalgia for classical ideas of the good life. Claire Colebrook’s paper challenges the very idea that new therapeutic cultures of happiness are (necessarily or only) at odds with classical conceptions. Colebrook explores how the classical model of happiness as a virtuous life shares with the new cultures of happiness a certain impulse to order: happiness requires an origin and

telos, which means happy subjects narrate their lives in a certain way, as having shape, purpose and direction. By implication, to critique the (classical) critique of (popular) happiness is not to become uncritical of popular happiness and its technologies of subject formation. It is instead to think about the history of happiness as a history of the present.

Critiques of the happiness industry that call for a return to classical concepts of virtue not only sustain the association between happiness and the good, but also suggest that some forms of happiness are better than others. This distinction between a strong and weak conception of happiness is clearly a moral distinction: some forms of happiness are read as worth more than other forms of happiness, because they require more time and labour. Noticeably, within classical models, the forms of happiness that are higher are linked to the mind, and those that are lower are linked to the body. In Schoch's description a 'weaker, thinner' happiness is linked to 'mere pleasure'. Hierarchies of happiness may correspond to social hierarchies that are already given.

In other words, happiness is located in certain places, as being what you get for being a certain kind of being. The being of happiness would certainly be recognisable as bourgeois. We could even say that expressions of horror about contemporary cultures of happiness involve a class horror that happiness is too easy, too accessible, and too fast. We just have to remember that the model of the good life within Greek philosophy was based on an exclusive concept of life: only some had the life that enabled one to achieve a good life, a life that involved self-ownership, material security and leisure time. For Aristotle happiness was both about being 'trained in the right habits' and 'depends on leisure' such that 'the happy man' will spend most of his life 'in virtuous conduct and contemplation'.²⁴ The classical concept of the good life relied on a political economy: some people have to work to give others the time to pursue the good life, the time, as it were, to flourish. Arguably, such a political economy is essential rather than incidental to the actualisation of the possibility of living the virtuous life.

Ideas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy 'in the right way'. For example, Fiona Nicoll explores in her paper on happiness and gambling how the distinction between the recreational gambler and the addict rests on class as well as racial distinctions. The recreational gambler has a 'good happiness' and the addict is unhappy, or has a 'bad' or misdirected happiness. Some forms of happiness are 'worth' more, becoming signs of worthiness. In turn, unhappiness can function as an explanation of social deviation and inequality. A cultural studies approach to happiness might consider happiness as a world-making device, as bringing a certain world 'happily' into existence, in which the line between good and bad is clearly drawn. Cultural Studies might in its very worldly orientation, offer a rigorous analysis of happiness and power: ideas of happiness support concepts of the good life that take the shape of some lives and not others. Reading happiness is a matter of reading how happiness and unhappiness are distributed and located within certain bodies and groups.

Our aim in this special issue is to generate new readings of 'ideas of happiness' that operate within culture. Papers consider different cultural forms: including literature (Berlant, Colebrook), film (Ahmed, Love), therapeutic culture (Blackman, Colebrook), autobiography (Hamilton), as well as cultural objects such as pokies (Nicoll). Papers do not just reflect on how happiness

is represented within culture, but also on how happiness generates effects, bringing a certain world into existence. Happiness can be understood as a promise or aspiration (Ahmed, Berlant, Love, Nicoll); a habit (Blackman); a narrative (Colebrook); a memory (Hamilton), as well as an emotion, feeling or affect. Happiness does things, for sure.

One common connection between the papers is a concern with happiness as a mode of temporality. A number of papers consider how happiness operates as a futurity, as something that is hoped for, creating a political and personal horizon that gives us an image of the good life. If we hope for happiness, then 'what' are we hoping for? Lauren Berlant's paper in this special issue considers the affective range of optimism, and how optimism involves a 'cluster of promises' that can sustain our attachment to objects in advance of their loss. Optimism for Berlant can be cruel (though not always, and not only) and has an intimate relation to how subjects endure situations of poverty, violence and despair. I also consider happiness as a promise in my contribution. The very promise of happiness – that if you do this or if you have that, then happiness will follow – is what directs us towards certain life choices and not others. Heather Love addresses this promissory logic of happiness by considering the idealisation of marriage. Love considers the significance of queer unhappiness in *Brokeback Mountain*, asking whether queer politics should invest its hopes and longings in the image of the good life implicit in marriage, or even the 'happy ending' of coupledness, or whether the task for queers might be to find joy and pleasures elsewhere, perhaps somewhere 'over the rainbow'.

While some of the papers consider happiness as an orientation towards the future, Carrie Hamilton raises the question of the past, and what it means to think about 'happy memories'. One of the truisms rehearsed in much of the literature is that happiness and good feelings tend to leave fewer traces behind: Hegel famously described periods of happiness as 'the empty pages of history'.²⁵ Hamilton explores happy memories as a way of considering how reading individual and collective histories as suffering misses out on the positive affects that might trouble as well as follow the ordinary scripts of happiness. Happiness becomes not something that we can simply retrieve as memory, but a relationship to the past that keeps open the possibility of happy memories.

Although many of the papers in this special issue can be read as critiques of how happiness supports social norms and ideals (by making them affective, by giving them purpose, direction, form) it is not the case that the labour of this work should be read only as critique. All the papers also offer glimmers of other happier possibilities: whether in the moments of joy and becoming that cannot be reduced to narrative (Colebrook), in the proximity to others that makes happiness sociable and contagious (Blackman); in the ordinary and difficult labour of living that keeps us open to being startled (Berlant); in the pleasures of the body that do not fit a normative concept of the good (Hamilton); in the possibilities opened up by the refusal to let go of suffering (Ahmed); in the intimacies of bodies that dare not and cannot come together in a happy marriage (Love), or in the agentic actions of communities that refuse to invest in the good objects of the nation (Nicoll). By suspending belief that happiness is a good thing, this special issue does not suspend but enable a conversation about what is good. If an alternative history of happiness begins from some other point than the good, then this history opens up other grounds for happiness. Indeed, if we return to the etymology of happiness – coming from

the word 'hap' suggesting chance – we might open up its ground. The 'hap' in 'happiness' is the same 'hap' in the word 'perhaps'. An alternative history of happiness might be one that is open to the 'perhaps' of what happens, which follows the less well-trodden paths on its grounds.

NOTES

1. For excellent accounts of different philosophical traditions on happiness see V.J. McGill, *The Idea of Happiness*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1967 and L.W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996.
2. Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Human Well-Being*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, pxi.
3. There are too many books to list all of them here. The following are some of the key books published in 2006: Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Harper Collins, 2006; Jonathon Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, William Heinemann, 2006; Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, Penguin, 2006; Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, Atlantic Monthly, 2006; Daniel Nettle, *Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile*, Oxford, 2006; Mathieu Ricard, *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*, Little, Brown and Company, 2006; Richard Schoch, *The Secrets of Happiness*, Profile Books, 2006; Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*, Hamish Hamilton, 2006. See Boyan's review article in this issue, which offers a reading of Layard and McMahon.
4. Examples of recent books on happiness that we could describe as popular psychology, or 'how-to' manuals include: Heather Summers and Anne Watson, *The Book of Happiness: Brilliant Ideas to Transform Your Life*, Capstone Publishing, 2006; Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realise Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, Nicholas Brealey Publishers, 2003; and Robert Holdon, *Happiness Now!: Timeless Wisdom for Feeling Good Fast*, Hodder Mobius, 1999. One of the most popular books on happiness is based on a series of interviews between Howard Cutler and the Dalai Lama, *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1999.
5. See Barbara Gunnell, 'The Happiness Industry', *The New Statesman*, 6/11/2004.
6. For example, the *Independent on Sunday* had a special on 'The Secrets of Happiness: Why the Ancients Hold the Key', 17/03/2006.
7. Information about the BBC programme, *The Happiness Formula*, can be accessed on: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/happiness_formula/.
8. See: <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/list.htm>. The results of global surveys of happiness are debated in the journal *Happiness Studies*.
9. See <http://www.nriol.com/content/articles/article1.html>,
10. For details of David Cameron's speech about happiness. See the BBC website: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5003314.stm.
11. For further information about GPI and the genealogy of the term see: <http://www.gpiatlantic.org/gpi.htm>.
12. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations Books I-III*, Penguin Books, London, 1999, p105. Thanks to David Glover for this point.
13. Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p59.
14. Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, George Simpson (trans.), Free Press of Glencoe, Illinois, 1960, p241.
15. Nettle, *Happiness*, op. cit., p3.
16. Ruut Veenhoven, 'Questions on Happiness: Classical Topics, Modern Answers, Blindspots', in Fritz Strack, Michael Argyle and Norbert Schwarz (eds), *Subjective Well-Being: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1991, p15.

17. Lauren Berlant, 'Two Girls, Fat and Thin' in S.M. Barber and D.L. Clarke (eds)

Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory, New

York, Routledge, 2004, p75.

18. Layard, *Science*, op. cit., p5, p6.

19. Ibid., p13.

20. Positive psychology began with a critique of how psychology has taken 'anxiety, depression and other negative states' as its object lesson (Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Happiness*, London, Methuen, 1987, p1). For more recent developments see C.R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez (eds), *The Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002; and Mihály Csíkszentmihály, *Flow: the classic work on how to achieve happiness*, London, Rider & Co., 2002.

21. There have been a number of books published within cultural studies on emotion and affect, though notably they tend to emphasise the role of negative emotion. See for examples: Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Performativity, Pedagogy*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2003; Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004; Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2005; Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004. Psychoanalysis offers an important critical perspective on happiness, drawing on Freud's critique of the pleasure principle as well as Lacan's seminars on ethics. See Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death and the Remainder of Life*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press and Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, London, Verso, 2002.

22. Some recent books aim to combine the new science of happiness, positive psychology and classical conceptions, such as Haidt, op.cit., *Happiness Hypothesis*.

23. Schoch, *Secrets*, op.cit, p1.

24. Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, J.A.K. Thomson (trans), London, Penguin Books, 1976, pp337, 329, 83. I am not suggesting here that the Aristotelian concept of the virtuous life can be reduced to this critique. Rather I am questioning the *gesture* that idealises classical happiness over contemporary happiness. The long Aristotelian traditions of writing on happiness as virtue offer alternative concepts of the good life that arguably are based on a less exclusive or particular concept of life. Alasdair MacIntyre's work, for example, describes virtue as 'an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any goods', Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Duckword, 1981, p178. See also his preface to the revised tradition of *The Unconscious: A Conceptual Analysis*, Routledge, New York, 2004, where he develops a defence of an Aristotelian concept of a 'teleologically structured life' against psychoanalytic models. Indeed, he suggests that a psychoanalytic critique of neurosis is 'not only compatible with but in need of such a conception of human flourishing'. However, MacIntyre's subsequent re-definition of human flourishing as 'the actualization of [human] distinctive potentialities issues in reason-informed activity' might still rely on an exclusive model of what counts as life, pp34-5. Thanks to David Glover for suggesting I return to MacIntyre.

25. G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Leo Rauch (trans), Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1988, p29.