

Luka Zevnik

# Critical Perspectives in Happiness Research

The Birth of Modern Happiness

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*I dedicate this book to my late father,  
Ivo Zevnik.*

# Introduction: Towards a Critical Perspective in Happiness Research

Ever since Socrates (in Plato's Republic 352a) put forth his famous question about 'how we ought to live our lives,' happiness has not only represented one of the cardinal themes in Western thought, but it has also been perceived as being 'central to the point of human experience' (Nettle 2008, ix). While the intensity of interest in happiness in Western culture has varied across time, it is safe to argue that the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st are characterized by increased attention to this important but elusive theme. The list of self-help books offering various recipes for achieving happiness seems endless: *Happiness now!* (Holden 1999), *The Happiness Makeover: How to Teach Yourself to Be Happy and Enjoy Every Day* (Ryan 2005) and *Happy for no reason: 7 steps to being happy from the inside out* (Shimoff 2009), to name only a few.

The discourses about happiness have not only flooded the field of so-called pop-psychology, but also popular culture. Hollywood movies like the *Pursuit of Happiness* and *Eat Pray Love* testify that the cultural industries no longer sell only dreams, but also certain cultural representations of happiness. Journalists are also igniting the happiness bonfire: happiness and well-being have become common themes in both the electronic and more traditional print media like magazines and newspapers. The famous *Time* magazine, for example, dedicated a whole issue to happiness in 2005. Consumer culture is no exception, as we are increasingly sold not just products, but pure happiness. For example, Coca Cola's global campaign launched in 2009 was called *Open Happiness*, and the editorial in the IKEA 2010 catalog, entitled *Happiness*, promises 'a happier life at home' (provided that it is furnished with IKEA's furniture, of course).

On the other hand, people who doubt that happiness is a thing that can simply be bought and consumed have started engaging in various spiritual and healing practices more or less connected to new religious groups and movements that are increasingly penetrating the dominant culture. One can also educate oneself at an increasing number of conferences and seminars about happiness. From there, it is only a small step to therapy and so-called positive psychology, which opposes the traditional psychological focus on negative and pathological mental states and instead emphasizes the cultivation of positive ones.

A strong interest in happiness is also present in other academic disciplines. It is possible to observe a revival of interest in the philosophical tradition of the ‘art-of-living,’ which aims to provide philosophical answers to the question of how to lead a good and happy life. Meanwhile, more and more economists and politicians are acknowledging that the development of countries should not only be based on economic indicators like GDP, but it should also include indicators that show the well-being and happiness of their citizens. Last but not least, in the last few decades, a specialized interdisciplinary field called Happiness Studies, dedicated exclusively to the study and empirical research of happiness, has gained a lot of ground in academia.

All these recent developments, which constitute what Ahmed (2007/2008) calls ‘the happiness turn,’ represent the first reason why happiness figures as a topic worthy of an in-depth study. The second major reason to embark on a study of happiness is that even though in the last decades we have witnessed an inflation of happiness research, there have been a very few attempts to provide a more critical perspective on happiness. In addition, the existent critical approaches within the so-called critical tradition/theory mostly focus on themes that are widely regarded as inherently problematic such as the problem of material inequalities, exploitation, racism and violence. While these are certainly important areas of critical analysis, I believe that, in addition to them, certain themes that are widely accepted as positive such as happiness can indeed be problematic and hence demand critical attention. In other words, even the themes (or one could even say precisely the themes) constituting our experience that are widely accepted as positive and unproblematic can (all the more easily) be connected to relations of power in society or better yet, can be employed in order to exercise certain forms of power. The next logical step from questioning the widely assumed “intrinsically positive nature of happiness” in Western culture is to also question its universality. Is happiness really a timeless universal experience?

The book offers an interdisciplinary exploration of the origins of happiness in the Western culture that questions these widespread assumptions. As such it provides a novel critical perspective on happiness that represents an alternative to the existent body of research dominated for the last 30 years mostly by psychology. In contrast to the prevalent quantitative empirical approach I intentionally do not start by articulating a construct/definition of happiness or well-being. Drawing from anthropology, cultural studies, critical sociology and cultural history I rather trace the unfolding of wider social processes and practices in the context of which happiness (along with its main characteristics) is defined (and made meaningful) by individuals, groups of individuals and institutions. It could hence be argued that the definition of happiness actually spans across the whole book and is not limited to a condensed “a priori definition”. In this sense, the book is—epistemologically speaking—a call to “*return to happiness*”. This paradigm shift aims to affirm wider historical, social and everyday meanings and practices related to happiness as vital focus of research. The call to “return to happiness” also implies that various scientific constructs and definitions of (subjective) well-being conceived in the ivory towers of academia should be stripped of their scientific myth about representing

(more) objective models of happiness and must rather be recognized for what they are: merely one array of cultural constructions that have emerged as part of the current historical regime of happiness in Western culture.

In the first part of the book I offer a condensed overview of happiness research (Chap. 1) and an in-depth, critical review of the existent theories and research of happiness and its relation to culture (Chap. 2). To that end, the existent theories and empirical research concerning the connection between culture and happiness are critically examined and supplemented by insights from anthropology, cultural psychology, cultural studies, history and neuroscience. This provides the basis for the provocative argument that happiness is not universal but instead a culturally and historically specific experience that emerged in the 17th and the 18th century and that is characteristic only to the Western world. With the help of a novel interdisciplinary methodological framework developed in the end of the first part (Chap. 3), the second part of the book, expands upon this argument through an analysis of the social, religious, ethical and political processes that lead to the emergence of the experience of happiness.

The second part of the book is essentially the world's first Foucauldian inspired cultural history of happiness or put in Foucauldian terms: a genealogy of happiness. Genealogy of happiness is conducted with the help of the concept of experience used by the late Foucault to make sense of his entire opus. Following from this, genealogical analysis is conducted in every chapter in the second part along the three interconnected axes of experience that, according to Foucault, constitute the experience of any object: the axis of truth, the axis of relationship to the self and the axis of power. Accordingly, every chapter in the second part is organized into three main subsections, each corresponding to one respective axis of experience.

The second part of the book starts by examining how Christianity established salvation as the cardinal ideal of human existence and why such an ideal wasn't achievable in the present life (Chap. 4). The analysis of the medieval Christian experience is concluded by arguing that it cannot be simply equated with the experience of happiness, which only emerged in the 17th and 18th century, when the ideal of human existence increasingly started to be pursued in the present life.

The first steps towards the birth of happiness are traced back to the times of the Renaissance and the Reformation movement (Chap. 5), which were still, however, mainly characterized by the Christian experience. In addition to the existent and still prevalent Christian ideal of salvation, the Renaissance movement (starting in the 15th and 16th centuries) and the Reformation movement (starting in the 16th century) introduced what I call the problematization of (good) feeling and the affirmation of everyday life, which later resulted in the experience of happiness. The problematization of (good) feeling on earth and the affirmation of everyday life for some time, therefore, coexisted with the preceding and still dominant idea of salvation, until in the 17th century the former started to slowly but surely dominate the latter.

In Chap. 6 I argue that it was precisely this transformation (in which good feeling on earth in connection with the affirmation of everyday life started becoming the primary ideal of human existence) that represented the first major development,



which marked the birth of the modern experience of happiness. The second such major development was that the ideal of human existence not only became possible already in this world, but also that it became perceived as entirely achievable with human efforts. Since the birth of happiness also established the basic structure for all later forms of happiness in Western culture, the illumination of this process is relevant not only because it can support the argument of the historical and cultural character of happiness, but also because it represents a valuable point of departure for any further inquiries into manifestations of happiness in our culture. In this regard Chap. 7 briefly outlines the development from the birth of happiness to its contemporary manifestations. Here it has to be noted that the books' main focus is on the birth of happiness in the 17th and the 18th century. Consequently the analysis of the developments after the birth of happiness conducted in Chap. 7 is less in-depth and should be seen as a point of departure of future research. As an example of the latter I conduct an analysis of modern consumer culture that is depicted as one of the main strategies of happiness in contemporary western societies. In the Conclusion (8) I recapitulate the main steps leading to the birth of happiness and argue that happiness has represented one of the central themes guiding the processes of modernization that have fundamentally determined what we experience today. Following from this, (the birth of) happiness is presented as essential to our understanding of a broader context in which important aspects of individual and social life—such as consumer culture, the modern state, economic system, science and technology, idea of progress, etc.—have emerged in the West.

Ljubljana, 2013

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**Part I**  
**The Return to Happiness**

# Chapter 1

## Overview of Happiness Research

This chapter will provide a condensed overview of the major approaches for the study and research of happiness that have started multiplying especially after the 1970' and try to illuminate their main characteristics. Since the cardinal aim of this chapter is not to provide an inclusive intellectual history of the idea of happiness in the western culture, we shall not explore the works of specific authors in-depth. Rather, the aim is to map out a theoretical and research field within which it will be possible to situate all the major approaches for the study and research of happiness in the western culture. Within this field we are then going to position our own theoretical point of departure for the study of happiness that will be predominantly focused on the connection between culture, happiness and relations of power.

### Happiness and Philosophy

The philosophical approach initiated by Socrates's question about how we ought to live our lives has had the longest and the richest tradition of studying happiness in the western culture out of which all other "non-philosophical" approaches have later evolved. Within the modern classification of philosophy happiness is positioned in the domain of moral philosophy. According to the editors of a recent philosophical reader on happiness, the theme of happiness actually represents 'a central topic of moral philosophy' (Cahn and Vitrano 2008, p. vii). In this sense, argue Cahn and Vitrano (2008, p. vii), the entire history of ethics could even 'be viewed as a set of variations on the theme of happiness'.

The philosophical approach to happiness deals with the nature, source and value of happiness and it includes questions like: What is happiness? What are its causes and conditions? How to determine the criteria for what counts as causes, conditions and source of happiness? How to live a good and happy life? Is something like ultimate happiness even possible? Is happiness necessary for a worthwhile life? Is it sufficient? Does happiness depend on one's state of mind, one's consequences or both? Etc.

Ever since the Antiquity it is hard to find a single philosopher in the history of western thought who wouldn't tackle at least one of the above questions. While in more general discussions about happiness within (moral) philosophy all of these questions are usually closely connected, it is nevertheless possible to identify two specific sub-approaches that vary according to the emphasis given on particular lines of questioning. Insofar as the majority of explicit philosophical takes on happiness pertain to one of these sub-approaches they deserve a closer inspection.

The oldest approach which elaborates on the Socrates' question how we ought to live our lives is usually referred to as the tradition of philosophy as a way of life. Due to its practical appeal it is often also called the tradition of art-of-living (Nehamas 1998, p. 2), which according to Dohmen (2003, p. 351) forms a part of the subfield of moral philosophy called normative ethics. Art of living 'is a form of self-direction with a view to the good life' (Dohmen 2003, p. 351) that stresses the connection between *logos* and *bios*, between theory and practice. Namely, argues Nehamas (1998, p. 2), within the philosophy of art-of-living 'what one believes and how one lives have a direct bearing on one another'. According to Nussbaum (1994), Hadot (1995) and Nehamas (1998) the art-of-living philosophy has predominated above all other forms of philosophy in the ancient Greek and Roman times. Antique philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Seneca etc. have all provided and pursued different visions on how to live a happy life.

With the rise of Christianity in the second half of the first millennia, art-of-living philosophy has mostly given way to Christian theology. In the contemplations of theologians like St. Augustine, John Cassian, Gregory of Nyssa and St. Aquinas the classical art-of-living (or the care of the self as Foucault (2000a, p. 288) calls it) has mostly been transformed and integrated into Christian renouncement and deciphering of the (earthly) self. In this sense happiness as the ultimate ideal of human existence was replaced by the notion of bliss (beatitude) that belonged to the realm beyond this world.

Within modern philosophy the tradition art-of-living regained some of its original momentum in the works of philosophers like Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, Artur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, Friederich Nietzsche, Pierre Hadot, Michele Foucault etc. We have to note, however, that according to several prominent modern philosophers such as Kant (in Nehamas 1998, p. xii), Nietzsche (1997) and Nehamas (1998), art-of-living tradition has never reacquired the predominant role it had occupied in Antiquity and represents only a marginal current in modern philosophy.

Already Kant (in Nehamas 1998, p. xii) in the *The Philosophical Encyclopaedia* was aware that modern philosophy seldom fails in following the art-of-living imperative for harmonizing theory and practice towards a good and happy life: 'When will you begin to live virtuously, Plato asked an old man who was telling him that he was attending a series of lectures on virtue. One must not just speculate forever; one must one day also think about actual practice. But today we think that those who live as they teach are dreamers'. Nietzsche (1997, p. 187) was even more harsh in his critique of the practical sterility of the modern institutionalized philosophy: 'The only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves something, namely

trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities: all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words'. Nehamas (1998) observes that the situation diagnosed by Kant, Nietzsche and later also Foucault (2005) persists in contemporary philosophy. Still, he argues, philosophy has only 'few practical implications for everyday life' (Nehamas 1998, p. 1). In order to at least partly re-activate the art-of-living tradition in contemporary philosophy Nehamas' (1998, p. 2) book 'aims at opening a space for a way of doing philosophy that constitutes an alternative, though not necessarily a competitor, to the manner in which philosophy is generally practiced in our time'. For Nehamas (1998, p. 2) this implies recognizing that a conception of philosophy as a way of life 'exists, study how it survives in some major modern philosophers, and see that it is what some of us are still doing today'. And indeed according to several authors involved in the art-of-living themselves (see Cottingham 1998; Dohmen 2003; Kekes 1995, 2002), art-of-living is gradually gaining ground in contemporary moral philosophy. This "revival of art-of-living philosophy" is part of a larger trend of increased interest in the theme of happiness towards the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century in the western societies, which Ahmed (2007/2008) calls 'the happiness turn'.

While the tradition of art-of-living is predominantly concerned with ways of achieving individual happiness, there is another notable sub-approach of philosophy of happiness that emerged much later than the art-of-living and that extended the philosophical discussion of the quest for happiness to the realm of the collective. In Antiquity it was held that happiness was only achievable by way of a prolonged and intensive cultivation of one's life that was reserved for the rarified ethical elite. Following from this, philosophy concerned with happiness was predominantly equated with art-of-living understood as an individual exercise aimed at achieving individual happiness in the present life. With the introduction of the notion of original sin Christianity universally refused the possibility of attaining the ideal of human existence on earth replacing the art-of-living philosophy with theology and Christian asceticism. The break with the centuries long tradition of sin and the decisive step towards the philosophy of collective happiness was only made in the seventeenth century by a rationalist current in the Christian tradition. The so-called Deism and natural theology transposed the universalizing message of Christianity from 'universal sinfulness' to the idea of a 'universal providential order created by the merciful God for the mutual benefit and happiness of all of its inhabitants both in heaven and on earth. On such bases it was possible for the first time in the history of western culture to conceive of a philosophy of communal or public happiness most lucidly captured in the famous maxim 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. The philosophy of communal happiness culminated in the enlightenment utilitarian philosophy, which directly connected happiness with the maximization of earthly sensual pleasure.

The main innovation of utilitarian philosophy for the study of communal happiness was the idea that 'if maximizing happiness is the point of individual lives, then the point of systems of government and economy should be to maximize collective or aggregate happiness' (Nettle 2008, p. ix). Dedicated to the enlightenment vision



of human and social progress and their belief that human affairs can be examined with a set of objective numerical and mathematical gauges initially developed for the study of natural laws, utilitarian philosophers have formulated various algorithms to measure (the progress towards) individual and collective happiness. In spite of the fact that they lacked precise data for their algorithms, the philosophy of communal happiness laid the foundations for what has later become a science of happiness.

## The Science of Happiness

For millennia, argues Ed Diener (2008, p. 245) the father of empirical happiness research, the study of happiness ‘was the domain only of philosophers, religious scholars, and armchair thinkers’. On the crossroads of psychology and sociology a new approach to happiness has emerged in the western culture in the 1960’, which claims that in comparison to the speculative nature of inquiry in philosophy, it can provide systematic, empirical and scientific accounts of happiness. At least indirectly marked by philosophical approach to happiness, similarly also the science of happiness has two main sub-approaches: one that mainly focuses on individual happiness and one that focuses on (measuring and providing) collective happiness.

Considering its main emphasis on individual happiness<sup>1</sup> the so-called positive psychology pioneered by psychologist Martin Seligman (2003) could be seen as a scientific version of art-of-living philosophy. Contrary to the approach of traditional psychology that is dedicated to the ‘amelioration of psychopathology’ (Ryan and Deci 2001, p. 142), positive psychology focuses on the scientific study of happiness, well-being and positive emotions. Positive psychologists clearly acknowledge that they ‘have not invented the study of happiness, well-being, or strengths’ (Positive Psychology Center 2010). In their view the most important contribution of their approach to the study of happiness has rather been

to make the explicit argument that what makes life most worth living deserves its own empirically based field of study, to provide an umbrella term that brings together isolated lines of theory and research, to promote the cross-fertilization of ideas in related fields through conferences, summer institutes and research grants, to develop a comprehensive conceptual view of broad notions of happiness, to bring this field to the attention of various foundations and funding agencies, to help raise money for research, and to firmly ground assertions on the scientific method (Positive Psychology Center 2010).

In this sense ‘positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive’ (Positive Psychology Center 2010). According to the Positive Psychology Center (2010) such ‘objective,

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<sup>1</sup> Even though positive psychology is undoubtedly also concerned with some aspects of communal happiness and emphasizes a good social context as one of important conditions for individual happiness, it is primarily concerned with individual happiness.