

Book review

The happiness hypothesis: Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom, Jonathan Haidt, Basic Books, New York, 2006, 320 pp., \$15.95, hardback (ISBN 0465028012)

Happiness was a hot topic some 2500 years ago. And it's a hot topic now. From Plato to positive psychology, from Buddha to the burgeoning business of self-help books, the understanding of happiness—what it's made of, how to get it—has been of persistent human concern. With the book *The happiness hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt makes a significant contribution to the long history of understanding happiness.

The book sets out to examine several perennial issues in the study of happiness and to refine and extend those issues in light of current scientific research. This is no small task. Few books attempt to tackle such a big topic in all its bigness while sticking to research, and none has surpassed this book's proficiency in doing so. Haidt situates research from a wide range of psychological disciplines (notably social, personality, developmental, biological, and evolutionary psychology) in the context of the world's ancient wisdom traditions (notably Greek philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism in India, and Taoism in China). The difficulty in attempting this task lies either in slighting the ancient writings or in overextending the current research. But Haidt has a gift for doing neither. Plus, ancient Eastern philosophy is now fashionable in the West and is frequently misrepresented when either skeptically critiqued or blindly championed. In contrast, Haidt is careful in his examination of the ancient East and West, making sound connections to the present. As for those connections, he doesn't simply paste a pithy, ancient quote at the top of a chapter and then focus only on the current research. He presents the research in the context of ancient wisdom, such that the presentations of ancient philosophy and modern research flow smoothly and inform each other, showing how current research has its roots in longstanding ideas on happiness—and how those ideas pan out in the light of empirical evidence.

Readers who are psychologically minded (though not necessarily in the field of psychology proper) and

partial to life's big questions will be drawn to *The happiness hypothesis*. The book caters to the academic looking for an integration of recent psychological research on happiness, well-being, and meaning-making as well as to the student and educated public looking for a scholarly yet accessible introduction to the study of happiness. No other book that I have read covers the topic of happiness in the particular manner of this book, and then from such an optimal balance of breadth and depth. As for engaging books about research on meaning and happiness, two that kept coming to mind are from the early 1990s, Baumeister's *Meanings of life* and Myers's *The pursuit of happiness*. The present book integrates the spirit of those two with the added framework of ancient philosophy on the good life plus, of course, more recent research. As a fan of ancient world wisdom and modern psychological science, I've long thought that such a book would be useful, so it is immensely pleasing to see that such a book has emerged, and so successfully.

In addition to substance, the book is plain fun to read. Haidt writes in a lively, inviting style. Metaphor and illustration go a long way in this book both to crystallize ideas and to entertain. Haidt is funny but not flippant (the latter of which can happen all too easily when taking a critical eye toward life's big questions and simultaneously not becoming a sourpuss). Overall the book is refreshing, stimulating, and engaging from beginning to end.

A very good read of the good life

Aristotle equated happiness with the good life, which he called *eudaimonia*. This happiness consisted of not only pleasure but also virtue, such that the good life was one filled with pleasant experiences and a high degree of moral character. (He also said that happiness required leisure and luck, a point to which I'll return later.) More recently, two approaches to studying happiness have emerged in psychological science (Ryan & Deci, 2001). *Hedonic* happiness deals with attaining pleasure and minimizing pain. *Eudaimonic* happiness deals with attaining pleasure plus phenomena like virtue, meaning, and growth, all combining into a more enduring kind of happiness.

The happiness hypothesis clearly examines happiness in the eudaimonic tradition.

The book sets out to examine two main “happiness hypotheses” that have persisted over the centuries. The first is that “happiness comes from getting what you want,” but the book soundly dismisses that kind of happiness as fleeting. The second is that “happiness comes from within,” a favorite of many ancient philosophers as well as contemporary psychologists (academic and popular). Yet the book provides ample research showing that external conditions, notably in the form of relationships, do contribute to happiness. In the end, Haidt suggests that happiness comes from “between” the internal and the external (which is not to say that it comes from both internal and external; beyond that, I won’t give away the ending).

The bulk of the book is devoted to explicating 10 “great ideas” about happiness and the good life that began in ancient times and that have received extensive study in modern psychological research. These great ideas include the divided self (e.g., the mind–body problem, controlled versus automatic processing), conformity and the difficulty of changing one’s mind, the golden mean, blame, how progress and status affect happiness, love, suffering, virtue, divinity, and purpose in life. Some of these topics (love, purpose) are naturals for the study of happiness. Others are less so (blame, conformity). Indeed Haidt launches his tour of happiness research from a perilous port. The first chapter emphasizes the immense power of automatic, unconscious forces over controlled, conscious forces. Here Haidt employs the metaphor of elephant and rider (respectively), an image that recurs effectively throughout the book. He then neatly summarizes the argument that conscious processing is new on the evolutionary scene, “like new software, Rider version 1.0,” adding that the “rider evolved to serve the elephant.” While Haidt is not the first to claim that consciousness is a new phylogenetic development, he not only revisits the idea in an engaging fashion but also does so in order to lay a foundation for the topic of *happiness*. However sensible to the modern scientist, such a proposition—that an enduring happiness demands conscious processing and that consciousness is largely trying to serve a beast that seeks immediate and biological desires—is bound to dampen even the optimist’s hopes for intentionally cultivating more happiness in his or her own life. In the second chapter, Haidt goes on to explain how readily our minds follow suit. Research on negativity bias and affective priming show that if we weren’t already disposed toward fear or prejudice, we can all too easily be made to act on them. Following that is perhaps hope’s most damning metaphor in the book, the “cortical lottery”: some people are born with

happy neurochemistry, whereas others are not. Despite these and other hindrances to happiness, happiness emerges, and Haidt spends much of the rest of the book showing ways in which it does. To content-code this book as a reflection of Haidt’s personality, I would call him a skeptical optimist.

Each chapter I found to be insightful and very good reading, filled with useful information (for research, for teaching, and personally) and skillfully argued opinions. Even where I disagreed with a point or thought “but then again,” I could easily identify how and why I disagreed—a result, I always think, of the writer’s clarity. Haidt comments on current trends in a range of areas related to happiness in the public at large (areas like education, politics, and religion) particularly as they deal with morality, his specialty area. For example, Haidt argues against the current focus in moral philosophy and education that is placed on moral reasoning to the exclusion of moral character, an erstwhile concern. What’s lost, he concludes, is training in how to incorporate moral decisions into one’s understanding of self. The self is both elephant and rider, and Haidt argues convincingly that the moral-reasoning approach takes “the rider off the elephant.” But nothing is that simple, and Haidt goes on to criticize those who advocate the teaching of moral character with the mentality of good people versus evil people. Haidt cites positive psychology’s study of virtuous qualities or “strengths of character” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) as a constructive force in this moral-education debate.

Some nitpicking

A few problematic issues did surface with some regularity, though none significantly detracted from the overall force of the book. First, happiness was not sufficiently distinguished from meaning. In psychological research, the good life (and eudaimonic well-being) has been framed more broadly as pleasure plus personal meaning-making (e.g., Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). What’s counter-intuitive in this research is that measures of happiness and measures of conceptual meaning-making (such as moral reasoning) seldom correlate in adult populations. In other words, people who can think complexly about their lives are about as likely to be happy or unhappy. Yet the popular belief that happiness and meaning (notably virtue) go hand in hand has persisted since Aristotle (Flanagan, 1991). While *The happiness hypothesis* excels at integrating research related to happiness, this integration might come at the expense of emphasizing the important differences between happiness and phenomena like meaning and virtue.

Second, as for meaning-making and morality, the structural–developmental approach comprises a significant portion of research on these topics yet is not represented in this book. For example, the theories of Loewinger (1976) and Kohlberg (1969) chart the stages or degrees of conceptual complexity by which people create psychosocial meaning and reason morally. Perhaps the absence of this work comes from Haidt’s position (mentioned above) on moral reasoning in general, or the fact that the structural–developmental approach is in many ways antithetical to social psychology. But whatever the reason, the developmental approach offers something that the book is missing. The book explains very well the *limitations* to happiness and meaning, and it also explains how happiness and meaning emerge despite those limitations. But the *heights* and potentials of eudaimonic happiness are less explored. Structural–developmental theories can chart those heights, or at least the higher capacities for meaning-making that contribute to eudaimonic happiness.

Finally, you can’t readily judge this book by its cover. The first subtitle, “Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom,” checks out okay, but “why the meaningful life is closer than you think” does not. In fact, if you don’t “win the cortical lottery” and have a low set point for happiness, wouldn’t the meaningful life be further than you thought?

Conclusion

Aristotle had a formula for eudaimonic happiness, essentially that happiness = pleasure + virtue + leisure + luck. *The happiness hypothesis* largely supports that formula. The first two components of happiness (pleasure and virtue) are covered extensively throughout the book (again, in the eudaimonic tradition of happiness). As for leisure, the book notes the general finding that money doesn’t buy happiness except when comparing poverty to the middle class; here leisure and happiness do go together. Finally, luck: the cortical lottery is all about luck, as are many of the life conditions that happen to shape our personal worlds.

However, *The happiness hypothesis* offers much, much more than a confirmation of Aristotle’s

formula. Indeed, many of the great old sages and writings covered in this book (Plato, the Stoics, Aristotle, Buddha, Jesus, Lao Tzu, the Upanishads, to name just a few) receive both confirmation and disconfirmation. Haidt uses research in psychology and related disciplines to partially support, partially refute, and ultimately refine the great tenets of wisdom that are our cultural and pan-cultural heritage. This wisdom heritage is not merely matter for disengaged philosophizing; this heritage forms the values and assumptions that guide our individual and collective beliefs about how to live a life worth living. To have these cornerstone thoughts examined in such a rigorous and engaging manner is a great boon for the book’s readers and for the field of psychology. One moral emotion that comes to mind is, appropriately enough, awe of the sublime: *The happiness hypothesis* situates the individual human life in a context that is historically, biologically, socially, psychologically, philosophically, and otherwise grand.

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