

No laughing matter

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Who do you think would be the happier of these two people: Bob, an intellectual 35-year-old single, athletic, handsome white man earning \$100,000 in sunny California who spends his spare time reading and going to museums? Or Mary, a sociable 65-year-old plain, black, overweight woman on dialysis, who spends most of her free time on church activities and lives with her husband in a snowy part of New York state on a joint income of \$40,000?

Before I started to read some of the new books on so-called "happiness research", I would have bet that Bob would be happier. But I would have been wrong, according to University of Virginia psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who poses the Bob and Mary case in his work *The Happiness Hypothesis*. One of the biggest findings in happiness research, says Haidt, is that environmental and demographic advantages - such as Bob's health, wealth, youth and sunshine - are less important than we think. Marriage and strong social connections are more significant, so Mary is likely to be happier than Bob.

Talk of happiness studies, or the "new science of happiness", is everywhere at the moment. The BBC has just aired a six-part series on it. The Conservative leader, David Cameron, wants to focus "not just on GDP but on GWB - general well-being". Harvard University's most popular class is now a course in happiness, or "positive psychology". Cambridge University and Wellington College boarding school offer similar instruction.

The flurry of recent books on the subject is a symptom of the happiness phenomenon. But these writers are also fuelling the debate, as they bring previously obscure academic research on happiness - by economists, philosophers, psychologists and geneticists - to more mainstream attention.

So what can an academic usefully add to such a familiar, yet elusive topic as happiness? Happiness is common territory for philosophers who, going back to Plato and Aristotle, have broadly believed that contentment depended on leading a virtuous and ultimately satisfying "good life". And we understand - even if we don't always agree with - the great religious figures of history who said happiness was the reward for a life well lived. But is there really such a thing as an objective state of happiness that can be scientifically measured and observed? There is, according to today's happiness thinkers.

Psychologists say the simple act of asking people how they feel over time will give a surprisingly accurate assessment of their contentment. Those reported levels of happiness may be further verified, they say, by measuring brain activity with electronic scans (happy people have more activity on the left front of the brain; unhappy ones have more on the right). Happiness-school economists then say these findings should help us to shape public policy, by focusing more on the "general well-being" of which Cameron now speaks.

But the happiness movement is making some people very unhappy. Wellington College's classes are "a recipe for mediocrity" according to one critic in *The Independent*; "namby-pambying" (*the Daily Mail*); and an "ideal formula for raising good animals" (*The Times*).

Frank Furedi, professor of sociology at the University of Kent, says the new "happiness crusade" would please the Controller in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. To Furedi, the secret of happiness is a paradox: you only find it by seeking something else, namely the virtuous life advocated by the ancient Greeks. "Happiness," he has written, "is the indirect outcome of engaging with others in the pursuit of civic virtues, and attempting to do good."

So who is right? Those who think we cannot much improve on what the ancients said about happiness? Or those who argue that, just as our surgeon knows more about brain surgery than Hippocrates, we can now have a much more sophisticated understanding of what makes us happy?

A persuasive case for the scientists rather than the sages can be found in five new books on happiness, including the one that tries to argue the reverse.

Richard Schoch, professor of the history of culture at Queen Mary, University of London, is very much of the school that the ancients still know best. I was looking forward to reading Schoch's book, *The Secrets of Happiness*. The blurb on the cover by Julian Baggini, editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine*, said it was a "kick up the rear to the 'new science of happiness'" and "hugely enjoyable".

This will depend on how hugely enjoyable you find Schoch's descriptions of, say, Stoicism ("like a battery fully charged, it is ever ready") or desire ("Silk against skin. Scarlett Johansson").

As for the kick up the rear to the happiness thinkers, Schoch singles out Richard Layard, whose *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2005) has become a bible for neo-utilitarians swayed by his argument that the ability to measure happiness has significant public policy implications.

One of Layard's central observations is that even though westerners are now better paid, fed and sheltered, they are not necessarily happier. And once average income exceeds about \$20,000 per head, more money does not guarantee greater happiness. So governments would be better off raising taxes and tackling great sources of misery such as mental illness, which accounts for a quarter of disease yet receives just 13 per cent of health spending in the UK and 7 per cent in the US.

But Schoch says Layard's definition of happiness ("feeling good - enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained") is a "weaker, thinner" version of contentment and "the so-called 'new science' of happiness perpetuates this impoverished notion of the good life."

Real happiness, he says, requires much more effort. Far better to consider the lessons of detachment and indifference offered by the Stoic thinkers, such as Seneca, or the traditions of India's jnana yogins, who gave up their family, home, property and career to pursue wisdom, and therefore true happiness.

Schoch does admit that walking out on one's children, spouse, home and job is unrealistic for most of us. "But that is our problem," he says, "and it reveals more about us - our weaknesses, our fears or perhaps just the circumstances that press upon us from all sides - than it does about happiness."

But Schoch's closing definition of what it means to be happy is curiously unsatisfying: "To be authentically happy means to take possession of ourselves, to bring about the person we are in potential, to become more real." (His italics.) For many readers, Layard's ideas of how to achieve happiness will sound more real still.

Nicholas White, a professor of philosophy at the University of California, Irvine, offers a more balanced view of the nature of the ancients in *A Brief History of Happiness*. The chief worth of White's (unhappily dull) book lies in its attempt to explain how thinking on happiness changed from Greek antiquity through to Jeremy Bentham's 19th century utilitarian idea of the "greatest happiness of the greatest number". Unfortunately, his history barely mentions the most recent thinking on happiness. But he does concede that when it comes to giving advice on happiness, philosophers may not be the best source.

"Philosophers' concrete advice about how to become happy isn't any better (in fact, it's probably worse) than that of the average person," says White. "They generally don't know enough of the relevant facts, and they don't have the right temperament."

Moreover, the Greek prescription for a happy life was often rigidly planned. This, says White, is because Plato and Aristotle were fundamentally private educators, "in the business of persuading Athenian gentlemen to send their sons to them for training for a career". This meant they saw the need for plans, requiring education to see them through. Real life, of course, can be far more complex.

A more comprehensive, and much more gracefully written, narrative of the evolution of thinking on happiness comes from Darrin McMahon, a Florida State University history professor, in *The Pursuit of Happiness*. McMahon is wary of some of the newer happiness thinkers: "It is probably worth treating the recent 'revelations' of psychologists as less genuinely revealing than they and their publicists would have us believe."

Even so, he acknowledges that many of the new studies "do shed empirical light on a process of pursuit whose rhythms we have followed in a less clinical context over the course of roughly two and a half thousand years".

One of the psychologists McMahon cites is probably the most entertaining happiness thinker, Harvard professor Daniel Gilbert, author of *Stumbling on Happiness*. Gilbert specialises in "prospection", the study of how we think about our futures. His style may not appeal to all readers but there is much to admire in a Harvard man willing to start a chapter with the words: "The last decade has seen an explosion of books about poo." (Referring to children's books about potty training, his point is that the brain learns to make its owner use a toilet much more readily than it learns what really makes us happy.)

Gilbert briskly disposes of the idea that the ancients have a monopoly on wisdom about happiness, in part because their lives were so fundamentally different from ours. As he says, we barely think about the fact that most of us now make three big life decisions: where to live, what to do and whom to marry. But we are among the first humans to have had such choices. For most of recorded history, people lived where they were born, did what their parents did (Millers milled; Smiths smithed) and married whomever religion, caste or geography dictated. The agricultural, industrial and technological revolutions unleashed an explosion of personal liberty our ancestors never faced and, as Gilbert says, "for the very first time, our happiness is in our hands".

The trouble is, as Gilbert shows, the human brain is pathetically ill-equipped to decide what to do to be happiest. We are, he says, the only animals whose brains can imagine the future. "Until a chimp weeps at the thought of growing old alone or smiles as it contemplates its summer holiday, or turns down a toffee apple because it already looks too fat in shorts," humans will always be distinguished by their brains' ability to imagine.

But we don't imagine well when it comes to thinking about future happiness. We could draw on the advice and experience of others (as we did when learning about toilet training). But we don't, in part because we believe ourselves to be terribly special.

As several studies cited by Gilbert show, young Americans expect to live longer, stay married longer and have more trips to Europe than average. They also believe they are more likely to have a gifted child, own their own home and appear in the papers than have a car accident or venereal disease. (The rest of us are not as optimistic as Americans, but still believe our futures will be superior to those of our peers.)

Similarly, we continue to strive for bigger cars or better lovers, even when past experience teaches we will rapidly adapt to their wonder and they won't make us any happier. "Psychologists call this habituation, economists call it declining marginal utility and the rest of us call it marriage," says Gilbert.

We also imagine that we will be much more miserable than we often actually are about things we dread and fear, be it the death of a spouse or paralysis from the neck down. So we believe Humphrey Bogart when he tells Ingrid Bergman on the runway that if she doesn't get on the plane with her husband Victor she will regret it "for the rest of your life". If she had stayed with Bogey, the man she really loved, she probably would have been just as happy, according to Gilbert.

But for the final word on the ancients versus the happiness thinkers, we should go back to Jonathan Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis*. The

subtitle of his book is "Putting Ancient Wisdom to the Test of Modern Science", and as it suggests, Haidt has explored how traditional thinking on happiness compares with more recent empirical research. Haidt is a psychologist, but is far from dismissive of the teachings of Buddha or Confucius.

Confucius, for example, was correct to insist on reciprocity, the principle of doing unto others as you would have them do to you. Research repeatedly shows, Haidt says, that such behaviour is vital for social animals such as humans. But Buddhist and Stoic ideas that happiness can be achieved by detachment or emotional indifference are harder to accept today. Echoing Gilbert, he says such ideas may have made sense in the turbulent times in which ancient thinkers lived, when life was subject to the whims of warring kings or capricious Roman emperors. But we no longer live like this: "For the first time in human history, most people [in wealthy] countries will live past 70 and not see any of their children die before them."

Moreover, he cites more recent psychological studies showing that some things really do make humans much happier and are thus clearly worth striving for, such as a sense of control over their lives. In one famous study, two groups of nursing home residents were given extra benefits - a plant in their rooms; a movie once a week - but under different conditions. One group could choose their own plants and movie night; the other couldn't. Eighteen months later, the group with more control had better health and half as many deaths.

Similarly, strong relationships have been shown to strengthen the immune system; extend life (more than quitting smoking); speed recovery from surgery; and reduce the risk of depression and anxiety disorders. Detachment certainly sounds a far less assured path to happiness in comparison.

But one of the significant findings that Haidt mentions is also perhaps the most sobering: happiness appears to be surprisingly hereditary. Researchers think that between 50 and 80 per cent of all the variance among people's average levels of happiness can be explained by their genes, rather than life experiences.

It is easy to see why when one considers the case Haidt cites of the so-called "giggle twins", Barbara Herbert and Daphne Goodship. Both left school at 14, met their future husbands at 16, suffered miscarriages at the same time and then each gave birth to two boys and a girl. Both feared blood; drank their coffee cold; and had a habit of pushing up their noses with the palm of their hand that both called "squidging". As Haidt says, none of this would be astonishing, except that they were separated at birth and didn't meet until they were 40 years old - when they turned up wearing almost identical clothing.

Both women also had notably happy personalities and a habit of bursting into laughter mid-sentence. They had, says Haidt, "won the cortical lottery": they had more activity in the left frontal cortex of their brains, making them what he calls cortical "lefties": less subject to anxiety and more able to recover from negative experiences from infancy on.

In other words, no matter how much we earn, how well we marry and how virtuously we live, the pursuit of happiness will end up being partly determined by the set of genes we were born with.

We can never know what Plato or Aristotle would have made of such findings. And perhaps the fact of knowing these things will not make us any happier. But they surely reveal as much about the enduring human desire for happiness as the teachings of those who lived such very different lives more than 2,000 years before us.

THE SECRETS OF HAPPINESS: Three Thousand Years of Searching for the Good Life

by Richard Schoch

Profile Books £15.99, 243 pages

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAPPINESS

by Nicholas White

Blackwell Publishing £9.99, 194 pages

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: A History from the Greeks to the Present

by Darrin McMahon

Allen Lane £25, 560 pages

STUMBLING ON HAPPINESS

by Daniel Gilbert

Harper Press £14.99, 277 pages

THE HAPPINESS HYPOTHESIS: Putting Ancient Wisdom to the Test of Modern Science

by Jonathan Haidt

William Heinemann £17.99, 299 pages

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