

INTRODUCTION

The problem of human happiness—how to attain it and how to preserve it—is perennial. It may be, however, that the psychological imperative to achieve our own happiness as well as the philanthropic imperative to promote the happiness of others on a global scale are ascending to ever new heights. The psychological pursuit of happiness and the philanthropic impulse toward benevolence find their intersection in the socio-biology of human beings, who seem readily to experience a fellow-feeling variously described as compassion or sympathy. The Confucian sage Mencius (fl. 4th century BCE) aptly described this visceral commiseration typical of mankind:

1. Mencius said, 'All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. ...
2. 'When I say that all men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus:—even now-a-days, if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain the favour of the child's parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor from a dislike to the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing.
3. 'From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man' (Mencius, Book II, Chapter 6)¹

The observation of the natural sympathy of men for one another is also the starting point of Adam Smith's considerations in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. "How selfish soever man may be supposed," Smith wrote, "there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it."

The papers in this volume of *Conversations on Philanthropy*, "Philanthropy and the Pursuit of Happiness," shine light on the complex interplay between our understanding of happiness and our use of

¹ Mencius. James Legge, Translator. Chinese Classics, Vol. 2 [1895], available online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/menc/>.

philanthropy to pursue happiness for ourselves and others. What is happiness? What are its conditions, circumstances, and causes? Is happiness in itself the ultimate end of human action? How do we know when we, or the objects of our beneficence, have obtained it?

The reflections offered here grew out of a 2007 colloquium in which participants looked to the emerging field of positive psychology to assess its potential for improving our understanding and practice of philanthropy. Positive psychology has begun to explore more deeply the meaning of happiness by turning psychological researchers and clinicians away from behavioralist presumptions and toward a recovery of a richer cultural discourse about strengths and, yes, even virtues as critical constituents of a life well-lived.

At first glance, the move of positive psychology toward a more asset- and character-based approach to promoting human well-being seems a welcome correction in the course of modern psychology, which has tended to focus on the diagnosis and treatment of disease and dysfunction rather than on the positive questions of how to promote health and well-being by cultivating skills and strengths of character. The agenda of positive psychology, however, is ambitious, and there are whispers that positive psychology will not only help us improve our personal chances for “authentic happiness” but may also help us redesign social organizations and institutions through both policy and philanthropy. With the promises so alluring, we wanted to take a closer look at positive psychology to understand better its potential for promoting gains in happiness for individuals and communities.

Such questions are important. Theories of psychology and philanthropic concern have often come together in history in the form of policy. Bernard Sheehan, for instance, has described how Enlightenment confidence in the idea of progress during the Jeffersonian era led to an aggressive philanthropic plan to civilize the American Indian. According to Sheehan, “Jeffersonian philanthropy” required “that the Indian abandon the hunter-warrior culture, the tribal order, and the communal ownership of land. It commanded him to become civilized.” Far from precipitating happy and flourishing tribes of Native Americans, however, the plan of improvement planted the “seeds of extinction.”²

² Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).

Sheehan quotes Alexis de Tocqueville's trenchant observation in *Democracy in America* about the difficulties inherent in the encounter of European and native cultures in North America:

From whatever angle one regards the destinies of the North American natives, one sees nothing but irremediable ills: if they remain savages, they are driven along before the march of progress; if they try to become civilized, contact with more-civilized people delivers them over to oppression and misery. If they go on wandering in the wilderness, they perish; if they attempt to settle, they perish just the same. They cannot gain enlightenment except with European help, and the approach of the Europeans corrupts them and drives them back toward barbarism. So long as they are left in their solitudes, they refuse to change their mores, and there is no time left to do this, when at last they are constrained to desire it.

This observation seems as relevant as ever as pressures on the nations of the world to accommodate cultural pluralism persist in this era of globalization. We are often left on the horns of a dilemma: do we enshrine our distinctive cultures, promulgating them or defending them as necessary, or do we abandon our care for them altogether, which seems a sure route to a life of anomie? Can either policy make us happy?

In the preface to his cautionary tale *Brave New World*, written for a post World War II republication of his 1932 novel, Aldous Huxley predicts that "The most important Manhattan Projects of the future will be vast government-sponsored enquiries into what the politicians and the participating scientists will call 'the problem of happiness'—in other words, the problem of making people love their servitude" (Huxley 2005). Huxley's dystopian imaginings of a brave new world in which genetically engineered human inhabitants are propelled through their days in a soma-induced complacency, eerily foreshadowed the ethical dilemmas in which we now find ourselves in a world where clinical psychopharmacology is widespread and the human genome has been made legible.

After a century in which philanthropic eugenics, behaviorist psychotherapy, and postmodernist-inspired self doubt have each had their

turn, positive psychology's appearance on the scene is largely welcome in restoring our focus on the common humanity among cultures and in recovering considerations about the role of character and virtue in our personal pursuits of happiness. Whether positive psychology holds seeds of promise for attaining the collective goal of the greatest happiness for the greatest number needs to be carefully considered, however, for in setting our sights on such goals that would necessitate policies of philanthropy we may neglect to our detriment other equally important ends of human life.

In acknowledging commiseration as a feeling common to all men, Mencius did not neglect to point out the other guiding principles of man's life:

4. 'From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man ..., that the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man, that the feeling of modesty and complaisance is essential to man, and that the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man.
5. 'The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence. The feeling of shame and dislike is the principle of righteousness. The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of propriety. The feeling of approving and disapproving is the principle of knowledge.
6. 'Men have these four principles just as they have their four limbs. When men, having these four principles, yet say of themselves that they cannot develop them, they play the thief with themselves, and he who says of his prince that he cannot develop them plays the thief with his prince.
7. 'Since all men have these four principles in themselves, let them know to give them all their development and completion, and the issue will be like that of fire which has begun to burn, or that of a spring which has begun to find vent. Let them have their complete development, and they will suffice to love and protect all within the four seas. Let them be denied that development, and they will not suffice for a man to serve his parents with (Mencius as cited above, enumeration continues from earlier passage).'

Benevolence given free reign in a man's life without the necessary checks and balances of the principles of righteousness, propriety, and knowledge may merely alleviate the pain we feel when seeing others suffer without elevating us or others to something called happiness. Neither Mencius, nor

Aristotle, nor Cicero, nor St. Paul, nor Maimonides, nor Adam Smith, nor many other philosophers and theologians ancient and modern would be likely to describe a benevolent life lived without shame, without modesty, and without reflective approval of our actions as a genuinely happy life. Philanthropic policy that seeks to promote happiness apart from a deeper conversation about the full range of virtues that contribute to a man's satisfaction in life and in the human community may fail us in the end. It is to this conversation that our authors here ultimately contribute.

The paradoxes that surround the elusive pursuit of happiness are many, which brings me to a brief comment on our cover art for this volume. "Smiley" has become an ubiquitous companion to the Baby Boomer generation and its descendants. Flashed briefly before us, his grin invites a fleeting burst of cheer. A more penetrating gaze into his changeless demeanor, however, invites a less comfortable response. Wikipedia has an intriguing catalogue of the appearance of Smiley's face in popular culture, where he appears in deeply ironic motifs associated with murderers, werewolves, aliens, and the Ku Klux Klan, among others. Whether this irony is merely humor or deeper social comment, study of the list leaves one with a strange feeling that one should beware of Smileys bearing gifts.☺

—*Lenore T. Ealy*
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