



For Most of History, People Didn't Assume They Deserved to Be Happy. What Changed?

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At a time when it's easy to grow despondent at the state of the world, it may help to consider that feeling good is overrated. That's not a sentiment often heard in Western culture, which tends to emphasize entertainment, pleasure, and immediate comfort. But the truth is that where the pursuit of a full and flourishing life is concerned, good times matter less than we think.

For centuries, in fact, that insight was spread by the world's religious traditions and reaffirmed by philosophers and sages, who understood that life was hard and suffering inevitable. It was not until the 18th century that Western thinking underwent a revolution in human expectations, transforming what men and women understood as their earthly due.

Ordinary suffering

As a wise man declares in Herodotus's *The History*, written in the fifth century BCE, "There is not a man in the world, either here or elsewhere, who is so happy that he does not wish-again and again-to be dead rather than alive." A grim accounting, that. Yet it captures nicely the ancients' understanding that suffering, even in the best of circumstances, was impossible to avoid. From the Book of Job to the first of the Buddha's four noble truths, peruse the wisdom of the past and you will find the message again and again: The world is a painful place.

That's was not to say that one had to simply grin and bear it. Most religions and philosophies suggested that the best way to deal with suffering was to look it in the eye, prescribing a variety of regimes. Aristotle advised a life lived in accordance with virtue as the best means to happiness. Jews recommended fidelity to the law; Christians, the cultivation of charity. Confucians and Daoists, for their part, taught their followers to live in accordance with the Way. And Muslims sought submission to God and his word.

Yet what all of these traditions shared was the belief that suffering, though pervasive, could be overcome through discipline and sacrifice. It was important to resist short-term pleasures in favor of long-term cultivation of the mind, spurning fleeting seductions in favor of more lasting harmony and peace.

This lifestyle wasn't supposed to be easy. The ranks of the content, as Aristotle observed, would ever be the "happy few." But for those rare people who would commit themselves to the discipline of the regime, the promise of a flourishing life was great. "The mere search for higher happiness," Cicero observed, "not merely its actual attainment, is a prize beyond all human wealth or honor or physical pleasure." True happiness, in short, had to be earned.

The pursuit of happiness

But something unusual happened in the 18th century: The way people talked about happiness started to shift. Whereas happiness had once been seen as a rare and special achievement in a world of suffering and

pain, now there was a growing consensus that many stood a good chance of outwitting suffering, once and for all.

“Does not everyone have a right to happiness according to his whims?” asked the French Encyclopedia in its entry on the subject. It was a telling question. Americans, too, spoke of a right to the pursuit of happiness in their founding Declaration of Independence. And in a number of their state constitutions, such as those of Virginia and Vermont, they even spoke of a right to obtain it. Human beings did not have to suffer from birth until death. All men and women should have cause to expect happiness in this life.

After so many years accepting suffering as the norm, why did people think they could make it an exception, putting happiness in its place? A number of factors contributed to this shift. Famine and epidemic disease were in decline, which meant that people could worry less about surviving, and more about living well. Improving living standards combined with a sense of greater control over the environment: homes were better heated, fields were better tilled, and streets were better lit. That allowed people to imagine continuing to exert control over their circumstances, bending the world and all its uncertainties and privations to their will.

Finally, new religious and philosophical views associated with the Enlightenments in Europe and America downplayed sin and damnation, while praising the human capacity for enjoyment. We were built to be happy in this life, it seemed, not just the next-and God wanted it so.

Collectively, these developments served to undermine the longstanding view that suffering was inevitable, which meant that it was no longer necessary to be so suspicious of pleasure. Why was it a sin to enjoy our bodies and the fruits of this earth? And why should we not work to multiply our wealth, and with it our ability to procure more pleasant feelings? Pain was bad. Pleasure was good. We should work to minimize the one and to maximize the other.

This was the logic of the widespread utilitarianism of the age, which promoted the “greatest happiness of the greatest number.” It also promoted a new understanding of happiness itself as the sum of pleasurable sensations. Once thought of as the summon bonum, the highest good of a virtuous life, happiness was increasingly conceived in hedonic terms as subjective emotion-good feeling registered by a smile.

Of course, transformations on this scale don’t happen overnight-change was always slow and imperfect. Many an oppressed worker or captive slave must have scoffed at the vaunted right to pursue happiness. In the 18th century, moreover, contemporaries were still inclined to pay heed to older wisdom. “Happiness is the aim of life, but virtue is the source of happiness,” Thomas Jefferson maintained. Many others agreed. And yet the logic of the revolution in human expectations worked in a countervailing sense, encouraging the belief that happiness was not something we earned, but something we deserved.

Thinking of happiness in terms of pleasure also fostered the belief that it could be had for a price. As one 18th-century political economist put it, in modern commercial societies, people, “as it were, bought and sold happiness.” A new dress or a fine set of china might do the trick, or even better, a well-furnished house in which to take your coffee and tea! In a nascent capitalist economist like the United States, that was a

powerful motivator. The pursuit of happiness, in effect, became the pursuit of prosperity and the pleasures it could afford-the pursuit of the American dream.

Life on the hedonic treadmill

Over the course of the next two centuries, that dream was embraced by ever-wider segments of the population. It is easy to understand why. Like the revolution in human expectations on which it is based, the American dream has much to recommend it. Hope, we know, is a staple of happiness in its own right. And whatever the older moralists might have had to say on the subject, contemporary research suggests that in any given society, the rich are happier than the poor, while in comparative terms, the happiest countries of the world tend to be the wealthiest. Surely the possibilities for feeling good are multiplied when one faces fewer financial constraints. It is hard to really regret the passing of a world in which suffering was regarded as the norm.

And yet we also know that despite massive gains in wealth in recent decades, the US, like other developed nations, has not grown considerably happier in this period, if at all. At the same time, we have witnessed an alarming growth in reported cases of mental illness, loneliness, and other indicators. This suggests that whatever the state of our credit card bills, we have yet to max out the happiness of the greatest number-a conclusion that the last presidential election would seem to confirm.

The causes of such social unease are necessarily complex. Yet one might suggest that at least part of the problem lies in the way we have pursued happiness since the revolution in human expectations of the 18th century.

Philosophers and thinkers have long predicted this result. Alexis de Tocqueville, for one, said as much in his celebrated *Democracy in America*, noting that although no one worked harder to be happy, Americans were haunted by a “strange melancholy.”

“It seemed to me that a cloud habitually hung on their brow, and they seemed serious and almost sad even in their pleasures,” he wrote. The “taste for physical pleasures,” Tocqueville believed, was the root of the problem. It drove Americans to endlessly multiply their needs, while encouraging their desires to continually outrun their capacity to fulfill them. The constant search for good feelings came at a cost.

Contemporary psychologists who study happiness refer to this self-defeating pursuit of pleasure as a “hedonic treadmill.” The best you can hope for is to stay in place and not fall off. Their work would seem to validate older wisdom about human flourishing. Many of the virtues recommended by the world’s traditions, for example-from gratitude and forgiveness to loving kindness and charity to others-turn out to be powerful sources of happiness in their own right, as do the meaning and social connectedness these traditions tend to confer.

The education that these traditions provide in disciplining our desires and steeling our souls against suffering can also be extremely effective in fostering mindfulness and resilience in the face of misfortune. In short, as the noted psychologist John Haidt observes, there is a good deal of “modern truth in ancient wisdom.”

So, if you find yourself feeling down, don't despair. Feelings aren't everything. Take solace in the wisdom of the ages. And rather than focusing on how to make yourself feel better, consider digging a little deeper into the causes of your suffering and doing a little spiritual heavy lifting. As the coaches like to say, no pain, no gain.