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978-0-521-19130-2 - The Psychology of Happiness: A Good Human Life

Samuel S. Franklin

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HAPPINESS

When Thomas Jefferson placed “the pursuit of happiness” alongside liberty and life itself in America’s Declaration of Independence he was most likely referring to Aristotle’s concept of happiness, or *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is not about good feelings but rather the fulfillment of human potentials. Fulfillment requires *virtue*, the moderation of desire and emotion by reason. *The Psychology of Happiness* is the first book to bring together psychological, philosophical, and physiological theory and research in support of Aristotle’s view. It examines the similarity between Aristotle’s concept of virtue and modern cognitive theories of emotion. It discusses ways of unearthing human potentials, the development of virtue, virtue’s neurological basis, the mistaken idea that fulfillment is selfish, and several other issues related to the pursuit of a good human life.

Samuel S. Franklin is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at California State University, Fresno. His work has focused on visual perception, motivation, the history of psychology, and the psychology of happiness. He began teaching the psychology of happiness in the late 1970s and was one of the first to do so. His research on Aristotle’s view of happiness has been presented at conferences, and he has published several articles in the area of visual perception.

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To Brenda with love
To my children and their spouses
Valerie and Peter
Debbie and Gary
Jonathan and Heidi
To my beautiful grandchildren
Audrey and Noah
Lydia and Henry
Hannah, Jack, and Briana

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PREFACE

Aunt Celia was a remarkable woman. She passed away peacefully in her 98th year. As a child she served as translator and intermediary to the new world when my father's family arrived from the old country with precious little knowledge of English or modernity. All her life she read armfuls of books lugged home from the public library. She boarded a streetcar and two buses each day to attend Los Angeles High School where she could learn Latin, unavailable at her local high school. By the age of 17 she had graduated from normal school and taken her first teaching job in Nevada, too young to be employed by the Los Angeles Unified School District. She contributed hard-earned dollars to help support the family and purchased its first automobile. She was the rudder that guided the ship of immigrants – so able, so strong, yet so fragile and afraid.

Celia spent her life teaching in public schools where few students or administrators recognized her gifts. She never married, never bore children, traveled little, purchased less, and pinched pennies so tightly that she died rich as well as unhappy. How ironic that dear Aunt Celia should be the source of my interest in happiness.

In the early 1960s when I was a graduate student, Celia sent me a copy of Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape*.¹ I loved the book, and its sequel *The Human Zoo*.² Desmond Morris suggested to me

¹ Morris, D. (1967). *The naked ape: A zoologists' study of the human animal*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers.

² Morris, D. (1969). *The human zoo*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers.

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that something was wrong with the way we lived and that we may be biologically unsuited to the environments we have created. His thesis was that we are really just hairless primates, better suited to the natural world than to the concrete jungles we call cities. Cities imprison us just as zoos cage their unlucky residents. And we, as they, live unhappily.

A few years later, while teaching Experimental Psychology, I became interested in an emerging field called Environmental Psychology. Consistent with Morris's thesis were scores of studies, on both animals and humans, suggesting that overcrowded cities generate misery and crime. In the 1970s, Environmental Psychology gathered an abundance of evidence that our unhappiness, incivility, and general social pathology was, in one way or another, a consequence of the environments in which we live.³

In the early 1980s, a friend, Dr. George Diestel, suggested that I view a series of videos featuring Bill Moyers's interviews of Dr. Mortimer Adler,⁴ University of Chicago professor and co-editor of the monumental Great Books of the Western World series. Adler loved Aristotle, as I have come to do, especially the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle examines how to achieve a good human life. Adler's discussion of Aristotle's *Ethics* changed the way I viewed the problem of happiness. Morris is partly right; our nature does require a certain range of surroundings but a pastoral setting is not enough to ensure well-being. We are a little closer to the divine than our animal cousins and our needs are quite different.

³ There are a number of books on environmental and ecological psychology available but two that seem to summarize the field as it was in the 1970s are Altman, I. (1975). *The environment and social behavior: Privacy, personal space, territory, crowding*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., and Moos, R. H., & Insel, P. M. (Eds.). (1974). *Issues in social ecology: Human milieus*. Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books.

⁴ Bill Moyers (1981). *PBS Six Great Ideas: Truth-Goodness-Beauty-Liberty-Equality-Justice*. (The Television Series) with Mortimer Adler. From the Aspen Institute in Colorado.

Our survival and reproduction are essential, but not enough. A good human life requires that we fulfill the potentials inherent in our nature. A bird is meant to fly, an acorn is destined to become an oak tree, a child will become an adult human being. We humans are endowed by nature with a common set of potentials and at the same time, we are uniquely gifted with our very own, individual possibilities. Most of us have the potential to speak, to walk, to be a parent, a friend, or a lover. Adding to our shared human characteristics, each of us is programmed with a unique recipe of other possibilities, some quite strong, others weak and barely noticeable, but all defining our individuality. You may have the potential to be an excellent artist but I was not blessed with that possibility. Our potentials are like the recipe for a complicated dish: a teaspoon of outgoingness, a tablespoon of scientist, half a cup of wife or husband, and a pinch of artist. Now add about a thousand more ingredients in various measures and you have a unique human being, a one and only, a person unlike any other. The possibilities are infinite. Each of us is special, unmatched, and truly one of a kind.

If the world is kind to us our possibilities will blend to form a sound, strong, healthy personality and we will flourish. The artist within us will mature and our potentials for friendship, honesty, and courage will flower as well. If we are able to become ourselves, we will be happy and the world in turn will be a better place. If, however, our musical talents can find no means of expression or our athletic powers go unrecognized and unnurtured, then we will remain frustrated and unfulfilled. None of us will ever know complete fulfillment but the closer we get the better our life will be.

Our potentials can be thought of as needs. If you are lucky enough to be inclined toward athletics, gifted with the desire to help others, or blessed with the ability to draw beautiful pictures, then those inclinations express themselves as needs. Artists need to paint, athletes need to be active, responsible parents need to nurture, and politicians, ideally, need to work at making a better world. Whether the world

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welcomes our potentials or frustrates them is another story, but we need to note at the outset that both the unique set of potentials within us and the world that accepts or rejects them are at play. Our possibilities are frustrated only at some cost, sometimes at considerable cost. Our uniqueness can be nurtured by the environment in which we develop or it can be discouraged and thwarted but not without damage to the person. Possibilities are needs and needs demand expression. When we are permitted to be ourselves and to satisfy our needs and actualize our potentials, then we live well. Happiness comes from ... no, happiness *is* actualizing, becoming our selves, fulfilling our possibilities.

Dear Aunt Celia had so much potential. She was terribly bright, so interested in the world, and so caring. She had so much to give yet was never able to be herself. Her early years were filled with responsibility to family. Like so many children of immigrants she bore the burden of leadership and stability. Given the enormous gap between her abilities and the confining roles that she assumed, her professional life could not have been very fulfilling. Her human relationships were often fragile because of her insecurities and overpowering fear of rejection. Celia's life demonstrates so tragically the importance of fulfillment and its unfortunate opposite. Celia's possibilities were great indeed, but the world in which she lived was less than kind. It failed to recognize her potentials. And she too failed, never really coming to know herself, viewing her potentials as trivial desires to be put aside until the obligations of the day were finished.

Unfortunately, it's too late for Celia but as her life enriched mine, I hope it will touch others. Celia is really the power behind this book. Her gift began my search for an answer to the question of how we should live. Aristotle realized, and I have come to accept his view, that happiness can never be an exact science; no specific instructions will be right for everyone. However, there are general principles that, if correctly applied, can move us all toward a good human life.