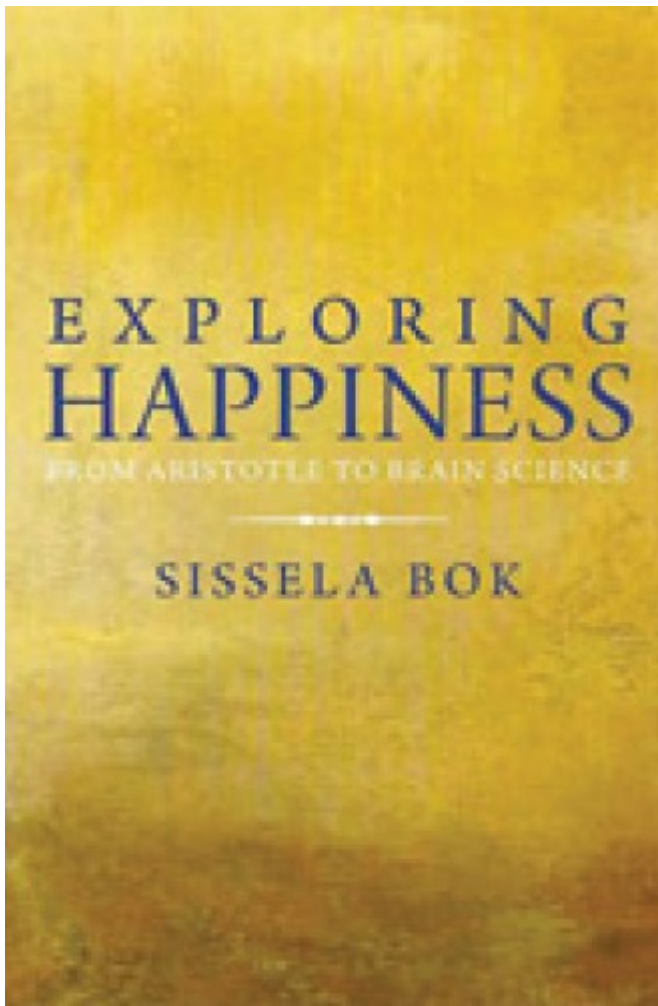


# Pursuing happiness

by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue

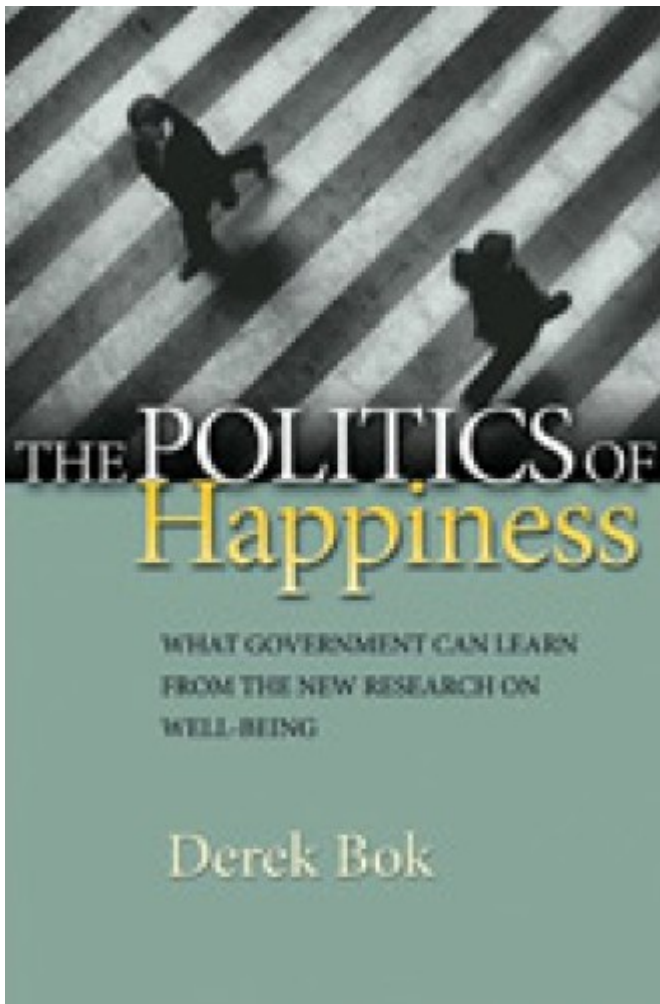


**In Review**



## **Exploring Happiness**

By Sissela Bok  
Yale University Press



## **The Politics of Happiness**

By Derek Bok

Princeton University Press

The Roman poet Horace tells the story of Lycas, a wealthy merchant who spent his days entertained by imagined actors performing nonexistent dramatic plays on the grounds of his estate. Lycas drew his greatest joy in life from these imaginary performances, but to onlookers his behavior was sheer madness.

Should one value and affirm a happiness that is based on an illusion? Lycas's relatives thought not. When they finally awakened him from his dream world, Lycas reacted as if betrayed: "You call it rescue, my friends, but what you have done is murder me!"

The story of Lycas captures one of the great challenges to any meaningful discussion of human happiness. Unlike concepts such as justice and courage that

seemingly lend themselves to rich treatises about their true nature, happiness is often perceived to be subjective, even inscrutable. We all claim to be able to identify courageous people when we see them, and we believe that we have the critical ability to determine, at times, that a person who claims to be courageous is in fact a fraud, a coward. But what does it mean to say that a person who claims to be happy is not, or that the happiness a person experiences is not real?

Was Lycas's happiness any less real because those around him failed to find joy in the same imaginary plays? If his happiness was somehow less real—less valuable—because it was based on a world not perceptible to onlookers, where does this leave romantics who find their greatest joy in their love for another or religious believers whose happiness rests in a Being beyond conventional sight and sound? Are the experiences of all of these people to be dismissed as madness, or can we responsibly affirm and even promote at least some of these paths to happiness?

These questions are the subject of a pair of books by two leading commentators on contemporary moral and social issues. Sissela Bok, senior visiting fellow at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, offers a clear and engaging historical tour through dozens of competing philosophical renderings of happiness over the ages—from the Greeks to Desmond Tutu. Her husband, Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard and currently a research professor there, examines the political implications and social imperatives that emerge from modern empirical research on the subject of happiness.

Sissela Bok asks, "What do we mean by happiness?" Derek Bok asks, "Given our emerging scientific consensus about the nature of human happiness, how can government best serve to promote and maximize it?" Not surprisingly, the answers the Boks offer to these questions are complex and provocative—and, I believe, incompatible in significant ways.

Sissela Bok argues that ours is a special time, parallel to the sixth and fifth centuries BC when thinkers such as Confucius, Buddha, Lao-Tzu and Socrates posited a range of competing and world-altering paths to happiness. She writes, "Not since antiquity have there been such passionate debates as those taking place today about contending visions of what makes for human happiness." She holds that there is thus great contemporary value in the process of exploring what others—philosophers, historians, theologians—have written over the centuries about the nature of happiness. The purpose of her book, she cautions, is not to help

readers find happiness but to help them "learn about its nature and its role in human lives." In so doing, she tells us, we will learn much about ourselves.

The contemporary political philosopher Robert Nozick raises this possibility: suppose you could attach your body for the remainder of your life to an experience machine. Floating in a tank of fluid and connected by electrodes to an incredibly advanced computer, you would spend the rest of your days fully realizing your greatest personal dreams—winning the Pulitzer Prize or the Super Bowl, inventing a cure for cancer or a new video game—in such a way that these experiences would be utterly indistinguishable to you from reality. The things experienced, though, would not be real; they would be created solely in your mind by the machine. Given the opportunity, would you plug yourself into this machine for life, thus ensuring the perpetual satisfaction of all of your most cherished desires?

For Augustine, the answer was a clear no. As Sissela Bok explains, Augustine held that there is but one happiness that is worth experiencing, and it is not determined by personal preference. Speaking to God in his *Confessions*, Augustine asserted, "Happiness is to rejoice in You and for You and because of You. This is true happiness and there is no other." Many things seemed to promise pure happiness to Augustine in his youth—play, food, friendship, sex—but he came to conclude that these pleasures are not real and do not bring happiness of a true sort. Aquinas agreed: "Final and perfect happiness can consist of nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence."

In our times, supposedly dominated by individual self-interest and the quest for material satisfaction, we might assume that Nozick's personal-happiness machine would be preferred over the Augustinian vision of a happiness that is found only through individual denial in deference to a higher ideal. But Nozick reports that only about 5 percent of current college students say they would accept the offer to plug into the hypothetical experience machine. Why is there such a resounding rejection of this guaranteed path to personal satisfaction, Bok wants to know. Alternately, what is distinctive about that 5 percent of students that leads them to embrace Nozick's offer?

Here emerges one premise of Sissela Bok's book: how a person conceives of and defines happiness tells us much about who that person is. Bok's examples are many. Friedrich Nietzsche rejected the link, suggested by Augustine and Aquinas, between happiness on the one hand and virtue, altruism and God on the other. He defines

happiness as "*not* contentment, but more power; *not* peace at all, but war; *not* virtue, but proficiency." Jonathan Swift told us that "happiness . . . is a perpetual possession of being well deceived." Seneca wrote, "When once we have driven away all that excites or frightens us . . . there comes upon us first a boundless joy that is firm and unalterable, then peace and harmony of the soul." Sigmund Freud warned, "One feels inclined to say that the intention that human beings should be happy was not included in the plans of the 'Creation.'" By means of such single sentences about happiness, we learn much about the fundamental beliefs and overarching philosophies of each of these thinkers.

For readers who seek an answer to the inevitable question of which thinker best captures the true nature of happiness, Sissela Bok offers little help. "There is no one definition of happiness, I suggest, that should exclude all others, much less be imposed by force and indoctrination." As to how the seemingly oppositional definitions offered by the likes of Augustine and Freud can coexist, Bok once again offers only very general guidance. "We need to look at the different [theories] together and consider the roles they have played in human lives, weighing together the evidence they offer and the practical implications for how to live and how best to pursue happiness," she suggests.

While Bok's reluctance to exercise her formidable philosophical skills to develop a moral recommendation here can be frustrating, the point of *Exploring Happiness* is not to prescribe the content of happiness but to describe the ways in which the rich and continuing historical discourse on human happiness has come to define our deepest convictions and to capture our highest ideals. This it does very well.

In *The Politics of Happiness*, Derek Bok takes a very different tack, basing his argument almost exclusively on recent empirical research into the nature of happiness. Bypassing the history of ideas that is the focus of Sissela Bok's volume, he explores the post-1970 "boom industry" of surveying people about what they think makes them happy. "Mounds of evidence have accumulated on how happy people claim to be in different countries, how their levels of contentment vary from one subgroup of the population to another, and what conditions or experiences are most closely related to the way people feel about their lives," Derek Bok tells us.

Although he concedes that there are limits to the value of these polls and opinion surveys about happiness—for one thing, research shows that people are often very poor judges of what will make them happy—Bok believes that "investigators can

now publish findings about the well-being of populations that are far more useful to policy makers" than the theories available to previous generations. This research holds "the prospect of improving many of the judgments that public officials make in devising programs to better the human condition."

What specifically does this recent empirical research on happiness reveal? Bok starts by mapping out four initial findings. First, we learn that while the standard of living in the United States has improved markedly over the past 50 years, average levels of happiness have not. Rich Americans today are, as a whole, modestly happier than poor Americans, but the percentages of Americans who describe themselves as "very happy," "pretty happy" and "not happy" have not changed for generations. Apparently, our levels of happiness have less to do with the material comforts we possess and more to do with our expectations about the material comforts we believe we should possess.

Second, people tend to overestimate the effects that certain changes in their lives will have on their levels of happiness. They predict that a new car, more money or a move to a warmer climate will bring them more happiness than these things do. The impact of such changes on levels of happiness is modest, and it tends to dissipate almost entirely in a short period of time.

Third, growing levels of inequality in the U.S. between haves and have-nots have not led to growing levels of dissatisfaction. Ironically, the only group that empirical research shows to be measurably upset by the growing economic inequality in the United States are well-to-do Americans. If the election of Barack Obama signaled a new populism in the U.S., there is no sign of such a shift in the happiness research.

Finally, the research shows that there is no correlation between the percent of gross national income that a nation spends on social welfare programs and the average happiness levels of that nation's population. Swedes are, on average, moderately happier than Americans, but this has more to do with the average economic level of Swedes than with their state-guaranteed health care and family leave rights.

From these empirical findings, Bok develops a series of public policy prescriptions designed to boost overall levels of happiness in society. If people are poor judges of what will make them happy, then, he advises, we should offer more classes in high school to teach students what psychologists and pollsters have learned about happiness: "Learning more about the sources of happiness and dissatisfaction can

clearly be of great value to students." If at least minimum levels of wealth are needed for happiness, and if a great source of unhappiness is fear of the loss of a job, Bok suggests, we can employ private arbitrators to provide a basic means of redress for American workers who are unjustly fired. It would also help, Bok contends, to more strictly enforce a 60-day notice period before layoffs are permitted.

Most of Bok's suggestions are modest and reasonable. They also seem arbitrary. It is not clear why alternate and perhaps more radical steps would not be warranted. If people greatly overestimate the happiness derived from the purchase of an expensive new car, we could offer a high school course outlining for students the latest happiness research and the sober reality of consumer remorse, all the while knowing that the students will go home and be bombarded by the latest Lexus and BMW commercials on television. We might alternately decide to adopt as public policy a ban on those flashy car commercials, much like we did with cigarette ads; or we might impose a hefty luxury tax on cars to get more people to support and utilize public transportation; or we might teach Buddhism in high school, promoting it as a path to the cessation of worldly desire in our youth.

It is not clear why Bok's suggestions should be preferred over countless other options, why his proposals would be more effective means of raising happiness levels, or why the considerable public resources necessary to pursue any one of these options would be better spent in curbing the people's desire for a new car (that research shows will not make them happy) than their desire for a fat-laden fast-food burger (that research shows will not make them happy). This quandary uncovers an inherent limit to the research on which Bok is so reliant: at its best, empirical research uncovers what is; it has little to say about what might be.

Using happiness research, Bok also offers scientific affirmation of some of the core values and mores of American life. He reports that people who sustain lasting marriages, contribute to charities, engage in community service, maintain close friendships and participate in organized religion are all, on average, considerably happier than those who do not. In short, happier people tend to be morally good people—at least by the standards of mainstream American ethics. Bok finds this finding "gratifying" and expresses relief that widespread satisfaction does not come from "taking advantage of others and being insensitive to their needs."



While I, too, find comfort in these findings, I wish Bok were more critical of the research that he utilizes. One wonders, for instance, if supporting mainstream moral values actually makes one happier, or if people who adhere to mainstream values are happier because their behavior receives less resistance from their peers. In other words, does being married make one happier, or does being married in a culture that validates marriage make one happier? This is a crucial question to settle if we are to use happiness research, as Bok suggests, to shape public policy. If the former is true, we would presumably want to enact laws and policies to promote marriage for as many Americans as possible. If the latter is true, we might want to consider removing tax laws and social policies that favor marriage so nonmarried individuals could find greater happiness in and support for their personal life choices.

It is appropriate to remember that, for all of their differences, Nietzsche and Augustine agreed on at least one point: the vast majority of people find greatest satisfaction in following the path of least resistance—in pursuing the common, the everyday, the banal. Both thinkers were at odds with their ages, exhorting their peers to a vision of happiness and the good that was wholly unpopular—one that required personal sacrifice and self-denial. To say that people find happiness in mainstream mores would be neither a surprise nor a validation for Nietzsche or Augustine. To them, it would merely be confirmation of the magnitude of the moral task at hand.

As I read *The Politics of Happiness*, I came increasingly to feel that something significant was missing from Derek Bok's account. Then it hit me. What was missing was a theme that is central to Sissela Bok's volume.

Since ancient times and through centuries of passionate debate—in Horace, Seneca, Augustine, Aquinas, Nietzsche, Swift, Freud and countless others—philosophers, historians and theologians have suggested that there is a critical difference between where people in fact find happiness and where they should find happiness, at least if happiness is to be lasting and true. It is not that this difference has been universally embraced, nor that a consensus has emerged around where happiness should be found, but thinkers have been nearly united in the view that a serious discussion of the philosophical and theological nature of happiness must precede any policy discussion about how happiness might be promoted.

Contemporary research on happiness, grounded as it is in polls and opinion surveys, circumvents this important debate. It reifies that which is and thus limits the debate about what might be. It treats existing opinion as reasoned judgment and proclivities as prescriptions.

To the modern pollster, the opinions of each individual must by definition be weighed equally—the opinions of Lycas as heavily of those of Nietzsche or Augustine. Truth is found in compiling results and determining a consensus. It is tempting to resolve age-old and seemingly intractable philosophical debates by deferring to popular opinion. It is tempting, and it may even be scientific, but is it wise? If not, then when all is said and done, modern happiness research may tell us very little about happiness.