

Five books on happiness

reviewed by [Ellen T. Charry](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

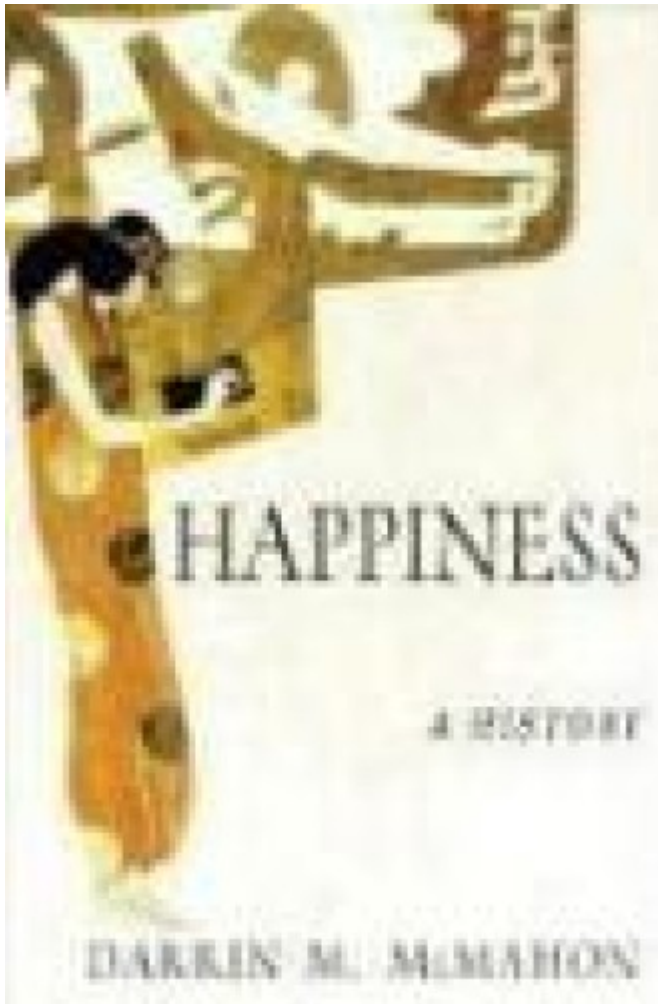
In Review



Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile

Daniel Nettle

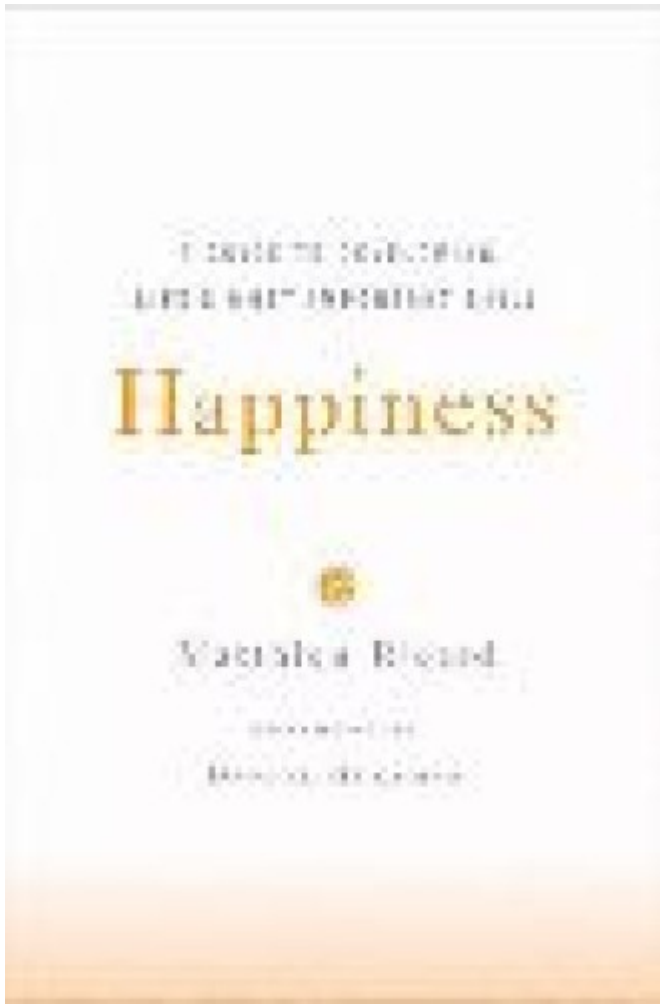
Oxford University Press



Happiness: A History

Darren M. McMahon

Atlantic Monthly Press



Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill

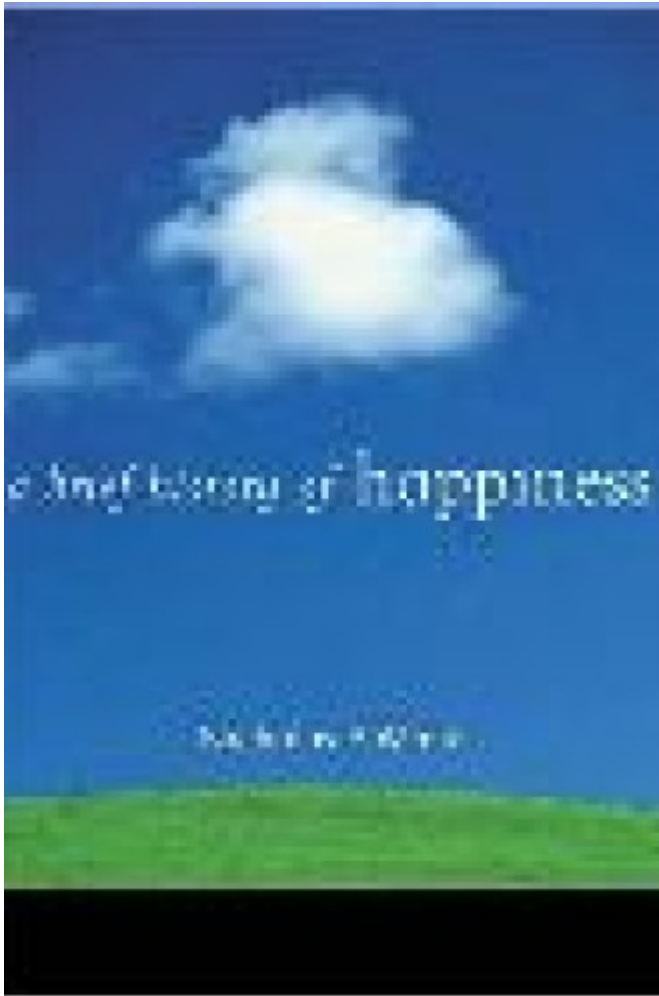
Matthieu Ricard

Little, Brown



Happiness and Greek Ethical Thought

M. Andrew Holowchak
Continuum



A Brief History of Happiness

Nicholas White
Blackwell

The quest for happiness is back with a vengeance. The bookstore's self-help section is overflowing. Colleges offer courses on happiness, and they are oversubscribed. Institutes that present "pleasant activity training" and "mindfulness training" and help you learn to increase your "flow" abound. Meanwhile, we all feel a bit serotonin-deprived and eagerly await the next mind-enhancing drug, a safe and legal version of Ecstasy.

British psychologist Adam Phillips has declared that the whole happiness craze is bunk. We simply need to come to terms with the unavoidability of suffering, he says. From the "don't worry, be happy" policy espoused by Daniel Nettle to the "grin and bear it" approach espoused by Phillips, the array of ideas about happiness is

overwhelming.

The books we have here are both popular and academically serious. They are (in alphabetical order by author) a treatment of ancient Greek philosophy with a current proposal (Holowchak), a history of the search for happiness (McMahon), advice from experimental psychology (Nettle), a plea for compassion from popularized Tibetan Buddhism (Ricard), and a history of the various philosophical positions on happiness (White). We will take the more popular treatments first and then turn to the more serious academic works.

Daniel Nettle is a lecturer in psychology at the University of Newcastle, England. In *Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile*, he brings findings from sociology and psychology together with evidence from neuroscience and biochemistry, and concludes that we have a happiness set point that is strongly correlated with personality factors. Evidence shows that most people in the developed world are reasonably happy, but that all except the most happy expect to become more so in the future. We adapt to both positive and negative changes in circumstances. The initially positive effects of desirable events seem to wear off, and we return to our previous happiness level. It is similar with setbacks; we adapt to them—although some setbacks, like permanent injury and bereavement, are harder to bounce back from—and we resume the happiness level we had before the change.

The greatest predictor of happiness or unhappiness, Nettle found, is whether we are extroverted or introverted. Extroverts, he says, are likely to be more happy than introverts, less given to neuroticism and depression, and more likely to spring back from stressors. He links introversion—unfairly, in my judgment—to neuroticism, which he associates with the fear and worry that are hangovers from prehistoric days when fear was a helpful instrument for physical survival against predators. Nettle advocates hobbies, sports and religion as helpful diversions that enable introverts to complexify their personality arsenal so that if failure or setback should occur in one area, other involvements will be in place to take up the slack. We may not be able to make ourselves happy, Nettle writes, but we can train ourselves to be less unhappy.

Being on the introverted side myself, as most academics are, I found Nettle's categorization of intellectuals as neurotic a bit short-sighted. After all, extroverts are less likely than introverts to be cautious, and more likely than introverts to enter into relationships precipitously and then find themselves in a bind or in danger. The

treatment is out of balance.

Another popular volume is Matthieu Ricard's *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*. Ricard is a French cellular geneticist who gave it all up to become a Buddhist monk. He uses many of the same studies that Nettle cites and employs a similarly accessible style, but to a different end. While Nettle avoids allowing any moral judgments into his "purely" scientific treatment of happiness, Ricard is openly evangelical, insisting that the Buddhist way of compassion for all beings is the only way to lasting happiness. Studies show that adequate income provides a foundation for happiness, but after the basics are met, happiness departs from income and status levels and resides in another realm.

Ricard combines the Buddhist interest in stopping craving, especially for vain objects, with the Western focus on doing social good. Mindfulness achieved through meditation can refocus us on becoming compassionate, loving and caring toward all beings. Ricard is eager not so much to shed his Western heritage as to undergird its social concern with control of anger, rejection of hatred, a sense of the unity of all being and especially the cultivation of compassion that he takes from Buddhism. His most arresting point is that holding on to negative emotions is self-defeating. Negative emotions are manufactured by our own mental weaknesses, and they are the path to violence and enslavement. Emancipation comes through enlightenment—through realizing that negativity toward others destroys not only them but ourselves.

Although Ricard is not interested in any bridges to Christianity, there are several. While compassion is a more important virtue in the East than in the West, forgiveness is a genuine link. And while Buddhism has no doctrine of sin, let alone original sin, the Buddhist insistence on the unity of all reality and the need to assume a humble place within it provides another connection. Ricard's is a hopeful and optimistic book, with some turns of phrase that are trivial but also some that are genuinely helpful. Perhaps its most important reminder is that the key to happiness lies within the individual and is not dependent on fortune.

The three remaining books in our cache are all creative and serious academic efforts. Darrin McMahon's history of happiness is the first work I know of to chart the development of the idea from its ancient to its current forms. A nice summary of this masterful and engaging work appeared in a special *Daedalus* issue on the theme in Spring 2004.

A major question battled back and forth over the ages is whether happiness is a gift of the gods (be they pagan or Christian) or a matter of fate, or whether there is something we can and ought to do to be happy. Aristotle presented the first developed theory of happiness as virtue, but he and Plato agreed that beyond virtue, happiness consists in contemplation of God and is the occupation of sages. This idea challenged the notion that happiness originates in a source outside of the individual, and it set up the tension embraced by Christianity that while happiness is a gift of divine grace, there are things we can do to get closer to it even though it remains permanently elusive. Augustine is the chief voice here, moderated in the Middle Ages by Aquinas's retrieval of Aristotle's emphasis on virtue as itself rewarding.

This development made a small but significant space for thinking about happiness in this life that was gradually enlarged by the Renaissance humanists and even the magisterial reformers, with their blessing of marriage and family and of seeking the glory of God in everyday life. It was not until the 17th century, however, that this world became truly important. John Locke, aided by other English divines, created enough interest in the importance of pleasure to turn attention from heaven to earth, although goodness and happiness were still held together.

The most radical break with the past lay in the realization that if happiness is construed primarily as physical pleasure, it need not be connected to goodness at all. At the end of the 18th century, with Kant, duty trumped happiness as having moral gravitas, and the latter began a new life on its own, bereft of its classical moral and religious supports. And so the tale leads to books like Nettle's, in which it is presupposed that happiness has nothing to do with the moral life.

McMahon is not pleased about where we have landed. He concludes that even happiness detached from God and goodness is elusive. He may be tired at the end of his strenuous effort to tell the story of happiness, even though he omits a few contributors to the conversation, like the Earl of Shaftesbury, Joseph Butler and Henry Sidgwick. But his effort is worth it—not least because he reminds us that we cannot and should not stop thinking about this slippery and seductive topic. His excellent work may stimulate us to take stock of ourselves and the paths we have trod in pursuit of happiness. A little sobering is not bad for the soul.

Nicholas White's history of happiness is both interesting and curious—and a little depressing. Rather than presenting a straightforward history, White moves back and

forth among significant voices in the philosophical conversation on happiness, from the ancient Greeks to social-scientific researchers who measure preferences. The result is informative but disappointing. Instead of arguing for a consistent position, White concludes that the attempt to conceptualize happiness is doomed and that it has taken us 2,500 years to realize that the topic is simply too much for us.

Though White's story lacks McMahon's interesting historical details and though the two tellings have different orientations, they are similar enough that it is appropriate to read them together. White wants to know if we can determine whether people are happy by applying some uniform standard to everyone; he concludes that we cannot. He clearly recognizes the conceptual defeat of quantitative hedonism, but his discussion remains on the theoretical level, so we do not get to see the remaining alternatives duke it out, although Kant's *aporia* about grasping happiness conceptually clearly wins. McMahon tells us, on the other hand, that Kant, backed by the 17th-century Anglican divines, radically changed the happiness playing field, and that the new rules suggest that we can never recover.

But is an overarching method for sniffing out each one's happiness on an independent scale what we really want? Do we not want spiritual guidance instead? We don't want to talk about how to measure happiness; we want to be happy. We want to know what is worth organizing our efforts around so we can steer our life in that direction and enjoy doing so. White's construction of the problem—as a philosophical quest for a definitive frame for assessing happiness—seems off the mark unless we are social scientists or market analysts looking for the perfect questionnaire.

Finally, M. Andrew Holowchak discusses happiness in Greek ethical thought. He teaches philosophy at Kutztown University, and it is easy to see this book as a text for an undergraduate course. A readable introduction to central issues in classical thought, it focuses primarily on Plato and Aristotle, but Epicurus, the skeptics and the stoics are also well represented. Holowchak puts the ancients in conversation with modern philosophers, who pick up or reject threads of the rich ancient dialogue. Reading this volume is excellent preparation for working with more difficult texts, like Julia Annas's *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

Unlike McMahon and White, Holowchak steps out of the role of impartial narrator to make his own suggestion for how themes in ancient Greek ethics can be relevant today. After presenting four classic treatments of happiness (with helpful diagrams

and charts to explain the ancients), he takes up the powerful Delphic inscription “Know yourself” as appropriate for us too. Self-knowledge as personality integration follows Plato’s two-tiered path to justice—that is, harmony—first in the soul and then in the polis. Holowchak agrees that happiness is a matter of both psychic and social integration, but he needs to make explicit a third element that Plato and Aristotle took for granted: cosmological integration. Seeing all our actions in the largest perspective is training in a sense of responsibility that is truly virtuous.

Holowchak has turned to the ancients to help us past what he sees as a serious impediment of modern moral philosophy: its support for radical individualism, which, since Kant and Mill, has marked what he calls a great divide between individuals and institutions. Individualism cuts the conversation about happiness off from our embeddedness in community, in experience and in a cosmic perspective for self-understanding.

The suggestion that happiness requires integration at the psychological, social and cosmic levels is interesting, but Holowchak does not develop it into a full-scale proposal. I imagine that he has his work cut out for him trying to get undergraduates to envision any reality beyond that of the radical individualism that is the only thing they know.

Except in McMahon’s history, Christianity is silenced in these books. Happiness is completely our business, and God is nowhere to be seen. Although these authors disagree about whether we can achieve happiness—and if so, how—the struggle to do so is up to us. As McMahon says, Christianity’s contribution to the great discussion was to add the idea of hope in a life to come to sustain us when the goal of happiness escapes us in this life, but beyond that the faith apparently has little to offer. That story remains to be told.