“The Sickness Unto Health”

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE HAPPINESS AND WELLBEING AGENDA
“The Health Unto Death”

“The very people who burst with proofs of exuberant vitality could easily be taken for prepared corpses, from whom the news of their not-quite-successful decease has been withheld for reasons of population policy.”

What is happiness?

- Happiness is absorption in someone or something beyond the self.
- Happiness is aleatory – it happens by chance – to seek it is to destroy it.
- Happiness is fleeting and constructed in recollection. If one tries to seize hold of the moment of happiness it escapes you.
Being absorbed (flow)

- Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment.
- Merging of action and awareness.
- Loss of reflective self-consciousness.
- A sense of control (immersed coping).
- A distortion of temporal experience (time flows faster).
- The activity is intrinsically rewarding, not directed intrinsically towards a goal.

(From Nakamura and Czikszentmihalyi, 2002:90).
One does not seek “the flow” but this is a result of being involved in an intrinsically rewarding activity.

If you focus on happiness itself – on the need to be absorbed – you lose the feeling of happiness (Vernon, 2008: 34).
“I never indeed wavered that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct and the end of life. But I now thought that this was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy . . . who have their minds fixed on some other object than their happiness”.

• Taking life “en passant”
• If you ask yourself whether you are happy, then your happiness ceases.
Problems with Happiness as absorption

- Too extreme a notion of happiness.
- We need a broader concept of wellbeing – related to social goods and relationships, not such an extreme version of happiness.
- One can seek happiness – too much emphasis here on chance.
- Not all absorption in something beyond the self leads to happiness.
Responses to this critique

- It may not be a common experience – but absorption is a realisable yet regulative ideal.
- This concept is related to the range of social goods that come to stand under the name “wellbeing”.
- Happiness must have a content.
- We can accept that absorption alone does not bring happiness – it must be a pleasurable absorption.
Action for Happiness

- GIVING
  Do things for others
- RELATING
  Connect with people
- EXERCISING
  Take care of your body
- APPRECIATING
  Notice the world around
- TRYING OUT
  Keep learning new things
The contradiction of happiness

- A recognition of happiness as a concept concerned with moving beyond the self – towards others, towards the body, to the environment and to the future.
- At the same time a concept of possessive individualism remains at the heart of the happiness agenda.
“The great challenge now is to use our mastery over nature to master ourselves and to give us more of the happiness that we all want”.

Layard (2011: 27).
Four elements of individualism

- Possessive individualism (C.B. Macpherson).
- Emotional capitalism (Eva Illouz).
- Reification (Georg Lukács, Axel Honneth).
- All are interrelated and all are integral to the happiness agenda.
Possessive Individualism - Macpherson

- Individual as owner of his or her own capacities, thoughts and emotions.
- The individual does not derive these thoughts from society.
- Not part of a larger social whole
- Society consists of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities.
- Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors.

Emotional Capitalism

- Intimate life and emotions are turned into objects of calculation that can be captured quantitatively.
- Emotional literacy and emotional intelligence.
- The private self is not marginal but increasingly performed publicly.
- The emphasis on emotional fulfillment also creates a “suffering self”.
“...in emotional capitalism emotions have become entities to be evaluated, inspected, discussed, bargained, quantified and commodified”.

Reification: Georg Lukács

- What happens with our emotional life in the happiness agenda is that our feelings and thoughts are turned into things, a process of reification.
- They become analogous to the dominant form that things take within capitalism – commodities.
- Emotions are handled, inspected and produced to achieve the end of happiness.
Two forms of self-reification, according to Honneth.

Detectivism – we relate to our mental states as something fixed and given that we can discover and inspect.

Constructivism – mental states are things that can be willed and produced, and can be determined according to a given situation.
“... one’s own self becomes reified because in both cases these states are grasped as given, thing-like objects”.

There's more to life when you stop and notice.

Action for Happiness

Notice the world around
www.actionforhappiness.org
The Example of the Jay.
If you can’t change it, change the way you think about it.
Giving

if you want to feel good do good

ACTION FOR HAPPINESS
Do things for others
www.actionforhappiness.org
The meaning of life is a life with meaning.

Action for Happiness

Be part of something bigger
www.actionforhappiness.org
The futility of pursuing happiness

- Happiness is not the goal of public policy.
- The search for happiness is conducted as though one could seek it in the first place.
- Seeking happiness produces a form of self-relationship that excludes the possibility of happiness.
- Happiness can not be controlled, produced or demanded.
“The admonitions to be happy, voiced in concert by the scientifically epicurean sanatorium-director and the highly-strung propaganda chiefs of the entertainment industry have about them the fury of the father berating his children for not rushing joyously downstairs when he comes home irritable from his office”.