

The Psychology of Happiness (2nd Edition)

By Michael Argyle
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IT SEEMS everyone has a view on happiness. Joan Collins, the Dalai Lama and over 100 others have released new titles on the subject since the beginning of 2001. Michael Argyle takes a different approach to most. In his text, *The Psychology of Happiness*, he examines what science can tell us about happiness based on a comprehensive review of available research. The text is not a self-help book—rather it attempts to answer key questions about happiness: What is it? How do we measure it? What are its components? What determines how happy we are?

Michael Argyle is well placed to express his view. The first edition of this book released in 1987 is recognised as a 'classic' text in the history of happiness literature. Professor Argyle has himself conducted research that the book draws upon.

Argyle goes to great pains to incorporate all available research. With 35 pages of references it is almost as if he attempting to prove that this is a serious field of study. Many readers will no doubt be surprised how much research has been conducted on happiness. Readers of the first edition may be equally surprised as to how far the field has developed since Argyle's first edition 15 years ago. To this new edition Argyle states that he has added 'material on national differences, the role of humour, money, and the effect of religion'. More telling is how many of the references are dated since the first edition.

Argyle begins by discussing how researchers study and measure happiness. In doing so he explains the difference between Subjective Well Being (SWB) and Objective Well Being. Subjective Well Being is a measure of happiness conducted by asking survey respondents how they felt about their life. Objective Well Being is a measure of observable variables, such as life expectancy, that we believe are important for a good life.

The distinction is important. We learn that there are no satisfactory objective measures of happiness. Thus any effective measure of well-being needs to include

some subjective measures. Argyle elaborates on the many problems of measuring SWB. SWB measures are open to response bias; surveys on cultural differences do not exist for most historical periods and are expensive to conduct.

Despite the challenges, great progress has been made. Researchers measuring SWB have been able to deconstruct happiness into separate but related dimensions of positive effect (that is, joy and other positive emotions), satisfaction, and negative effect (depression and anxiety). In a few chapters Argyle covers a lot of ground ranging from the biochemistry of positive emotions to theories of social comparison and adaptation to life events.

The bulk of the book is spent reviewing a range of topics and their relationship to happiness. There are separate chapters examining the relationship of happiness to humour, social relationships, leisure, work environment and employment, religion, money, and personal characteristics. These chapters are fascinating reading. Although some of the findings are to be expected, many are not obvious—it is encouraging to discover that my happiness will likely increase with age and that not winning the lottery was possibly a good thing.

There are some important messages. On money Argyle concludes that in prosperous countries, 'Making individuals or countries richer has very little effect on their subjective well-being'. Social relationships are described as 'perhaps' the 'greatest single cause' of happiness. Argyle also provides interesting insights into what can be quite complex relationships. For example, it appears that religion has positive effects on happiness but that this is significantly due to the social support and the sense of purpose and meaning that religion typically provides.

Argyle devotes a chapter to reviewing national differences in happiness. In international happiness surveys Australia consistently ranks alongside Iceland, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries as some of the happier nations. A key reason is our extraverted nature (important in building social relationships) in addition to our 'good weather' and economic prosperity. There are of course

issues with cross-country comparisons such as conducting surveys in different languages and different social norms that may significantly bias results. Unfortunately the only way to address these issues and to obtain a historical perspective is to resort to objective measures (for example, suicide rates).

A key take-away from this work is that the research into the psychology of happiness has now come so far that policymakers, economists and others interested in social policy must take this field of psychology seriously. There is growing evidence that despite substantial growth in many traditional measures of progress people are not getting substantially happier. Happiness research is an obvious step in solving this paradox. Unfortunately the social policy reader may be left with an empty feeling of where to from here. It is not immediately obvious how much of this research can be put to good use.

Argyle typically does not comment on social policy. This is probably a good thing. Occasionally he strays from his expertise in psychology to make policy statements, unfortunately without applying the same rigour. After providing a well-researched and convincing discussion on implications of unemployment to well-being he switches tack and without justification or evidence claims that 'banning overtime would save a quarter of a million jobs in Britain'.

Herein lies the key challenge in using this research for social policy. Are there opportunities to improve well-being by guiding behaviour through social policy or is it better simply to leave individuals to act in their own best interest? I believe opportunities exist but more work, more than is in this book, is required to draw these out.

One of the strongest messages is that we should pay more attention to this field of study. Argyle notes that far more research effort has been devoted to depression than to happiness. I find it concerning that we persist with using only objective measures of progress even though they are recognised as ineffective for measuring happiness. If we are to find the policy implications of happiness research then more economists and policymakers need to understand this research.

The psychology of happiness is a complex field. There is a plethora of theories, research measures and definitions. But for those who have yet to encounter the significant developments that the field of psychology has to offer this is an excellent overview.

Reviewed by Richard Tooth

***The Reckless Mind:
Intellectuals in Politics***

Mark Lilla

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IN HIS book, *Capturing the Culture*, American film critic Richard Grenier made the comment that the West's cultural and intellectual elites 'find this society morally wretched, in fact, miserably lacking in the shining values that give life meaning'. This statement is borne out in Mark Lilla's book, *The Reckless Mind*, which studies the lives of some of the 20th century's most prominent intellectuals and thinkers, and their adherence to totalitarian doctrines and attitudes.

Consisting of essays, which originally appeared in the *New York Review of Books* and *The Times Literary Supplement*, Lilla's book studies the lives of eight prominent thinkers. The chapters deal with Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Alexander Kojeve, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. A long opening chapter looks at the intellectual love affair between Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt. The concluding chapter, 'The Lure of Syracuse', analyses the nature of what Lilla calls the philotyrannical mind in the 20th century.

The chapter on Heidegger, Jaspers and Arendt beautifully evokes the intellectual friendship that can develop when people share a love of philosophy. This relationship broke down, however, when Heidegger attached himself closely to the Nazi Party in the early 1930s, joining the party openly in 1933 when Hitler became Chancellor. Jaspers, in particular, tried to convince his

old friend and former colleague that his commitment was a mistake. Heidegger for his part distanced himself from Jaspers, whose wife was Jewish, during his rectorship at Freiburg University. Arendt fled to France, and then onto the US. Even after the Nazi defeat and the revelations about the death camps, Heidegger refused to apologise for his part in the regime, forcing Jaspers and Arendt to conclude that despite his philosophical brilliance, Heidegger was morally a lost cause.

The chapters on Carl Schmitt and Alexander Kojeve are of particular interest. Neither thinker is well-known in the Anglo-Saxon world, though their influence on European thought was and is profound. Schmitt came from a bourgeois Catholic background and rose to become one of the chief legal experts of the Third Reich, defending the concept of the Führerprinzip as a necessary measure in the so-called war against the Jews.

Schmitt's continued intellectual influence on the German Right is extraordinary given his Nazi record. What is even more extraordinary is the interest of the radical New Left in Germany who seem to have adopted him as an important thinker, drawn to his scathing attacks on liberalism and democracy.

Unknown outside France, Alexander Kojeve was the son of middle-class Russian parents who fled Russia in the wake of the October Revolution in 1917, despite his own conversion to communism. Attracted to radical political and mystical doctrines, and an ardent admirer of Stalin, Kojeve expounded a strange philosophy that combined Hegel, Marx, Heidegger and Nietzsche to a small audience of left-wing intellectuals in Paris in the 1930s.

Announcing the End of History, Kojeve preached the death of nobility and human greatness, and saw as inevitable the triumph of the universal and homogenous state, which he identified with the liberal capitalist West. His teachings influenced a whole generation of French thinkers, and contributed greatly to the rise of existentialism and postmodernism in the postwar world.

Perhaps the most fascinating chapter is the final one, in which Lilla seeks to rescue the idea of the intellectual from the moral relativism and totalitarianism that many of

the intellectuals in the 20th century have worshipped. Drawing on Plato's idea of the philosopher as a man in love with abstract ideas of Beauty and Goodness, Lilla argues that intellectuals need self-discipline if they are not to let this love become an all-consuming obsession with forcing the world to conform to abstract concepts.

Lilla has hit upon an important point: most of the intellectuals discussed in these essays were caught up in essentially theological and mystical questions. Despairing of a fallen, materialistic world, full of evil and suffering, and lacking in spiritual beliefs and values, many turned to radical political doctrines and parties as a way of correcting the imperfections of the world. Many concluded that these imperfections could only be eradicated via the cleansing fire of totalitarian dictatorship, which would force the human race into conformity with their version of the ideal world.

As Orwell made clear in his classic novel *1984*, totalitarianism was a new religion for many, who hoped it would usher in the Millennium of peace and plenty for the human race. By replacing the union of humanity with God at the end of time, totalitarian doctrines sought to build the perfect society in the present, rescuing a fallen humanity through radical measures and state-sanctioned programmes.

Following Plato, Lilla argues that intellectuals need to restrain their love for abstract virtues, and realise that the Good will never be implemented in an imperfect world. The Philosopher King must learn to rule over his own inner world before he can hope to have any influence on the outside world. And what must the intellectuals do when a society refuses to accept the philosopher's account of the True and the Beautiful? According to Lilla, Plato counsels withdrawal, maintaining a critical distance and awaiting more hopeful times.

Along with Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* and Tony Judt's *The Burden of Responsibility*, Lilla's book is a worthy contribution to the philosophical history of the 20th century and of Western intellectuals.

Reviewed by Martin Sheehan