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‘Not Suffering, not melancholy’ (penultimate version – see Sydney Review of Books website for final version)

Review by Anya Daly of - *On Happiness*, edited by Camilla Nelson, Deborah Pike & Georgina Ledvinka

What is happiness? The word conjures sunshine, pleasure, expansiveness and possibility – and we could all claim some knowledge and experience of happiness. Nonetheless, happiness, perhaps more than any other experience, is as much defined and delineated in the negative. Happiness is not suffering, not anguish, not absence or lack, not loneliness, not depression, not melancholy. Happiness, it would seem, is an ideal state to be sought, to be cultivated, defended and even boasted about. That we do not in fact have grasp of a pure state, such as happiness, in isolation from its contraries is illuminating something important in how ourselves and our realities are structured. We are able to recognise it not only because it is already a part of our experiential repertoire but also because we are already familiar with its converse. This insight has direct implications for our experiences in general and for the experience of happiness in particular.

The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna’s (150-250 CE) tetralemma can also be invoked to illuminate this paradox. The tetralemma is established as follows: we can recognise a thing as being what it is because of its positive characteristics; the thing is also what it is because of what it is not; the thing is thus a combination of what it is and what it is not; and finally, because of our shifting non-coinciding attention between what it is and what it is not, the thing is neither what it is nor what it is not. If we run this four-cornered negation with ‘happiness’ we have: happiness is the state or experience of pleasure, joy and positivity; happiness is not the state or experience of suffering, anguish, depression etc.,; happiness is both what it is and what it is not; because of our shifting attention between what it is and what it is not, happiness is neither what it is nor what it is not.

The aim of this tetralemma is to demonstrate the radical contingency that is at play in our grasp of reality and this applies equally to our grasp of the experience of happiness. The negative, what opposes happiness, is as essential to happiness as the positive components; ignoring the negative effectively negates happiness. In this way we can say that the analyses and discussions about happiness in *On Happiness* have conceptual/ logical vindication and give added justification for the editors’ warning that “this book will not make you happy”. Focussing on happiness as a life goal or investing in a sense of entitlement to be happy, is finally self-defeating. Only when we relinquish our self-obsessed efforts to orchestrate and control life’s contingencies, taking a long hard look at the unpleasant things and seek rather to cherish other-directed values, will happiness arise organically. Happiness thus appears to be an epiphenomenon, a by-product of doing and achieving anything that has value. Like a shadow thrown by a light, happiness inherently depends for its existence on another source than itself.

The Ancient Greeks considered happiness not merely as a subjective state, but as the by-product of cultivating various virtues which constituted a ‘good life’. Is a good life a happy one? What significance should we assign to the various values or virtues? Is there an intrinsic interdependence between certain values and virtues? Is happiness dependent on freedom, justice, courage or honesty? Can a slave, an unjust person, a coward or a liar be truly happy? Conversely, a virtuous person may have tragedies befall her and so we would not wish to claim that her life was a happy one. This manner of questioning inevitably leads into ethical considerations and as such the notion of happiness appears to play a normative role.

Over the course of the history of philosophy various candidates for ‘happiness’ have been considered from the most basic idea of sense pleasure, through to the higher pleasures and further to the Greek notion of *eudaimonia* (generally translated as human flourishing) spanning the spheres of private and public concerns. With the ascendancy in late antiquity and the middle ages of Christian thought, the ‘good life’ exemplified in personal flourishing and harmonious communities came to be supplanted by Christian virtue and ‘other-worldly’

aspirations. No longer was evident flourishing and happiness seen as indications of a 'good life', but rather could indicate a deficiency of piety and sacrifice, potentially closing the gates of heaven.

The Early Modern period saw the beginnings of philosophical efforts to extricate thinking from the strait-jacket of the medieval scholastic dogmatism and so with Jeremy Bentham we have a return to a secular ethic which defined 'the good' in terms of utility and pleasure. His student John Stuart-Mill, redefined the greatest utility as 'happiness' and today utilitarians define utility more flexibly and broadly as 'preference satisfaction'. The recently established school of 'positive psychology' aims to encompass all the historical candidates for happiness; happiness as satisfaction and 'flow', as a subjective state, as an interior experience unique to the individual in conjunction with happiness in the *eudaimonic* sense as a life well-lived, attuned to others and society. As the phenomenologists Husserl, Stein, Scheler and Merleau-Ponty attest, we are not isolated solitary creatures but are born into sociality and sociality is constitutive of the kinds of beings we are. Any individualistic 'happiness-endeavour' is thus doomed from the start – others must also be part of the equation. The burgeoning research in the field of social cognition into intersubjectivity, empathy, altruism and compassion lends significant empirical support to these phenomenological accounts.

Optimism, the notion of dispositional happiness which is able to face obstacles and vicissitudes with resilience also warrants examination. The eponymous hero of Voltaire's novelette *Candide ou Optimisme*, presents us with a caricature of extraordinarily robust dispositional happiness. Candide's unquestioning confidence in the authority of his teacher Professor Pangloss, who despite the evidence of horrendous brutality and corruptions espouses the view that this is the best of all possible worlds, both plunges him into many fraught and dangerous situations and ironically ensures that he escapes relatively unscathed. Bob Brown, the ex-leader of the Greens, aligns himself with Candide in giving his memoir the title *Optimism: Reflections on a life of action*. Candide and Bob both are witness to the devastations and corruption that goes hand in hand with ignorance and greed, and both finally settle for cultivating their respective gardens. Bob writes: "These days I am an optimist and I like it. It is also a reasonable option because optimism is a key ingredient for any successful human endeavour – and isn't keeping Earth viable the greatest endeavour we can ever undertake?" He goes on to quote Bertrand Russell - "The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt": this is in turn referencing a line in W.B.Yeats' poem, *The Second Coming*, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity". What is relevant in these reflections for our discussions is that happiness and optimism do not arise ex nihilo, they are situated in the world, a particular time and place, and arise in dependence on cultivation and action. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso advises: "Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions".

On Happiness illuminates the phenomenon of happiness with a clear eye on its paradoxical nature – that in seeking to capture the essence of happiness itself, many divergent and sometimes seemingly opposing notions come into play. Paradoxical, also in that in mustering all the strategies and necessary ingredients for a happy life, sometimes in the end the reverse is in fact achieved – abject misery.

The editors/ writers declare their challenge in the beginning with the Introduction titled 'This book won't make you happy' – warning off those who seek a superficial quick-fix recipe typical of the self-help variety of 'happiness books'. Nielson and Pike thus set the requirements higher, demanding that readers be prepared to relinquish the naïve and cherished conventional nostrums for happiness in favour of a more nuanced understanding that may in fact lead to some rather uncomfortable conclusions. The common-sense assumptions of happiness are interrogated through various lenses – philosophical, political, social, cultural and literary – ultimately inviting us

both to reconfigure our understanding of the paradox of happiness and to seek out ways of better addressing issues that block or corrupt our flourishing as individuals and as societies.

On Happiness is a broad-ranging interrogation, each essay tackling a different dimension of our experience of 'happiness' according to the writer's own experience and expertise. The scope and concerns of each essay, nonetheless, spill across disciplinary boundaries so that the ethicist, the economists, the philosophers, the professors of English, the professor of Law, the psychologist, the cultural theorists etc., also draw variously on literature, philosophy, politics, comedy, history and the human sciences creating an interweaving of thought and styles that makes this collection particularly readable and thought provoking.

In the first section, *Philosophical Engagements*, Clive Hamilton, Professor of Public Ethics, launches the interrogation with his essay 'The Lies of Happiness', an incisive examination of the opposing forces of self-deception and authenticity. He targets specifically the happiness industry which underwrites the consumerist culture of markets, brands and lifestyle icons, leading to the corruption of values, the trade in false promises and the dumbing-down of society in general. Underpinning these lies is not only the implicit message that having gained all the 'happiness-inducing' goods, the pathway to success and popularity will open up but also that it is all within our control and we only need adjust our attitudes. In this way unhappiness is neither an unfortunate state of mind, nor the outcome of difficult external circumstances such as debt, failing marriages, poor health, unemployment, overwork, etcetera; it is just having the wrong attitude, being out of tune with this positivistic universe and as such even becomes blameworthy.

Professor of Economics, John Quiggin's essay 'What Happiness Conceals', continues this realist line and skilfully unpacks the facts in the relatively recent fixation on 'happiness economics'. He calls into question the inflated claims made on the basis of research which has among other things generated what is known as the 'Easterlin Paradox' – that increased wealth only increases happiness levels up to a certain point after which it tapers off and may even decline. The message being that as long as the basics and some extra luxuries are affordable, the higher levels of wealth add no 'happiness' value. Quiggin also cites the immensely popularised politico-economic strategy adopted by the then King of Bhutan in the 1970s of replacing the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) with the GNH (Gross National Happiness). It is not surprising that taken out of context of the Buddhist culture which centres around the core Buddhist teaching – *The Four Noble Truths*, the first of these being *The Truth of Suffering* (sickness, old age, death, impermanence and contingency being the standard contemplations...) that this strategy was hyped up in the West and lauded as an 'ingenious' way to solve economic woes by displacing them with happiness measures. This reflects more the West's penchant for fads and fetishes rather than the blissful naivety of an idyllic but struggling Asian nation. While this strategy has inspired a questioning of values it is important to remember that how something is measured does not alter that which is measured, only perhaps our perception of it. And this is exactly Quiggin's point in deconstructing the methodologies, the conceptual frameworks and interpretations of various economic instruments. Quiggin asks us to interrogate deeper rather than just abdicating judgement to the specialists – the economists. He reminds us that economics is a work-in-progress and that despite the grand proclamations of having found the key solution to poverty, inequity and injustices, the proponents in the various debates are still grappling with the challenge of applying theory to the hard and often intractable objective realities.

Brock Bastien's essay 'Loving happiness but feeling sad', returns us to the subjective with an examination of the emotional toll of living in cultures with a 'happiness' obsession. Bastien contrasts the West's fetishization of happiness with the East's suspicions of happiness-seeking, giving more value to tranquillity and balance and thereby finding concordance with ancient Greek views. Bastien cites various psychological studies which support the view that you *can* have too much of a 'good thing'. Again he brings the discussion back to the key connecting insight across all the essays - that happiness is as much understood through the contraries – in this case sadness.

The treatment of depression also points to an interesting phenomenon – that depressed people are often more depressed about being depressed than just being depressed. This reflects another Buddhist insight that not only do we suffer but we add another layer and suffer about suffering. Bastien insightfully examines how our culture in its tendency to reject and delegitimize negative emotion, effectively compounds depression and psychological suffering. He describes this as a kind of materialism which has not only over-evaluated pleasure and happiness and negated the value of uncomfortable emotions, but also has led to the commodification of happiness and the pathologizing of negative emotion, notably sadness as depression requiring pharmacological and psychological interventions.

In the opening paragraph of his essay, 'Anger and Courage: The Daughters of Hope', philosopher Richard Hamilton confronts us squarely with the misery of the world – from the sufferings of disease, loss and starvation to the misery of the empty pleasures of the degenerate affluent. And these miseries are most often accommodated within corrupt political systems and intensified by the looming ecological catastrophe. Nonetheless, Hamilton assures that there is reason to have hope – hope allied to constructive anger and courage. Hamilton identifies a number of worrying self-deceptions that we tend to deploy so as not to face up to brutal realities and more concerningly so as to ignore the plight of others, justifying their sufferings as 'deserved'. This is a kind of literalist and distorted interpretation of 'karma' – the poor deserve their poverty, the rich are entitled to their wealth – conveniently ignoring the systemic imbalances that perpetuate such disparities. He cites a number of studies that expose the sometimes ugly and paradoxical psychological dynamics at work in our attitudes to wealth, love, success and all their contraries. The 'Just World Hypothesis' of Melvin Lerner captures the pernicious nature of victim-blaming and entitlement-defending, from personal misfortunes to repressive political mentalities embodied in the extreme right rhetoric of the Tea-Party and now Donald Trump or closer to home the rhetoric of One Nation, Pauline Hansen and Tony Abbott. It is not surprising given the tenor of Hamilton's approach from the outset, that he eventually progresses to a discussion of the Stoics. His analyses are informed and he makes a compelling case for the value of constructive anger and courage in the face of injustices.

Steven Connor, Professor of English, offers a lucid and ironic analysis of the hedonic, tracing our often uneasy relation with pleasure in a discussion which spans the woes of institutional manipulations and economic appropriations. Connor observes that the professions most intimately associated with the higher pleasures of literature, the arts, music etc., are often almost apologetic for their passions wishing to give the impression to the general populace that they do put in the 'hard yards' and suffer for their art. "The ravening beast of earnestness", Connor argues is poisoning our pleasures. He further asserts that "the least bad thing about this is that it is dull and enervating. The worst thing about it is that it provides so many opportunities for bullying and coercion" (p.66). Connor draws on etymology and psychoanalysis both to illuminate hidden dimensions and to parody our complex attitude to pleasure-seeking. His phenomenological reflections on pain and pleasure with regard to temporality encapsulate a much deeper project which here, he only presents the bare contours. The more thoroughgoing interrogation will perhaps be found more fully articulated in his forthcoming book, *Living By Numbers: In Defence of Quantity*. "Pleasure" serves Connor well to present many tantalizing entrées into his wide-ranging scholarship – from philosophy, art, phenomenology, literature, history and back to philosophy again with his defence of Bentham's utilitarianism. While I acknowledge Connor's appreciations of Bentham's Utilitarianism, I would suggest that the 'felicific calculus' as another 'top-down' ethics is ill-equipped to reflect the complexities of ethical experience. Despite the various modifications it has undergone in the attempts to address abhorrent outcomes when rigorously applied, it still fails to engage with key ethical concepts such as justice, integrity and partiality. Moreover, these failures all point to a serious underlying flaw. This flaw is the failure to take account of the nature of human subjectivity – that humans are essentially intersubjective and social.

Having teased out the 'big questions' and presented a number of conceptual frameworks in this first section 'Philosophical Engagements', the second section, 'Social Interrogations', anchors these ideas in the social domain, showing how our understandings and expectations of happiness gear into and structure lived experience.

Camilla Nelson in her essay 'Happy Housewives and Angry Feminists: The Myths of Modern Motherhood', offers a wry and penetrating examination of the immense pressures and contradictions surrounding parenthood, most particularly motherhood. Ignoring the 'gritty realities' of motherhood, impossible and dubious ideals are pushed on women through the media leading to a "re-inscription of the ideologies of motherhood" which retain all the perversities of biblical credos, escalated by the fears of external threats (abductions, paedophiles and germs), the admonitions of 'experts' and the aspirations of the various waves of feminism. These all combine to ensure that mothering is likely to be fraught and joyless. Fortunately, Nelson also presents the other side, the 'Parenting Hate Reads' and the mummy blogs which celebrate "mothering that is chaotic, life-like and down-to-earth" (p.89). Nelson also explores the impoverished conceptions of happiness and the coercive promotion of the so-called 'Natural' which underpin much of the misapprehensions around mothering. She concludes that "if society can solve its social problems then maybe parenting will cease to be a misery competition – mothers might not be happy in the utilitarian or hedonistic sense, but will lead rich and satisfying lives – and then maybe a stay-at-home dad can change a nappy without a choir of angels descending from heaven singing 'Hallelujah'" (p.94).

David Ritter, CEO of Greenpeace Australia-Pacific, is an activist of extensive experience who has also been given recognition in an honorary fellowship at the School of Law, University of Western Australia and as an Associate in the Sydney Democracy Network, University of Sydney. Ritter writes an evocative account of the campaign to block what could potentially become Australia's largest coal mine at Maules Creek. The realities he presents are stark and his arguments for urgent action, backed up by thorough research are in earnest. Key to the case he makes are the analyses pioneered by economist Amartya Sen and developed further by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, known as the 'capabilities approach' to economic and social development – bringing this into useful engagement with the debates on climate change. In his essay, Ritter affirms that the local and the global cannot be understood in isolation; they are interdependent. The callous disregard of supposedly local concerns, such as those of the 'Leard Blockade' will inevitably contribute to the global catastrophe which is climate change.

The third essay in this section, 'Pursuing Happiness; The politics of surviving well together', continues the concerns of ecological sustainability. J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy offer useful evaluations of the various 'happiness indicators' developed so as to decouple happiness from purely economic considerations and broaden the focus from individual well-being, to societal well-being, to planetary well-being. Significantly, they argue that the emerging research not only challenges assumptions about the role of wealth in happiness but also the typically capitalist accounts of economy which narrow the focus to solely production and consumption, ignoring all the other activities that contribute to economic well-being and happiness which fall below the radar. The 'relational metrics' they propose accords with the relatively new domain of social accounting.

The claim that literature plays a unique role in awakening our humanity and ethical imagination, as advanced by philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond, is compellingly elucidated through Deborah Pike's essay, 'The Russian Way of Happiness: On love, choice and community'. This essay is an elegant and thoughtful meditation on the writings of Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, adding an important literary dimension to the overall interrogation of happiness. Pike organises her discussion around the theme of 'choice', linking this to recent philosophical and psychological research and shows how 'choice' may ultimately lead to self-sabotage. It is choice that drives the tragic trajectories of the Russian novels she presents. She writes: "Reading these great novels is like tumbling into an immense web of event, choice, action and consequence, where the characters' pursuit of personal happiness above all else is radically thrown into question" (p.164). The unflinching gaze of

these Russian writers expose the sometimes perfidious sides of human beings below the push and pull of social convention. Pike's judicious use of character analysis and quotation builds a convincing case for the value of the long view, depicting the excoriating sufferings and moral jeopardies that ensue under the pressures of choice informed by an individualist pursuit of happiness in the present moment.

The remaining essays by Larrisa Behrendt, Ranjana Srivastava, Alice Pung, Georgina Ledvinka, Anna Kamaralli, Tony Moore and James Arvanitakis traverse other diverse personal, cultural and conceptual landscapes, investing the concrete with moral significance and adding to the wide-ranging debates contained in this collection.

If *On Happiness* has an underpinning message, it lies perhaps in the challenge to question our assumptions about happiness, to honour the value of both sufferings and joys, and it calls us to "think of [happiness] in new and more socially attuned ways". (p.15).

Brown, Bob, (2014) *Optimism: Reflections on a life of action*, Richmond, Victoria: Hardie Grant Books

Øyvind Rabbias; Eyjolfur, K. Emilsson; Hallvard Fossheim; Miira Tuominen (eds), (2015) *The Quest for the Good Life: Ancient Philosophers on Happiness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press