

Sissela Bok

Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science.

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Sisela Bok has written an engaging book on a topic that almost all human beings have explored, in one way or another at least. Most humans have at some point reflected on the concept of happiness, if not philosophically then at least according to prescribed dictates of their cultures. For many the idea of happiness is instantiated in the achievement of those goals that their particular cultures consider ideal. Thus, if the culture places the greatest value on acquiring wealth, the individual who acquires it would tend to experience the psychological state of what he or she would deem as 'happiness'.

Human beings are teleological or goal-seeking beings, and when some much-desired goal has been achieved the feeling of satisfaction is often described as 'happiness'. Thus, propositions such as the following are easily understood and appreciated in colloquial discourse: 'The happiest day of my life was when I graduated from university with distinction after overcoming a severe illness;' or, 'I felt so happy when my team won the final.' The intriguing question in all this is: what exactly are the sensate states of individuals when they proclaim that they are happy at the occurrence of some event, or when they claim that they are happy because they have attained a certain level of intense and great satisfaction? On the other hand, are there qualifications that an observer can place on the definition of happiness that rule out sensate feelings of happiness at the attainment of certain goals or the occurrence of certain events? Can one, for instance, be truly happy if the happiness in question derives from taking a drug, or from being hooked up to a happiness machine? Can one be genuinely happy as an executioner in a society that practices capital punishment? It is the discussion of questions like this that makes Sissela Bok's *Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science* such an interesting book.

Bok begins her disquisition on happiness in a rather personal way, with the observation that she might not have been at all given the medical advice her mother received. Her point here is that happiness is not a sensate state that can be attained automatically; it requires work, just as her mother worked to attain some form of happiness just by giving birth to her. That was indeed her mother's version of sensate happiness. Does this mean that there is no single recipe for happiness, beyond personal sensate feelings? This kind of question prompts Bok to explore happiness as a concept, not as a means to offer criteria as to how to find it, but rather 'to explore what we can learn about its nature and its role in human lives' (2). She points out that the idea of happiness involves contending visions today in much the same way that it did in the fifth and sixth centuries BCE. Thus, taking the long history of ideas approach in order to offer a comprehensive analysis of happiness, Bok expresses her ultimate goal as follows: 'First, I wanted to ask what we can learn about it from bringing together the striking new

findings of natural and social scientists with long-standing traditions of reflection by philosophers, religious thinkers, historians, poets, and so many others' (3).

Bok first discusses the myriad views—some quite sophisticated—of a non-measurable happiness as expressed by prominent thinkers of the past such as Aristotle, Epicurus, Seneca, Petrarch, etc., then later the idea of a measurable happiness as expounded by 19th century utilitarian theorists such as Bentham, Mill, and Edgeworth. There is a weakness here in the discussion, given that the author does not fully explore the differences between happiness as a psychological state, and happiness as sensate pleasure derived from external stimulation, e.g., the consumption of external goods. The earlier, classical views of happiness all seem to explore the possibilities of happiness beyond mere sensate stimulation. More modern views take their cue from the economic utilitarianism of Bentham, Mill, and Edgeworth, for whom happiness and sensate pleasure are correlative. The ostensibly empiricist approach of the latter group of thinkers would seem to tie in with Bok's observations that modern neuroscience has been able to plumb the depths and recesses of the human brain to identify those areas associated with pain and pleasure. This kind of research has certainly been of much use in helping to alleviate the sensate feelings of despair experienced by the clinically depressed.

However, arguably this neuroscientific approach merely compounds matters, in that it seems to suggest that happiness is reducible to the stimulation of pleasure and pain locations in the brain. On this account, there would be good grounds for arguing that there is no such thing as happiness in itself; it is all an illusion. If so, then there is no basis for objections to more realistic variants of Nozick's 'experience machine', according to which happiness derives from mere brain stimulation.

This approach will not do for Bok because, although she argues for 'the greatest possible leeway in the pursuit of happiness', the paths one might take to happiness are subject to the moral limits by criteria such as 'respect for oneself as a moral agent and the fundamental rights of others. In either case, the moral limits imposed on the pursuit of happiness are real' (176). Bok reinforces her position with the deontological principle that '(p)ursuits of happiness that abide by fundamental moral values differ crucially from those that call for deceit, violence, betrayal' (176). According to her, these fundamental moral values are so regarded because they have been found necessary in all societies: no society could survive without them. The problem, though, is how to universalize them so that they are 'recognized by all as applying to outsiders, strangers or enemies' (177). But given that happiness, according to Bok, is not simply reducible to personally experienced sensate states, the question can be asked: Can one be genuinely happy while knowing that there are situations in the world where great unhappiness—engendered by 'deceit, violence, [and] betrayal'—is being experienced by others? Implicitly we are asking whether a psychologically normal person can be happy knowing that others are unhappy on account of the pain-inducing or unhappiness-inducing actions of others? For Bok, the answer is 'no', which is why for her a 'happy torturer' amounts to a contradiction in terms. As for what one should make of the psychological states of individuals who are indifferent in subjectively sensate terms to the palpably unhappy situations of others, or what is to be made of the feelings of pleasure felt by many at the public or private state-sanctioned executions of individuals accused or convicted of having committed capital crimes; for Bok, those individuals, though experiencing great pleasure

at the knowledge of such events, could not possibly be deriving genuine happiness in these instances.

This brings us back to the operational structures of the human brain. In strict material terms the brain is just another organ of the human body. It is capable of being diseased or healthy. So, are the brains of those who experience sensate pleasure at, e.g., acts of torture, diseased or otherwise? The problem is that there are so many people who have this experience that the following question arises: could it be that the cognitive pathways of healthy brains are compromised by the operant conditioning of culturally embedded stimuli?

If Bok is right, it would appear that there is a disjunction between the experience of sensate pleasure—economists speak of ‘bliss points’, etc.—and happiness. But if one argues that sensate pleasure derived from direct sensory stimuli is not translatable into happiness—as in the case of Bok’s rejection of the idea of a happy torturer—then what are we left with in our search for an adequate definition of happiness? Perhaps the solution is to adopt a minimalist position and posit that a feeling of ‘happiness’ requires some form of sensate recognition of some event but with the qualification that those forms of sensate recognition be consensually agreed on by others. Thus in practical terms happiness—in its minimalist sense—would be the sensate experience felt in performing acts that make others feel ‘happy’. This probably explains why some of the self-confessedly happiest people are those who engage in charity work or do medical work under the most extreme conditions. It all boils down to the simple question, ‘What’s in a life?’. The answer that most people offer is, ‘To be happy’. The philosophical question then is, ‘But how?’. That is the question that Bok tackles in her book. She does so engagingly, with verve and intellectual commitment, making her work a valuable companion to any course in ethics.

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