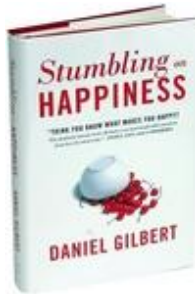


“Oft Expectation Fails, and Most Oft There”: Stumbling Blocks in the Pursuit of Happiness

A review of



Stumbling on Happiness
by Daniel Gilbert

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Reviewed by
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—Following an impromptu litany of the many worldly calamities on my mind one particular day, I asked a group of students what the past 100 years or so of psychology had contributed to the world's welfare. Although several psychological phenomena could explain the uncertain silence that met my question (e.g., norms regarding rhetorical questions, negative affect priming hampering creativity, the debilitating effects of my pedagogy), perhaps these students were paralyzed by visions of shelves crammed full of self-help books stretching endlessly toward the horizon like a textbook illustration of the vanishing point. Given the practically inconceivable number of these books, one must seemingly reach one of two conclusions: Either we do not know what makes people happy, or we know but something stops them. As Daniel Gilbert warns in the foreword to his despairingly fun book, *Stumbling on Happiness*, although he does not tell you anything useful about how to be happy, you are welcome to purchase a self-help book, and once you have “done everything it says to do, and found yourself miserable anyway, you can always come back here to understand why” (p. xvi). What follows is a delightfully pessimistic, humorous, and persuasively written argument that something stops people from being happy.

—In Gilbert's book, he argues that the “something” springs from a quirk of the human mind: its inability to accurately forecast how events will make us feel. Gilbert slyly builds an image of the human being as concerned about the future but inextricably bound to the present, incapable of reasonably comparing past experiences, casting an undeservedly rosy glow on himself or herself, recreating rather than recalling past events, failing to account for important elements of future events, acting embarrassingly confident that what he or she imagines is the way things are or will be, and generally making a great big muck of things. Reading *Stumbling* is like being a part of an exceptionally edifying and entertaining social psychology seminar, and it is great, if bewildering, fun. As Gilbert later writes, “If the goal of science is to make us feel awkward and ignorant in the presence of things we once understood perfectly well, then psychology has succeeded above all others” (p. 64). The same could be said for this marvelous book.

Happiness Is...

—Gilbert makes two critical philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of the seemingly unattainable happiness people pursue. First, happiness consists of or is reducible to maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain—primarily emotional, in this case. This is a straightforward hedonic proposition. For example, we might feel that volunteering at a soup kitchen is good for us and think it contributes to our well-being because it is virtuous. Not so, Gilbert argues. Such activity contributes to our well-being only because it elicits pleasurable emotions. Furthermore, the pleasurable emotions serving at the soup kitchen (or reading Gilbert's book) elicits are indistinguishable from those elicited by eating banana cream pie. Several psychologists would differ on both of these points. For example, a variety of psychological needs have been proposed, the satisfaction of which leads people to flourish regardless of whether it feels good (see Kagan, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Others have argued that the emotions differ in their impact on us as a function of the personal meaning their eliciting conditions possess (Fredrickson, 2000). Thus, even if behavior only contributes to happiness by causing pleasurable emotions, serving at a soup kitchen might evoke more powerful emotions (e.g., pride) than eating banana cream pie (e.g., yum). *Stumbling* is unlikely to settle this 2,400-year-old debate, but it is rewarding in the insights it provides and the questions it raises.

—Second, the “gold standard” of happiness is the pleasure and pain held in specific, discrete moments (see also Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). As Gilbert points out, whereas people may not be able to accurately tell you how they felt or even what they did in the past, much less how they will feel in the future, they are fairly likely to be able to tell you how they are feeling and what they are doing at the moment you ask them. If we add up all of the relatively accurate moments, we get a relatively accurate picture of how happy someone really is. Thus, according to Gilbert, the best estimate of a person's happiness is a summation of his or her pleasant and unpleasant moments. Our problem, then, lies in our inability to ensure ourselves a future replete with pleasant moments.

“Ay, There's the Rub”

—Gilbert appears fond of using Shakespeare to introduce the numerous and systematic errors we make when attempting to predict how future events will make us feel. What we expect to experience is rarely what we actually experience. However, as Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in't” (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n.d., Act 2, Scene 2, Line 206). Although we are certainly terrible reconstructors and predictors of our very own experiences, particularly emotional ones, such propensities are seemingly quite adaptive. In example after example of how faulty we are as students of our own experiences, Gilbert perhaps inadvertently gives the reader the impression that we are really, really lucky we are so very, very wrong. Take, for example, the belief that having children will make us happy. This belief is untrue, according to Gilbert's recounting of the research literature (although when you ask them what makes them the most happy, most parents say it is their children). Yet it is a “superreplicating” belief because, despite its untruth, it is linked with its own perpetuation in obvious ways. People who do not hold this belief are less likely to have children, whereas people who do hold this belief are more likely. Societies that do not hold this belief perish, whereas those that do proliferate. The main thrust of the book, of course, is that delusional beliefs such as these prevent us from being happy. I could not help feeling that, erroneous though they are, such beliefs seem fairly important to sustaining life as we know it.

—But, we might object, in addition to our culturally inherited beliefs about what will make us happy, we also have our memories of what made us happy and sad before. These, too, are wrong. We did not feel as devastated by the loss of our pet cat or the 2000 election by Al Gore as we thought we would be or as we remember we did. We were not as pleased by the acquisition of a new objet d'art or the 2000 election of George Bush as we thought we would be or remember we were. Gilbert's definition of happiness, privileging the moment over recollections and anticipations, means that, in reality, we are probably both a little less sad and a little less happy than we think we are. It gets confusing to add this all up to try to discover whether we are better off or worse off with our errors.

—Gilbert comes to the conclusion that we are worse off and suggests an admittedly unpalatable antidote. The necessity of this antidote is propelled by some degree of an assumption of prevailing unhappiness among people at large. To the contrary, research suggests that most people are happy, not miserable (Diener & Diener, 1996).

Misery Loves Comedy

—Of course, misery has never been more fun. I had an eerie suspicion that Gilbert knows more than he lets on. He looks so happy in his jacket photo, and his writing seems to belie an engaging, vivacious joie de vivre. At one point, Dr. Pangloss, from Voltaire's *Candide*, makes an appearance, illustrating the point that humans are in some ways engineered to make the best of any circumstance. That is to say, no matter how bad things are, they can still be considered good. Reading Gilbert's gleeful account of the myriad ways we strike out again and again in our quest to learn what will make us happy, I had to wonder why he seems so darn perky. I could practically hear him chuckling as he crafted evocative sentences, one after the other. Meaning systems theorists might argue that such joy as this comes from the pleasure of knowing how things work, regardless of whether they work to our advantage (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). This is a decidedly nonhedonic perspective on happiness, however, so perhaps Gilbert has figured out a way to predict which future moments will bring the most pleasure. Given his penchant for rhetorically wagering fine dining and wining experiences against our inability to accurately answer the fundamental riddles he raises, one might imagine a gustatory solution.

—Conversely, he might use his own antidote to our failure of imagination. If we want to know how we are going to feel about something in the future, he suggests we ask any random person who is experiencing that same thing right now. If we want to know whether we will enjoy banana cream pie, we should ask someone who is eating one rather than rely on our guesses, tainted as they are by our present satiation, mood, or preferences for other types of pie. He cites some unpublished research suggesting that such experiential surrogates enable more accurate forecasting than our own gut instincts. To some degree, this is a great idea. After all, isn't that why you are reading this right now? Aren't you likely to scan the blurbs by other authors on the jacket before deciding whether to buy Gilbert's book? Do you ever peer at the delicious-looking meals of other diners and try to gauge how well they like their food? This antidote seems to be ingrained to some extent in our world already. Yet it has some obvious limits. When pondering whether one should go to a movie, one is likely to encounter different opinions. What if one is deciding whether to travel to Padua or Paducah, or to Montmartre or Montana? As Gilbert notes in a different context, that trip to Montana might have a highly influential peak moment that

retrospectively annihilates the rain-soaked, bug-infested days, leading to an inaccurately enthusiastic recommendation. It seems this antidote is also unlikely to help with big decisions. Should we have children? Well, the research (based, ironically, on retrospective, not momentary, reports) suggests that relationship satisfaction dives with child rearing, so no, we should not. But what if we caught a mom or dad witnessing his or her child's first steps? What if we saw him or her cleaning the shards of Great Aunt Agnes's reliquary from baby's sticky mitts?

☞ Sometimes, inaccuracy seems important. Take the example of clinical treatment for panic attacks. Part of this process is convincing people that they are not going to die every time they start to feel sweaty or feel their heart thumping at their ribs. Imagine encouraging a client who is terrified of the mere possibility of another attack to ask someone who is experiencing one how he or she feels. The person would likely exclaim, "I feel like I am going to die!" Treatment would be set back four weeks. I suspect that Gilbert offers his antidote more to underscore problems predicting our own future happiness than as a practical solution, and future research on emotional surrogates will be fascinating to read.

☞ However, there is something else that is ultimately unsatisfying about Gilbert's antidote, related to his definition of happiness. Happiness, we are led to believe, consists of having many pleasurable moments. The moment is what matters. Yet in illustrating countless examples of how people's typical experience of life, full of retrospective prevaricating and prospective misjudgments, is so very different from the moment, Gilbert inadvertently makes the point that the moment does not matter, that it is obliterated by our errors. Furthermore, our errors mostly seem to make us happier. The dissection of life into pleasant and unpleasant moments, perhaps best chosen by strangers, seems far from life as it is lived, full of ambivalent moments, delayed gratification, misremembrances of things past, and all.

☞ In the end, Gilbert is true to his word. There are no answers to finding happiness here. We are fairly convinced that we do not do things the right way, but we are left with the unanswered question of what the true consequences are.

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