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AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS

by Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D

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PREFACE

FOR the last half century psychology has been consumed with a single topic only-mental illness-and has done fairly well with it. Psychologists can now measure such once-fuzzy concepts as depression, schizophrenia, and alcoholism with considerable precision. We now know a good deal about how these troubles develop across the life span, and about their genetics, their biochemistry, and their psychological causes. Best of all we have learned how to relieve these disorders. By my last count, fourteen out of the several dozen major mental illnesses could be effectively treated (and two of them cured) with medication and specific forms of psychotherapy.

But this progress has come at a high cost. Relieving the states that make life miserable, it seems, has made building the states that make life worth living less of a priority. But people want more than just to correct their weaknesses. They want lives imbued with meaning, and not just to fidget until they die. Lying awake at night, you probably ponder, as I have, how to go from plus two to plus seven in your life, not just how to go from minus five to minus three and feel a little less miserable day by day. If you are such a person, you have probably found the field of psychology to be a puzzling disappointment. The time has finally arrived for a science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called the "good life."

The pursuit of happiness is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence as a right of all Americans, as well as on the self-improvement shelves of every American bookstore. Yet the scientific evidence makes it seem unlikely that you can change your level of happiness in any sustainable way. It suggests that we each have a fixed range for happiness, just as we do for weight. And just as dieters almost always regain the weight they lose, sad people don't become lastingly happy, and happy people don't become lastingly sad.

New research into happiness, though, demonstrates that it can be lastingly increased. And a new movement, Positive Psychology, shows how you can come to live in the upper reaches of your set range of happiness; the first half of this book is about understanding the positive emotions and increasing yours.

While the theory that happiness cannot be lastingly increased is one obstacle to scientific research on the subject, there is another, more profound obstacle: the belief that happiness (and even more generally, any positive human motivation) is inauthentic. I call this pervasive view about human nature, which recurs across many cultures, the rotten-to-the-core dogma. If there is any doctrine this book seeks to overthrow, it is this one.

The doctrine of original sin is the oldest manifestation of the rotten-to-the-core dogma, but such thinking has not died out in our democratic, secular state. Freud dragged this doctrine into twentieth-century psychology, defining all of civilization (including modern morality, science, religion, and technological progress) as just an elaborate defense against basic conflicts over infantile sexuality and aggression. We "repress" these conflicts because of the unbearable anxiety they cause, and this anxiety is transmuted into the energy that generates civilization. So the reason I am sitting in front of my computer writing this preface-rather than running out to rape and kill-is that I am "compensated," zipped up and successfully defending myself against underlying savage impulses. Freud's philosophy, as bizarre as it sounds when laid out so starkly, finds its way into daily psychological and psychiatric practice, wherein patients scour their past for the negative impulses and events that have formed their identities. Thus the competitiveness of Bill Gates is really his desire to outdo his father, and Princess Diana's opposition to land mines was merely the outcome of sublimating her murderous hate for Prince Charles and the other royals.

The rotten-to-the-core doctrine also pervades the understanding of human nature in the arts and social sciences. Just one example of thousands is *No Ordinary Time*, a gripping history of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt written by Doris Kearns Goodwin, one of the great living political scientists. Musing on the question of why Eleanor dedicated so much of her life to helping people who were black, poor, or disabled, Goodwin decides that it was "to compensate for her mother's narcissism and her father's alcoholism." Nowhere does Goodwin consider the possibility that deep down, Eleanor Roosevelt was pursuing virtue. Motivations like exercising fairness or pursuing duty are ruled out as fundamental; there *must* be some covert, negative motivation that underpins goodness if the analysis is to be academically respectable.



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