Kitkat Dambeck

Professor Jacqueline McDaniel

Expository Writing

29 March 2023

Happiness: A Skeptical Approach

Happiness is broadly defined as a desirable emotion. However, a practical definition of happiness includes many specifics about what that mood includes, and what factors contribute to it. Happiness is in effect the principal desire, all other desires stemming from a desire for happiness. The manor in which happiness is described has a great deal of influence over what happiness looks like, and how it is obtained. Described well, the desire would be attained. Described poorly, it would lead one into rabbit holes of confusion and frustration. It is only by doubting each potential claim, in a scientific method, that can reveal the which manors of description are best. In “Immune To Reality” Daniel Gilbert examines mood, and the role the “psychological immune system” plays in the dynamics of one’s mood. Barbara Fredrickson’s “Love 2.0” explores love from a skeptical, scientific perspective. Defining happiness with skepticism ensures that one’s understanding of happiness is sound and attainable.

Without skepticism, false things will be include in one’s understanding of happiness. Skepticism is therefore necessary as a means to purge any admitted falsities. Gilbert writes “Clever Hans was no genius, but Osten was no fraud. Indeed he’d spent years patiently talking to his horse about mathematics and world affairs, and he was genuinely shocked and dismayed to learn that he had been fooling himself” (Gilbert 143). Osten used intuition to describe the scenario. This lead Osten to conclude that the horse was learning math, and that teaching Hans math brought Osten happiness. However, when rigorous doubt, skepticism, was applied, the truth was revealed, and made Osten very upset. It is typical, even natural, to define happiness with ones intuition. However it is also typical to find oneself operating under false assumptions. Falseness in begets falseness out. Falsities in understanding happiness cause long diversions into states of confusion, dismay and general unhappiness. It is by supplanting these falsities, such as intuition, with doubt that the false aspects of one’s understanding can be corrected. For example, it is common for a romantic relationship, or a bond, to be a core aspect of one’s expectations of happiness. About bonds, Fredrickson writes “At times it feels great, while other times it hurts like hell. At times it lifts you up with grand dreams for your future and at other times oppresses you with shame about your inadequacies.” (Fredrickson 120). That is to say that romantic bonds are not a sure way to attain desirable emotion. They may evoke some, but they may also evoke undesirable ones. When one assumes that a bond will lead to happiness, they have included a half-truth in their definition of happiness. This is the result of an uncritical approach. Just as Hans was not clever in the way Osten assumed, a bond will not inspire the same emotions as is assumed. Such false things are an inevitability of an approach lacking in skepticism. One must be critical of what is included in one’s definition of happiness. For if not, what is attained might not truly be a desirable mood.

Through skepticism, true things can be included in one’s understanding of happiness. Gilbert writes “people expect to feel equally bad when a tragic accident is the result of human negligence as when it is the result of dumb luck but they actually feel worse when it is dumb luck and no one is blame worthy” (Gilbert 148). That is to say that people place an unfounded confidence in their ability to predict how they will feel about a given phenomenon, specifically the presence of a scapegoat. Clever Hans is an insightful but ultimately anecdotal example. However the study Gilbert cites is much more scientific. Intuition is again shown to be a poor predictor. In doubting this way, a consistent pattern emerges: that blaming someone makes a tragedy, and the resulting mood, less unpleasant. This pattern is representative of a scientific fact, in essence, a truth. It is only by examining each claim individually, that is with rigorous skepticism, that false claims can be weeded out, and such a truth be distilled. By including that pattern, rather that mechanic, of the psyche in an understanding of what happiness is, that understanding becomes sound and attainable. Happiness is defined through restriction from falsehood and deception, and expansion through truth and understanding. By the restrictive half, romantic bonds, and teaching horses are both revealed as not perfectly true. Scapegoating remains true, however this specific truth is not particularly applicable. Fredrickson states that “people with higher vagal tone, science has shown, are more flexible across a whole host of domains- physical, mental, and social.” Vagal tone, unlike intuition, has been proven to improve many areas of life related to mood. This truth is very applicable, because unlike scapegoating, it is quantifiable. Vagal tone is a measurable biometric that can be maximized. It is possible to, and Fredrickson did, discover means by which this can be done. This principal of identifying the true causes of happiness, and then building upon those is how a skeptical definition can become an attainable one. When one’s definition is build on sound truths and understanding, so to will the results of one’s actions be sound.

The use value of a true understanding of happiness, is that with it the malleability of one’s emotional context becomes opportunity for the attainment of happiness. Gilbert writes “that we are more likely to look for and find a positive view of the things we’re stuck with than the things that we’re not” (Gilbert 150). That is to say that when one is committed to something, voluntarily or otherwise, the brain is naturally inclined to develop a positive relationship with it. Therefore, one can cause a positive outcome by inducing this kind of stuck-ness with inescapable situations. As a knife is made sharp by filing off excess metal, an understanding of happiness, that has been made true through skepticism, is practical for ensuring attainment of happiness. Commitment, or inescapability, is one example of this application. However, it is not the only one; more can be understood through continued development of the understanding. Fredrickson writes “Through eye contact and close attention to all manner of smiles– and the embodied simulations such visual intake triggers– your gut instincts about whom to trust and whom not to trust become more reliable. Rather than avoid all new people out of fear and suspicion, oxytocin helps you pick out on cues that signal another person’s goodwill and guides you to approach them with your own” (Fredrickson 128). Scientific exploration has revealed this mechanic of oxytocin, in which it stimulates social bonding. The same process applied to the mechanic of vagal tone and inescapability can be applied to oxytocin: oxytocin may be intentionally invoked, especially in situations where it would be most adventurous, such as when meeting new people, or trying to build new connections. This is only effective when both the mechanics of oxytocin, and the aim of the action, are understood. This requires not only scientific skepticism, but also personal skepticism. That is to say one needs to know not only the mechanics of psychology in general, but also the hows and whys of their own personal desires.

Confusion about the aims of one’s desire, the definition of their happiness, leads one into unhappiness. It takes active, intentional effort in order to change this. Fredrickson says “Longing like this is not just another mental sate. It’s deeply physical. Your body craves some essential nutrient that it’t not getting, yet you can’t quite put your finger on it” (Fredrickson 118). Longing stems not just from a lack of something. but even a lack of knowlage of what that something is. Confusion is not only they symptom of longing, but also the cause, a visious feedback loop. Lacking a solid definition of the desire, and therby a definition of happiness, entreanches the state of longing. Inescapability does not trigger because there is nothing to even be escaped. The missing “nutrient” must be defined, an active processn unlike inescapability. Each possible “nutrient” needs to be considered and doubted. However if one is ignorant of this, logically one will not do this. Gilbert writes that “the vast majority of students preferred to enroll in a photography course in which they would ultimately be dissatisfied with the photograph they produced.” (Gilbert 151). That is to say that people tend to have a poor understanding of how the define happiness. They tend to choose freedom over the actuall mood of happiness. This choice avoids the inescapability that commitment would have, as well as the effects such would have on one’s ability to rationalize and justify a postive mood. Choice can be desireable, and can sometimes be the “nutirant” which to happiness. However that is an asumption that is reavealed as false on further analasys. Choosing the free-er, escapable photo course is akin to teaching of math to Hans; both are grounded in assumptions. Either assumption, if included in a definition of happiness, and acted upon, will not lead to a desireable, happy emotion. Changing these assumptions requires the conceptually easy but practically difficult work of being skeptical of ones own motives.

Happiness is the principally desirable emotional state. The specific desires included in it must be described before it is possible to attain the. The definition of happiness is restricted by falsehood, expanded by truth, and applied through understanding. The assumptions, such as happiness coming from the bond of another, can be identified, and criticized. When this process reveals truth, such as that of the vagal tone, that truth becomes the foundation for sound action. Such an action may be committing to a difficult choice, thereby lessening the unpleasantness of it, or practicing the meditations that increase one’s vagal tone. The work of defining happiness is burdened upon each individual, but the purpose of defining happiness is ultimately the attainment of it. By defining skeptically, the defining becomes most effective for attainment.

Works Cited

Fredrickson, Barbara, Love 2.0, 2023. New York: Hudson Stre­et Press. pp.117-140.

Gilbert, Daniel, Stumbling On Happiness, 2006. New York: New York. pp 141-159