Chapter 2
What is happiness?

Journal notes, August 8

Sundown on the Pond. A gull is laughing from a perch on a post in the Pond. Now a skimmer glides by, plowing a tiny furrow through the shallows. No permanent mark. Nothing is permanent out here. Sand and water... no mark endures save of notion, of idea... Here the veil between us and the truth of existence is very thin and, to my mind, can be pierced. These past few weeks, I have settled into mindless existence, with few thoughts and no dreams. My being is effortless, untroubled by pain, unstirred by joy. This being is meditative, with no need of mantras or quiet rooms.

Ron Haybron, *Island*

Thriving

A click. Rzzzzzzzz! Line spools off the reel at breakneck speed. A lusty bellow, 'dol*pheen*!' Seconds later, another downrigger pops, and more line starts paying out. Two dolphinfish hooked, and where there are two, there are probably more. (These are tuna-like fish, not the beloved mammal.) Eyes gleaming, Big Joe notes the location of the sargassum patch and leaves the helm to take one of the rods, while his friend Mac takes the other. This is commercial fishing, not sport, so the tackle is heavy and no time is wasted playing the fish. Soon a pair of twenty-pounders are aboard and

the boat is circling back for more. Gorgeous fish while alive, a riot of gold, green, and blue, dolphin quickly lose their colour when caught. Occasionally Joe feels a twinge of regret at killing these lovely creatures. But not today. Today he is fully in the moment, locked in on his prey, and whoops with delight as they haul in another pair.

More ballyhoo on the downriggers, more dolphin on the line. 'Gaw-*damn*! Reel's gettin' hotter 'n a [something unprintable].' All told they bring in a couple of dozen, enough for a good profit. Satisfied with the day's catch, Joe puts his twenty-three-foot Sea Ox on a heading for home. A spare, utilitarian boat with twin Mercury outboards and an open cockpit design, the Sea Ox is not for the faint of heart. Not, at least, if you plan to fish forty miles offshore, well into the Gulf Stream, with only a compass and your eyes for navigation. Getting home means hitting a target, an inlet, perhaps a mile across, after hours of meandering through a six-mile-an-hour cross-current. If you do find the inlet, you must thread the boat through some of the most treacherous waters on the seaboard, using throttle and wheel to avoid getting broadsided by a wave or pitch-poling the boat—nose-diving into a trough, flipping end over end. In which case your remains could well become a fine meal for the crabs.

Yet Big Joe Fletcher is in his element. On the long ride home, he is silent, unreflecting, attention fully engaged with the sea, the sky, the boat. Were you to ask him what he feels, he would tell you 'nothing'. He is absorbed in the moment. Passing through the inlet brings a bit of tension, but this quickly fades once they reach the comparatively sheltered waters of the sound. Back at the dock the men share a couple of cans of beer while cleaning the fish, exchanging jokes and friendly gibes with other boaters and passers-by. Joe gives some of the steaks to Mac, keeps some for himself, while the remainder will end up as 'mahi mahi' on the plates of lucky tourists in local restaurants. ('Dolphin', the local name, doesn't go over so well with some diners.)

In the evening, Big Joe and his wife Pam expect to stroll back down to the docks to join the sunset crowd. But some friends drop by and they pass the evening on their front porch, laughter punctuating a chorus of crickets, frogs, and cicadas. An hour later, a couple more wanderers join the fun. Out come a couple of guitars, and the small band of ruffians adds its own music to the nighttime choir.

Things have not always been easy for Joe. He's had his share of romantic troubles and financial difficulties. But at this stage of his life, things are good. The fishing is solid, and between that and the odd carpentry job, the bills get paid. He doesn't need much cash—the house he built himself, and just about any maintenance work on that, the boat, or his truck he can do himself. Many other things can be had by trading with his neighbours.

Joe himself is a big man, in just about every way. A tall, red-bearded man carrying a few more pounds than strictly necessary, and possessed of a booming voice, he carries his bulk with confidence and ease. He does not anger easily, nor is he prone to fret; problems are a part of life, and there's no point worrying. He is big in spirit too: sharp-witted, quick to laugh, exuberant and vital, not given to guile or indirection, he is fully his own man. All the more so since leaving his job at a mainland boatyard. Spending his days at the beck and call of another man never sat well with him, made him feel unnaturally small. Better to be free than a wage slave, even if it means doing without a few things. Big Joe Fletcher is, and feels, free.

You probably won't need much convincing that Big Joe is a happy man. But on what basis would you make this judgement? The description doesn't include Joe's opinion on the matter, and you could well imagine that he doesn't really have one.

In Joe's case, as in real life, we judge how happy someone is not by opinion polling but by observing the person: Do they have a spring in their step? Do they seem tense, tightly wound? Comfortable in

their skin? Do they just seem 'off'? Do they laugh easily? Get angry at little things? Burst into tears over minor frustrations?

What we are doing, I think, is trying to assess the person's general *emotional condition*. The term 'emotional' can mislead, since it suggests a narrow focus on feelings like joy or sadness, fear or anger. But being tense isn't really an emotion at all. And what your posture or stride reveals about your 'emotional condition' is something other than an emotion. It's something deeper than that.

We sometimes try to get around the limits of emotion words by speaking of the psyche or soul. Think 'she's in good spirits', or Bob Marley's plea for a lover to 'satisfy my soul'. But I think these sorts of cases involve broadly emotional matters nonetheless, so I will stick with 'emotional condition'.

If this suggestion is right, then much of our everyday thinking about happiness identifies it with a person's emotional condition. Roughly: *to be happy is to have a favourable emotional condition.* Let's call this sort of view an *emotional state theory* of happiness.

So we have a definition of happiness. Is it a good one? Well, we probably can't point to any single definition and say that's *the* correct one. But I would suggest that it's a pretty useful way to think about happiness. It makes sense of the weight people place on happiness, as when a parent says he wants his children to grow up to be 'happy and healthy'. While I will sketch some reasons for preferring this view to the main alternatives, I will not delve deeply into the debate here. Suffice it to say that, while many people find an emotional state account of happiness attractive, I am not describing a consensus view here. The alternatives remain popular as well.

The three faces of happiness

Let's explore this view of happiness in further detail. What exactly does happiness involve? When people think about happiness in

emotional terms, they tend to picture a specific emotion: feeling happy. So powerful is this association that happiness frequently gets reduced to nothing more than cheery feelings or 'smiley-face' feelings. This is a radically impoverished understanding of happiness: there's much more to *being* happy than just *feeling* happy.

Think about those periods in your life when you were happiest. Not so much that day when you were elated over a special event, like the birth of a child. Rather, those times of relatively sustained happiness. Not everyone experiences such periods, but if you have, I suspect they looked something like our picture of Big Joe Fletcher, or the photograph of my father and me in Figure 2: good stretches of time wholly absorbed in something you love doing, feeling fully yourself and in your element. Energized, alive, and yet also, deeply settled and at peace—no doubts, no fretting, no hesitation. And yes, feelings of joy here and there, perhaps a good dose of laughter. But those feelings are not the most important part of the story.

2. The author and his father, sailing

We can usefully break happiness down into three broad dimensions. Arguably, each dimension corresponds to a different function emotional states play in our lives. But in this book I will skip the argument and simply present the view.

We can think of happiness as a kind of emotional evaluation of your life. Some parts of this evaluation are more fundamental than others. At the most basic level will be responses concerning your safety and security: letting your defences down, making yourself fully at home in your life, as opposed to taking up a defensive stance. I will call this a state of *attunement* with your life. Next come responses relating to your *engagement* with your situation: is it worth investing much effort in your activities, or would it be wiser to withdraw or disengage from them? Finally, some emotional states serve as *endorsements*, signifying that your life is positively good. People often make the mistake of thinking all emotional states are like that.

All three aspects of happiness are important, and different ideals of living can emphasize different parts of the picture. Americans, for instance, put more weight on endorsement or engagement states like joy and exuberance. Whereas Asian cultures tend to focus more on the attunement dimension.

Endorsement: feeling happy and other classic emotions

Let's begin with the most familiar aspect of happiness, the *endorsement* dimension. The most obvious examples here are feelings of joy and sadness. It makes sense for these states to be so closely associated with happiness: they tend to accompany gains and losses, successes and failures.

But it is easy to overstate their significance. While the occasions that call for feeling happy can be important, they may be the exception rather than the rule, even in the best of lives. And such feelings tend not to last very long: you enjoy your good fortune for a bit and then get on with the business of living. If we focus too much on these sorts of feelings, we can easily get the impression that

happiness is fixed over the long haul: a simple matter of fleeting emotions that quickly dissipate, ultimately leaving us back at our temperamental 'set point' level of cheerfulness (see Chapter 5).

Yet we should not discount the endorsement side of happiness. In general, it is far better to be cheerful than dour. Life is impoverished without regular doses of laughter. And the generic label, 'feeling happy', conceals a surprising diversity of feelings. Joy, for instance, should not be confused with high-fiving elation. Consider the quiet joy a parent feels when looking in on his sleeping child. By contrast, the jubilation of a sports fan whose team has just scored a goal may be less pleasant, and less fulfilling, even if the feeling is more intense.

Engagement: vitality and flow

The second dimension of happiness concerns your *engagement* with your life: not bored, listless, and withdrawn, but energetic, interested, and engaged. You can affirm your life, not just by giving it a 'thumbs up', but by enthusiastically taking up what it has to offer. This can happen even when things are not going particularly well, for instance when struggling to accomplish a difficult goal.

There are two forms of engagement. The first of these centres on states of energy or *vitality*: what we might call the exuberance–depression axis. A passionate and demanding orchestra conductor, for instance, might be exuberant, even happy, without being obviously cheerful or joyful. I do not know whether the Cleveland's George Szell was like this, but he was evidently quite passionate in living, embodying a kind of exuberance (Figure 3). The mere fact that he was a harsh taskmaster need not disqualify him from happiness. A lot depends on whether his temper often left him deeply unsettled, or simply passed through, leaving little imprint on his inner state.

The exuberant form of happiness is typified in ideals of passionate living, notably in Nietzsche, Goethe, and countless other

3. Cleveland Orchestra Conductor George Szell

romantics and artists. But one need not pursue the passionate life to the Nietzschean extreme. Many people, like Big Joe, lead lives of great vitality without great suffering.

The second form of engagement appears in Aristotle's work, and more recently in the notion of *flow* developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow is the state you assume when fully engaged in an activity, typically a challenging activity performed well. Athletes and musicians describe it as being 'in the zone'. In states of flow, you lose all sense of self-awareness, of the passage of time, and are not aware of feeling anything at all. Yet it is a highly pleasant state, and clearly a state in which you are happy. It is roughly the opposite of boredom.

The importance of engagement is particularly clear in cases of depression, where lethargy and listlessness signals a broad psychic disengagement from one's life. This sort of withdrawal is always awful, and sometimes disordered. But it can sometimes be functional, facilitating major life changes by pulling us out of our

existing routines and signalling that our present way of living may not be worth continuing.

Attunement: peace of mind, confidence, expansiveness

To understand the third dimension of happiness, consider its most familiar aspect, tranquillity. Tranquillity tends to get the back of the hand these days. People crave entertainment and excitement, and peace of mind can sound a lot like boredom. 'Just give me a Xanax to take the edge off, thank you, and I'll be on my way.'

But I would suggest that tranquillity, or something like it, is the cornerstone of happiness. Perhaps it is possible to be happy without it, but the going will be tough. To see why, we need to get clearer on what tranquillity is. We might think of it as 'settledness': not merely peace of mind or lack of internal discord but a kind of inner surety or confidence, stability and balance. Being imperturbable. The ancient Greeks called it *ataraxia*, Buddhists *sukkha*, and it was perhaps the most sought-after state of mind in ancient religious and ethical thought.

Consider how the happy person looks. While endorsement's characteristic appearance is the smile, and engagement's the jaunty gait, tranquillity presents itself in the relaxed, easy posture. It is clearly a highly pleasant state, and not simply the absence of disturbance or other feeling. Nor does it rule out states of high energy or exuberance, as Big Joe illustrates.

Let's expand on this. Think about the biological condition that states like tranquillity represent. When an organism is in familiar and safe circumstances, where it has mastery of its environment, it can let down its defences and confidently engage in whatever pursuits it wishes. It is this condition, in a person, we are concerned with. The Stoics might have said that the individual in that situation finds her life *oikeion*—familiar—to her. She is utterly at home in her life. In her element.

Similarly, think of the state you assume when relaxing with family, or with an old and dear friend. You feel completely at home with that person. 'Tranquillity' seems too narrow a term for the condition of psychically being at home in one's life.

I will call it a state of *attunement*. In this state a person relaxes and blossoms, living as seems natural to her, without inhibition. The opposite of attunement, disattunement, is not merely anxiety, but more like *alienation*: your circumstances are in some sense alien to you—unfamiliar, imposing, threatening. Defences go up: anxiety, stress, insecurity. Attunement appears to have three basic aspects:

1. Inner calm ('tranquillity')
2. Confidence
3. Expansiveness of mood or spirit. Feeling 'carefree', or being 'uncompressed'.

'Confidence' refers to an emotional condition, not your opinion of yourself. Think about what we might call 'somatic confidence'—feeling wholly at home in your body. Picture, at the negative pole, Nixonian awkwardness. The former president seemed to personify a Cartesian dualism of body and mind gone badly askew. You could have stood *behind* Nixon while he thrust his appendages skyward to signal 'victory' and known immediately that you were not observing an entirely happy man. At the positive end of the spectrum, we might imagine the athletic grace of a ballet dancer.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, attunement arguably forms the core of happiness. Anxiety, stress, insecurity, and related states are not just unpleasant in themselves. They rob us of much of our capacity for the other dimensions of happiness. You might get some measure of cheerfulness while suffering from these forms of disattunement. But exuberance, flow, and joy will be hard to come by. Intuitively, a troubled, anxious, tense, or stressed out person does not seem to be happy, however cheerful she might be. She isn't really at home in her life.

It is easy to overlook the importance of attunement for human well-being, because it does not command our attention like the others do. Take the condition of being *stressed*. Stress is said to be pervasive in the present culture, yet seems not to be taken very seriously. Worries about it are often dismissed as the petty complaints of the rich. Such attitudes are unsurprising since stress usually doesn't monopolize our attention the way, say, back pain can. It can seem more a nuisance than a great problem.

The appearance is misleading, for the main drawback with stress is not the suffering it involves but its corrosive impact on the person. (In one rather more literal way than you might imagine: stress can leave a lasting mark on your genes, increasing your risk of future disease. There is good evidence that your baby can *inherit* those changes, and later on acquire further genetic changes, not to mention changes in brain development, from living with your stress.)

As well, stress compresses and flattens the spirit, smothering your capacity for pleasure. Stressed individuals get less out of life, and indeed there may be less *to* life for them. For their attention is narrowed, and they cannot as easily enjoy, or even notice, what life offers them. The joys of living, the manifold small pleasures that leaven our days are substantially foreclosed when we are stressed. What remains is usually quite bearable, but a lot less worth having.

On a winter morning not long ago, one of the world's leading concert violinists, Joshua Bell, pulled out his Stradivarius and gave commuters in a Washington, DC, subway station a 43-minute virtuoso performance. 1,097 people passed by, many being the sort that routinely pays $100 for a ticket to see him play in a concert hall. Fears of a mob scene proved unwarranted: almost everyone completely ignored the musician, and only seven stopped to listen for even a moment.

A Brazilian shoe shiner who normally dislikes street musicians remarked, 'If something like this happened in Brazil, everyone would stand around to see. Not here.' She continued, 'People walk up the escalator, they look straight ahead. Mind your own business, eyes forward. Everyone is stressed. Do you know what I mean?' The one commuter who recognized Bell exclaimed to a *Washington Post* reporter, whose article was fittingly entitled 'Pearls Before Breakfast':

> It was the most astonishing thing I've ever seen in Washington. Joshua Bell was standing there playing at rush hour, and people were not stopping, and not even looking, and some were flipping quarters at him! Quarters! I wouldn't do that to anybody. I was thinking, Omigosh, what kind of a city do I live in that this could happen?

Mostly affluent in material terms, these busy, disattuned commuters were in some ways quite poor: in this case time poverty. This in turn yields lives impoverished of beauty and wonder. This is not a minor disadvantage. Recall the quote from the Pirahãs that started this book: when asked why a missionary would be visiting them, beauty is the first thing they mention.

The hidden face of happiness

Our sketch of happiness is not yet complete. So far we've considered the felt or experienced side of happiness. But there's more to it than that. Take the fictional case of Robert:

> Robert leads a very active life, and most of the time he is in a good mood: cheerful, smiling, and genuinely feeling good. He also believes that his life is going well and sincerely reports being satisfied with his life. Yet at the end of the day, when he is alone and no longer occupied with things to do, he often feels deeply depressed, sometimes breaking down in tears before falling asleep. He has been like this for several months.

Robert's overall balance of pleasant over unpleasant feelings—his 'hedonic balance'—seems decidedly positive. But is he happy?

Almost no one I've asked thinks so. Of 39 students given the case, only one deemed him happy, and the most common response was 'very unhappy'. About half the students were asked to explain their answers to the question, and only one suggested that his experience was actually unpleasant on the whole. The most common explanation, by a narrow margin, was this: 'deep down, Robert's emotional condition is bad'.

This is interesting. Apparently, many people think you can be unhappy, in emotional terms, even though you usually feel pretty good! What's going on here? According to a long tradition of psychological thought, a large portion of psychological well-being is *unconscious*. On this view, much of what ails us lies buried beneath the surface of consciousness. While we tend to associate such ideas with Freud and his followers, you need not buy into Freudian theory to accept the importance of unconscious states for human well-being. Indeed, virtually everyone nowadays takes the idea for granted, fuelling countless films and novels whose characters' seeming happiness is belied by smouldering distress, just waiting for the right trigger to bring it out. In the film *American Beauty*, for example, the chipper realtor Carolyn Burnham maintains a sunny demeanour that no one in her family mistakes for happiness: beneath the smiles lies a foundation of festering torment, and it is only a matter of time before she snaps (Figure 4).

In Robert's case, his workaday good cheer masks a deeper discord, which he manages to keep at bay with busyness. His emotional condition, though positive on the surface, is decidedly *un*favourable. He is unhappy.

It seems that happiness includes, not just experienced emotions and moods, but the *nonconscious* aspects of our emotional conditions as well. What, exactly, does that involve? Perhaps we need to posit unconscious moods and emotions. I am not sure we know enough about this region of the psyche to say with any confidence. Perhaps all that really matters is that, in such cases,

4. Annette Bening as Carolyn Burnham, *American Beauty*

we are especially *prone* to experience certain moods and emotions. You might have a hair-trigger tendency to become anxious, for instance. Or perhaps you're generally in a good mood, but unusually likely to become irritable or sad. And those propensities alone count as deficits in your happiness.

Let's call this aspect of happiness a person's *mood propensity*: her current propensity to experience certain moods and emotions rather than others. While an individual's temperament tends to be more or less fixed, her mood propensity changes with the circumstances of her life. Cases like Robert suggest that mood propensity is a major aspect of happiness. Ordinarily we don't think much about this side of happiness, because our mood propensities tend to line up with our experienced feelings. But sometimes they do not. A man grieving the recent loss of his beloved wife, for instance, might cope by distracting himself with chores, watching movies, and playing poker. Yet his close friends don't consider him happy, for his calm and good cheer rest on a knife-edge, liable to turn at any moment into anxiety or tears.

Happiness as emotional well-being

Let's say, then, that happiness has two parts: your emotions and moods, and your mood propensity. Taken together, these things constitute your emotional condition. So:

> To be happy is for one's emotional condition to be favourable on the whole.

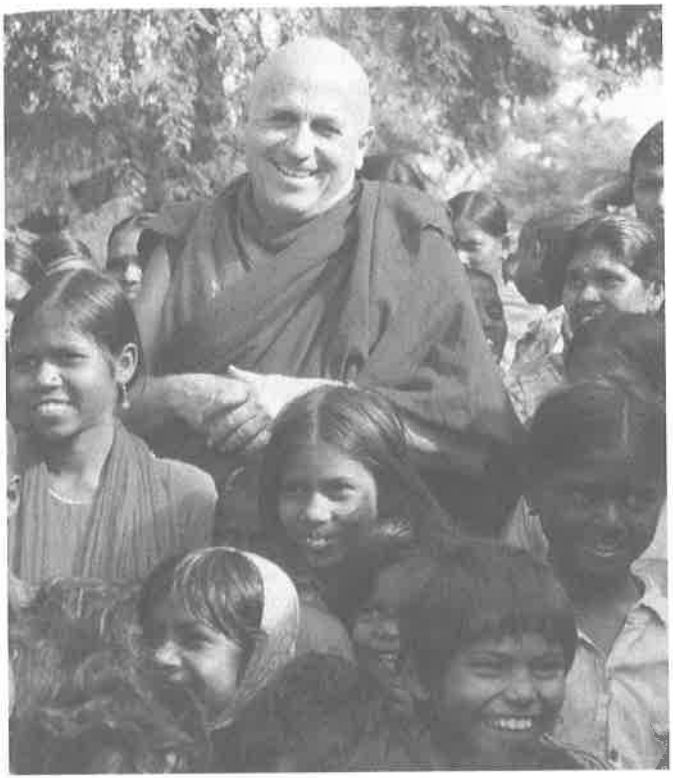
Think of happiness as roughly the opposite of anxiety and depression, or what psychologists often call *emotional well-being*. Since this term already has some currency, I will often refer to happiness as emotional well-being.

An interesting feature of the Robert case is that, if my students' reactions are any guide, it finds virtually no support for one of the most popular theories of happiness, *hedonism*. Hedonists define happiness as a positive balance of pleasant over unpleasant experience. Hedonism is far better known than the emotional state theory, perhaps because people assume that there's no difference between them.

As 'Robert' makes clear, the two theories are different: people seem to grant that Robert's experience is mostly pleasant, but still think him unhappy on emotional grounds. If nonconscious states form the basis for calling Robert unhappy, then hedonism *can't* be the theory people are relying on. Nonconscious states aren't experiences, by definition. So they can't very well be pleasant or unpleasant experiences.

In fact, the differences between the two theories are pretty deep. According to hedonism, to be happy is just for the flow of your experience to be pleasant enough. Happiness is just a sequence of experiences. According to the emotional state view, to be happy is for your psychological *condition* to be a certain way. To assess happiness is to try to figure out a person's basic emotional orientation or demeanour: is she reacting favourably, in emotional terms, to her life? To be happy is essentially to be favourably disposed, in emotional terms, toward your life.

A colleague and leading Buddhist thinker on happiness, Matthieu Ricard, describes a very similar view in these words: 'By "happiness" I mean here a deep sense of flourishing that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind. This is not a mere pleasurable feeling, a fleeting emotion, or a mood, but an optimal state of being.' This state of being, moreover, 'defines the quality of every moment of our lives'. Ricard himself, pictured in Figure 5, is a pretty good example.



5. Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard and friends

Widely reputed to be an exceptionally happy person, he certainly seems that way to me.

You can accept the basic idea of an emotional state theory of happiness without agreeing with my suggestions about the three dimensions of happiness, or the nonconscious side of happiness. If you think about our emotional conditions differently, you may prefer a different version of the emotional state view. Some readers may prefer yet another account altogether, such as the life satisfaction theory. We will take up that theory next.