

TWO

Control

In Chapter One, we looked at the desired outcome of the control strategy – happiness as *security*. We think that, by going to war with reality, we can achieve a stable set circumstances – the perfect job, relationship, home and so on – which will give us a lasting sense of meaning and satisfaction. The problem with this idea is that our lives are inherently insecure. There are things we can do to be happier and more secure, but we can never eliminate insecurity from our lives entirely.

Okay, so we can't live happily ever after. But does that mean we should stop trying to control our lives to our liking? After all, there are circumstances that make us happier, even if they do not make us happy. We may eventually lose our war with reality, but the strategy of control might still be worth it for the few battles we win along the way.

In this chapter, we will see why this process of control is problematic. By trying to control everything in our lives to our liking – solving all our problems, protecting ourselves from our fears and achieving all our goals – we might well make ourselves a bit happier. But, in the process, we are likely to miss out on many of the things in life that matter.

Happiness and control

What really matters

Let us begin by considering the past few days. Most likely, you've spent a large amount of time in your own *problem-solving bubble* – made up of all the things in your life you feel you can control to

your liking. You may have woken up with a to-do list already in your head – a list of pressures and demands on your time, some threats or anxious thoughts on your mind, or a number of small achievable goals to tick off throughout the day. Between work and necessities, like sleep and feeding yourself, you may have organised to meet up with some friends, do some physical or cultural activities or spend time with loved ones. In general, you may have been successful at all these things – protecting yourself from anything going too wrong, but also finding time to do some of the things you enjoy and care about. If only there were more hours in the day, you could have been even more successful.

Well, the good news is that, even if there aren't more hours in the day, there are more days. Tomorrow, you can continue to do all the things you feel you need to do. So, naturally, the to-do list in your head rolls over to the next day ... and the next, and the next. In fact, your past few days may have been much like your past few weeks, months or even years: waking up with problems already in your head and setting about the day doing your best to solve them all. There is always stuff to do – always circumstances under our control that we can change.

The bad news is not that this process never ends – the fact that we are surrounded by immediate and potential problems is the nature of life. As the poet Emily Dickinson noted, ‘Low at my problem bending, / Another problem comes /’.¹ This endless problem solving is, in part, what makes life meaningful – we can always find ways of improving our own lives and the lives of others.

No, the bad news is that we can become so consumed by our internal to-do list and problem-solving chatter that, after the days and years have rolled by, we may realise that we haven't spent them as we really wanted to – we haven't done the things that really matter to us. We can improve our lives in countless ways. But we only have one lifetime in which to do so. What matters is that we improve our lives in the ways that we most care about.

In thinking, ‘if only we had ____ then we'd be happy’ we can end up *overdoing* things. We may fill in the blank with ‘money’, ‘status’, ‘relationships’, ‘growth’, or whatever. But no matter how successful we are at achieving these things, it will never be *enough*. We will either want to achieve more of them, or quickly fill in

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the blank with something else. The more we focus on whatever we fill in the blank with, the less we focus on everything else in our lives that matters too.

This is most obvious when it comes to our long-term goals and ambitions. We can devote the majority of our time to careers and projects that we aren't really that interested in or don't find enjoyable. In doing so, many of the small pleasures that make life meaningful – like observing the passing weather or watching our children play – can pass us by.

But the same goes for what we pay attention to on a moment-to-moment basis. Whereas some people may recognise the view out of the window, others may see the dirty windowsill. Neither perspective is incorrect – their value depends on how we want to spend our time. Sometimes it is useful living in our problem-solving bubble. At other times, it can be better to step outside it.

Over time, how we allocate our attention in the short and the long terms adds up. Improving our lives in the ways we most care about is easier said than done. There's no guarantee that we will get it right. A poignant illustration of this predicament is the 'regrets of the dying'. During her career as a palliative care nurse, Bonnie Ware recorded what she found to be the most common regrets people have towards the end of their lives.² The top five were:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

Reading this list, you may already resonate with some of the things on it. You may also recognise that doing these things, despite sounding relatively simple, can actually be really hard. Each comes with its own set of risks, from disappointment to financial insecurity. For instance, going against other people's expectations is hard because we don't know what negative consequences we might have to face from doing so – all the potential failures and rejections. There may be very good reasons

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why people can get to the end of their lives having not prioritised these things during their lifetimes. It is easier to focus on the things we know we can get right, even if that means neglecting the things we most care about.

The ‘regrets of the dying’ illustrate the extent to which we can continuously overdo things at the expense of what really matters – not just over the past few days, but potentially for the majority of our lives. We spend the majority of our time in our problem-solving bubbles, but what if the problems we are constantly trying to solve aren’t the things that are most important to us? What if being continuously successful at solving them will never be enough?

In the remainder of this chapter, I will show just how prevalent this problem is. It is what underlies a wide range of problems, from the seemingly trivial, such as the ‘fear of missing out’ (FOMO) to more serious issues such as addiction.

There is, however, hope. By getting to know the opportunity costs associated with living in our problem-solving bubbles, we can begin to see the value of doing things differently. As well as trying to control ourselves, others and our environment, we have the psychological capacities to better *understand* all these things. From Chapter Four onwards, we will see how these capacities can open up a profoundly different way of thinking about happiness – one that focuses less on control and more on understanding.

CONCLUSION

The happiness opportunity

A happy ending?

At the beginning of this book, I said that I couldn't guarantee you will be happier by the end of it (and that there was a good chance you'd be the opposite). Despite having the word 'happiness' on the cover, it's just not that kind of book. What I did promise, however, was that you would have a better understanding of what it means to be happy without being blind to what really matters. I hope I have come true on that promise.

The problem with the way we think about happiness in modern society is that we think it comes from control. We think that happiness comes from achieving the list of things in our heads – having a meaningful job, a loving relationship, a beautiful home, a healthy body, a calm mind and so on. These things may all be perfectly worthwhile. But no matter how important each of them seems, what we have in our head will not come close to being an exhaustive list of the things in life that matter most. Our lives are simply too messy and complex for that.

We cannot control everything in our lives to our liking and expect to receive a lasting sense of satisfaction and meaning in return. We will still be insecure. We will still be vulnerable to things falling apart or not going to plan. The idea of receiving happiness through the means of control is a fantasy.

We have seen that there is another way – one that switches our focus from control to understanding. This does not mean that we abandon the items on our list, or try and escape the list in our heads altogether. It means we can aim to achieve the things we care about while remaining open to what we don't know. We

can both question the items on our list and pay more attention to what might be missing. Of course, we may well continue to think that, ‘if only we had _____ then we’d be happy’. But we can recognise that this is an illusion – that, whatever we fill in the blank with, achieving it will not make us happy. This can help us see the world differently. We can be more curious about the items on our list. We can explore how to improve our lives both with and without them. And over time, we can begin to understand and commit to what really matters.

We can apply the same process on a social and global level. When it comes to our most pressing political issues – such as climate change, crime and health – we often have a list of things in our heads that we think will make everything better. We think we can solve climate change by switching to renewable energy sources, reduce crime rates through policies of retribution or rehabilitation or create a healthier society with advances in medical treatment. All of these things are likely to help. But none of them focuses on the underlying causes of the problems, and they therefore lack the ability to make us all better off in the long term.

Like our individual lives, our political issues are too messy and complex to solve by focusing only on the things we can readily control. We need to understand the wider social conditions that result in criminal behaviour and make people ill. And we need to understand the global systemic causes of climate change. With a better understanding of these issues, we can begin to make real social change.

This is how happiness and politics are connected. In modern societies, both currently fall under the same logic of control. And both can benefit from being thought about differently: with less control and more understanding.

Control versus understanding

Control and understanding have been the two main characters of this book. But both of these protagonists have had their own motley crew of support roles.

The strategy of control is about going to war with reality, with the ultimate aim of achieving security and stability. We get

there through the means of control, with a mindset of *certainty* and *predictability*. Other notable characters include habit, order, manipulation, power and separation.

The strategy of understanding is about striving for peace with reality, with the ultimate aim of living well within *insecurity*. We get there through the means of *curiosity*, *compassion* and *care*, with a mindset of *uncertainty* and *possibility*. Honourable mentions go to attention, creativity, flexibility, trust and connection.

What I don't want to do is give the impression that one side is good and the other side is evil. Our psychological capacities for control and understanding work together – we need to both to live good and meaningful lives. If, at times, I have come across as calling the control-crew the 'bad guys' and the understanding-crew the 'good guys' this is because, as a culture, we have swung way too far in the direction of control. The idea that happiness comes from control is the predominant one in society. We think that, if only we get everything in our lives just right – the perfect job, relationship, home and so on – then we'd be happy. And it is through our attempts to readily control all our social issues that we end up with simple narratives, temporary solutions and technological fixes rather than removing their underlying causes. I am not saying that we should relinquish all control over our personal and collective lives. But we could do with trying to control things a lot less than we are currently doing.

Still, the idea of having less control over our lives is a scary one. Without any control, we will inevitably suffer. We might reasonably ask, therefore, how much we should switch our focus from control to understanding? Can we be curious and compassionate all the time? And even if we can learn from our suffering, when do we stop trying to better understand the world and change it instead?

We can search for evidence to help us answer these questions. Psychology and cognitive science offer pointers that we can seek to apply in our lives as individuals. For instance, these disciplines are beginning to show how harmful it can be to get 'stuck' in habitual patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and how beneficial it can be instead to remain open to different ways of seeing the world.¹ Addiction and depressive and anxiety disorders may be instances of an overly rigid mind. Practices of mindfulness

and other cognitive therapies may be good examples of how to relate to this mental solidity. Moreover, we don't need to suffer from a mental illness to apply these insights to our own personal circumstances.

On a societal level, we also have plenty of evidence that shows the harms of control and the benefits of understanding. For instance, in Chapter Seven, we looked at the problems with controlling criminal behaviour through punishment and incarceration. Incarceration rates in the US are not only expensive to maintain, but also fail to deter criminal behaviour and cripple the socioeconomic situation of families and communities with members in prison. High incarceration rates are a clear example of the limits of control and the need for more understanding. Alternative policies such as focusing on prevention and rehabilitation have been shown to be more effective in the long term.²

Throughout this book, we have looked at a wide range of this kind of research. Ultimately, however, we do not yet have enough of it to know how much we can switch our focus from control to understanding. And we are unlikely to have this kind of evidence anytime soon. Our individual and collective lives are too uncertain and complex to be able to come up with a definitive balance or perfect ratio of understanding and control. The right balance is likely to differ for each society, each person, and for every situation we are in.

Instead of trying to find the perfect balance between understanding and control, we should treat this gradual switch from control to understanding as a *process*. We can begin by recognising that in most parts of our lives, we have probably veered too far towards control and could benefit from going in the opposite direction. We can then continue from there. Every time we think we are certain about something – that we should do X, that we need Y, or that Z must happen for everything to be okay – we have the opportunity to see things differently. We can see whether we benefit from paying more attention to what we don't know – embracing uncertainty and being curious and compassionate towards our lives. We may not find this beneficial. But we can only find out by trying.

As we saw in Chapter Five, this process of embracing uncertainty may be the only way in which we can find out what we most care about and are truly capable of. This ongoing process of appreciation, exploration and commitment may not be an easy one, but it is how we can begin to discover what really matters.

The more we commit to this process, the more we realise that a focus on understanding can be valuable *in itself*. Whereas the strategy of control is about being *useful*, the strategy of understanding is about discovering what is *true*. There is something beautiful about opening ourselves up to the bigger picture. Not only do we get the benefits of seeing the world in non-habitual ways – of beauty, gratitude and flexibility – we also get to see reality more clearly. We get to live with our eyes open. This may not be a life in which we are happy all the time, but it will be a full life. It will include all the good bits and all the bad bits, and each bit will have a part to play.

This way of approaching life is not only more oriented towards truth; it is also more *connected*. Our psychological capacities for connection and understanding feed off each other. When we spend time with our loved ones, for instance, we pay them a different kind of attention from how we treat strangers. Instead of making quick, glancing judgements, we make sure to listen to what our loved ones have to say. We want to understand who they are and how they feel. Through this deeper understanding, we can care for them better. This form of open, generous attention defines our intimate relationships. It is what makes us see our loved ones not merely as objects that exist to gratify our own needs, but as subjects who we stand in relation to and who have rich inner lives of their own.

The switch in focus from control to understanding is about giving this kind of attention to our lives in general. According to the strategy of control, the world is populated by predictable objects which we can use and manipulate for our own gain. In contrast, according to the strategy of understanding, the world is full of meaningful subjects (including ourselves) who we can connect with and understand better. The world of understanding is a much more beautiful and connected one than the cold, instrumental world of control.

The need for understanding

In modern society, we may need understanding and connection more than ever. Many of the individual and social problems that define our time have disconnection and a lack of understanding at the heart of them.

On an individual level, we are encouraged to be the ‘best possible version of ourselves’ or find our ‘true, authentic selves’, rather than connect with, and better understand, the messy, complex, multiple and diverse humans that we are. It is no surprise that perfectionism and burn-out are on the rise, as are mental disorders such as depression, generalised anxiety and addiction.

On a societal level, we are witnessing increasingly vast inequalities between the top 1 per cent and the rest, as well as between the upper-middle and working classes. This disconnect has no doubt contributed to the rise of populism and extremism. On a global level, our lack of connection and understanding with the natural world has created the very real threat of catastrophic climate change.

Our attempts to control these problems may make things better in the short term, but can also make them much worse in the long term. In this book, we have seen that the problem with control is that it comes with significant opportunity costs. The things we can most easily control are often the things that have the least impact – they often help with the symptoms of problems, but not their underlying causes. We can see this clearly with addiction. It may be more readily under someone’s control to temporarily relieve their cravings than deal with the deeper problems they are trying to escape from. But we all know that this strategy only makes things worse in the long run.

There is, however, a positive side to opportunity costs. They are costly because the opportunities to do things differently are out there – we just aren’t taking them. This is why the strategy of understanding can be so effective in the long term. It is how the happiness problem can become the happiness opportunity.

On a personal level, we may not need all the stuff we have, to achieve as much as we think we do, to be defensive in front of loved ones, to always be reliable and dependable, or funny and

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smart and so on. We might be able to spend more time doing what we are interested in and enjoy, or be vulnerable in front of others, or kinder to people who are different from us. Taking these opportunities is far from easy, and may come with little guarantee of success. But with understanding, we can see that a different kind of life is possible.

We also have the opportunities to do things differently on a social level. We can solve our major social problems by focusing on their underlying causes and understanding the wider social conditions that people need to live well. And we can make global progress by understanding what all nations, groups, individuals and species need to cooperate with each other and make everyone better off. We are a long way away from this vision of social and global change. But understanding that a radically different world is possible is the first step towards achieving it.

My hope is that, from switching our focus from control to understanding, not only can we discover where we need to go, but we will also have more of the resources we need to get us there. There is something perversely comforting about the fact that the list of things inside our heads will not make us happy – that we can never have the secure and stable circumstances and the lasting sense of meaning and satisfaction that we so long for. Acknowledging our insecurity, alongside our psychological capacities for understanding, can give us a kind of inner resource to live well without having to achieve all the items on our list.

With this inner strength and flexibility, we can continue to work towards the better kind of life, society and world that we know are possible. We can commit to making the changes that really matter, secure in the knowledge that, even once they have been made, there will still be plenty of work to do.