

Why Universities Should Seek Happiness and Contentment

Paul Gibbs

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Why Universities Should Seek Happiness and Contentment

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To Zoe, Leo and Maggie

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Preface

Raising a Heideggerian smile

What is happiness, and what is its relationship to contentment and higher education? These two questions are the foci of this book. These are big questions, and throughout history they have been addressed in some form or another. Philosophers have concerned themselves with happiness for at least 2,500 years. Some have argued that happiness is pleasure, others that it is a virtue and still others that it is the fulfilment of human nature, but they all have fundamentally disagreed on what happiness actually is. My position, developed in this book, is that happiness is episodic, an emotional eruption (more likely from someone who is content, but not restricted to them) from what we perceive at a moment in time to bring us joy in many physical and mental forms. Happiness as an entitlement does not make sense, because you cannot give happiness, as it is not embedded in entities or events.

Although the work contained in this book is not a Heideggerian study of higher education and happiness, in many key theoretical developments it is to Heidegger that I turn. I am particularly dependent on his work in my construction of the notions of happiness and contentment. This is achieved through utilizing his notion of attunement,¹ or disposition reviewed in moods and emotions or temporary feelings. Heidegger's notion of attunement holds the power to put us in touch with our authentic potentiality-for-Being, and as such, our propensity for happiness and contentment, in all their phenomenological manifestations, is a part of who we are: the self as a being-for-itself.

I have in mind an aspirational contentment, one where we are contented as a fundamental attunement to the stance that we take on our being. This is not a desire to become what other might want one to be, but a thought-through, reflective notion of how one might realize what is one's potential and in what ways and then aspire to achieve this. In this it differs from any sense of neo-liberal imposed image of the successful consumer of things and people. It is anything but tranquil. Such a stance requires active engagement with others and is the homeostatic state of one's being. It can be disrupted by emotions, but it tempers such emotion to levels of appropriateness. It is resistant to extremes, although

it can tolerate them for short periods of time. So, for me, contentment is being, and it is also temporality. It is an alternative to anxiety, although both states can have eruptions of positive or negative emotion. I would suggest that a fundamental attunement of contentment sees the management of anxiety, whereas a fundamental attunement of anxiety is less tolerant and, at the extreme, sees maladaptive behaviours that are conveniently diagnosed as manic depression. I see a pedagogy of contentment dealing with self-understanding and taking a stance on what one feasibly can become. In doing so, one is able to make choices about one's possibilities and strive to achieve the feasible, not the impossible.

Raising a historic smile

Political debate on whether happiness should be a goal of public policy reached its post-Enlightenment zenith in the eighteenth century, with a series of perspectives from the Italian Baccaria, the French philosopher Helvetius and the Scot Hutcheson, among others. Following these were others who might be held responsible for the 'British Happiness Enlightenment', led by Bentham and J. S. Mill. They forged the link between education and happiness. Bentham recognized the link, but Mill provided a more sustainable rationale. Mill provided a more subtle approach to Bentham's proposed homogeneity of pleasure. However, this linkage was lost, as it merged into the agreement that education was no more than an instrumental factor in the realization of happiness, which was mainly the result of increased income and prosperity. So compelling became these self-defeating arguments that the World Bank recommended privatized higher education to developing countries, which infused into the core of higher education the business capitalist notion of being, where extrinsic value overrides intrinsic value.

This led to increased concerns over happiness amongst economists after a paper by Easterlin (1974) suggested that happiness, rather than economic growth, income or consumption, should be a policy priority. In fact, he showed that average self-reported happiness appeared to be the same across rich and poor countries, and that economic growth does not increase well-being. Castriota (2006) proposed that the positive effects of education on happiness result from a variety of intermediary processes and, as a consequence, 'the quantity of material goods a person can buy becomes less important. It is reasonable to believe that a low education level reduces the chances of achieving a high level of job satisfaction and the probability to have a stimulating cultural life, and makes the purchase of material goods a more important determinant of the life-satisfaction' (3).

This echoes Seneca's retort to his detractors in 'On a Happy Life', justifying his riches as enabling him to enact his virtues, and defending such a life by his claim that 'I own my riches, you own you' ([54–62] 2008: 157). This is a nuanced rendering by Seneca of stoicism principles that value the simple life, reducing one's needs in order that one might be fulfilled and achieve happiness. It was subsequently tested after his break with Nero. Of course, while educational institutions could support the desirability of education for economic, ideological and spiritual reasons, the questioning of the institutional structure – let alone the desirability of what they packaged – assumed a certain worth.

One 'i' in happiness

With the continued rise of individualism in the developed world, the decline of collectivist ideologies and the neglect of others, happiness is arguably becoming our supreme value. Happiness is also acquiring unprecedented economic importance. Consumerist economies are increasingly geared to supply happiness rather than subsistence or even affluence, and a chorus of voices is now calling for a replacement of gross domestic product (GDP) measurements by happiness statistics as the basic economic yardstick.

These statistics might have relevance in the developed world where there is a market for almost everything one needs: food, shelter, education, health and security. We can work from home, shop from home and then post selfies of ourselves consuming at home. We survive in a world where virtual reality becomes the real reality for many young people (and adults), and where addictions to a whole range of social substances relieve us from thinking. Sales of alcohol are generally on the rise, online betting hooks a wider range of consumers through adept marketing, and the developed world's addiction to cheap food is aesthetically evident. We are encouraged to run away – psychologically, sociologically and in our imaginations – from the world of others' sufferings, anxieties, hopes and joys intermingled, and the richness of human endeavour, to construct a special time/space cocoon where happiness dominates and where striving, despair and anxiety are dispelled. Indeed, happiness of this shallow form, always in need of repletion, is strongly influenced by expectations that are catered for by an unquestioning consumerism, fuelled by the mass media. Indeed, we are often caught in the double bind of being guilty for having not been happy enough in a culture that demands happiness! This is ever more pressing given the emergence of the idea of 'post-truth'² of our realities foreseen by Baudrillard in his work

Simulacra and Simulation and the urgency of the kinds of issues for higher education and our being that I have discussed in the contemporary educational climate.

Perhaps Adorno's striking and pessimistic passage on 'compulsory happiness' in *Minima Moralia* offers a resonance, albeit originally written nearly seventy years ago.

The admonitions to be happy, voiced in concert by the scientifically hedonist sanatorium-director and the highly-strung propaganda chiefs of the entertainment industry, have about them the fury of the father berating his children for not rushing joyously downstairs when he comes home irritable from his office. It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces. (Adorno, 2005: 63)

What this book isn't

In a book of this size, it is impossible to cover the range of approaches to happiness and contentment that are now available, nor is it wise to attempt to do so while keeping the reader's attention. So here is a swift summary of what the book does not do.

It does not promote a way to be happy, although one might decide to be. For the main part, it avoids the positive psychology that has rapidly become associated with such approaches. There are no quick fixes offered, and I assume none are desired. There are no lesson plans or proprietary programmes licensed by universities (perhaps like the Penn Resiliency Program or Acceptance and Commitment therapy). For the most part, it does not deal with the exciting developments in neuroscience or in mindfulness.³ That is not to say that the insights, especially from this field of scientific endeavour, cannot add weight and evidence to the discussion, just that what it adds is still unclear. What is clear is that we learn in all circumstances when emotions affect our learning, even if they are unhappiness or distress, although we might learn better without them. Indeed, their presence does enhance our overall educational experience, if not the amount prescribed for learning.

What this book is

What the book does try to do is develop with the reader a shared understanding of some of the problems that are engaging the studies of happiness, clarify that

the real higher educational issue concerns the disposition of contentment, and that higher education ought to help to create rationalized and willed contentment among its students.

This book is not about adding to the growing number of books on self-help and the passion of positive psychology to make you happy. That readership is already catered for in many ways by other books, from television psychotherapists and online courses to mindfulness retreats. Most of these are packaged to satisfy our consumer needs. Indeed, back on 12 September 2014, an edition of the seminal medium of capitalism and consumerism, the *Financial Times*, offered a book review on happiness. Opening the article with the assurance that books abound that promise to tell you how you might achieve such a state, it concluded, using the insights of Laycock and Clark, that the much more important problem was overcoming *unhappiness*. Cave, in that review, acknowledges that the majority of books on how to be happy only seem to reinforce the message that we are not yet as elated as we ought to be, a message that only makes us feel inadequate and miserable. He suggests a turn towards understanding suffering – not inflicting it, but finding out how to reduce it. More beneficial, he continues, would be a focus on the task of ‘relieving suffering, which could at least make some kind of wellbeing possible for millions for whom it is currently unimaginable. Acknowledging the extent of anguish in our society might also help us to appreciate the blessing of feeling merely fair-to-middling, as you probably are right now while reading this article I tend to agree, and the function of this book is to advocate contentment (within which happiness and its forms can flourish) with being in the world passively, but in a willed contentment based on an educated notion of what one can be and what one wants to be, and aligning them together as an agent in the world in which we live.

Happiness and (higher) education

The notion that education is desirable for happiness has become lost in institutionalized education within the consumerist epoch and, although reignited by Noddings’s (2003) claim that happiness ought to be an aim of compulsory education, it has yet to fan the flames of higher education pedagogy. There are few contributions that address such issues in higher education. One such is the *Inaugural Address* by Mill, where his insistence that general education supports the formation of willed choices is evidence of how he understood higher education. He described

the function of a university: 'not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood' (Mill, [1867] 2000: 5). He accepted that professionals need training, yet not that this was a function of the university. He claimed:

The proper business of a university is different: not to tell us from authority what we ought to believe, and make us accept the belief as a duty, but to give us information and training, and help us to form our own belief in a manner worthy of intelligent beings, who seek for truth at all hazards, and demand to know all the difficulties, in order that they may be better qualified to find, or recognize, the most satisfactory mode of resolving them. (ibid.: 81)

Mill argued compellingly, I think, that 'professional men should carry away with them from an University, not professional knowledge, but that which should direct the use of their professional knowledge or capabilities, and bring the light of general culture to illuminate the technicalities of a special pursuit' (7). This argument concerns the quality of the rounded person who understands their cultural and moral responsibilities prior to undertaking employment, leading to a more conscientious and wise use. Indeed, he saw no place for the university directly to teach the professions (although he allowed for associated schools). In his ideal of higher education, it could be argued that Mill set out that those trained in skills without the interest to contextualize them in culture do not further their higher faculties, or hence their happiness. Rather than a skills acquisition agenda, I would suggest that the mission of a university is a search to develop the capabilities to optimize its students' potential to make responsible choices as to what they will be, willed as a fusion of the intellectual and emotional. The use of capability here refers to 'being able.' In Sen's (1985) work, this is typically by being able to improve one's situation or compete for resources by participating in a market, and in Nussbaum's (2000) by being able to live a truly human life. 'Being able' requires both freedom from external restraints and personal skills. For both, capability is obviously required to make a viable life plan that evokes contentment when lived, though not all capabilities are equally functional.

Potentiality for becoming

Capabilities spring from what Aristotle⁴ called *dunamis*, and drew two meanings. The distinction is between causal powers and potentiality as a way of

being.⁵ According to Witt, causal power ‘is a dispositional property of a substance to change (or be changed by) another substance. In contrast, potentiality is a way of being and be given a dispositional analysis’ (2003: 7). The distinction is important, for potentiality determines the extent to which dispositional capabilities can be activated: what it is able to do and thus what it is possible to do. For instance, you will either grow tall or not, male or female. If you are male and tall, then you have the potential to play rugby for the British Lion rugby team as a second row forward, provided you have the dispositional capabilities such as strength, skills and a desire for physical violence! The development of dispositional causal powers is a job for training, and education, as Dewey⁶ might have argued, offers us insights into our own personal way of being and warns against seeing it as efficiency. Education ought to provide an arena for the development of our potential and a place to be unsettled – unhappy, if you will – and to discuss the choices one is able to make. These choices, to be plausible, need to be adapted to personal circumstances, not to predetermine or to truncate options, but to allow the development of feasible ways to plan to be. They need not be coherent for well-being, for we may be ‘mistaken in our attitudes, commitments, and values, or we might be mistaken in the relative importance we suppose them to have’ (Kekes, 2010: 81). Notwithstanding this, they are reasonable, given that we may not possess the intellectual, emotional, gender or ethnic requirements to become the president of the United States or a female bishop in the Church of England. Commenting on studies of workplace learning, Dall’Alba suggests that they can ‘demonstrate that failure to achieve an unrealistic ideal (perpetuated by organizations, professional associations and/or professionals themselves) can result in feelings of impostership; of never being good enough or as accomplished as others’ (2009: 41).

How, then, can higher education provide the capabilities so that students can feel, will and grasp their potential? Of course, this raises issues of fairness and social justice that would need to be addressed from an institutional perspective, but assuming that these have been plausibly resolved so that resources are, in the main, equitably allocated, what does a capability agenda mean for a higher education pedagogy of happiness? It begins with a notion of freedom that allocates resources in ways that enable functionality, not solely on the basis of outcomes. Indeed, Robbins offers what seems to be a valuable mission for profound happiness in higher education when she writes that, according to the capability approach, it ‘should be conceptualized in terms of people’s capabilities to function; that is, their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and

activities that they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be' (2005: 95). This requires a pedagogy for university teachers, who Walker advocates should be 'concerned with educational, processes and valued achievements. Selected capabilities would shape and inform conditions, practices and the evaluation of outcomes of university education which is for rationality and freedom, higher learning and agency of students' (2010: 915), and thus reveal their potential for profound happiness.

Where to start and finish

The book has three sections. In the first, I start the exploration in the state of higher education, for it is here that I want to harness contentment and see its influences in the pedagogy of such institutions. I then offer a historic and mainly philosophical history of happiness (for there is little to be said on contentment). I close the section with a discussion of the contemporary meaning of happiness and how it is used in UK higher education policy documents.

The second section considers how happiness and higher education have been researched (for, still, contentment has no leverage). My research shows that enduring happiness looms surprisingly large in both potential and existing students.

The third section develops the notion of happiness and contentment as a way of being, and then develops this into a discussion of a pedagogy of contentment in higher education. The penultimate chapter offers a comparison between Eastern and Western notions of contentment. The coda attempts to bring coherence to the ideas and the potential for action.

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Part One

What Are We Talking About?

Happiness and Education: Recognizing Their Importance

The government presents its White Paper on the future of higher education as a radical new policy direction. Yet the paper is designed to serve the same two objectives that have governed higher education policy for the past quarter of a century. One is to strengthen the role of students as consumers whose preferences determine the course of higher education provision. The other is to increase the focus of higher education on preparing students for graduate employment.

The contradiction should be obvious. Employers do not treat employees as consumers. Spending three years as a consumer will not prepare you for the world of employment. It is not the content of our degree programmes that we should be changing in order to improve our students' employability. It is the role we expect our students to play within our institutions of higher education. (New Statesman, 11 June 2011, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/cultural-capital/2011/07/students-work-education>)

One among a few or the only aim of education?

According to Noddings, happiness is both the means and end of education (2003: 261); that is, happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness (2003: 1). Her view is primarily inspired by the utilitarian philosophical tradition, which includes Hume and Mill. Hume includes humour, recreation, enjoyment and fun in the definition of happiness (Noddings 2003: 19), whereas Mill regards happiness as the absence of pain and the attainment of desired pleasures. Noddings's view is inspired by the American pragmatist tradition of Dewey,

according to whom the object and reward of learning are the continuing capacity for growth (2003: 83) but also the multiplicity of aims, which change according to the needs and beliefs of a society. In a pragmatist and utilitarian fashion, Dearden held that 'in education, as in life, there is a number of final ends constitutive of the good of man, and on some occasions we may judge some of them properly and rightly to overrule personal happiness, even if for a time the result is that we are less pleased with ourselves or with our lives' (1968: 28).

For Barrow, happiness is an end of life, but not the sole end (1980: 114), since at times people freely choose to make sacrifices. However, happiness is 'the supreme end or value in the sense that no other end can coherently be regarded as equally or more important in the long term' (Barrow, 1980: 115). In this sense, Barrows criticizes the idea of happiness as short-term enjoyment and considers happiness in education not only in the present but also in the long term (this implies that there are things that are more important than current enjoyment). Education is concerned not only with the happiness of the individual but with getting people to find their own happiness while contributing to or, at the very least, allowing the happiness of others (Barrow, 1980: 123).

Barrow does not hold that happiness is an aim of education, since, for him, the essence of education is understanding, and 'education in itself is not about happiness' (1980: 123). However, since happiness is of value to everybody, he argues that we should be concerned with the happiness of pupils, both long term and short term, where pupils are considered as individuals and as citizens. As he holds, 'in itself, enjoyable education is preferable to unenjoyable education, and an education that incidentally contributes to happiness is superior in itself to one that does not' (Barrow, 1980: 124). So, in the end, promoting happiness is a proper aim of education that is concerned with socializing and training, in addition to education, even granting that it cannot be, strictly speaking, an aim of education in general (Barrow, 1980: 124). However, interestingly, he points out that the role of education (and its contribution to happiness) changes according to the age of the children involved. In this respect he states that where young children are concerned, education is not the priority: happiness, instead, is the aim at this stage; learning to read is subsidiary (Barrow, 1980: 124).

This view is not shared in White's *The Aims of Education Restated*, where he argues that one of the intrinsic goods that education contributes to a pupil's well-being is happiness. He suggests that 'one's well-being might consist in leading a morally virtuous life' (White, 1982: 98). This would depend on whether or not he happened to want to do so and equally it might not consist if the patterning of his preferences were different. However, he concludes that an educated person

is not one in whom knowledge is the central characteristic, but one in whom virtues are more centrally explicit. He says that the 'educated man is a man disposed to act in certain ways rather than other. He possesses the general virtues of prudence or care for his own good . . . this being an extended rather than narrow sense, includes within it the more specifically moral virtues like benevolence, justice, truthfulness, relevance and reliability' (White, 1982: 121).

However, Noddings criticizes the Greek philosophy approach to happiness, and especially Aristotle's view of happiness expressed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as being 'intellectualist', for it locates happiness in rationality. Noddings also criticizes the Christian emphasis on suffering as a precondition for an elevated spiritual life, since, according to her, this view defers happiness to the afterlife. Instead, Noddings's utilitarian and pragmatist take on happiness in education conceives happiness as pleasure obtained during one's lifespan, derived from satisfying children's needs, whether these are openly expressed or inferred (attributed to them by an adult, e.g. the need to eat green vegetables). She identifies five sources of happiness: making a home; love towards places and nature; parenting; character and spirituality; and interpersonal growth. Also, Noddings sees interpersonal relationships such as friendships and companionships as crucial in promoting happiness, thus emphasizing the role of 'caring' relationships.

However, since Noddings's own caring theory holds that seeking happiness implies the avoidance of suffering (2005: 397), it also downplays effort and difficulty (which inevitably imply suffering). As she states, 'the caring perspective implies that educators should avoid coercion as much as possible because it undermines caring relationships. Yet it is through coercion, in the form of compulsory education, that liberal democracies attempt to make sure that children from all socioeconomic backgrounds receive a minimum standard of education' (Noddings, 2005: 399). In other words, by advocating the utilitarian notion of happiness as the absence of pain, Noddings downplays the role of suffering in education.

Suffering, or at least a struggle, is implicit in the work of Whitehead who, while arguing that the function of education is the acquisition and unitization of knowledge, acknowledges that this ought to be difficult (or at least the teaching of dialectic) for, in education, 'as elsewhere, the broad primrose path leads to a nasty place' (1967: 4). Struggle or suffering as part of education is a view shared by Roberts (2013), who argues that the aim of life (or the realization of one's potential) is not just happiness but despair. Advocating existentialism, rather than utilitarianism or pragmatism, Roberts holds that 'despair needs not be seen an aberrant state from which we should seek to escape; rather, it is a key