

HOW HAPPINESS STUDIES LETS US DOWN

We Want to Be Happy. This Isn't Helping.

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Demand elicits supply. The demand I have in mind is the demand for happiness: Suicide rates are [up](#), depression is [up](#), and though people want to be happy, as they do in all ages, they say they [aren't](#). The resulting supply is an explosion of books, conferences, and college and business school courses on being happy, and the emergence of happiness gurus, celebrities, and superstars.

The scholarly component of this explosion is the new academic field of Happiness Studies, sometimes called Positive Psychology. Its prehistory seems to lie in the humanistic psychology movement typified by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, who urged practitioners not to dwell exclusively on pathology and mental illness but to consider the elements of well-being. Today led by such figures as Martin Seligman and Jonathan Haidt, the field has left those beginnings far behind. No longer just a recondite academic theory, it has gone far beyond the stages of bloom, vogue, and fad to become a full-blown, galloping movement. Having written both a [scholarly book](#) on Thomas Aquinas's theory of happiness and a more popular treatment of [How and How Not to Be Happy](#), I am in no position to say that people shouldn't address in such an important topic. Taken as a whole, though, the field exhibits some disturbing features, as galloping movements usually do.

When I say it's big, I'm not kidding. The University of Pennsylvania, home to the [Positive Psychology Center](#), hosted the First World Congress on Positive Psychology in 2009. These congresses have become an annual event, organized by the [International Positive Psychology Association](#). So far, by my count, only one university offers a [degree program](#) in the field, but a fair number offer certificates or concentrations of one sort or another, and many schools offer courses in it. A course on happiness at Harvard is the most popular in the university's history, enrolling [up to 1400 students](#) at a time. [Harvard Business School](#) has got into the act too.

Some such courses aim at students in general, while others target psychologists, counselors, or managers. A [handbook](#) published by Oxford University Press presents research applying Happiness Studies to businesses and other organizations, with the aim of making workers not just happy but "elevat[ed]" and "inspire[ed]." But the Happiness Studies movement has also spawned business opportunities of its own. For instance, the teacher of the Harvard happiness course is an entrepreneur, urging visitors to his website to "Join the Happiness Revolution" by earning a certificate at his own [Happiness Academy](#).

If enrollees in this and similar programs expect happiness credentials to enhance their career opportunities, they seem to be right. Consider the [World Happiness Summit](#), an annual gala which brings happiness enthusiasts together with a motley collection of psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, yoga teachers, life coaches, entrepreneurs, educational administrators,

“master teachers,” and “chief happiness officers” of various firms, along with someone bizarrely described as the “Indiana Jones of Positive Psychology.” Many of these speakers represent entire organizational networks. Did I say Happiness Studies is a movement? The phenomenon is beginning to look more like an ecosystem, with all sorts of experts, thinkers, promoters, and sales specialists occupying various ecological niches.

It would be cheap, I think, to tax serious scholars of happiness with the silliness and excess of some of the more enthusiastic votaries of the Happiness Studies movement. Still, anyone who has more than a passing acquaintance with the great history of human reflection on human fulfillment, including such giants as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, can’t help but feel deflated and disappointed. An [interview](#) with the Yale “happiness professor” Lauri Santos encapsulates the ways in which the Happiness Studies movement lets us down. Professor Santos’ [research](#) focuses on cognition and cognitive development in dogs and monkeys. However, she has been teaching a popular course on Psychology and the Good Life since 2018, as well as producing podcasts on happiness that millions of people have downloaded.

At the end, the interviewer asks “So what’s the answer? What’s the purpose of life?” Here’s her reply: “It’s smelling your coffee in the morning. [Laughs.] Loving your kids. Having sex and daisies and springtime. It’s all the good things in life. That’s what it is.”

In other words, she doesn’t know.

Not that coffee, loving your kids, sex and daisies and springtime aren’t good. But that ducks the question, doesn’t it? We can gain insights just as helpful from greeting cards and embroidered samplers – in fact, better. At least the hackneyed “if life hands you lemons, make lemonade” responds to the problem of suffering. “Have all the good things” doesn’t. Do we need a whole field of psychology to tell us it’s good to have good things? What is the secret to enjoying them? What do we say to people who have them all, but find that they aren’t enough? [Between 1999 and 2019, suicide rates increased 33%](#) -- and that was before the pandemic. I suspect that a lot of these people drank coffee, liked sex and daisies and springtime, and at least tried to love their kids.

I know how hard it is to think these matters through, how challenging it is to explain them, and I don’t want to be snarky. The happiness professor does say some good and important things. For example, I admire her for challenging the fixation of many of her students on money, which doesn’t help much unless you’re below the poverty line and can’t put food on the table. Her students fight her about this. She fights them back. Bravo. But I wish I could cheer more often.

Still using Dr. Santos as an example -- but without snark -- let’s consider some of the other things the Happiness Studies crowd gets wrong.

She knows that we are confused about what makes us happy. As she puts it, “our minds lie to us.” Yet she apparently puts absolute trust in the results of self-administered subjective self-report happiness questionnaires. If we can’t trust our judgments of what makes us happy, why should we trust our judgments of how happy we are right now?

She doesn't challenge the interviewer, who prefaces a question by remarking "we all have more resources about how to be happy than any humans ever." Yet why are the resources of three thousand years of thought about the question passed over so lightly? Perhaps because earlier thinkers didn't have self-administered subjective self-report happiness questionnaires. Then again, maybe they had something better. I am thinking of Socratic dialogue. For consider: If on the one hand we humans have some inside knowledge of ourselves, but on the other hand our minds also lie to us, then perhaps instead of just tallying what we think we know, it would be better to use some things we think to cross-examine other things we think. "So you think happiness lies in honor? Would you be happy if you were honored for qualities you knew you didn't have?"

She knows that we need meaning in life, but like other Happiness Studies folk, she seems to be a relativist concerning what the meaning of life really is. It doesn't matter whether the beliefs on which you and the people in your "cultural apparatus" base your lives are true; whatever gives you a sense of meaning and belonging is good. Except when it isn't. For in the end, she can't quite stomach the relativism of meaning. Pressed by the interviewer, who asks about white nationalism, she admits that people who have left white-supremacist organizations report having found a sense of meaning and belonging in them, but "I want to stay away from advocating, like, oh, the white-nationalist-exercise organization is great for well-being." Contrast Augustine, who didn't have to contradict himself because he wasn't a relativist of meaning in the first place: "For I ask all men whether they would prefer to have joy in truth or in falsehood. They hesitate no more in preferring the truth than in wishing for happiness itself."

She rightly says happiness is hard work: "Why are there so many happiness books and other happiness stuff and people are still not happy? Because it takes work! Because it's hard!" She is right: It is hard! But there is not a single mention in the interview of what *makes* it hard: That it depends on the practice of the virtues, and the virtues are hard. Virtue alone won't make you happy, but you sure won't be happy without it.

She knows that happiness has something to do with good feelings. The problem is that she thinks it *simply is* good feelings. She is not alone in this. Martin Seligman, one of the leading figures in the positive psychology movement, writes in his modestly-titled book [Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being](#) that the first pillar of positive psychology is the study of "positive emotion." Viewing philosophical attempts to define happiness as a bewildering maze, he suggests that we must proceed scientifically, and the scientific approach begins by defining happiness as the aggregate of "emotions" and "strengths," which is later amended to "emotions" and "gratifications." In other words, in the name of not defining happiness, we define happiness, and in the name of avoiding philosophical clutter, we adopt a definition that is philosophically defective. For the classical philosophers presented a compelling argument that happiness isn't something we are *feeling*, but something we are *doing*. [Aristotle](#) described it as an activity of the soul which implies a rational principle and is carried out in the most excellent possible way. [Thomas Aquinas](#) agrees, because it would have to be the highest activity of our highest power – [overflowing](#), as he says, into the lower ones. Could these thinkers have been onto something? As Mortimer Adler [remarked](#), there is a difference between having a good time and having a good life.

Some of the gaps and omissions of the Happiness Studies approach are not only disappointing but strange. Speaking with astonishment of those who do not know God, the author of one of the Wisdom books [writes](#), “these men are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him ... yet again, not even they are to be excused; for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?” It is no part of my purpose to castigate the Happiness folk for focusing on this life. Perhaps they are not to be blamed for their blind spots about God, because their gaze is directed so resolutely to the present world. Yet again, perhaps they are to be blamed, for if they have the power to study this world so carefully, then how do they fail to see even this world more clearly?

For example: First, considering that one doesn't have to believe in God to make the distinction, it is odd that the Happiness Studies promoters cannot tell the difference between being comforted by God, and being comforted by a *belief* in God -- or, for that matter, by a belief in fate, My Inner Goddess, or electricity. Faith, for them, is just another “positive emotion.” Yes, I may feel good if I base my life on a delusion, but can I be said to be having a good life?

For example: Considering how fragile and vulnerable the happiness of this life is, it is odd that they say so little about suffering. Has not man a [hard service](#) on this earth? I may do everything right and yet find myself mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Not only may I mourn because I don't have all that coffee and all that sex, or because it isn't springtime, or because my children have fallen ill – but I may have “all the good things” and still mourn. As Aristotle pointed out, good fortune in excess may perhaps better be called bad fortune.

For example: Considering that one can “have everything,” such as wealth, health, beauty, friendship, and meaningful work, and yet ask “Is this all there is?”, it is odd that they never ask why. We cannot help but long for something not to be found in the created realm. What adaptive value there could possibly be in a natural desire for which there is no natural satisfaction? Even the old pagan, Aristotle, knew that nature makes nothing in vain. Then doesn't our very nature point beyond nature?

Even gazing downward, how is it possible to miss this point? If we were merely evolved mud, we would be perfectly adapted to this world. We weep; therefore we rejoice.