

HOW IT FEELS WHEN LIFE SUDDENLY GETS BETTER

Review of "The nature of happiness" by Desmond Morris Little Books Ltd., London, UK, 2004
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Desmond Morris is a zoologist and anthropologist with a great interest in the evolutionary origins of human behavior. He is the author of many books, among which the famous 'The Naked Ape' (1967) and 'The Naked Woman' (2004). In his latest book "The Nature of Happiness", Morris considers happiness in an evolutionary perspective. One example: Morris explains the fact that co-operation and helping other people still contributes to our happiness which stems from the change our forefathers made from a gentle, repetitive, fruit-picking way of life to the more strenuous, demanding lifestyle of pack-hunters on the plains.

Morris defines happiness as follows:

The true nature of happiness is frequently misunderstood. It is often confused with contentment, satisfaction or peace of mind. The best way to explain the difference is to describe contentment as the mood when life is good, while happiness is the sensation we experience when life suddenly gets better. At the very moment when something wonderful happens to us, there is a surge of emotion, a sensation of intense pleasure, an explosion of sheer delight - and this is the moment when we are truly happy. Sadly, it does not last very long. Intense happiness is a transient, fleeting sensation. We may continue to feel good for quite a while, but the joyful elation is quickly lost. As one cynic put it: life is prolonged misery interrupted by brief moments of happiness (p. 12).

In this definition happiness is an intense passing emotion, akin to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow' as an emotional top-experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This use of the word happiness is different from the more common meaning of 'life-satisfaction', which is a more enduring state of mind; comparable to what Morris calls 'contentment'. In this journal, the term happiness is used in the latter sense (Veenhoven et al., 2000) and depicts people's appreciation of their own life as a whole. This appreciation contains an element of evaluation and this is a typical human capacity; incorporated in our cortex which is one of the most spectacular products of human evolution. Morris presents many alternative definitions of happiness in the last part of his book but he disregards happiness as 'life-satisfaction'. This is unfortunate since 'life-satisfaction' is an interesting type of happiness from an evolutionary point of view.

Having defined happiness as a short-lived emotion, Morris goes on to distinguish several variants of that experience. He mentions 17 of them and briefly discusses their evolutionary aspects. The following list results:

1. Target happiness as a result of successful efforts to achieve a specific target.
2. Competitive happiness as a result of winning a struggle against other people. In the most extreme form, this is the happiness of the sadist and the torturer.
3. Co-operative happiness as a result of helping other people.
4. Genetic happiness as a consequence of reproducing ones genes by falling in love, pair bonding, giving birth and successfully rearing the offspring.
5. Sensual happiness as a result of hedonistic experiences like eating, drinking and sex.
6. Cerebral happiness as a result of intellectual activities like playing games, artistic creativity and scientific research.
7. Rhythmic happiness as a result of activities like dancing, music, singing, aerobics, gymnastics and athletics.
8. Painful happiness as a result physical or mental masochism, like self-chastisement or the masochism of puritans who deny themselves every pleasure in life.
9. Dangerous happiness as a result of taking sensational risks as in gambling and in such extreme sports as mountain climbing and parachuting.
10. Selective happiness as a result of ignoring reality and concentrating on one's own emotions, like Nero fiddling while Rome was burning.

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11. Tranquil happiness as a result of meditation.
12. Devout happiness as a result of worshipping, like in Lour-des and Mecca.
13. Negative happiness as a result of eliminating or dealing with specific causes of unhappiness, like dressing entirely in black for the rest of one's life after the death of a child.
14. Chemical happiness as a result of taking drugs, alcohol and smoking.
15. Fantasy happiness as a result of daydreaming, supported by books, films and television.
16. Comic happiness brought on by humor and laughter.
17. Accidental happiness as a result of good luck, if your suitcase comes up first on the carousel after a long and tiring flight on a jumbo jet.

This classification is the core of the book. Regrettably that core is questionable. Morris does not explain how he derived this list, he just posits. Though the reader may recognise much in this phenomenology, some will also miss specific experiences on the list. What about the joy of a beautiful sunset? It is also unclear to what extent these emotions are universal; speculation about possible evolutionary aspects is no proof. All in all a well readable booklet, perhaps directing some people to new sources of happiness, but it is not a great contribution to the science of happiness.

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