

## INTRIGUING BUT MISTY PARADOX

**Review of Ziyad Marar's 'The Happiness Paradox' Reaktion Books Ltd., London, UK, 2003.  
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Ziyad Marar is Editorial Director at Sage Publications London. His book "The Happiness Paradox" is in the tradition of the humanities, it is a journey through thoughts about happiness in philosophy and psychology with stopovers in literature and poetry. His book is not based on empirical research; it is an armchair reflection. Marar contemplates the elusive nature of happiness, which he sees as a result of two mutually dependent but contradictory human needs: the need for freedom, adventure and self-expression on the one hand and on the other, the need to feel justified by security, social appreciation and interpersonal support.

In Marar's vision, freedom as well as justification require an audience of people who will only appreciate individual actions if actions are expressions of freedom. This makes freedom and justification mutually dependent: real freedom requires justification, and justification requires people to take initiatives in freedom, risking disapproval or even humiliation, instead of appreciation. The support of audiences is, on the other hand, only substantial if the people who constitute these audiences have the freedom to refuse such support. In love: partners must be able to be critical and must in principle be willing to break up their relationship; otherwise they are unable to provide real support. In Marar's words: uncritical support or "canned applause" is meaningless and useless. Hence, freedom and justification need each other but are also contradictory since complete freedom is not compatible with the search for social support. In Marar's view it is impossible to reach a permanent balance or equilibrium as Aristotle probably would have wanted us to do. There is a perpetual oscillation between the need for freedom and justification in all people. In Marar's view this oscillation makes happiness an elusive concept; the best we can do is to accept this oscillation and elusiveness and to learn to live with it. A nice example of his message is the drawing simultaneously showing a duck and a rabbit (p. 172). If we look at it as a duck, the rabbit will appear before our eyes, whether we like or not, and vice versa. The two basic needs are, like these two images, inseparable.

This basic "paradox" is demonstrated in matters of love and work; according to Freud the two most important domains in life for happiness. In both domains people have to take risks and have to accept being vulnerable to others or, in Marar's words: in both domains there are powerful audiences that matter. In all domains, including love and work, happiness appears to be elusive because we are always short of either freedom or security. The clash between the idiosyncrasy of the individual and his social character appears to be the fundamental issue in Marar's philosophy.

A weak point in the book is the absence of clear definitions of central concepts. This weakness is demonstrated in Marar's choice of a rather vague and outdated concept of happiness; formulated on page 23 as follows: *The current "psychological" meaning is given as originating in the late 18th century and is as follows: a mental 'feeling' or 'affection' as distinguished from cognitive or volitional states of consciousness. Also 'feeling' as distinguished from the other classes of mental phenomena.* This vague formulation, stressing the emotional aspect without further specification, precludes the use of research into happiness in the present day meaning of people's evaluation of their own life as a whole.

Marar's concept of freedom is also very broad in his own words on page 38: *In fact, freedom in the sense I am using it is a complex and textured array of overlapping notions that includes discovery, authenticity, independence, artistic creation, escape, bliss, uniqueness, irony, will, power, self-indulgence, fantasy, transgression, perversion, comedy, desire, genius, the call of the wild and the "search for strange".* His justification, and morality, concept are also rather vague. Justification is a moral concept but this morality is based on the approval and support of other people, which is a rather unusual and counter-intuitive interpretation of morality.

This vagueness of central concepts makes it difficult to understand the relationships between happiness, freedom and justification. Are the needs for freedom and justification really contradictory and, if so, is this contradiction really a serious problem for happiness? People can make decisions about their interpretations of freedom and justification and about possible trade-offs. And perhaps people find pleasure in making such decisions!

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Another weakness, related to the conceptual vagueness, is Marar's negligence to consider the results of empirical research on subjective well being of which happiness research is a part. This research shows that life satisfaction and mood level are fairly stable. So happiness in that sense is apparently not elusive and the impact of "oscillation" is at least limited (Veenhoven, Inglehart). By taking a closer look at the results of empirical research Marar could also have acknowledged that people tend to be happier if they have more political, economical and personal freedom and that there is also a positive correlation between individualism and happiness (Veenhoven, 2000). The fact that individualism and freedom have a positive impact on happiness implies at least that his "oscillation" can take place on different levels, even if there is no fixed balance or equilibrium. If Marar had studied such results, he might have developed a more optimistic outlook on happiness. Tensions between basic human needs probably create problems and perhaps different types of "oscillation", but most people appear to be able to cope with these problems.

## REFERENCES

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