

THE GOOD LIFE

IN SEARCH OF THE HAPPY COUNTRY

Most people, no matter where they live, no matter when you ask, will say it is important to live ‘a good life’. Feeling largely satisfied with life, on the whole, is the greatest goal most people have, as we each live our own little lives and do the best we can for ourselves and those near and dear to us.

Even good old Donald Duck wants to live the good life, trying desperately to get everything right – and failing miserably, giving us all a good laugh with his eternal cartoon capers. On a less humorous note, the good life is also what Uncle Vanya longs for, in his own impossibly self-defeating way, in the eponymous piece by the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. And, tragically, it is what Shakespeare’s Juliet achieves, if only fleetingly, in the arms of her beloved Romeo, despite familial opposition on both sides.

Like us, these characters all aspire to find happiness. Obviously it is impossible to give any sort of exhaustive description of how we do this, or how others have done this down through the ages. Nevertheless, **philosophers have been preoccupied with the questions of what**

happiness is, what it ought to be, and how we find it for well over 2,000 years. Ever since Socrates, Plato and Aristotle strolled around ancient Athens, most philosophers and social thinkers have, at some point in their career, thought deeply about what people could and should do to live a good, happy life.

However, this book is not even remotely about telling readers what this or that philosopher, researcher, politician or novelist thinks about how others should live their lives. What it is about is what we can learn from the scholarship of happiness – by which I mean: what we can ascertain based on new findings from the academic study of how most people perceive their own lives. In other words, this book is about what we find out when we ask how most people experience life, rather than asking them about what they think life ought to be like.

Before moving on to the many insights I can share about the elusive ‘happy country’ we all want to inhabit, it is time to divulge the first big surprise in happiness research: Even though people live under extremely different conditions in a variety of countries and on continents that are far apart, they are all still people, which makes them surprisingly similar. The basic factors that are most important to happiness for a couple in Ghana are the same for a couple of roughly the same age in Denmark, Italy or Peru.

That is why, whether we read a tale from the *Arabian Nights*, a four-century-old play by William Shakespeare or a contemporary Finnish novel in the social-realism

genre, we almost instinctively understand the motivations and goals of the main characters. But if this is true, why are some of us still a lot happier than others, and how can entire populations live happier lives than other populations? These are questions that modern happiness research also studies, and which are therefore treated in this book.

WHAT PEOPLE THINK THEY KNOW ABOUT HAPPINESS

One problem for those of us trying to communicate the results of recent research on happiness is that almost everyone has a fixed idea, sometimes an ideological conception, about what happiness ought to be. This puts us up against what scholars call ‘folk theory’ and ‘popular psychology’ – consisting of people’s own ideas about the world, paired with cockeyed folk wisdom from hackneyed sayings and popular songs, and supplemented by half-digested ideas from self-help books, tabloids and other popular media.

Throughout this book we will confront folk theory with the findings achieved through serious scholarship, looking at what our results show about people’s lives. In certain areas folk theory rings true, and some old sayings actually reflect centuries of wisdom. In other areas they fall badly wide of the mark.

It is therefore wise to approach the topic of happiness with an open mind and a good dose of scepticism and common sense. Not all research is high-quality research,

and pretenders and would-be scholars have written multitudes of books on happiness that seem to be based on research but have little to do with evidence-based knowledge. Happiness is hot these days, and many ordinary people struggle to distinguish pure glitter from real gold.

In recent years, happiness scholars have been obliged to concede that quite a few findings from the early studies in the 1990s were based either on chance or on downright misunderstandings. This is not uncommon, however, especially in ‘young’ academic fields, of which happiness research is one. Here, too, development is rapid when sceptical scholars turn their critical eyes on the work of their peers and on regular people.

I would imagine that 20 years from now, when current and future scholars have become a bit older and much wiser, we will see a different and more finely grained picture than the one we have today. This book presents what we know about happiness at the moment, with the state of research today. However frustrating it may seem, there will be questions we touch upon that only have one scientific answer: “We honestly don’t know.”