ZYGMUNT
BAUMAN

the art of life

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You are not an isolated entity,

but a unique, irreplaceable part of the cosmos.

Don’t forget this.

You are an essential piece in the puzzle of humanity.

Epictetus, The Art of Living

It is the wish of all men … to live happily,

but when it comes to seeing clearly what it is that makes life happy,

they grope for the light;

indeed, a measure of the difficulty of achieving the happy life

is that the greater the man’s energy in striving for it,

the further he goes away from it

if he has taken a wrong turning on the road …

Seneca, ‘On the happy life’

INTRODUCTION
What is Wrong with Happiness?

The question in the title would baffle many a reader. And it is meant to baffle – to prompt one to pause and think. To pause in what? In our pursuit of happiness, which – as most readers would probably agree – is on our minds most of the time, fills the greater part of our lives, cannot and will not slow down, let alone stop … at least no longer than for a (fleeting, always fleeting) moment.

Why is this question likely to baffle? Because to ask 'what is wrong with happiness?' is like asking what is hot about ice or malodorous in a rose. Ice being incompatible with heat, and rose with stench, such questions assume the feasibility of an *inconceivable* coexistence (where there is heat, there can't be ice). How, indeed, could something be *wrong* with *happiness*? Is not 'happiness' a synonym of the *absence* of wrong? Of the very *impossibility* of its presence? Of the impossibility of *all and any* wrong?!

And yet this is a question asked by Michael Rustin,[1] as it has been by quite a few worried people before and probably will be in the future – and Rustin explains why: societies like ours, moved by millions of men and women pursuing happiness, are getting richer, but it is far from clear whether they are getting happier. It looks as if the human pursuit of happiness may well prove to be self-defeating. All the available empirical data suggest that among the populations of affluent societies there may be no connection at all between rising affluence, believed to be the principal vehicle of a happy life, and greater happiness!

The close correlation between economic growth and enhanced happiness is widely believed to be one of the least questionable truths, perhaps even the most selfevident. Or at least, this is what the best-known and most respected political leaders, their advisers and spokespeople, tell us – and what we, who tend to rely on their opinions, repeat without pause for reflection or second thoughts. They and we act on the assumption that the correlation is genuine. We want them to act on that belief still more resolutely and energetically – and we wish them luck, hoping that their success (that is, adding to our incomes, to our disposable cash, to the volume of our possessions, assets and wealth) will add quality to our lives and make us feel happier than we are.

According to virtually all the research reports scrutinized and summed up by Rustin, 'improvements in living standards in nations such as the United States and Britain are associated with no improvement – indeed a slight decline – in subjective well-being.' Robert Lane has found that despite the massive, spectacular rise of American incomes in the postwar years, the self-reported happiness of Americans has declined.[2] And Richard Layard has concluded from a cross-national comparison of data that although the indices of reported satisfaction with life grow by and large in parallel with the level of national product, they rise significantly only up to the point where want and poverty give way to the gratification of essential, 'survival' needs – and stop climbing or tend to slow down drastically with further rises in affluence.[3] On the whole, only a few percentage points separate countries with an average annual income per capita between 20,000 and 35,000 dollars from those below the barrier of 10,000 dollars. The strategy of making people happier through raising their income does not seem to work. On the other hand, one social index that seems to be growing most spectacularly in line with the level of affluence, indeed as fast as subjective well-being was promised and expected to rise, has so far been the incidence of criminality: of burglary and car theft, drug trafficking, economic graft and business corruption. And of an uncomfortable and uneasy sensation of uncertainty, hard to bear, let alone to live with permanently. Of a diffuse and ‘ambient’ uncertainty, ubiquitous yet seemingly unanchored, unspecified and for that reason all the more vexing and aggravating …

Such findings feel profoundly disappointing, considering that it was precisely an increase in the overall volume of happiness ‘of the greatest number’ – an increase led by economic growth and a rise in disposable cash and credit – that was declared, through the last several decades, to be the main purpose guiding the policies set by our governments, as well as the ‘life politics’ strategies of our, their subjects. It also served as the main yardstick for measuring the success and failure of governmental policies, and of our pursuit of happiness. We could even say that our modern era started in earnest with the proclamation of the universal human right to the pursuit of happiness, and from the promise to demonstrate its superiority over the forms of life it replaced by rendering that pursuit less cumbersome and arduous, while being more effective. We may ask, then, whether the means suggested to achieve such a demonstration (principally, continuous economic growth as measured by the rise in ‘gross national product’) were wrongly chosen? If so, what exactly was wrong with that choice?

The sole common denominator of the otherwise variegated products of human bodily and mental labour being the market price they command, the statistics of the ‘gross national product’ aimed at grasping the growth or decline of the products’ availability record the amount of money changing hands in the course of buying and selling transactions. Whether or not the indices of GNP acquit themselves well in their overt task, there is still a question of whether they should be treated, as they tend to be, as indicators of the growth or decline of happiness. It is assumed that as the spending of money goes up, it must coincide with a similar upward movement in the happiness of spenders, but this is not immediately obvious. If, for instance, the pursuit of happiness as such, known to be an absorbing, energy-consuming, risk-fraught and nerve-taxing activity, leads to a greater incidence of mental depression, more money is likely to be spent on anti-depressants. If, thanks to an increase in car ownership, the frequency of car accidents and the number of accident victims grow, so too does expenditure on car repairs and medical treatment. If the quality of tap-water goes on deteriorating all over the place, more and more money will be spent on buying bottled water to be carried in our rucksacks or travel bags on all trips, long or short (we will be asked to swill the contents of the bottle on the spot whenever we approach this side of the airport security check, and need to buy another bottle on the other side of the checkpoint). In all such cases, and a multitude of similar instances, more money changes hands, boosting the GNP figures. This is certain. But a parallel growth in the happiness of consumers of anti-depressants, victims of car accidents, carriers of water bottles, and, indeed, of all those many people who worry about bad luck and fear their turn to suffer might come – that is far less obvious.

All that should not really be news. As Jean-Claude Michéa recalled recently in his timely rewriting of the convoluted history of the 'modern project',[4] as long ago as 18 March 1968, in the heat of the presidential campaign, Robert Kennedy launched a scathing attack on the lie on which the GNP-bound measure of happiness rests:

> Our GNP takes into account in its calculations the air pollution, tobacco advertising and ambulances riding to collect the wounded from our motorways. It registers the costs of the security systems which we install to protect

> our homes and the prisons in which we lock up those who manage to break into them. It entails the destruction of our sequoia forests and their replacement through sprawling and chaotic urbanization. It includes the production of napalm, nuclear arms and armed vehicles used by police to stifle urban unrest. It records … television programmes that glorify violence in order to sell toys to children. On the other hand, GNP does not note the health of our children, quality of our education or gaiety of our games. It does not measure the beauty of our poetry and the strength of our marriages. It does not care to evaluate the quality of our political debates and integrity of our representatives. It leaves out of consideration our courage, wisdom and culture. It says nothing about our compassion and dedication to our country. In a word, the GNP measures everything, except what makes life worth the pain of living it.

Robert Kennedy was murdered a few weeks after publishing this fiery indictment and declaring his intention to restore the importance of things that make life worth living; so we will never know whether he would have tried, let alone succeeded, in making his words flesh had he been elected President of the United States. What we do know, though, is that in the forty years that have passed since, there have been few if any signs of his message having been heard, understood, embraced and remembered – let alone any move on the part of our elected representatives to disown and repudiate the pretence of the commodity markets to the role of the royal road to a meaningful and happy life, or evidence of any inclination on our part to reshape our life strategies accordingly.

Observers suggest that about half the goods crucial for human happiness have no market price and can’t be purchased in shops. Whatever your cash and credit standing, you won’t find in a shopping mall love and friendship, the pleasures of domesticity, the satisfaction that comes from caring for loved ones or helping a neighbour in distress, the self-esteem to be drawn from work well done, gratifying the ‘workmanship instinct’ common to us all, the appreciation, sympathy and respect of workmates and other people with whom one associates; you won’t find there freedom from the threats of disregard, contempt, snubs and humiliation. Moreover, earning enough money to afford those goods that can only be had through the shops is a heavy tax on the time and energy available to obtain and enjoy *non*-commercial and *non*-marketable goods like the ones listed above. It may easily happen, and frequently does, that the losses exceed the gains and the capacity of increased income to generate happiness is overtaken by the unhappiness caused by a shrinking access to the goods which ‘money can’t buy’.

Consumption takes time (as does shopping), and the sellers of consumer goods are naturally interested in tapering to a bare minimum the time dedicated to the enjoyable act of consuming. Simultaneously, they are interested in cutting down as far as possible, or eliminating altogether, those necessary activities that occupy much time but bring few marketing profits. In view of their frequency in commercial catalogues, promises in the descriptions of the new products on offer – like ‘absolutely no effort required’, ‘no skills called for’, ‘you will enjoy [music, views, delights of the palate, the restored cleanliness of your blouse etc.] in minutes’ or ‘in just one touch’ – seem to assume a convergence in the interests of sellers and buyers. Promises like these are covert/oblique admissions that the sellers of goods would not wish their buyers to spend too much time enjoying them, so wasting time that could be used for more shopping escapades – but evidently they must also be a very reliable selling point. It must have been found that prospective customers wish for quick results and only a momentary engagement of their mental and physical faculties – probably to vacate time for more attractive alternatives. If cans can be opened with a less 'bad for you' kind of effort thanks to a new miraculously ingenious electronic can-opener, more time will be left to spend in a gym exercising with gadgets promising a 'good for you' variety of exertion. But whatever the gains in such an exchange, their impact on the sum total of happiness is anything but unambiguous.

Laura Potter embarked on her ingenious exploration of all sorts of waiting rooms expecting that she would find there 'impatient, disgruntled, red-faced people cursing each lost millisecond' – fulminating at the need to wait for whatever 'urgent business' brought them there.[5] With our 'cult of instant gratification', she mused, many of us would 'have lost the ability to wait':

> We live in an era where 'waiting' has become a dirty word. We've gradually eradicated (as much as possible) the need to wait for anything, and our new, up-to-the-second adjective is 'instant'. We can no longer spare a meagre 12 minutes for a pan of rice to boil, so a time-saving two-minute microwavable version has been created. We can't be bothered to wait for Mr or Mrs Right to come along, so we speed date … In our time-pressed lives, it seems that the 21st-century Briton no longer has time to wait for anything.

Much to her surprise (and perhaps that of most of us), however, Laura Potter found a very different picture. Wherever she went, she sensed the same feeling: 'the wait was a pleasure … Waiting seemed to have become a luxury, a window in our tightly scheduled lives. In our "now" culture of BlackBerrys, laptops and mobile phones, "waitees" viewed the waiting room as a place of refuge.' Perhaps the waiting room, Potter concludes, reminds us of the intensely pleasurable, alas forgotten, art of relaxing …

The pleasures of relaxation are not the only ones to have been laid at the altar of a life hurried for the sake of saving time to chase other things. When the effects that were once attained thanks to our own ingenuity, dedication and hard-learned skills are ‘outsourced’ to a gadget requiring only a swish of a credit card and a push of a button, something that used to make many people happy and was probably vital for everybody’s happiness is lost on the way: pride in ‘work well done’, in dexterity, smartness and skill, in a daunting task performed, an indomitable obstacle overcome. In the longer run, skills once obtained, and the very ability to learn and master new skills, are forgotten and lost, and with them goes the joy of gratifying the workmanship instinct, that vital condition of self-esteem, so difficult to replace, along with the happiness offered by self-respect.

The markets, to be sure, are keen to redress the harm done – with the help of factory-made substitutes for the ‘do-it-yourself’ goods that can no longer be ‘done by yourself’ because of your lack of time and vigour. Following the market’s suggestion and using its (paid-up and profit-generating) services, one would for instance invite a partner to a restaurant, treat children to McDonald’s burgers, or bring home takeaways instead of preparing meals ‘from scratch’ in the family kitchen; or one would purchase expensive gifts for loved ones to compensate for the dearth of time spent together and the rarity of the occasions to talk to each other, as well as for the absence or near absence of convincing manifestations of personal interest, compassion and care. Even the agreeable taste of the restaurant food or the high price tags and highly prestigious labels attached to the gifts sold in the shops will, however, hardly match up to the value in added happiness of the goods for whose absence or rarity they are meant to compensate: such goods as gathering around a table laid with food that has been jointly cooked with its sharing in mind, or lengthy, attentive listening by a person-who-counts to one's intimate thoughts, hopes and apprehensions, and similar proofs of loving attention, engagement and care. Since not all goods necessary for 'subjective happiness', and notably the non-marketable goods, have a common denominator, their balances elude quantification; no increase in the quantity of one good can fully and truly compensate for the lack of a good of a different quality and provenance.

All and any offerings call for a certain sacrifice on the part of the giver, and it is precisely the awareness of self-sacrifice that adds to the giver's feeling of happiness. Gifts that take no effort and call for no sacrifice, and therefore do not require resignation from some other coveted values, are worthless in this respect. The great humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow and his little son shared their love of strawberries. Their wife and mother indulged them with strawberries for breakfast; 'my son', Maslow told me, 'was, as most children are, impatient, impetuous, unable to slowly savour his delights and stretch his joy for longer; he emptied his plate in no time, and then looked wistfully at mine, still almost full. Each time it happened, I passed my strawberries to him. And you know', so Maslow concluded the story, 'I remember those strawberries tasting better in his mouth than in mine … ' Markets have flawlessly spotted the opportunity of capitalizing on the impulse to self-sacrifice, that faithful companion of love and friendship. The willingness to self-sacrifice has been commercialized, just like most other needs or desires whose gratification has been acknowledged as indispensable for human happiness (a Cassandra of our days would advise us to be wary of markets even when bringing gifts …). Self-sacrifice now means mostly, and preferably exclusively, parting with a large or possibly yet larger sum of money: an act that can be duly recorded in the GNP statistics.

To conclude: pretending that the volume and depth of human happiness can be taken care of and properly served by fixing attention on just one index – GNP – is grossly misleading. When it is made into a principle of governance, such a pretence may become harmful as well, bringing consequences opposite to those intended and allegedly pursued.

Once life-enhancing goods start to move from the non-monetary realm to the commodity market, there is no stopping them; the movement tends to develop its own momentum and becomes self-propelling and self-accelerating, diminishing yet further the supply of goods that by their nature can only be produced personally and can only flourish in the setting of intense and intimate human relationships. The less possible it is to offer to others goods of the latter kind, goods 'that money can't buy', or the less willingness there is to cooperate with others in their production (a willingness to cooperate is often greeted as the most satisfying good that can be offered), the deeper are the feelings of guilt and the unhappiness that result. A wish to atone and to redeem the guilt pushes the sinner to seek yet more expensive, buyable substitutes for what is no longer offered to the people with whom their life is lived, and so to spend yet more hours away from them in order to earn more money. The chance to produce and share the sorely missed goods which one is too busy and too exhausted to conjure up and to offer is thereby yet further impoverished.

It looks therefore as if the *growth of 'national product'* is a rather poor measure of the *growth of happiness*. It may be seen instead as a sensitive indicator of the strategies, wayward and misleading as they may be, which in our *pursuit* of happiness we have been forced, persuaded or cajoled to adopt – or manoeuvred into adopting. What we can learn from GNP statistics is how many of the routes followed by seekers of happiness have been already redesigned to lead through the shops, those prime sites for money to change hands – whether or not the strategies adopted by happiness-seekers differ in other ways (and they do differ), and whether or not the routes they suggest vary in other ways (and they do vary). We can deduce from those statistics how strong and how widespread is the *belief* that there is an intimate link between happiness and the volume and quality of consumption: an assumption that underlies all shop-mediated strategies. What we can also learn is how successfully markets manage to deploy that hidden assumption as a profit-churning engine – by identifying happiness-generating consumption with consumption of the objects and services offered for sale in the shops. At this point, marketing success rebounds as a sorry plight, and ultimately as an abominable failure of the self-same pursuit of happiness it had been presumed to serve.

One of the most seminal effects of equating happiness with shopping for commodities which are hoped to generate happiness is to stave off the chance that the pursuit of happiness will ever grind to a halt. The pursuit of happiness will never end – its end would be equal to the end of happiness as such. The secure *state* of happiness not being attainable, it is only the *chase* of that stubbornly elusive target that can keep the runners (however moderately) happy. On that track leading to happiness, there is no finishing line. The ostensible means turn into ends: the sole available consolation for the elusiveness of the dreamed-of and coveted 'state of happiness' is to stay on course; as long as one stays in the race, neither falling from exhaustion nor being shown a red card, the hope of eventual victory is kept alive.

By subtly shifting the dream of happiness from the vision of a full and fully gratifying life to the search for means believed to be needed for such a life to be reached, markets see to it that the pursuit can never end. The targets of the search replace each other with mind-boggling speed. It is fully understood by the pursuers (and, of course, by their zealous coaches and guides) that if the pursuit is to achieve its declared purpose, the pursued targets have to quickly fall out of use, lose their lustre, attraction and power of seduction, be abandoned and replaced – and many times over – by other, 'new and improved' targets, doomed to suffer a similar lot. Imperceptibly, the vision of happiness shifts from an anticipated *after-purchase* bliss to the act of *shopping* that precedes it – an act overflowing with joyous anticipation; joyous for a hope as yet pristine, untarnished and undashed.

Thanks to the diligence and expertise of the advertising copywriters, such life-and-(high)street wisdom tends nowadays to be acquired at a tender age, well before there is a first chance to hear subtle philosophical meditations on the nature of happiness and the ways to a happy life, let alone a chance to study them and reflect on their message. We may learn, for instance, from the first page of the 'Fashion' section of a widely read and well-respected magazine, that Liberty, a twelve-year-old schoolgirl, 'has already discovered how to make her wardrobe work well'.[6] Topshop is her 'favourite store', and for a good reason: in her own words, 'even though it's really expensive, I know that I'll come out with something fashionable.' What the frequent visits to Topshop mean for her is first and foremost a comforting feeling of safety: Topshop's buyers confront the risks of failure on her behalf and take the responsibility for the choice on themselves. Once she buys in that shop, the probability of making a mistake is reduced to nil, or almost. Liberty does not trust her own taste and discretion sufficiently to buy (let alone don in public) just what has caught her eye; but things she bought in that shop she can parade in public with confidence – confident of recognition,