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Letter from the Director

Dear Readers,

As I near the end of my first year as the Honors Program Director, I can easily say that the best part of the job is interacting with so many talented and energetic students. Symposium is the result of these types of students that Honors has in abundance. As I write this introduction to Volume 3 of Symposium it is worth noting that it has passed another milestone. It takes enormous vision and effort to start an undergraduate scholarly journal and typically a core group of students are the ones that get it done. What Volume 3 shows us is that the torch can be passed as Michelle Ammirati has taken over as editor-in-chief. Without a doubt Symposium is now a permanent part of Honors.

Of course it takes more than a great staff to produce an undergraduate journal of this quality. Honors students have stepped up and submitted an engaging array of superb articles. Where else can someone read an “almost love story” or ponder the possibility of “science” as a tool for social oppression? Certainly insights into happiness are of interest to everyone. Finally, you’ll find a bit of witchcraft and a discussion of Herland. Volume 3 of Symposium is sure to have plenty to captivate its audience.

As you enjoy reading through The Ithaca College Honors Undergraduate Journal you should think about how you might contribute next year. There are always opportunities to help in producing the journal either as part of the editorial staff or as a contributor. I would be remiss if I didn’t point out that publishing in Symposium helps fulfill the Scholarly Engagement portion of the new honors program.

I want to thank Michelle, the rest of the editorial staff, and the contributors for making it so easy to be proud to be the director of the Honors Program. I’m grateful to be around such intellectually curious and engaged students.

Cheers,

[Signature]

Thomas J. Pfaff
Director, Ithaca College Honors Program

Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

I am thrilled to present to you with the third volume of Symposium for the 2013 – 2014 academic year.

First and foremost, I would like to extend a huge thank you to Honors Program Director, Thomas Pfaff. Thank you for your constant support and excitement about Symposium. I have no doubt that Symposium will continue to be a part of the Honors Program at Ithaca College with Tom’s help.

To Erin Gardosh, Rebecca Kaebnick, Stephanie Krail, Julia Hall, Emily Martin, and Kayla Reopelle, thank you for your dedication to this publication. Symposium would not exist were it not for their hard work and the many hours they have spent working as an editorial board.

This year, the submissions we received reflected a wide array of work from very different disciplines with each piece offering a distinct writing style. During the process of reviewing these submissions, the editorial board decided to change the direction of Symposium for this and future issues by putting less of an emphasis on research, and more of an emphasis on creative, scholarly work.

As you read through these scholarly musings, I hope that you learn something new from your peers, you are inspired to explore a new area of interest, or that you are moved to submit your own work next year. For me, Symposium has been a way to be more involved in the honors program over the past three years, and as a senior it is something I can leave behind for the program.

With that said, I am excited to formally announce the new Editors-in-Chief for next year: Rebecca Kaebnick and Emily Martin. Congratulations! I am confident that they will take Symposium far.

All the best,

[Signature]

Michelle Ammirati
Symposium Editor in Chief
Spring 2014
Vol. 3

Motherhood in Herland: The Importance of Choice

Wonder Women & Lethal Girls

Alexa Salvato
Class of 2017 Journalism, B.A.

Three men defy orders and travel to a fabled land where only women live. When they arrive, they are shocked to discover that not only does this land exist, but it is also thriving. One of the first questions that arises, of course, is how this utopian society manages to reproduce without the presence of men. This is a theme explored in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s novel Herland, published in 1915. Gilman poses a socialist-feminist utopia with a heavy emphasis on motherhood. She creates almost a completely pro-choice society, in that the women in Herland have much choice about if and when they will bear children. Yet around the time of the novel’s completion, the idea of birth control as a form of eugenics was also gaining traction, further informing the work. The novel offers a fascinating lens on the history of the belief today that when women have sovereignty over their bodies they have control over their lives, but also that a pro-choice world cannot exist unless it exists equally for all people capable of reproduction. It also demonstrates the benefits that could be enjoyed by a society that reveres, instead of minimizes, the work of motherhood.

In the 1910s, at the time of Herland’s publication, the idea of eugenics, defined by Merriam-Webster as “a science that tries to improve the human race by controlling which people become parents,” was becoming popular. This was in conjunction with the ideology of Social Darwinism and the residue of racism that was resurfacing at the turn of the century as immigrants flooded to the urban centers of America. The idea was even supported by many suffragists at the time.

Margaret Sanger, one such activist as well as the founder of Planned Parenthood, was one vocal advocate for eugenics. Sanger stated in a 1921 article called “The Eugenic Value of Birth Control Propaganda”: “As an advocate of Birth Control, I wish to take advantage of the present opportunity to point out that the unbalance between the birth rate of the ‘unfit’ and the ‘fit,’ admittedly the greatest present menace to civilization...” Sanger expresses that a certain portion of the population is considered less desirable and therefore less fit to birth children. But at the same time she was making this statement, her work was allowing many women to become educated about reproductive health and gain access to contraception for the first time. This demonstrates how the sociohistorical backdrop of Gilman’s novel may have served as inspiration for her fictional world.

Gilman depicts Herland through the interesting perspective of three male visitors. They are educated young men, explorers Terry, an egotistical misogynist who funds the journey; Jeff, a lofty botanist who puts women on a pedestal; and our narrator, Van, a sociologist who sees the women around him in the most human light. For this reason, Van records all he learns of Herland, including its lengthy history. After its men were killed in a combination of devastating war, a volcanic eruption, and, finally, the murder of the last male survivors by the remaining women, Herland began to grow. “For five or ten years [Herland’s women] worked together, growing stronger and wiser and more and more mutually attached, and then the miracle happened—one of these young women bore a child” (Gilman 48). The women deemed this a gift from their goddess, as well as a testament to their sisterhood. This asexual reproduction persists throughout the region’s history; all women are descended from that one initial mother, and are therefore connected as “sisters.”

This sisterhood is a unique aspect of Herland’s brand of motherhood. Women for centuries have spoken of feeling isolated in the hard work of raising children primarily alone; in Herland, it is the opposite. One woman explains: “We each go without a certain range of personal joy...but remember—we each have a million children to love and serve—our children” (60). Although the central focus in each individual’s daily activities is on the children of their community and building a sustainable future, the women also have various other tasks to fill their time and energy; and unlike the nuclear family that existed at the time of Gilman’s writing, there is not a special tie from a particular mother to her biological children. From the author’s perspective, this benefits not only the women of this land but the children as well. For example, the men are surprised to find out that the women do not have surnames: “But does not each mother want her own child to bear her name?” I asked. “No—why should she? The child has its own” (64). This practice allows the child to be an autonomous being instead of a component in a family unit, something that I think is far healthier for the child than being overly connected to one’s parents.

The idea of each individual working independently for an established greater good is a basic tenet of socialism. This novel avoids the political term, preferring to discuss “cooperation.” In Herland, motherhood is considered the highest calling for women, on practical, personal, and spiritual levels. The women link “mothering” not just to the physical bearing of a child, but also to the way a child’s emotional and intellectual life is shaped. This theoretically sounds excellent, since it regards women as more than just vessels for their future children, which was their dominant role at the time. A problem with this vision is revealed when one of the women, Somel, explains to Van that not all women are permitted to be mothers: “The care of babies involves education, and is entrusted only to the most fit” (70).

When Jeff remarks that the men have not seen any “defectives” in their travels, Somel admits that, although the asexual reproduction of the society originated from a woman’s wish for a child, not all women of Herland are given that privilege: “If the girl showing the bad qualities had still the power to appreciate social duty, we appealed to her, by that, to renounce motherhood. But if the fault was in a disproportionate egoism—then the girl was sure she had the right to have children, even that hers would be better than others.” Somel indicates that this policy is necessary because of their belief that mothering includes not just birthing but also raising the child; not all women are qualified to “educate” children. Some women of Herland are separated from their children for this reason. According to Somel, though, this does not upset the women; “For the child’s sake, [the mother] is glad to have for it the highest care” (71). “I was unconvinced,” writes Van of Somel’s claim, I, too, found this claim to be unbelievable in its denial of maternal feelings and its blatant prejudice against women who were not perfectly obedient and subservient to the greater good of the society. This reflects the concept of eugenics; the “unfit” were unfairly portrayed to be poor immigrant women because they were not the accepted norm in American society at the time. This ideal is epitomized when Somel in Herland professes: “We have, of course, made it our first business to fill their time and energy; and unlike the nuclear family that existed at the time of Gilman’s writing, there is not a special tie from a particular mother to her biological children. From the author’s perspective, this benefits not only the women of this land but the children as well. For example, the men are surprised to find out that the women do not have surnames: “But does not each mother want her own child to bear her name?” I asked. “No—why should she? The child has its own” (64). This practice allows the child to be an autonomous being instead of a component in a family unit, something that I think is far healthier for the child than being overly connected to one’s parents.

Wonder Women & Lethal Girls
Connections to the real world are also clear in Gilman’s choice of the reproductive process of Herland. In the context of the large number of unwanted pregnancies in the early 1900s Herland’s practice of asexual reproduction sounds like a women’s rights activist’s dream. As Van explains to the readers of his sociological observations:

> When a woman chose to be a mother, she allowed the child-longing to grow within her till it worked its natural miracle. When she did not so choose she put the whole thing out of her mind, and fed her heart with the other babies. (60–61)

Since it relies on asexual reproduction, it is impossible to fully adopt this practice in human society. But the concept is so empowering; if a woman wanted to have a baby, she could have one, and if she did not, she would not, and would not be looked down upon for it. In Herland, these women, if deemed “unfit,” would either be asked not to think these thoughts or their children would be given up to other women to mother (70–71). Similarly, birth control advocates were giving the women of the early twentieth century access to contraceptives for a tainted reason: to limit the amount of births of lower-class children into the world. This is not giving women of all kinds sovereignty over their bodies; this is an attempt to improve a society instead of giving an individual the opportunity to improve her own life in the way that is best for her. The latter is a much nobler cause.

Van has an epiphany after his discussions with the women of Herland: “You see, they were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless involuntary fecundity… in the sense of Conscious Makers of People” (58). The women were Mothers with a capital-M of reverence, active in their choice to bear children. The practice of motherhood in Herland can teach us many important lessons about how motherhood could be improved in the real world. For example, collaborative parenting and a variety of positive role models can produce healthy independent children, and that not all women want to be mothers, but there are many ways to be a good one. The presence of eugenics-based theory in Herland is a negative aspect of this utopian vision: for me, it brings Herland from being a fantasy to an absolute nightmare. But the idea that mothers should be “Conscious Makers of People” is a beautiful one, whether presented in a novel of 1915, New York in 1916, or America in 2013. If women are “Conscious Makers of People,” they govern their bodies; they are also the “Conscious Makers” of their destinies.
The fear of being called a fag is only one contributing factor, unfortunately. Pascoe also identifies something she calls “compulsive heterosexuality.” This concept identifies the performance of masculinity in adolescent men. This performance includes: the ability to get girls, dominate girls’ bodies, talking about girls, and touching women as they please. Adolescent masculinity is completely centered on asserting power over adolescent women. If Brad and Chad were to act upon their sexual fluidity with each other—that is to say that Brad and Chad identify as heterosexual in our hypothetical situation and still have romantic and/or sexual feelings for each other—compulsive heterosexuality would leave them with absolutely no idea of what to do on both an emotional and mental level. To be masculine, both boys are supposed to dominate girls, get girls, talk about girls, and touch girls; yet they have a want or need to pursue romantic and sexual feelings for each other. The cultural script they’ve been handed by compulsive heterosexuality and the fag discourse rely on these young men’s sexuality centering on keeping femininity subordinate. Sexual fluidity challenges this sexist power dynamics along with monosexist and heterosexist power dynamics. All of these dynamics in some way factor into the construction of adolescent masculinity:

Sexist: femininity is weak and only are masculine when you are not feminine.

Monosexist: people are only attracted to only one gender and anyone else is faking it.

Heterosexist: heterosexuality is the norm and behaviors and attractions outside it are other.

So Brad and Chad might be madly in love with each other, but the poor boys probably will not ever act on their feeling due to a socialized need to meet rigid social standards for masculinity.

If Brad and Chad aren’t meant to be in their high school years, why couldn’t they explore their feelings for each other when they go to college together? Pascoe did identify the fag discourse as a phenomenon that pertained mostly to high school students, after all. Why is it that we still don’t see Chad and Brad, and other men their age, showing their sexual fluidity when they’re happily rooming together their first year at St. John Fisher?

First off, if they didn’t explore these thoughts and feelings during puberty and high School—their formative years—it’s much less likely they would do so later on in life. Our brains develop neural pathways based on our experiences as we go through life, as a way to make us more proficient in things that we continue to do and see. You climb a rock wall; your brain develops more connections to neurons having to do with hand positioning, coordination, etc. The same is true for sexual and romantic experience. If your brain considers other-sex desire as the only option, it’s only going to develop neural pathways that support that attitude and behaviors associated with it.

There is another factor to be considered when it comes to the development of sexuality and associated neural pathways in a boy: pornography. If a boy is made to assume he’s strictly heterosexual, he will naturally watch heterosexual porn. And, in many cases, “lesbian” porn as well. (I say “lesbian” because the sex that goes on in those videos is so far from the sex real-life lesbian women are having). Both types of porn focus on putting women’s bodies on display for the viewing pleasure of men. These types of porn will also help cultivate this boy’s neural pathways that have to do with his sexuality. Depictions of desire for women can foster and bolster actual desire for women because of how our brain adapts and learns.

Now why is it that Chad and Brad can’t recognize and act on their feelings? Stacey and Tracey started a relationship with each other when they became closer as co-captains of the cheer squad. If it weren’t already obvious, Chad and Brad cannot act on their feelings because our culture treats women and men quite differently—especially in regards to what behavior is “gender-appropriate.”

Women and girls are discouraged from masturbating, while it is almost assumed that men will masturbate. Porn is mostly meant for the express purpose of masturbation. I really don’t know of many people that watch porn for the fun of it (or at least when that fun isn’t auto-erotic in nature). Most porn is marketed towards
men. Straight porn, lesbian porn, and gay porn are all marketed toward men. Unless it’s the rare feminist pornographic piece where we have a refreshing reprieve from the male gaze. So if Stacey and Tracey do masturbate, it’s still likely that they don’t use porn as an aid for masturbation. Both straight porn and lesbian porn are, on average, quite degrading to women. This isn’t the setting in which most women feel turned on. Nor is it a situation that of many of the women Lisa Diamond interviewed for her book. The women in Diamond’s study described feeling safe with and respected by the women and men they explored their sexuality with. A lot of porn, ironically, isn’t a very sex-positive space.

Stacey and Tracey would not have had the same kind of gender reinforcement that Chad and Brad have had, and not just from porn, either. Stacey and Tracey’s genders aren’t restricted by compulsive heterosexuality and fag discourse like Chad and Brad’s are. This is because of the very same idea that the fag discourse asserts: the feminine is weak and wrong.

Let’s say Stacey and Tracey come to school in clothes like that of the masculine basketball girls Pascoe discusses in her book. The two girls would most likely not be teased or harassed for their change in dress. In fact, it’s possible that they might gain status from it, especially if they also adopted some masculine characteristics. Let’s use leadership, their new status as captains of the cheer team, as the characteristic. Stacey and Tracey would likely gain status from this because they’ve adopted characteristics perceived to be masculine or right. The basketball girls in Pascoe’s study were thought of as too cool, even though they could often be obnoxious and boisterous. These actions did not matter because they played into gender norms and reaped the benefits of doing so. If Chad were to cry in frustration—something considered to be feminine—in the hallway because he’s overwhelmed by the fact that he feels like he can’t express his feelings for Brad, he would likely be called a fag. It’s also likely he would hear about it for most of his time in high school. Girls don’t have an exact equivalent to the fag discourse because their gender is policed through a narrative different from that of boys. They are told in various ways to be submissive and to be as traditionally feminine as possible. While every bit as destructive, its tricks are not totally equivalent to those of the fag discourse, which is based on the fear of femininity. It is based in ensuring the masculine space stays masculine. Masculinity, especially within the fag discourse, is defined by the absence of femininity.

In Sexual Fluidity, Lisa Diamond talks about sexual fluidity as a trait that is almost exclusive in women. I’d have to disagree with this thesis. Pascoe observed that boys experience serious gender policing in their high school years thanks to the fag discourse and compulsive heterosexuality. The construction of masculinity as not feminine is a significant influence on boys and their sexuality. This is why I challenge Lisa Diamond’s thesis: it seems less that men are inherently less sexually fluid and more that they’re trained to not be sexually fluid. Boys are taught that to be men they must dominate women socially and physically. Because of this, and the assumption that boys have exclusive other-sex attraction, boys don’t really have the option of considering sexual fluidity. Their experiences and activities with their gender and sexuality, like use of pornography, will reinforce the idea and their brains will develop neural pathways that will make this how they actually are. This development in boys’ formative years could be why we don’t see as much sexual fluidity in men. The absence of these factors in girls’ teenage years could also be why we primarily see sexual fluidity in women. The gender policing that they experience is different from the kind boys experience because it isn’t seen as wrong for girls to act masculine. Being feminine isn’t about repudiating the other gender, but about staying underneath men so that they can keep power. The very same reason boys can’t be feminine is why girls can be masculine: femininity is seen as weak and wrong and masculinity is seen as right and strong. Sexual fluidity seems like less of a phenomenon that’s inherent for women and more like something that’s discouraged in men and ignored in women. We’re all sexually fluid to some degree, but we can be socialized to not recognize or act upon our sexual fluidity. Maybe Chad and Brad will never be able to have their happily ever after together. But maybe one day when they are both living in Los Angeles in their mid-twenties, they will answer a Craigslist ad in the Casual Encounters section and find each other again.

Works Cited


Evolutionary Bigotry: “Science” as a Tool for Social Oppression

Evolution of Evolution: Society and the Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection

Bud Gankhuyag
Class of 2014 History, B.A.

In 1859, Charles Darwin’s first book on natural selection, On the Origin of Species, was published and captivated not only the scientific community but the Western world in general. Darwin’s inundated scholarship and extensive research on natural selection canonized him as a figurehead of science who now comprises a major cornerstone in modern biology. While the vast majority of scientists have continued to further the understanding of evolution and natural selection, others have used these ideas for different motives. At the time of Darwin’s writing, another influential British thinker, Herbert Spencer, was crafting his own evolutionary hypothesis, one which professed the natural superiority of high-class whites. A decade after On the Origin of Species was published, the eugenics movement took shape and led the movement for human selective breeding. Convincingly articulate, proponents of social Darwinism and eugenics disguised their arguments and claimed them to be scientific, when in contrast they interpreted the natural world through other, non-scientific means. The motivation behind the creation of these two pseudo-sciences was to defend and perpetuate both white supremacy and class elitism. Social Darwinism and eugenics were ethnocentrically produced, scientifically argued, and created not for understanding the natural world, but as a tool for social oppression.

In order to develop an understanding of the world, human beings have several “ways of knowing,” a term used by physical anthropologist Dr. Eugenie Scott. In her book, Evolution vs. Creationism, she identifies four epistemological methods: one source of information is authority, from which a human can receive information from one who is older or of a higher social status. Similarly, another way of knowing is created through the belief of a higher being. This process of revelation occurs when a human believes in a supernatural force or entity whose word is deemed to be absolute truth. For instance, religious doctrines have been and continue to be immensely influential on human societies. Humans can also use logical processes to develop knowledge, and this way of knowing “presents rules for how to tell whether something is true or false.” By using logic, a human relies less on others but more on his/her own cognition through reasoning skills. Additionally, we can test the natural world and interpret data through logic to reach a possible conclusion, an episteme popularly known as science. The epistemology of our species involves these four ways of knowing, but science particularly stands out above the others because of its practicality through evidence and procedure. By being able to use nature as the “arbiter of truth,” the process of science theoretically relies on pure observation and mitigates influence from social factors, which may not necessarily be truths.

One advantage that science has for developing truths is experimentation. Repeated testing of the natural world can lead to the establishment of laws and theories, trustworthy explanations grounded in solid research and testing. Because nature is what determines truth, and scientists observe it, scientific claims evolve by trumping previous claims. This tentative characteristic of science is useful; as Scott says, “the willingness to change one’s explanation with more or better data, or a different way of looking at the same data, is one of the great strengths of the scientific method.” Because the other ways of knowing lack these extensive processes of evaluation, science’s body of knowledge tends to be more thorough and conscientious. The other ways of knowing are not bound to the natural world for its elucidations, however, but scientific explanations of the natural world are meticulously tested and crafted. Thus, science is fundamentally the best-equipped to explain the natural world as truthfully as possible.

Science and all other ways of knowing create a body of information for society’s use and application. Whether knowledge is authoritative, revelatory, logical, or scientific, the information passed from society to an individual is a part of socialization, the process of acquiring identity and values by the exposure to one’s social environment. This information profoundly affects one’s understanding and opinions of the world and is transmitted through the four ways of knowing. A person may be socialized to spiritually interpret the clouds in the sky as a work of a god, while another may be taught to apply logic by observing rain during cloudy days and concluding that clouds are composed of precipitation in a non-liquid physical state. These ways of knowing impact one’s culture depending on their assigned value.

Inextricable to socialization, culture, which is the collective identity of beliefs, values and customs carried by individuals in a society, is upheld by people’s epistemology. Authority and revelation, as ways of knowing, often hold very strong positions in culture. Logic and science can both carry large cultural importance as well. Western cultures promote science as an episteme through education systems, research, economic incentives, and the immortalization of scientists throughout history. This social valuation of science has led many people to claim certain, non-scientific views derived from other epistemes. Others, however, have faithfully kept to the doctrines of science, and one such figure is Charles Darwin.

Charles Darwin was a British scientist prominent in the 19th century for popularizing the theory of biological evolution through natural selection. Alfred Russel Wallace had previously studied this hypothesis, but Darwin spearheaded the idea into the public eye. Although evolution and its mechanics had been speculated in the scientific community before Darwin, his work was exceptional because his logos was distinctly articulate, sensible and simple:

“I cannot doubt that during millions of generations individuals of a species will be occasionally born with some slight variation, profitable to some part of their economy. Such individuals will have a better chance of surviving, and of propagating their new and slightly different structure; and the modification may be slowly increased by the accumulative action of natural selection to any profitable extent.”

Charles Darwin successfully developed the theory of natural selection by applying the epistemes of science and logic. His theory that individuals had a better chance of surviving through acquired traits was based on astute scientific observation. In the Galapagos Islands, by the coast of South America, Darwin applied his

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 5.
7 Ibid.
hypothesis of evolution to his observations of finches, particularly the diversity of their beaks. 9 Beak sizes and shapes were thought to differ from island to island; an idea that was first brought to Darwin by Nicholas O. Lawson, the vice-governor of the Galapagos Islands. 10 Darwin observed that beak sizes ranged from small to large and narrow to wide, and he attributed these differences to evolutionary adaptations. He hypothesized that descendants of the different finches migrated to various parts of the archipelago and developed differently selected beaks based on ecological niche, a process called adaptive radiation. Darwin’s observations are an entire literature, and both his challengers and successors have repeatedly tested the principle of natural selection. Because Darwin trusted science as a way of knowing, he quickly made natural selection become fully adopted by the scientific community.

While Charles Darwin was working tirelessly, another influential British thinker was creating his own ideas on evolution. In 1851, Herbert Spencer released Social Statics, in which he professed that evolution was a progressive process, which strived towards complexity and improvement. A scholar of many disciplines, Spencer expanded his ideas on evolution through further works such as Principles of Psychology and Progress: Its Law and Cause. 11 Spencer based his works on the evolutionary hypothesis of an earlier academic named Jean Baptiste Lamarck, who claimed that individuals could consciously and actively create preferable traits and pass them on to their offspring. Herbert Spencer took Lamarck’s ideas and tailored them to describe human society, building on his own assumptions of the world. Using the veil of a scientific idea, Spencer proposed that human society was structured hierarchically because those at the top were naturally superior to those at the bottom. According to him, the white and the rich were privileged because they had been naturally selected as society’s best. Spencer used the rhetoric of science to defend a personal conviction, but his arguments had been interpreted as scientific by many and thus came to falsely represent the discipline. This appropriation of science was indicated by the term “Social Darwinism” that later coined his ideas.

Herbert Spencer and his scholarship are products not of science but of culture and socialization. At the time of his writing, Spencer’s mind carried assumptions that high-class people were intrinsically superior to lower-class people, and that whites were the dominant race. These views were indoctrinated in him as part of his high-class, European upbringing. Authority, as an approach to knowledge, crafted Spencer’s socialization into white supremacy and class elitism, later reflected in his academic research. A specific contextualized lens was developed for Spencer through which to view race and class; through this lens, Spencer interpreted and manipulated observations of race and class in support of his acquired views. His authoritative narrative and narrow lens is indicated by his writing:

> During early childhood every civilized man passes through that phase of character exhibited by the barbarous race from which he is descended. At the child’s features – flat nose, forward-opening nostrils, large lips, wide-apart eyes, absent frontal sinus, etc. – resemble those of the savage, so too, do his instincts. Hence the tendency to cruelty, to thieving, to lying, so general among children. 12

In this example, Spencer defined the “barbarous race” through a distinct collection of physical features. His delineation of these traits was a construction of his preconceived notion of a “barbarous race” and not of scientific observation. What exactly constituted a human as “barbarous” for Spencer was unclear, as he made an unexplained connection between so-called savage-like features and instincts. According to Spencer, poor people looked and acted a certain way, so their children must have as well. However, the information that Spencer used for logical conclusion was biased. The conclusions made by Spencer are less indicative of human reasoning but more of authority and socialization. Drawn from his own assumptions of society and biology given to him by authority figures, Spencer attempted make a scientific claim but failed. Since his knowledge and understanding of the world was through authority and not through science, none of Spencer’s work can qualify as methodical. Spencer himself may not have claimed to be a scientist, so what Spencer did then was use science, or the disguise of science, as a means through which to enforce cultural norms. Because Spencer benefited from racial and class systems of oppression, he used scientific rhetoric as a tool for his own legitimation and to advance the rich, white cause of maintaining their social status and power.

Continuing the legacy of Herbert Spencer, social Darwinism was advanced by the work of Ernst Haeckel. Haeckel had an extensive background in science, but his stance on race and class were similar to that of Spencer. What Haeckel proposed was that race was a biological determinant that separated white and black people into hierarchical categories. 13 Similar to Spencer, Haeckel operated under the ideology of white supremacy. Despite his scientific background, his claims were rather based on myopic beliefs of no scientific value. He separated humans into a hierarchy of twelve species and thirty-six races based on speech and hair-type, with the darker, “woolly-haired” peoples closer to being ape than human. 14 While there were geographic and phenotypic trends among each category, Haeckel’s separation of the human species into these groups suggested that he believed humans were biologically and genetically different, and thus, unequal. Hierarchical definitions of nature can be found as far back as the days of Ancient Greece and Aristotle, whose “scala naturae” model of nature justified the ascendancy of human (i.e. white human) existence. 15 These definitions had been in place long before Haeckel, who first accepted them without any question and then proceeded to his studies. Haeckel’s work and experience demonstrate the cultural forces at play during his time. Even as a man of science and observation, his claims of white supremacy were believed to be absolute truth.

After Spencer and Haeckel, social Darwinism evolved from a theoretical framework to a larger movement. In 1869, Francis Galton published Hereditary Genius, in which he argued for human breeding and the selective breeding of more favorable traits. 16 The subtext of this argument was that ubiquitous preferable traits existed and could be identified, and that those who possessed such traits were superior to those who did not. Galton made these claims later in his works that sought to provide statistical and scientific evidence of the purported superiority of whites. His emphasis on race became the driving force behind his work, assigning traits to races, as Spencer had previously done. According to Galton, these traits should be bred for, and people who do not carry the traits should be discarded. For this purpose, Galton coined the term “eugenics” in 1883. 17

Like that of Haeckel and Spencer, Galton’s work existed within a cultural framework that racialized people based on geographical origin and skin color. The biological existence of race was assumed by society writ large, not having known at the time that genetic variation among people of different racial categories is not dissimilar to that of people in the same racial category. 18 It is possible that differences in skin color are due to the
pigment melanin, which helps retain folic acid, a B vitamin necessary for DNA synthesis and repair that can be destroyed by sunlight. Race, thus, is biologically unfounded. Echoing this vener is the concept of ubiquitous preferably traits; in actuality, evolutionary adaptations are based on local environment and selective pressures, so no single trait can make the beholder able to survive and reproduce in all possible situations. Eugenics has survived since Galton, and the movement remains supported by many in the current world. Contemporary arguments, namely Marian Van Court’s, emphasize eugenics’ potential role in preserving human intelligence. Van Court, a white woman, claims that intelligence is strictly genetic and hierarchical among humans, and that those at the bottom are undermining this intelligence. She cites numerous studies and experiments to help propel her cause, but in the footsteps of her predecessors, she operates within a specific framework that capitalizes on authoritative knowledge. Van Court may claim to be a scientist, but her assumptions of a quantifiable level of human intelligence and advancement of civilization indicate a non-scientific and dishonest point of view. Science, as a way of knowing, is again re-appropriated as a means to exercise cultural power. Both social Darwinism and eugenics claimed a scientific background and case, but they forewent a strong scientific foundation to present a persuasive package that served to accommodate oppressive cultural views. Supporters of these ideas were indoctrinated by the dogma of their cultures and perpetuated their cultural views through scientific rhetoric. In contrast, loyalty to science from thinkers such as Charles Darwin makes his scientific conclusions thorough. Darwin trusted science above all other ways of knowing, and his commitment is evident from his nearly insurmountable amount of research, collected over a 30-year period. So meticulous was Darwin in his process of creating knowledge that he, as writer Charles Sumner argues, “was able to put himself in the place of those who scoffed at his ideas, to argue against his own theory, and to provide a solid answer to those criticism. He predicted many of the arguments skeptics would mount and tore them down step by step.” No matter how prejudiced Charles Darwin may or may not have been, his research, albeit mostly focused on animal behavior, did not suggest racist or oppressive claims, because it was done through an approach that was strictly scientific and not ethnocentrically assumptive. Spencer and Haeckel, in contrast, trusted more in authority than science. Galton and the rest of the eugenics movement, however, presented a wealth of scientific evidence to back their claims. This may have been useful in persuading people to agree with them, but any scientific work cannot be used to support eugenics because it is a subjective, non-scientific position. In her argument, Marian Van Court cites studies of intelligence that suggest a hereditary intelligence hegemony, but her definition of intelligence itself is a social construction, defined and measured by the Intelligence Quotient test that thinking acts as an objective judge of intelligence. Intelligence, like other evolutionary traits, is bound to the contextual environment, so any test that strives for universality will fail short. Advocating for eugenics is a stance that could not have been created without the influence of Euro-centrism and classism, and the fact that these models of intelligence were self-affirming (i.e. a test created by whites for whites) further discredit these studies. This evidence used for pro-eugenics arguments is deliberately searched for and selected among other evidence. Some studies supporting notions of eugenics may exist, but advocates overlook the vast majorities that say otherwise. 

Culture and social constructions have the power to undermine the cause of science as a way to understand the natural world. Many people throughout history have tailored scientific arguments in attempt to perpetuate cultural norms and oppression. This is science being removed from its fundamental principles and coated to support an agenda other than understanding the natural world. True science is not able to support social Darwinism or eugenics because both are founded on unscientific principles. However, some of those who have stayed faithful to the principles of science have helped undermine these dominant conceptions of superiority. Contemporary knowledge of genetics does not support race as a real divider among humans, and scientific methods in sociological research have helped understand race’s artificiality. Science can thus be reclaimed in the face of eugenics and social Darwinism to combat the oppressive forces that are responsible for creating the two. The constructions of white supremacy and class elitism exist to this day, but science can aid in the effort to destroy them.

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Witchcraft in Musicals and Fiction: The Absence of Religion

Witchcraft in a Cross Cultural Perspective

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European witchcraft and the images of witches it created have permeated American culture through literature, music, and television. The images of witches created by documents like The Malleus Maleficarum can be seen in various examples of popular American culture.

Television shows, of the past and present represent the modern image of a witch differently, but often revert to the ideas described in this text and the common belief systems associated with European witchcraft. In her book, Witchcraft Myths in American Culture, Marion Gibson discusses the concept of witches and family life, highlighting the role of The Malleus Maleficarum in creating the image of the evil woman and thus, the idea that women needed to be tamed. Her argument continues, supported by the domestication of television witches through shows like Bewitched. In popular culture the image created by The Malleus Maleficarum still remains, but as a teaching tool for women, though now it is devoid of religious context.

From Gibson’s writing and the images that are presented of witches in American culture, the presence of The Malleus Maleficarum can still be seen, especially in dramatic literature, highly regarded fiction, and modern-day musicals. Through The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales and Shakespeare’s Macbeth, as well as the modern-day musicals Into the Woods and Wicked, the images of witches over time have proven to form around the collection of ideas of witchcraft in The Malleus Maleficarum. However, there exists a significant distinction between the images of witchcraft in a religious context in The Malleus Maleficarum versus those devoid of religious context serving as a teaching tool about morality.

European Witchcraft can be studied in depth concerning historical, political, economic, and other important factors. However, overall, European Witchcraft must be looked at within a religious context because Christianity and witchcraft have been closely linked for many centuries. Through this lens, the study involves understanding Christianity from the 1400s to the mid-1900s. Scholar Elaine G. Breslaw, editor of Witches of the Atlantic World, devotes an entire section of her book to the distinction between religious and non-religious witchcraft. When speaking of witchcraft in Europe, Breslaw writes that the reason there was such a strong link between religion and witchcraft is because witchcraft at the time, was inherently “in opposition to religion and [sic] linked to demonic practices.” When The Malleus Maleficarum, the reigning document dictating witchcraft practices in Europe, was published, everyday people attributed supernatural phenomena to witchcraft and the devil. Though the Malleus Maleficarum was a highly influential document, it was not the only idea circulating throughout Europe. Various communities in Europe, in different countries, defined “magic” as something else. Magic is a word used loosely because the concept of good versus evil, or white and black magic could be found in various stories told by common folk, but it was not outlined in doctrine. For instance, in Italy, a primarily male-based group of individuals began to surface, claiming to be what Carlo Ginzburg writes about in his text The Night Battles, a group called the Benandanti. The group of men, popping up in different regions of Italy and often with slightly altered, but mostly similar stories, believed that they were born with a caul that allowed them to go forth in the night and fight evil witches in a battle over the year’s harvest. The Benandanti believed that they were fighting evil and doing God’s work, and that they were in fact, not witches. Unfortunately for the Benandanti, magistrates questioning them tried to make them confess to a pact with the devil because the magistrates did not believe that the idea was anything separate from what The Malleus Maleficarum dictated. This was particularly important and tended to show up in the text of documents. The Benandanti exemplify a disconnect that existed between doctrine and common belief, something that makes European witchcraft confusing for scholars and historians. The disconnect between witchcraft and religion offers an explanation for the separation of the European witchcraft image from its inherent religious ties later on.

With this disconnect in Europe, the representation of Witches in Fiction varied greatly. The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales, though they came from the same authors, were a collection of stories that reflected different types of witches such as sorceresses, witches, men with powers, and animals with the ability to speak. The fictional stories often reflected ideas of the poor and local villagers, which shows the disconnect between religion and common belief. In The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales, the women depicted as witches were often evil, jealous, old or widowed, or as sexually alluring younger women. These images are directly related to those presented in the Malleus Maleficarum. In addition to these images, the tales include animals and witches keeping people as pets or bewitching them into another form. This is similar to the image of familiars, which were animal spirits connecting witches with the devil. The devil was also present in many of the stories, illustrating the presence of religious context, but still within the confines of stories reflecting peasant beliefs.

In the tales, the witches were seen as only evil, but certain forms of witchcraft or magic performed by men showed signs of people believing in good magic, as the Benandanti believed in their own goodness. Here, good versus evil witches became an image of witchcraft put down in text, in opposition to the image of witches that could not be anything but evil in a religious context. According to the ideas presented in the Malleus, witches could not be good. However, according to The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales, some of the representations of witchcraft allowed for good magic to be performed. Traditional imagery and the message offered by the tales operate as a teaching tool, despite the confusion surrounding whether the stories are religiously tied.

An altogether different representation of witchcraft in literature is that of witches in Shakespeare. In Shakespeare’s Macbeth, three witches are seen gathering around a cauldron, producing ingredients that would be associated with evil witches portrayed by the Malleus Maleficarum. The witches are also hideous and chanting or singing while their cauldron bubbles away. These witches reflect the images of the religious European
Witchcraft in Musical Theatre

Moving from fairy tales to the representation of witchcraft in the modern-day musical Wicked, once again the storyline in devoid of religious context, but reflects the imagery of an ugly witch who teaches a societal lesson. The appearance of the main character, Elphaba, is so important in this musical that her green image becomes synonymous with her “wickedness.” The green face, pointy nose, and black Halloween garb that often appear as a representation of witchcraft have become iconic images of the ugly hag from The Malicious Malefactorium in both the musical and American popular culture. “Alto on a Broomstick: Voicing the Witch in the Musical Wicked,” an article written by Michelle Boyd, a doctoral candidate in musicology at the University of Toronto, stated that “the idea of the monstrous witch—a withered old hag who wears a pointed black hat and flies on a broomstick—are firmly embedded into popular culture.”

Wicked explores the issue of good versus evil witches, once again highlighting the cultural disconnect that occurred in Europe between different countries when defining witchcraft. Wicked begins with the story of a young witch named Elphaba who is going to school and she has a horrible time fitting in because she is green. She is misunderstood, but ends up befriending another witch named Glinda and falling in love with a man named Fiyero. Inevitably, he is not supposed to fall for her (though he does) because she is different. Elphaba is so talented that the Wizard (of Oz) wants to recruit her for his work, but she does not think he is a morally sound wizard, so she refuses. Due to this, she is forced to watch her best friend Glinda assume her role, and Elphaba is dishonestly painted as a villain throughout Oz.

The musical is, in fact, a social commentary, and as Boyd describes it, “Wicked’s Elphaba embraces all of the complexity of the witch’s relationship to society.” Boyd says that “[j]ust as the word “wicked” has contradictory meanings (traditionally “evil,” but in more recent colloquial speech “awesome”), the musical by that name teaches much more than one lesson, and Elphaba plays more than one role.” The role of the witch has very clearly assumed the function of a teaching tool of morality and social commentary in this musical, but still represents the physical image of the European concept of evil witchery.

Both Into the Woods and Wicked highlight a distinction between the images of witchcraft in a religious context and those in a context devoid of religion. With religion directing the text, the musicals are a tool for teaching morality without associating witches to devil imagery. Even with The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales demonstrating that some tales do come with a religious context, others without one demonstrated the confusion and disconnect present in Europe at the time of their publication. With that disconnect present throughout different parts of Europe, The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Tales and Shakespeare’s Macbeth demonstrate that the images of witches over time have proven to form around the collection of ideas surrounding witchcraft in The Malefactorium. However, directly related to the initial idea that Gibson mentions in her book (that evil witches can become tame housewives), all of this literature presents a significant distinction between religious context and lessons about morality. Modern-day musicals operate under the proven image, but with a different and thought-provoking message about morality.

45–48.
8 Ibid.
10 Stephen Sondheim, “No One is Alone.”
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The Happiness Sessions: The Abstracted Research

The Pleasure of Finding Things Out

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Accompanying audio essay can be found at: https://soundcloud.com/ericapalumbo/the-happiness-sessions.

Introduction

As someone who has struggled with bouts of debilitating sadness, I have always had an intense fascination with happiness. Is it found in connections with others? Is it receiving materialistic things? Is it having a generally positive view of one’s own self and a good amount of self-worth? Is it being at peace with our place in the world? I was convinced that there had to be one overarching definition of happiness and one sure-fire way of attaining it.

From this curiosity, the idea for The Happiness Sessions was born. Through interviews I conducted over the course of the semester with family, friends, acquaintances, professors, professionals, and two very special individuals who answered my posting on Craigslist, I have discovered that happiness is not nearly as black and white as I believed. It is more than a feeling or an emotion — it is a state constantly being redefined as we age and find new ways to manufacture it. This is evident by the expansive research and literature that is dedicated to understanding and dissecting happiness. It would be impossible to discuss every article or book written or to highlight every conversation that has occurred on the subject.

I failed to find a single definition that was underlined, and there were very few times I received an answer I was expecting. Though the Haack’s definition is essentially stating that a person’s definition of happiness could be radically different than someone else’s understanding, simply because there really aren’t any set “boundaries of application” for it.

To further illuminate happiness’ intricacies, here is an excerpt from a lecture by Brown, titled “The Pursuit of Happiness: Is it Worth It?” Here, he quotes Friedrich Nietzsche, a 19th century German philosopher: “Nietzsche felt that the pursuit of happiness is a kind of ruse that stupid people blindly follow, and he didn’t, by the way, think pursuing it was natural. He felt we’ve only recently fattened ourselves like pigs in its pursuit. For him, the truly happy man is he whose “preying lion” has emerged from its cultural constraints. He is brimming w/ confidence, he does not doubt his right to happiness, by being ashamed in the face of “too much misery,” He knows no guilt or resentment, burdened by no pity or regret.”

For Professor Brown (and Nietzsche), happiness and virtue are things that should not be conflated, and should not be actively pursued. Brown argues that this very pursuit after this unattainable “nirvana” is precisely what is making us so unhappy, and states that the more we aim at success and make it a target, the more likely it is that we are going to miss it. Brown also concludes in his lecture that in addition to putting a stop to our constant pursuit of happiness, we should find contentment in letting happiness find us:

“Perhaps learn to take happiness as it comes because it may be that life is simply too large and complex to fit the label “life,” too multifaceted for us to step outside it and pronounce ourselves happy or unhappy. Perhaps it’s wiser to think of happiness as something that may, if we’re lucky, manifest not from some outside factor, but from something you do, or, from a habitual way of being in the world, engaging actively with others and the world around you.”

Oliver Burkeman writes a popular advice column called “This Column Will Change Your Life” for the British news outlet The Guardian. He recently participated in an online, interactive forum to discuss his recent book, “The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can’t Stand Positive Thinking.” One reader asked Burkeman how he would personally define happiness. His response to the reader’s comment on the live forum feed again exemplifies the “fuzziness” that surrounds our understanding of happiness:

“Ha, the big question. I spent a futile few months at the start of my work on this book trying to come up with a working definition, before concluding that if philosophers hadn’t figured it out over millen...
nia I probably wasn’t going to do any better. It’s a placeholder word, but I really think that’s fine: the problems I’m outlining (about “trying too hard”, focusing too narrowly, refusing to countenance the negative, etc) get in the way of happiness “however” you define it. Simpler answer: I think happiness for me anyway involves a little more tranquility, and a little less ceaseless excitement, than is portrayed in the self-help industry and the culture at large. Of course, if you’re truly happy doing something you’ll be so absorbed in the moment that these questions won’t arise...” [3]

Burkeman makes a fantastic point; happiness is so intangible, and so abstract that by refusing to accept and acknowledge that there will be negative times in our lives and that every moment will not be happy ones, we become deluded. Delusion is the opposite of true happiness, which Buddhist teachings say really stems from having a good amount of awareness about the reality of your life situation.[4] Through awareness comes acceptance, and, ultimately, happiness.

The “Self-Help” Industry

I usually spend a lot of time at Barnes & Nobles during the week. I find that it’s the perfect place to study in solitude, grab a coffee and maybe find a book to get lost in for a few hours. I like to browse the Bestsellers section in particular, because they’re not bestsellers for nothing. Amongst the popular tween dystopian novels, a good number of books that fall under the genre of “self-help” are beginning to appear on Bestseller shelves. The self-help industry takes in a reported $1 billion every year.[5] Authors offering this “advice” understand the American mindset of instant gratification: we want to be happy right now. Who wouldn’t be drawn to a book or an article that claims it knows the ultimate secret to being happy?

A couple of years ago, when I was straddling the treacherous line of being a high school senior and a college freshman, I turned to “self-help” literature in an attempt to find advice on how to make myself happy in a time of radical upheaval. However, after reading many authors claiming to know the secret to instant happiness, and reading articles that all proclaimed to know the sure-fire “10 Steps To Being Happy Right Now,” I was left feeling bitter, more confused, and even more unhappy. I couldn’t understand why — after following the steps word for word — I wasn’t happy. In fact, I was miserable and angry with myself for not being able to achieve the “happiness nirvana” that many authors spoke of.

I now realize, at the wise old age of 21, why this was the case.

Happiness has never been, nor will ever be, something that can be achieved in “10 simple steps.” Temporary cheerfulness, maybe. But deep, abiding happiness is something that is acquired through an accumulation of meaningful moments throughout our lives—moments that are big and small.

In January 2010, a popular memoir was released, and shot to the top of the New York Times’ Best Seller List minutes after it was published. The book is titled “The Happiness Project,” by New York socialite Gretchen Rubin. In an interview with New York Times Fashion & Style reporter, Hoffman, Rubin admitted she enjoys the privileged life of an Upper East-sider. Hoffman states that the rapid success of Rubin’s book stems from our society’s insatiable need for fulfillment. She writes:

“For as long as happiness has been a warm puppy, the word has been a perennial of self-help epigrams and book titles. In these anxious times, it’s almost a must-have.”[6]

Despite having the type of cushy and affluent life that most of us could never dream of (her father-in-law is the former secretary of treasury Robert Rubin), Rubin insists that the foundations of her book are applicable, regardless of one’s place on the economic spectrum. Her main argument? Happiness can be achieved through making simple modifications to our daily lives. Even the subtitle of her memoir, “Or, Why I Spent A Year Trying to Sing In The Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun,” implies a sense of normalcy. Rubin asserts her book is about “ordinary happiness,” because she wanted to change her life without making major changes, and without having to do something radical.

Rubin began her experiment already way ahead of the game. She had the resources she needed to track her daily happiness, and would never experience the disappointment of not being able to provide for herself or those she cares about — a factor that is a large contributor to unhappiness.

With Rubin’s book in mind, let’s examine Leo Dondelewski, a 23-year-old Ithaca resident, who came from Cleveland, Ohio to escape his damaging past and create a better situation for himself in Ithaca. Leo responded to my ad on Craigslist, and mentioned right off of the bat that he was gay. I wondered why he felt compelled to proclaim his sexuality to me in his response to my ad. When I met him a few days later, however, I realized why this was the case.

Dondelewski came out only a few months before, and had finally come to terms with the fact that it was a part of who he was. Though he said he had known he was gay since he was 16 years old, he couldn’t come out where he grew up, for fear of being ousted and attacked. His father left when he was very young, and has absolutely no relationship with his mother. Essentially, his grandmother raised him, and there was never a time in his life when he wasn’t struggling for money. When he was 18 years old, his grandmother passed away and he was forced to take full responsibility of his life at a very young age. After sleeping in his car during this period of upheaval, and after living in a few homeless shelters, he moved in with a friend who introduced him to the wonderful world of drugs. Getting high, he said, gave him an outlet where he could escape from his problems, if only for a momentary trip.

After I asked Leo to recall the happiest moment in his life, he laughed nervously and asked if it could be something about illegal. Of course, I said yes. He responded, “I used to do a lot of drugs and the high from that made me extremely happy. When I was homeless, me and the guy I met at the homeless shelter were staying at his girlfriend’s house, and she wasn’t there so we’d do a bunch a shit and get really fucked up and deep, and it was fun.”

He explained that the happiness he experienced from being on drugs filled the void of happiness that was lacking in his hard life.

I wonder what Gretchen Rubin would think of Leo’s perspectives on happiness, and if she truly believes that her advice of singing in the morning, and “generally having more fun” would be useful advice for someone in a similar life situation.

Though self-help books can provide us with a foundation from which we can slowly work toward recognizing our capacity for happiness, they more often than not foster societal constructions of happiness. Society tells us we need to have a loving marriage, two and a half kids, a dog, a cat, a fulfilling job, a nice car and an even nicer house in order to truly be happy. The fact of the matter is, those living the idealized American lifestyle really only count for less than half the population. If you ask one of these people from the “golden demographic” (we’ll call it that), chances are they aren’t really all that happy.

One of my favorite perspectives on happiness and the self-help industry in particular, comes from a recent article that appeared in popular independent news outlet, The Nation. The 9-page article, brazenly titled “Get Happy!” discusses our society’s obsession with attempting to underlie and define happiness in a way that makes it easy to understand, pursue, and attain. More importantly, however, it addresses the underlying sadness
and dissatisfaction we feel in our lives. The article’s author, Jackson Lears, begins his happiness piece with a bold statement about self-help literature:

“Reading books about how to be happy can be a depressing business. Part of this is because one can’t help imagining the sad souls who buy them, hoping to turn around a troubled life for $27.99 or less… Behind the facade of smiley-faced optimism, American culture seems awash in a pervasive sadness, or at least a restless longing for a sense of fulfillment that remains just out of reach.” [7]

The Psychology of Happiness

Leigh Ann Vaughn, associate professor of psychology at Ithaca College and participant in my Happiness Sessions, believes that amidst the confusion and opacity surrounding our understanding of happiness, it’s actually quite simple to measure how happy someone is.

“If you’re trying to do is measure happiness, and come up with a concrete definition of happiness that is measurable, it’s really easy to measure how happy people are. You can just ask them. Right now, you can measure people’s sense of their general happiness, you can measure aspects of happiness, like satisfaction with their life as a whole, happiness with yourself in particular — that’s self esteem. So there’s a lot of ways you can focus on what people are happy about. And people seem to be good at reporting how happy they are.”

These measurements, Professor Vaughn states, are the fundamentals of positive psychology. Martin Seligman, founder of positive psychology and director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, focuses on the empirical study of such things as positive emotions, strengths-based character, and healthy institutions to measure happiness. Seligman and his team of psychologists created a variety of questionnaires like the Authentic Happiness Inventory (AHI), Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire (FEQ) and General Happiness Scale (GHS) which measure overall happiness, current happiness and enduring happiness, respectively.[8]

The AHI questionnaire asks its subjects to rank their level of self-worth by choosing the letter that corresponds with how they feel about themselves. In one question, they can choose:

A) I feel like a failure;
B) I do not feel like a winner;
C) I feel like I have succeeded more than most people;
D) As I look back on my life, all I see are victories; or
E) I feel I am extraordinarily successful.

The questionnaire then takes an individual’s answers to 24 questions and calculates a score from 1.00 to 5.00 to determine his or her level of overall happiness. It also gives the tester a reflection of how they scored in relation to others within the same age group, gender category, occupation group, education level, and geographic area.

These tests proved useful when attempting to determine how happy people actually are, because they recognize that happiness should be determined on an individual level, and cannot be measured at a universal level.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, co-author of “Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change,” states in her study that there are essentially three factors that influence chronic happiness levels: genetic tendencies (50%), intentional activities (40%), and circumstance (10%).[9] For Lyubomirsky, genetics play the largest part in determining our level of happiness.

Lyubomirsky cites identical twin studies showing that 50 percent of the difference in people’s happiness is hereditary. Genetics are influential in forming personality traits that affect happiness (cite this). However, the study also states that when it comes to happiness, relationship quality matters as well. Identical twins were as similar in their level of happiness as were married couples.

The study concludes that while our level of happiness seems to be influenced by many things which include genes, interpersonal relationships, brain functions, and outlook on life, the level at which each of these factors affects our general happiness varies radically in nearly every individual. Therefore, it is quite hard to determine happiness on any scale larger than an individual level.

Recently, debates about the difference between feelings and emotions have come into play while trying to decipher happiness.

According to Professor Vaughn, people become confused because they do not recognize that feelings encompass a broader spectrum of human sensations. Feelings can be physical manifestations, like “feeling hungry” and “feeling pain,” in addition to emotional responses like “feeling happy.” Emotions exist under the “feelings umbrella,” in other words.

Tom Kerr, associate professor of writing at Ithaca College, holds a slightly different view on feelings and emotions than Professor Vaughn. He writes:

“There’s been a lot of interest in the past few years in happiness studies. I view happiness as a feeling, per haps, but also as social construct, a myth, really—definitely not an emotion. Emotions may contribute or lead to a person feeling happy, to the feeling of happiness, but happiness is not an emotion: a feeling is the conscious interpretation of an emotion or set of emotions, not the same thing as, or just a different word for, an emotion. So, when we say, “I just want to be happy,” or “I am happy,” or “I am not happy,” what are they saying exactly? It’s a great question. Very often, I think, people mean something like, “Things are going the way I like them to go,” or “all the pieces have come together just right,” or “I got what I wanted”—so something do with the fulfillment of desire rather than the experience of any specific emotion, save maybe for joy, which is usually fleeting.”

For Professor Kerr, emotions like joy, not necessarily abiding happiness, are fleeting. Happiness stays with us when we have a sense of fulfillment and things are going the way we want them to.


In the book, Damasio distinguishes: (a) six primary or universal emotions, namely happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust; (b) other “behaviors” or secondary and social emotions, like embarrassment, jealousy, guilt and pride; and (c) a class of background emotions such as well-being or malaise, calm or tension, fatigue or energy, anticipation or dread. In the background emotions, he states, the inducer is normally internal and the focus of response is mainly the “internal milieu” of the body.[10]

Damasio views happiness as an emotion — one of the six “primary” emotions we as humans possess. I am very receptive to Damasio’s stance that we are inherently layered. Happiness, like the other five universal emotions is an umbrella that covers other “behaviors” and “background emotions.” Perhaps, this is why happiness is such a difficult concept to grasp. It’s expansiveness is too wide to comprehend, so we often mistake behaviors like pride and background emotions like well-being or calmness for happiness.
Conclusion

If I had to define happiness after reading articles, doing research, and speaking with individuals, I would say happiness is truly subjective.

Nearly every psychologist, writer, philosopher and average-Joe have a different perspective on what it is, how we can attain it, and what factors in our lives contribute to it.

You cannot tell someone how to define his or her own personal happiness. It is something that we feel individually that can certainly be brought about through interactions with others. But I’ve also found that happiness is found within one’s own self, and being able to be at peace with our own thoughts when we are in solitude.

When this project began, I had only interviewed four different people. I was frustrated with the seemingly surface-level answers as I interviewed this group. I now realize this frustration grew from my mistake of going into my interviews harboring preconceived notions of true happiness.

There is no wrong answer to the question, “what was the happiest moment of your life?” It could be a particularly memorable high from doing drugs. It could be being saved from a cave-exploration trip gone horribly wrong. It could be overcoming a lifelong fear of falling by jumping out of a plane. It could be getting married, having children, graduating college, falling in love, buying a house, or anything that I previously believed fell into the category of “superficial happiness.”

I concluded my audio essay by asking Professor Brown, rhetorically, what would happen if people actively pursued what they knew would make them happy, as opposed to what they thought would make them happy. What would the world look like if that happened?

I don’t know the answer to this question. I will probably never know the answer to this question. I cannot concretely define happiness and I cannot say for sure that I know exactly what would make me happy. However, after conducting The Happiness Sessions, I can say I am utterly at peace with not knowing exactly what makes me happy. I’ve found, at the end of it all, we cannot plan for happiness. And I can say with the utmost confidence that unexpectedly stumbling upon happiness is truly one of the most beautiful things in life.

Works Cited

Rule-Consequentialism and the Prima Facie Duties: Allowing for a Consciousness

The Rules of Rules

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Humans are lost without rules; children have more respect for teachers who outline clear classroom policies, and adults appeal to many types of specified or merely widely- understood guidelines about everything from governmental laws to how to conduct a relationship. Countless thinkers throughout the era of human societies have attempted to lay out our moral structures as the basis for all decisions and actions. Some are simpler, centered around one universal doctrine, while others look to incorporate the complexity of human interactions within the framework. Brad Hooker and W. D. Ross are prime examples of the latter, Hooker through his rule-consequentialism, and Ross through his prima facie duties. Although each theory has many valid and questionable components, it will be valuable to focus on just one. Hooker and Ross approach the concept of consciousness by explaining how individuals retain intellectual autonomy, as individuals need to think through each situation critically to decide how to apply certain moral rules. These rules may appear arbitrary, but have actually been developed in accordance with already-established ideas commonly held by the majority of people in many societies. In the end, I come to the conclusion that prima facie duties are more compatible with our inherent philosophies, not only allowing us decision-making liberty but giving meaning to our consciences.

Both thinkers stress the sensibility of their theories. They are geared towards real-world individuals who often encounter complex situations in which there is not a single clear answer. In his essay “Ethical Pluralism: Prima Facie Duties and Ethical Particularism,” from The Fundamentals of Ethics, published in 2010, Russ Shafer-Landau writes about Ross that “the greatest attraction of the ethic of prima facie duties is its ability to accommodate our sense that there is, indeed, more than just a single fundamental moral consideration” (Ethical Pluralism, 2). In the real world, it is difficult to think of many scenarios in which one could make decisions based on one single moral rule, and feel no conflict whatsoever. Prima facie reasonings recognizes from the beginning that conflict between rules is inevitable, and ways of dealing with this are written into the theory: “We all accept that there are circumstances in which it is morally acceptable to break a promise, allow harm to others, etc.,” Ross dictates (2). Many times we find ourselves in situations in which to follow one prima facie rule is to violate another. The example offered by Shafer-Landau is that he has made an appointment with a student, but feels compelled to go to the hospital when his daughter is injured (2). As Shafer-Landau explains, it is the individual’s responsibility to gauge which rule is more immediate. None are ranked by importance, but in every conflict situation one rule will be more morally imperative to fulfill. In Ross’s example, the decision is easy when it is his daughter going to the hospital, but what if the person in need is a stranger injured on the side of the road? Most people would still stop to help. However, if the person in need has a flat tire, then it is hard to know whether one is morally obliged to keep his promise, or help change the tire. Yet again, if the problem is that the person simply was having trouble flagging down a taxi, the individual would almost always continue on to the coffee shop, because at that point the person in need is not in enough distress to merit promise-breaking. Prima facie duties do not dictate every action, but offer an agenda individuals can then apply to each scenario, utilizing their own powers of discernment. In fact, as Shafer-Landau writes, they do not need to be seen as a rule at all, rather “an excellent, non-absolute, permanent reason to do (or refrain from doing) something” (1). Many individuals can easily utilize this sensible approach without feeling like they are backing into a corner of moral regulation.

Hooker attempts to allow for this kind of flexibility. Hooker writes, in his essay “Rule-Consequentialism,” from The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory, published in 2000, that “individual acts of murder, torture, promise-breaking, and so on, can be wrong even when they result in somewhat more good than not doing them (The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory, 3).” In a book he published the same year, Ideal Code, Real World, Hooker explains how rule-consequentialism dictates that people should feel varying levels of obligation to different rules because that “the worse the effect if everyone felt free to do a certain kind of act, the higher the level of aversion should be to this kind of act” (3). Hooker uses an example similar to Ross’s about promise-breaking; the greater the promise, the more the individual feels compelled to keep it, whereas the greater the moral motivation to break it, the more he is inclined to break it, even when he is generally averse to breaking promises (4). The system works better when this kind of decision-making is allowed. When violating an absolute rule means denying one’s own morality, there is no point in reflecting on a rule because there is no possibility one will renge on it. This kind of robotic obedience seems to undermine the idea of morality itself, which is distinctly tied to the individual’s character. Hooker expresses this when he clarifies the meaning of “rule” in his theory: “rule-consequentialism takes the acceptance of rules to involve more than certain associated motivations. It also involves having sensitivities, emotions, and beliefs—indeed a particular cast of character and conscience...to accept a code of rules is just to have a moral conscience of a certain shape” (Ideal Code, Real World, 2). It is difficult to see someone mindlessly following a moral rule as someone with a discrete ‘moral conscience.’ Rather they are following that of someone else.

These two theories seem to push and pull at concepts of community and individuality. Both theorists take care to stress the presence of autonomous thinking within the larger structure of their theories ascribed to society. In the prima facie framework, this emerges when considering the justification of the duties. Shafer-Landau explains how one way of figuring out whether the rules make sense is through a perspective known as ‘coherentism’. Through the eyes of this theory, any rule that is already evident in our other beliefs is backed to accept the justification of the other beliefs, and the beliefs supporting those. According to Ross, this “circular reasoning” is eliminated when the circle of beliefs in large enough, allowing each to support a host of others (Ideal Code, Real World, 5). In this way, they supposedly all validate each other.

It would be immensely frustrating to argue with such a theorist about this—every belief challenged, he would offer up five other beliefs to support it, and to these there would be still more supporting beliefs. At some point, this becomes circular reasoning again, on a grander scale. However, another point made by Ross helps me sympathize with this view more readily. Shafer-Landau writes, “for some especially well-established beliefs (e.g., that there is a physical world; that I have been alive for more than one day; that there is a prima facie duty not to cause intense physical suffering), there may literally be hundreds of other beliefs that support them, and are supported by them” (5). These well-established beliefs are what we consider facts about daily life, but they are actually a simple concept that does take some reasoning. These beliefs would indeed create a legitimate support system; they are impossible to argue against. It seems as if Ross is consciously or unconsciously hinting...
at our intrinsic nature, present in the origin of the rules. When I think of an act such as killing another person, or dropping a baby from a height, I am physically repulsed—it makes me cringe. Likewise, it seems that being kind to others originates somehow from our evolutionary need to connect with others and form bonds of survival. It is difficult to integrate this idea into a moral framework, because moral frameworks tend to require logic and explanation, whereas this idea offers little more than “it is in our nature.” Surely, however, it is impossible to develop a framework without building off intrinsic feelings and emotions to a certain extent. Shafar-Landau touches on this when he discusses the origin of the prima facie duties. Ross believed the rules to be self-evident, that an individual is “justified in believing on the basis of careful reflection alone,” and that if one thinks long enough, she can often come to an understanding why the rule makes sense (7). If one can believe the rule to be true using logic, then evidence is unnecessary, and the phenomenon of circular reasoning is terminated (5).

In this line of reasoning, Shafar-Landau states, “we use our deepest commonsense beliefs, some of which will be self-evident, as the way to test moral theories” (Ethical Pluralism, 6). Therefore, these commonsense beliefs from which we base our perception of the world create inspiration and instruction for moral philosophies.

This idea would require that inherent beliefs are somewhat common, unspoken knowledge. It seems inevitable that many of us share some of these visceral and intuitive responses. How else could much of the human race be in agreement that various acts are unethical—such as killing babies? This leads me to the conclusion that Ross’s framework of supporting ideas is partly and unintentionally derived from our collective instincts. A framework with which many of us are already partly aligned would be incredibly durable, and as Ross writes, “this kind of mutual reinforcement creates a powerful web of beliefs; each strand…is justified precisely because it’s reinforcing links with many other strands” (Ethical Pluralism, 5). It is difficult to feel fully satisfied about Ross’s explanation of the origin and justification of the duties, yet there is something inherently truthful in them. I recognize that I have unconscious responses and notions about what feels right and wrong, which I cannot really explain, other than the fact that some things just feel so wrong. I know this to be true because it is part of my consciousness, and I experience it every day. I know this to be true in other people because I have observed similar reactions in others. Even babies, too young to have absorbed societal values about sharing and generosity, will try to connect with someone by giving them a toy to play with. Therefore, it is natural to feel slightly dissatisfied with Ross’s logic—what stems from inherent beliefs that often cannot be fully explained, but that are essential to shaping who each one of us, and society as a whole, are today.

Hooker’s rule-consequentialism is even more built on its effect on society—after all, its goal is to maximize overall wellbeing among all individuals involved. One of rule-consequentialism’s major arguments is that it works because society internalizes the rules, which means that people begin to make decisions based on rule-consequentialism, without having to deliberate extensively about each situation every time. While they still have an understanding of the rules, internalization streamlines their moral compass. In “Rule-Consequentialism,” Hooker explains that this kind of unconscious thinking means people are really in accordance with the rules, and the more people who make decisions to maximize wellbeing, the better off society will be (Rule-Consequentialism, 5). His concept of rule-consequentialism’s interaction with society as a whole echoes Ross’s idea that the moral framework is inspired by humankind’s intrinsic ideas about morality. He asks, “Isn’t the code best for general adoption by the group of which we are members the one we should try to follow?” (Rule-Consequentialism, 7). It comforts one to know that members of the community are not acting purely out of free will, but are in agreement about rule-consequentialism as a social code—something people are to pursue together. And the elements of this code are to be evaluated in terms of both fairness and the overall effects on the well-being of individuals, impartially considered (Rule-Consequentialism, 7). This statement points to the equity of rule-consequentialism. Because the rules are based on beliefs that, in the end, are supposed to maximize wellbeing, the rules do not discriminate. Every person is considered equally (Rule-Consequentialism, 7). In addition, rule-consequentialism’s charitable rational about wealth distribution is yet another community support, functioning to keep an eye out for those with lower socioeconomic status. Ross states that “a rule-consequentialist will be interested in redistribution beyond what is required to secure the very basic necessities” (Rule-Consequentialism, 9). He makes sure to clarify that the givers will not be overwhelmed by the requirement to redistribute, so much of the globe’s population will be much better off, and others’ wealth will not be compromised. All in all, this theory unites people as they make decisions about morality that, through equitable distribution, work to maintain society. This factor displays a major difference between Ross’s and Hooker’s presentations of their philosophies; Hooker takes great care to prove that rule-consequentialism maximizes wellbeing overall in society.

Hooker maintains throughout his writing that rule-consequentialism not only allows for, but requires, consideration about the application of the rules, and he again echoes Ross in asserting that part of understanding and aligning ourselves with rule-consequentialism is recognizing how it connects with what we already believe. His final argument for the philosophy is that “we can reach a reflective equilibrium between rule-consequentialism and our confident moral convictions” (Rule-Consequentialism, 9). The development of the rules starts from the ground up, taking stock of our widely–shared notions and fitting them together, piece by piece, to eventually have a functioning set of assertions. This appears, at least, to nearly mirror the formation of Ross’s framework. The fundamental difference is that Ross’s duties touch on many types of human interactions, and are almost designed to accept mistakes, as one of the duties is about making reparations. Hooker wishes to build a cohesive structure with an overarching moral theme, to maximize wellbeing. Ross feels that prima facie duties are more genuine, catering to what is necessities by the reality of humankind. Shafar-Landau implores humankind, in “Ethical Pluralism: Prima Facie Duties and Ethical Particularism,” not to settle with rule-consequentialism, because there is a better fit: “we can resist such charms, because they conflict with our deepest beliefs about what is truly morally important. Our confidence in the independent value of promise-keeping—or justice, or repairing our wrongs—should not be held hostage to a theory’s demands” (Ethical Pluralism, 6). As Ross sees it, and as can be understood by seeing collective human instinctual ideas as the origin of the prima facie duties, his theory does not tailor people’s actions. In fact, it gives structure while protecting and even promoting our basic, inherent beliefs. Ross does not wish to reprogram who we are, but to help us refine who we are. There is something immensely appealing about such a philosophy. In terms of people and their interactions with the world, Ross’s theory is much more open than Hooker’s. While there are more gaps, or room for mistakes, this means there is more individual interaction with the duties, advocating an understanding of the value of certain things. As explain by Shafar-Landau, “when prima facie duties conflict, and one takes priority over the other, the lesser duty doesn’t just disappear…regret is our way of acknowledging this forsaken duty, our way of recognizing that something of value was lost in the conflict” (Ethical Pluralism, 3). Even when we are forced to choose to hurt someone in order to protect another who is in a more urgent situation, we should still be conscious of the wronged person. This is what gives our conscience meaning. A final point Shafar-Landau makes about Ross’s theory is that, in some ways, it is a more difficult theory to follow than consequentialism or absolutism. Although with consequentialism, one still needs to use their own interpretation comprehend and apply the rules, the rules can be understood by going back to the theory of origin: maximize overall wellbeing. Ross actually sees rule-consequentialism as flawed because it is based on this one maxim: “consequentialism imposes order, system, and a unifying principle onto our moral thinking” (Ethical Pluralism, 6). This unified, systematic approach is appealing, and it cannot be denied that one is never quite sure of the definite basis of the prima facie duties, and never quite certain about how to apply them correctly. Yet this ambiguity is natural, and any theory that attempts to maneuver around it, is artificial. Shafar-Landau laments, “The lack of guidance we get from Ross’s
view of ethics can leave us feeling insecure and unsettled. That is regrettable. But that may also be inescapable" (7). This insecurity is actually a valuable feeling. It keeps us on our toes, thinking critically about the moral framework through which we organize our lives; it compels us to be conscious.

Ross does not try to fully explain everything; after reviewing his ideas, I am left slightly dissatisfied and not completely sure whether I would be able to correctly apply the rules. However, is the “correct” choice always attainable? Any kind of framework has its faults; absolute rules are not able to plan for the full variety of real-world situations. Hooker claims to take individual values into account, but in the end his theory is still fixated on maximizing wellbeing, with everyone in society working for this common cause. The flexibility in his theory is limited to the application of the rules, whereas the prima facie duties themselves are built from our fundamental moral concerns. Ross’s explanations touch our fallibility and sensitivity—that the rules are set up to help us correct mistakes and make difficult choices when rules conflict; that they are built off commonly-held, intrinsic notions that make up the deepest part of ourselves, fueling many of our desires and our understanding of the world. The prima facie duties allow us to channel our identities through our decision-making, and make room for our human nature.

Works Cited


