

Happiness: A History by Darrin M. McMahon  
Roslyn Ross's review Sep 03, 2014 Good reads  
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5 stars

I loved this book. Couldn't put it down. But here are my complaints:

The author

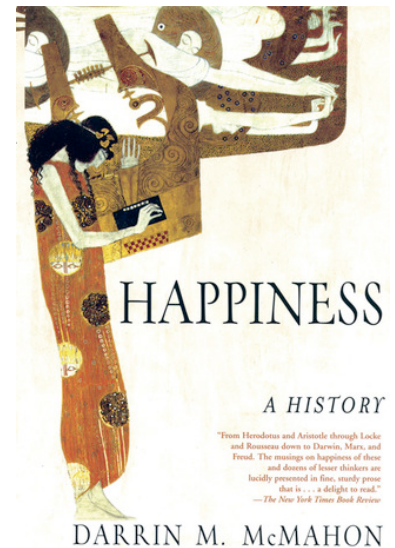
1. has obviously not read Joseph Campbell or Ayn Rand and any book analyzing happiness from Every Different Perspective Ever that hasn't read those authors is just sloppy.

2. tried way too hard to see something that wasn't really there. It is clear to me by reading the excerpts that most of the thinkers thought very clearly and thoroughly about happiness – there was much less development over time than he claims there is. His book contradicts itself in this way, claiming there was a new development in the concept of happiness when I could turn back 200 pages and see that, nope, actually that had been around for a long time, like happy endings to stories. No dude, they were not invented in the 1800's, off the top of my head – Shakespearean comedies?

3. His writing style killed me. He was full of random metaphors that pulled me out of his book like, "Strong black coffee to clear the head of an evenings wine, his work served as a sobering reminder of the ancient wisdom of the Christian Fall." Why he feels the need to say such a simple sentence in this way is beyond me. The entire paragraphs dedicated to "setting the mood" just destroyed this book. Before he quotes someone, he feels the need to set the scene: "There may have been an occasional cough as Lequinio took his place at the pulpit, the scratch of a workman's boots, perhaps, side-long glances, the rustling of clothes..." WHAT??? Just friggin give me the quote!!! Do I really need twenty pages telling the life story of everyone you want to quote? It could have been relevant, but it wasn't. This book could have been 100 pages, more focused and clear. Author needs to read The Elements of Style.

Famous ideas about happiness (but keep in mind these thinkers were not nearly as one-sided as these summaries make it seem):

- Ancient Greece: Any happiness anyone experiences is a miracle since as all life is tragic, happiness is pure luck, we are victims of fate
- Aristotle: The goal is to be happy in this life, here and now.
- Plato: Happiness is the ideal that does not exist, Heaven
- Epicurus: Pleasure is the goal (though keep in mind pleasure is defined by him as minimizing pain by living a simple life in the country)
- Stoics: Just be happy, whatever your circumstances, just decide to be happy and be happy \*note this is like today's Positive Psychology movement!
- Zeno: Learn to not desire anything and then you will be happy
- Dark Ages: Bear the pain of life now and be rewarded in Heaven – the only possible happiness is suffering now so that you can be happy in death, embrace suffering, suffering IS happiness!
- Aquinas: happiness is the process of fully realizing ourselves, happiness is the hope of Heaven, i.e. the hope of happiness
- Martin Luther: heaven and hell are actually psychological places - God wants us to be happy!
- Renaissance: Good people are happy. Bad people are unhappy. You'd better be happy or we will know you're bad
- Rousseau: intellectual people can't be happy, only dumb people, the only happiness is trying to make other people happy i.e. self-sacrifice, people can be forced to be happy if we control their needs, let us create a new man and a new nature! Then we will be happy
- The Romantics: happiness is god, have you noticed how happy kids are? Let's be like them! Be one with the world. No ego! Savages are happy too!



- Schopenhauer: Art is the only happiness i.e. the escape we feel when contemplating art i.e. not actually being alive is the only happiness, drugs are the only happiness
- Kant: Plato and Renaissance repeat—our duty in this life is to act in a way that renders us worthy of happiness, only good boys and girls get to be happy
- Locke and the Libertarians: One must assume responsibility of being happy for oneself
- Mill (and Rand if the author had read her): Happiness cannot be the goal, an emotion cannot be the goal, rather, happiness is what happens when you are pursuing your goals, you cannot “catch” an emotion, the minute you focus on them they are gone, liberty trumps happiness
- Industrialists: wealth is happiness
- Marx: work is happiness (similar to stoics, learning to love what you have to do anyway)
- Nietzsche: self-esteem is happiness. And power.
- Freud: unhappiness is life. The only goal is to eliminate gratuitous suffering (like Schopenhauer) And stop being delusional and preaching about happiness. You may find satisfaction in life from being loved.
- Modern Science: happiness is genetic, you have no control over it, so if you are not happy you should take drugs
- The Author's Conclusion: The idea that we can find happiness is a modern invention, as are the feelings of failure when we do not succeed. “On the whole the momentum of modern culture has been in the direction of earthly content, accompanied by a steady expanding sense of prerogative, entitlement, means, and due... God was happiness, happiness has since become our god... And happiness, we might say, has proved a taskmaster as hard, at times, as the God it has sought to replace.”

#### Other Notes

- What the intellectuals write about and leave for posterity often does not reflect reality for the masses.
- Since Ancient Greece man has been writing an endless stream of self-help books. I mean endless.
- Aristotle believed that only those who were wealthy enough to have leisure, education, and independence could be happy. Only those who have organized their lives so as to escape its ordinary conditions (of slaving away for survival) can be happy. I am inclined to agree!
- Many people throughout history have idealized simple country life as a happier life
- Commies seeking to level the playing field (how can anyone be happy if he is jealous of his neighbor?!) have been around forever too
- Great Schopenhauer quote: Accordingly optimism is not only a false but also a pernicious doctrine, for it presents life as a desirable state and man's happiness as its aim and object. Starting from this, everyone believes he has the most legitimate claim to happiness and enjoyment. If, as usually happens, these do not fall to his lot, he believes that he suffers an injustice, in fact, that he misses the whole point of existence; whereas it is far more correct to regard work, privation, misery, and suffering crowned by death, as the aim and object of life.”

