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## **Book Review**

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**Critical Perspectives in Happiness Research: The Birth of Modern Happiness**

**by: Luka Zevnik**

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Zevnik's (2015) *Critical Perspectives in Happiness Research* aims to question and refute the 'widely assumed' nature of happiness. According to Zevnik, the notion of happiness as inherently good and universally desirable is problematic and, when evaluated critically, is "merely one array of cultural constructions...a culturally and historically specific experience characteristic only to the western world" [Zevnik, (2015), p.vii]. Beginning with a critique of the current theories and research methodology regarding happiness, Zevnik argues that they are ethnocentric, insufficient, and ignore the power dynamic that establishes the very meaning of happiness. The next part of the book is an articulation of Zevnik's own theoretical framework, which relies primarily on Foucauldian historical analysis. The third and final part of the book is "the world's first Foucauldian inspired cultural history of happiness...a genealogy of happiness" [Zevnik, (2015), p.ix]. Going back to the Middle Ages, Zevnik traces the transformation of the Christian experience of sin and salvation, continuing through the Renaissance and Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and ultimately, to the modern experience of happiness with its manifestation in 20th century's consumer culture.

Zevnik begins with an overview of happiness research in philosophy, science and economics. Within the philosophical approach to happiness, he identifies two sub-divisions: the 'art-of-living' tradition and the 'collective happiness' tradition. The first tradition, concerned with whether an individual can achieve happiness and how to lead a happy life, can be traced back to ancient Greek ethics as well as to Christian theology. The second tradition extends the quest for happiness to the collective realm, epitomised by utilitarianism of the 18th and 19th centuries. Corresponding to these two philosophical approaches, Zevnik also identifies two scientific fields of happiness research. Positive psychology, which deals with individual subjects, studies "the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive" and focuses on the psychological and neurological factors that contribute to and determine a person's feeling of happiness [Zevnik, (2015), p.6]. Empirical happiness research employs quantitative methods in order to inquire as to the causes, consequences and dynamics of happiness. Within empirical happiness research, the predominant method is the assessment of individuals' subjective well-being (SWB) using self-reporting surveys.

Insights from SWB research have led to the establishment of the ‘economy of happiness’, which explores the relationship between well-being and traditional economic variables such as income and wealth – in order to question fundamental assumptions behind current economic and development models.

As Zevnik correctly points out, these fields of studies, and particularly empirical research, are grappling with the methodological issue of ‘cultural bias’, which distorts the measurement of happiness. On the one hand, there is growing recognition that significant cultural variations exist in understanding what constitutes happiness. On the other hand, as Zevnik (2015, p.15) argues, “any attempt to compare happiness or well-being across different cultures means that the researcher is knowingly or unknowingly assuming a universal notion of well-being.” While there are philosophers and theoreticians attempting to establish the groundwork for such a universal notion, Zevnik (2015, p.17) is in favour of the view that “well-being and happiness are culturally and historically specific phenomena.” The very nature of happiness, Zevnik (2015, p.18) writes, differs across cultures; thus “by articulating universal notion and definition of well-being, philosophers, researchers or theoreticians of happiness are in fact superimposing their own particular conception of nature of well-being.” This charge of ethnocentrism is well recognised by anthropologists studying well-being, who have pointed out that SWB “presupposes values and assumptions that are central to Western culture” [Zevnik, (2015), p.18] and who have long advocated for qualitative ethnographic studies instead of comparisons based on statistics. Zevnik takes one crucial step further and argues that even the anthropological approach implicitly assumes certain universal criteria, and thus remains vulnerable to ethnocentrism. He suggests that one must draw on postmodern anthropology and cultural studies for the tools to analyse happiness as the product of historical processes and power dynamics, and to understand why happiness has become so self-evident, universal and central in Western culture.

The next two chapters provide the Foucauldian theoretical background of Zevnik’s approach. For Foucault, the study of history was not about revealing unalterable truths of the past, but rather to shed light on how past ideas became established as contemporary truths. Thus, conventional historical accounts of happiness put far too much emphasis on notable thinkers of the past and their intellectual treatments of happiness – at the risk of projecting “the idea and experience of (modern) happiness onto periods in the history of Western cultures when in fact those ideas didn’t exist” [Zevnik, (2015), p.34]. In contrast, a Foucauldian approach would first and foremost asks how happiness in its modern form had come to be; hence, the book’s subtitle ‘the birth of modern happiness’.

To answer that question, following Foucault, Zevnik (2015, p.75) proposes three dimensions that one must look at: truth, power and relationship to the self. The analysis of truth questions how the concept of happiness is produced, propagated and redefined over time. The analysis of power explores power structures that establish one account of happiness as the dominant among many contesting ideas, and shows how that dominant account is subsequently used to maintain or disrupt the power status quo. Finally, an analysis of the self asks how abstract accounts of happiness are internalised in Western culture: how the individual no longer feels the need to justify his or her pursuit of happiness, but takes such pursuit to be natural and universal. Altogether, Zevnik provides a rich and elaborate genealogy of modern happiness, the following is a brief summary of his analysis. It should be noted that Zevnik follows a detailed chronological order whereas my summary focuses on some notable themes.

Zevnik's departure point is the Late Middle Ages, when the Catholic doctrine of sin dominated intellectual, social, public, and private life. Due to the so-called original sin committed by Adam and Eve, humans were condemned to suffer in their mortal life, and their only salvation would be the hope for a life after death in Heaven [Zevnik, (2015), p.78]. The implication here was two-fold: perfect bliss (beatitude) was not available on Earth, and life here and now was merely a preparation for the afterlife. Nonetheless, starting in the 14th century, Renaissance thinkers took a greater interest in the human subject and his mundane everyday life. The humanistic vision at this time depicted Heaven not as an alien realm, but as a desirable ideal "modeled more and more according to positive feelings experienced on Earth" [Zevnik, (2015), p.79]. Around the same time, the Protestant Reformation movement attacked the doctrine of sin and advocated that a blissful life in heaven would be achieved by having absolute faith in God [Zevnik, (2015), p.83]. Consequently, humans no longer needed to suffer, but can experience joy and good feelings in their relationship to God and to each other. Together, the Renaissance and the later Reformation ideas allowed for the notion of a pleasurable life on Earth through a moral and spiritual existence [Zevnik, (2015), p.94].

This exploration of happiness in one's present life became even more pronounced in the 17th century. A multitude of perspectives such as atheism, naturalism, rationalism, and deism had put forward the idea that humans are the appropriate subject of happiness: our desire for pleasure and avoidance of pain are no longer sinful, but rather as good and unalterable features of our constitution [Zevnik, (2015), pp.98–99]. The Enlightenment movement in the late 17th century discarded any remaining religious spins on happiness by replacing God with Nature as the source of happiness [Zevnik, (2015), p.103]. Life on Earth was no longer a temporary road to beatitude, but emerged as the sole domain of happiness: "the pursuit of happiness for the first time became completely independent from the divine and exclusively limited to the earthly realm" [Zevnik, (2015), p.104].

Looking back at this history, Zevnik (2015, pp.91–92) agrees with Foucault and Von Greyerz that the Reformation was not simply a theoretical struggle among Christian theologians, but rather a power struggle to determine who and what would govern men and their conducts in life. The weakening of the Catholic Church after losing its sacrosanct role as pathway between suffering humans and their salvation created a fertile condition for dissenting doctrines, and ultimately contributed to the rise of the age of happiness [Zevnik, (2015), p.77]. Zevnik notes, however, that modern happiness brought with it a new power dynamic, not totally unlike that of the previous era. The all-encompassing power of the Church was now transferred to the modern state, the clergy replaced by the police, and ultimate salvation was now measured in infinite progress towards happiness [Zevnik, (2015), p.123]. Aided by Utilitarianism, the modern state used the protection of public goods as justification for its legitimacy and its policing power. How humans ought to conduct their lives was now under regulation by the states, and public interests became the new constraints on individual's activities.

In compensation for such constraints, the individual gained more liberty in the realm of consumption. Thanks to the Industrial Revolution and the advent of early capitalism, material production and consumption had accelerated [Zevnik, (2015), pp.114–115]. Shopping became no longer a survival activity but a practice for leisure; people were buying and selling happiness in a very real sense [Zevnik, (2015), pp.120–21]. Moreover, such practices of consumption also gained moral weight. As utilitarianism replaced Christian theologies, maximising pleasure and avoiding pain "is not understood solely in

terms of the motives for human action, but also constitutes the principal moral standard of right and wrong” [Zevnik, (2015), p.105]. While previously, individuals were judged on their suffering or their faith in God, Zevnik (2015, pp.136–137) suggests that to be happy was now considered the ultimate moral obligation and the subject who fell short must be punished.

This results in the contemporary mode of living where individuals are constantly seduced by new consumer goods and sites of purchases. And yet as soon as the object is purchased, one begins to question whether it can bring true happiness [Zevnik, (2015), p.141]. Zevnik conjures up a vicious cycle between desire and consumption: unsatisfied desire becomes motives for consumption, which only produces disappointment, which then fuels new desire. Herein lies the ultimate paradox of consumer culture: the only way for the consumer to satisfy her desire is to find pleasure in desire itself, in imagining and fantasising that this material consumption would fulfil her desire, despite its apparent inability to do so [Zevnik, (2015), p.142]. One ought to ask whether being trapped in this quest of everlasting happiness is any different from the Christian dream of salvation. Zevnik’s (2015, p.148) concluding remark that “progress in Western culture has essentially been tantamount to progress towards happiness” leaves open the question: Has any progress been made at all?

This genealogy of happiness sheds some new light onto the historical trajectories of the concept. Zevnik’s major contribution here is the bringing of power dynamics into the analysis, which allows us to see how happiness is institutionalised and employed as a tool to maintain power and legitimacy. The startling comparison between the Christian experience of sin and the modern experience of happiness indeed confronts us with troubling questions about the nature of happiness and whether it is forever illusory. However, it would be unfortunate to treat this genealogy as the official history of happiness, despite the author’s ambitious claim. After all, what Zevnik offers is an interpretation of selected moments in the history of happiness. As decisive and significant as these moments are, undoubtedly there are other moments that are left out of his account. For example, the luminary Madame du Chatelet (1706–1749) argued that life is often full of misery, and happiness is akin to a life-preserving illusion: “for we owe most of our pleasures to illusion, and unhappy are those who lose it...[L]et us try to thicken the glaze that it places on most objects, more necessary for them than are the cares and adornments for our bodies” (Du Chatelet, 2009). Similarly, Adam Smith (1723–1790) observed that the relation between wealth and happiness is one founded on deception, but it is a deception that “rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind” (Smith, 1790). Both perspectives, united in their treatment of happiness as a lie, do not fit comfortably into Zevnik’s narrative, yet they are defining moments in the history of thoughts on happiness nevertheless. Likewise, among contemporary writers Bruni (2006) argues that modern happiness is rooted in a civil tradition and the civil society rather than the state. Bok (2010) advocates for an interdisciplinary approach to happiness, which takes into account personal statements, philosophical reflection, psychological insights, as well as advance in neurological science. Such diverse conceptualisations show that one must take Zevnik’s claim of an official genealogy of happiness with certain degree of skepticism, lest it brings a premature end to future investigation.

Furthermore, this genealogical analysis would hold little interest for economists and other practitioners of empirical analysis. It does not help that Zevnik outright rejects their methodologies very early in the book, but even then one must appreciate the force of his argument against a universal definition of happiness. Despite the burgeoning numbers of

empirical research studies in recent decades, there is virtually no progress in finding a better conceptualisation for happiness. Economists often use terms like SWB, happiness, welfare, or satisfaction as interchangeable without critically reflecting on the implicit assumption embedded in those terms, and Zevnik has convincingly exposed the ethnocentric assumption in his analysis. Regrettably, there is nothing in Zevnik's historical and cultural analysis that would shed light on how happiness is understood in culture and history outside the Western world. If indeed happiness is singular and specific to Western culture, then how does that compare with equivalent concepts from other parts of the world? How is it possible that the search for a good life, present in writing by early thinkers such as Confucius, Buddha, Zoroaster, Lao-Tse, Plato, and Aristotle, still remains a global concern? [Bok, (2010), p.3]. By hastily subscribing to Foucault's anti-representationalism and anti-foundationalism, Zevnik has chosen to ignore these problems rather than addressing them. Must we go from one extreme to another and give up hope for a universal notion of happiness that would allow a cross-cultural dialogue to be formed? Must the fruit of empirical research such as the consistent patterns in demographic profile of people with above-average life satisfaction be discarded? (Diener et al., 1990; Helliwell and Putnam, 2007) Perhaps the answer is no, and herein lies the ultimate shortcoming of this book: it brings up more questions than it can answer. Readers who look for a definitive account of modern happiness will likely be disappointed, but those who search for a novel addition to their understanding of happiness, alongside other perspectives in the history of this idea, might find that Zevnik's study has a rightful place.

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