

Sara Ahmed: 'The Promise of Happiness' Introduction (2010)

The following list of quotes gives you a road map of the article: it highlights the main points and offers a material for discussion. Discuss each quote with your peers (max. 4 people in a group); you can search the words if needed, explain how you understand the proposition, bring some examples or ideas to elaborate on the quote, you may also want to question it or criticize it.

p.1 "What they are describing is perhaps a consensus that happiness is a consensus. Do we consent to happiness? And what do we consent to, if or when we consent to happiness?"

What does the word consensus mean? See the dictionary if there's a need. What does Ahmed mean when she is invoking happiness as a form of consensus?

p.1 "If happiness is what we wish for, it does not mean we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness. Happiness might even conjure its own wish. Or happiness might keep its place as a wish by its failure to be given."

How do you understand these propositions? Can you think of an example?

p.2 The author situates herself as writing "from a position of skeptical disbelief in happiness as a technique for living well."

Explain, in what way the examples of happiness science propose that happiness might be understood as "a technique for living well"?

p.2 "The history of happiness can be thought of as a history of associations. In wishing for happiness we wish to be associated with happiness, which means to be associated with its associations. The very promise that happiness is what you get for having the right associations might be how we are directed toward certain things."

Discuss this quote! How do you understand it? What is Ahmed trying to say?

p.3 What is this notion of 'a turn'? You may be familiar with other turns; what does it mean in general?

p.4 "It is important to witness this turn, reflecting not simply on happiness as a form of consensus but on the consensus to use the word *happiness* to describe something."

By designating particular habits, characteristics, motivations, choices and life scenarios with the word *happiness*, we may actually join and feed particular ways of thinking about happiness. We may uphold certain norms and standards by which the idea of happiness is co-created. Ahmed suggests further in the text that this attitude may have political consequences. See pp.4-5, discuss!

p.5 "The belief that you can measure happiness is a belief that you can measure feelings. [...] This model both presumes the transparency of self-feeling (that we can say and know how we feel), as well as the unmotivated and uncomplicated nature of self-reporting."

Why is the method of self-reporting seen as problematic? Would you support Ahmed's proposition? Would you disagree? How would you measure happiness? Why would you do it?

p.6 "Much of the new science of happiness is premised on the model of feelings as transparent, as well as the foundation for moral life. If something is good, we feel good. If something is bad, we feel bad. [...] The science of happiness could be described as performative: by finding happiness in certain places, it generates those places as being good, as being promoted as goods."

Why is this understanding too simplistic? Can you think of examples when this model does not work?

p.7 "Happiness is looked for where it is expected to be found, even when happiness is reported as missing. What is striking is that the crisis in happiness has not put social ideals into question and if anything has reinvigorated their hold over both psychic and political life."

Why is happiness, as understood by the positive psychology approaches, seen as normative?

p.7 "The demand for happiness is increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals, as if what explains the crisis of happiness is not the failure of these ideals but our failure to follow them."

p.8 "We can immediately see how happiness becomes a disciplinary technique. Positive psychology aims to understand 'positive happiness' – by providing explanations of its causes – as well as to use this knowledge about happiness to create happiness."

This quote may serve as a definition of positive psychology as Ahmed understands it.

p.8 "Happiness involves developing a certain kind of disposition: 'Happiness is part of a broader syndrome, which includes choice of rewarding situations, looking on the bright side and high self-esteem' [Argyle]. Individuals have the project of working on themselves, governing their souls [...]."

pp.9-10 "You might note here that correlations (happiness with optimism, and happiness with altruism) quickly translate into causalities in which happiness becomes its own cause: happiness causes us to be less self-focused, more optimistic, which in turn causes us to be happier, which means we cause more happiness for others, and so on. Not only does happiness become an individual responsibility, a redescription of life as a project, but it becomes an instrument, as a means to an end, as well as an end. We make ourselves happy, as an acquisition of capital that allows us to be or to do this or that, or even to get this or that."

p.11 "The face of happiness, at least in this description, looks rather like the face of privilege. Rather than assuming happiness is simply found in 'happy persons,' we can consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable."

p.11 "If certain ways of living promote happiness, then to promote happiness would be to promote those ways of living."

p.12 "Hierarchies of happiness may correspond to social hierarchies that are already given."

p.12 "We could even say that expressions of horror about contemporary cultures of happiness involve a class horror that happiness is too easy, too accessible, and too fast."

p.13 "The classical concept of the good life relied on a political economy: some people have to work to give others the time to pursue the good life, the time, as it were, to flourish. Arguably, such a political economy is essential rather than incidental to the actualization of the possibility of living the virtuous life."

p.13 It is no accident that philosophers tend to find happiness in the life of the philosopher or that thinkers tend to find happiness in the thinking of thought. Where we find happiness teaches us what we value rather than simply what is of value."

p.14 "[...] I track the word happiness, asking what histories are evoked by the mobility of this word."

Pointing at the history of a particular word or a concept, remember Dixon's text?

p.14 "We will also need other kinds of critical and creative writing that offer thick description of the kinds of worlds that might take shape when happiness does not provide a horizon for experience."

p.16 "'there are infinite histories of happiness to be written' [McMahon]"

Where do those people who do not fit into the happiness profile presented by positive psychology derive happiness from? What other narratives or technologies of happiness can you think of?

p.17 "Can we rewrite the history of happiness from the point of view of the wretched? [...] I thus offer an alternative history of happiness not simply by offering different readings of its intellectual history but by considering those who are banished from it, or who enter this history only as troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy."