

Unhappy Consciousness: The (Im)Possibilities of Happiness in Hegel, Adorno, and Badiou

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Abstract

Dominant approaches to the study of happiness have primarily tended to be oriented towards the maximization of happiness. This drive toward maximization has entailed looking for ways to quantify and consequently measure the levels of happiness in individuals as well as in social groups. This paper, which represents an initial inquiry into the critical study of happiness, insists on the irreducible and finally profoundly subjective dimension of happiness. Drawing on the work of G.W.F Hegel, Theodor Adorno, and Alain Badiou, this essay attempts to formulate a theoretical framework that would be able to advance a legitimate critique on happiness, a concept that has for the most part evaded criticism, and suggests that the insights drawn from those aforementioned thinkers offer meaningful entry points through which a thorough inquiry of happiness might be pursued.

Keywords: Happiness, Affect, Adorno, Hegel, Badiou

1. Introduction

This essay represents our preliminary inquiry into the philosophical dimension of the steadily expanding area of Critical Happiness Studies. In particular, we attempt to place into meaningful conversation the writings of G.W.F. Hegel, Theodor Adorno, and Alain Badiou. Our agenda is to be able to formulate a theoretical framework that enables a thorough inquiry on happiness without restraint. Currently, dominant approaches to the study of happiness (in particular, Positive Psychology and Happiness Economics) have tended to be oriented primarily towards finding ways to maximize happiness. Consequently, maximization entails quantification, which allows for a measurable basis by which maximization could be judged as a success or a failure. There are, of course, legitimate philosophical issues that have to be addressed when we speak about measuring something so profoundly abstract as happiness. Hence, the philosophers that we have selected to be part of this essay are those whom we consider openly hostile to such rationalization of emotion. Indeed, the work of Adorno and Badiou, in particular, insists that there is a radically subjective element in happiness that cannot be reproduced by institutions and economies—and one would assume their pronouncement extends to pharmaceutical industries as well. This seemingly unreflective knowledge-production on happiness maximization is made

possible by the almost global consensus that happiness is the penultimate human desire. For the most part, happiness has enjoyed exemption from being the object of critical inquiry because of the unfounded idea that to critique happiness is to withhold its pleasures from those who rightfully deserve it.

To elevate the concept of happiness as a dignified concept worthy of philosophical reflection means having to perform the difficult task of tracing and mapping the multiple and diverse movements of desire, which are not uniform in term of movement, pace, direction. These movements may even, depending on a variety of reasons, collide, clash, entangle, and move in opposite directions. They do not necessarily have an organizing logic apart from the fact they move towards various locus points of happiness that are scattered all over the expansive edifice of fantasy. It is this irreducible and finally profoundly subjective dimension of happiness where the thought of Hegel, Adorno, and Badiou intersect on the topic. Happiness for them might be described as an “exceptional status,” to use the words of Badiou.

2. “Relief from Misery”: Hegel on the Unhappy Consciousness

The History of the World is not the theatre of happiness. Periods of happiness are blank pages in it...

G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*

In Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, we see the consciousness of the Self, as doubled within itself. The concept of the “unhappy consciousness” was introduced by Hegel in light of this phenomenon. In context, the “unhappy consciousness is the consciousness of itself as a doubled, merely contradictory creature”. The idea stems from Hegel’s examination of the dialectical relationship between the lord and the bondsman during the feudal order. As pointed out by Gillian Rose (2009): “Absolute ethical life of the feudal order is first presented ‘according to its relation’ as the ‘unhappy consciousness’” (169). In relation to this, Hegel’s concept of the spirit evolves and advances “through the relations of mastery and servitude that developed under feudalism” (120). The dialectical relationship of the master and the slave is founded on “the principle of divine election” and an overt refutation of the “universality to the work of those whom God has created to serve the master” (Abbinnett 2013, 120). The lord and the bondsman relationship endures through the dead equilibrium of work, whereas we see the Lord as dominating the docile body, that of the Bondsman. For the Bondsman, life preservation is the only thing that is valuable to him, which, then is relegated under the feudal protection of his Lord; while for the Lord, the Bondsman’s labor is directly proportional to the achievement of “pleasure of enjoying the satisfactions of his immediate desires” (in Särkelä 2015, 70). The Lord’s reduction of the Bondsman as a docile body is characterized by “a mere means of realization of [the Lord’s] arbitrary ends and achieves a more mediated relationship to his natural surroundings as he finds his object ready for enjoyment” (70).

Hegel’s analysis of self-consciousness and the feudal system gives a picture of the dissatisfaction of the Unhappy Consciousness in the resistance of the Enlightenment period against superstition, rationalization of religious worship and the totalization of scientism and utility maximization as the dominant worldview (Abbinnett 2013, 120). Moreover, the Unhappy Consciousness, under the feudal system, manifested itself in the individual who is “deprived of all satisfaction” from his work as it is accomplished primarily to satisfy the sovereign master, who subjects the servant through its claim as the “arbiter of life and death” (173). The dissatisfaction of the worker in his labor determined the contradiction wherein the overthrow of the established

feudal regime is nigh. For that reason, the Enlightenment period emerged. Accordingly, the revolt of free self-consciousness against the feudal system took two forms: one is through “the subjective idealism of Kantian and Fichtean philosophies (which conceived freedom as a formal attribute of the ego) and the materialism of the French philosophes (who saw the entire edifice of Sittlichkeit as opposed to the originary rights of humanity)” (173). For Hegel, the indication of suffering and autonomy in the feudal regime is the precursor of modern civil society and the establishment of the Enlightenment period (173).

The unhappy consciousness also resulted from the “loss of substance” or as Rose (2009) puts it, “[T]he unhappy consciousness arose out of the experience of the death of the Greek Gods.” But this does not necessarily pertain to the death of gods or of religion per se but of the authenticity of divine life which thus augments “the denial of existence and of transformative activity and hence of actuality” (Rose 2009, 170). The experience was first elucidated by the Roman philosophies of stoicism and scepticism. Stoicism does not necessarily oppose “transformative activity or productive relations”, but constructed and spurned them as “riches or poverty” (170). On the other hand, scepticism corresponds to the “realization” of the independent consciousness “as a negative stance towards otherness, to desire and work” (171). Accordingly, scepticism “treats itself as universal (the doubter or authority) and as contingent (as another representation to be subject to doubt)” (171). Further, in scepticism, the consciousness unveils itself as a self-contradictory consciousness. From this point, the doubled consciousness manifests and unifies the thoughts separated by scepticism.

In contrast to both Stoicism and Scepticism, the Unhappy Consciousness is aware of its alienation from its “essential end” therefore attempts to liberate itself from itself. In its attempt to achieve eternal life, it seeks to exploit every external means in the present to transcend towards its goal. Through religious devotion, the unhappy consciousness tries to reach “communion with its alienated end” however, the unessential consciousness fails to “flee from itself” as the activity of reaching its alien essence is “still just its own unessential doing” (Särkelä 2015, 74). The Unhappy Consciousness, in its servitude to the “essential end”, appreciates its natural environment and labor power as “gifts from an alien source” and goes on to work “assured that this is the activity of the beyond” (75). At last, with its failure to attain recognition from God, the Unhappy Consciousness comes into contact “with this truly authoritative recognizer through the mediation of the priest” (75). The priest, or the minister is another subject, a definite sinner himself, yet he is recognized to be in touch with God. On that note, the unhappy consciousness could only be united with God if it surrenders its independent consciousness and through the instructions of the mediator, it assures that the other’s activity is in accordance to God’s will. Through this, the authority of the Church is created, undermining the consciousness’ desire of emancipation (75).

In conclusion, Hegel’s concept of the “unhappy consciousness”, as for Derrida, “traces the elements through which the modern subject has learned of its unity with the historical relations of ethical life,” and that “to redeploy these categories as marking the falsity of happiness, morality, and feeling within the technological organization of capital is to miss the uniqueness of the ethical demands that arise from that organization” (Abbinnett 2013, 92-93). However, the unhappy consciousness functions as a reaction or resistance to the established social order, as to how it revolted against the feudal system to create modernity and the Enlightenment period to emancipate itself. The unhappy consciousness represents the revolting, chained peasant or proletarian, at the same time, it signifies the defeatist or fatalist subject who seeks satisfaction

from being one with the absolute or with God. In one way or another, the unhappy consciousness relieves the subject from its misery.

3. *The Damaged Life: On Adorno's "Melancholy Science"*

Life in the capitalist era is a constant initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies with the power that is belaboring him...Everyone can be like this omnipotent society; everyone can be happy, if only he will capitulate fully and sacrifice his claim to happiness.

Theodor Adorno

Theodor Adorno might be said to be an identifiably unhappy theorist. In fact, he claims that Philosophy, understood as the teaching of the good life, becomes increasingly difficult in the age where everything has been thoroughly commodified. Accused by his critics of being paralyzingly pessimistic and excessively elitist, what could his melancholy science tell us about happiness apart from a predictable call for its total rejection? It is crucial to note that Adorno's thoughts on happiness are characteristically fragmentary, which is characteristic of his style. Thus, it is difficult to identify a sustained reflection of happiness in his work because his approach is one that avoids the totalizing tendencies of thought inherited from Enlightenment dialectics and also because the form of his writing itself avoids reproducing the smoothing processes of domination that always attempts to conceal and silence difference and dissent (that is, one that stands outside its positive identity—hence, the emphasis on negativity, nonidentity, and negative dialectics in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer). Adorno's method asks us to reflect on fragmented subjective insights by which we could then analyze the contradictions in totality.

The epigraph of this section, taken from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, speaks of the insidious coupling of happiness and domination. For Adorno, happiness is not the mere product of clandestine ideological manipulation. He rejects the idea that happiness is sustained simply by stupidity and misinformation but part of the very rationality of the system that moves toward total administration. In fact, ideology has abandoned pretension, and is no longer false-consciousness; rather, it is direct domination. We are very much aware of the unhappy condition of unfreedom, but we are nevertheless instructed to be happy. Happiness in this case is produced and reproduced by larger social structures, institutions, and economies, targeted at collectivities rather than individuals. It is important to note that for Adorno as with other thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School (authentic) happiness cannot be collective. False collective happiness is achieved at the expense of (authentic) subjective happiness.

Theodor Adorno's concept of the "unhappy consciousness" may seem excessive but his entire repudiation of happiness can be attributed to his subjectivity as a German Jew who has seen the horrors of the Nazi regime and his adoration of Mahler and Proust, the latter whose pessimistic philosophy is prominent in his works (Helmling 2006, 170). The "unhappy consciousness" as posited by G. W. F. Hegel is the main conundrum that modernity, through the Enlightenment period, would at last conquer, however, for Adorno, it remains as the philosophy that modernity enforces on people as a moral imperative (156). On that regard, we should note that there is a critical distinction between the "old unhappy consciousness" and the "new, modern, rational (unhappy) consciousness". The transparency of the power relationship between "truth as the in-itself and consciousness as the for-another" was prominent for the old unhappy consciousness (Tubbs 2000, 50). There is an assumption that consciousness itself has always been the "slave to truth as the master" (50). Transparency resides where the consciousness itself is aware of its own duality and inability to unite with the absolute. The manifest unambiguousness

of the power relationship of “domination and subservience” was the cause of its unhappiness (50). On the other hand, the new unhappiness does not possess the similar attributes and is oblivious of the fact that it should be unhappy. The modern rational consciousness, oblivious of the facts, claims the knowledge of everything, including the absolute. The principle of modern freedom, promised by modernity, conceals the truth of the relative “slavery’ or dependence of modern rational consciousness upon its own abstract thinking” (50).

The Hegelian idea of the “unhappy consciousness” even extends to the Frankfurt School’s concept of the “culture industry” which is prevalent, alongside that of modernity. The “culture industry”, as conceptualized by Adorno, is “an oppressive mechanism” which stifles individuality and happiness,” (Coulson 2007, 141) and “manipulates mass emotion.” (Helmling 2006, 170) Adorno argues that pleasure is “no longer possible” as “social alienation and reification” continuously exists to inhibit human access to any form of joy that would result from “reconciled subjectivity” (Coulson 2007, 141). Modern society, through the forces of social reification, has created an illusion of happiness and promises for ‘dupes’ who were continuously subservient to the established social order (141). This, then, constitutes the critique of Adorno against mass culture [in his *Aesthetic Theory*], advancing the idea of high culture and art which aims toward the goal of human emancipation, however, this is irrelevant in the context of our study, so we would definitely leave it only up to this point.

The concept of the “Melancholy Science” as introduced by Adorno in his *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* is “not a pessimistic science” (Rose 1978, ix) but a “critique of bourgeois social praxis”(Adorno 2012, 131). It is primarily an inversion from the Nietzsche’s ‘joyful’ or ‘gay science’ – through which Adorno attempted to undermine the optimistic and totalizing claims of philosophy and social sciences. Adorno, who remains critical of collective and commodified happiness and entertainment shows the inauthenticity of the promise of emancipation proposed by the Enlightenment period. Melancholy science, like the concept of the “killjoy”, takes a critical stance and destabilizes the rationalization of an optimistic view towards the essence of happiness, noting that the capitalist social order has deemed the virtue of happiness today as inauthentic and unattainable, as freedom itself, a determinant of such, is repressed to maintain the totalizing order of things.

4. “*Happiness is a risk that we must be willing to take*”: Alain Badiou’s Evental Happiness

Alain Badiou’s entire philosophical trajectory could be understood as an attempt to determine the conditions that could give rise to the authentically new—that he argues is inaugurated by an Event—and how *bonafide* subjects are born in relation to that Evental rupture. For Badiou, Events properly occur in only four domains: Science, Politics, Art, and Love. What Events do is to force a situation, which is a particular organization of the world oriented towards conservation, to recognize novelty consequently altering its regulatory procedures, and thus opening possibilities previously unthinkable within the parameters of that situation.

Recently, Badiou has directed his attention to the concept of happiness, which he explicates by drawing homologies with his account of love. When asked in an interview for Verso Books “How can philosophy help us to be happy?” Badiou (2016a) offers a revealing response:

Happiness is what happens when you discover that you are capable of something that you did not know you are capable of. For example, in a romantic encounter you discover something that troubles your fundamental conservative selfishness: you accept that your

existence is utterly dependent on another person. Before experiencing it you hadn't had the slightest idea of that. You suddenly accept that your existence is utterly dependent on the other...Then you have to seek to draw the consequences of this happiness...in order to continue living this primordial novelty. So you have to accept that this happiness can sometimes work against satisfaction.

We suggest that the two crucial ideas in his response is the one on “novelty” and on “satisfaction.” For Badiou, real happiness involves newness; that is, the creation of an entirely new situation. Further, happiness is sharply distinguished from satisfaction. By saying that happiness involves the creation of a new situation, Badiou is suggesting either that happiness is itself Evental or that happiness accompanies authentic Events—that is, genuine Events produce feelings of authentic happiness. This raises the issue of the difference between authentic and inauthentic happiness (as well as the issue of authentic and inauthentic Events).

For Badiou, the key to distinguishing authentic Events from inauthentic ones is a single structural criterion: authentic Events emerge from the void of a situation. An Event is part of the situation and is not some external intrusion; it is the Truth, the central void, of the Situation rendered indiscernible by being beyond what Badiou calls the “law of Count.” Žižek (2009) provides a helpful example:

[T]he Leninist October Revolution remains an Event, since it relates to the “class struggle” as the symptomatic torsion of the Situation, while the Nazi movement is a simulacrum, a disavowal of the trauma of class struggle...The difference lies not in the inherent qualities of the Event itself, but in its place—in the way it relates to the Situation out of which it emerged (140).

This means that Events emerge from one of the elements that belong in a situation but not counted and therefore not represented as belonging to a particular situation. However, once a subject identifies an Event and attaches itself to an Event though the subject's fidelity to it, then the situation will be forced to recognize and consequently reorganize its regulative processes to accommodate the novelty introduced by the Event.

The link between authentic happiness and authentic Events is made apparent in Badiou's discussion of the difference between happiness and satisfaction and his emphasis on the idea of risk. Badiou argues that the contemporary world has confused happiness with satisfaction. While satisfaction seems to be concerned with safety, “a good place in the world” and also “the consumption of things [one] has fought to obtain, happiness for Badiou is an unsettling, radical concept (Badiou 2016a). As a radical concept, happiness includes the element of risk and should be conceived as a kind of “a perilous adventure.” Badiou (2016b) argues:

Happiness can't just be simple negation of unhappiness: it is a present, a gift from life that goes beyond the order of satisfaction. A gift from life that we must be ready to accept, a risk that we must be ready to take. It is a major existential choice: either a life that is only open to satisfaction, or a life that takes on the risk of happiness...”

The importance of the contribution of Badiou's thoughts on happiness is how it exposes how happiness, often portrayed by hegemonic representation as movement, is actually stasis and even paralysis. It emphasizes safety and locating an already-determined place in the world.

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