

The argument for unhappiness



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Is there an upside to feeling down?

IN *Against Happiness*, scholar Eric G. Wilson argues that melancholia is necessary to any thriving culture, and that it is the force underlying original insights.

There are many arguments for the increasing interest in positive psychology, and in individuals pursuing wellbeing in their personal and professional lives.

I concluded recently that only the very cynical should dismiss the positive psychology movement. One such perspective can be found in Wilson's *Against Happiness*.

HISTORY

It is important to again distinguish between state happiness (hedonic) and eudemonic happiness (wellbeing).

Wilson, a professor of English in North Carolina, is particularly critical of the American pursuit of state happiness,

which he argues breeds blandness.

He traces its early origins, referring to the US Declaration of Independence offering everyone the opportunity of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Wilson explains the declaration's phrase was originally "life, liberty and property", borrowed from British philosopher John Locke.

However, Benjamin Franklin, who, according to Wilson, believed "the true road to earthly joy [was] through the accumulation of stuff", argued for substituting the word 'happiness' for 'property'.

This historical note is important in suggesting that the view that happiness comes from material acquisition has a long linkage, at least in the United States.

ARGUMENT

Wilson scorns the current realisation of the American dream: dirty cities transformed into massive shopping malls and wars into blips on television screens and, everywhere, hearing "Have a nice day".

He argues that this push for earthly bliss is at the core of the American soul but at the expense of "sadness". In essence, he argues that the "happy man is the hollow man", given over to artifice, whereas enduring a sad existence is to participate in "life's vital rhythms".

His more central argument is that to "suffer melancholy is also to understand its polar opposite, joy". Wilson

sometimes confuses the clinical depressive state of melancholia with the 'black bile' temperament style of melancholy, and effectively argues for both, although expressing a caveat about not wanting "to romanticise clinical depression".

Wilson quotes from psychologist James Hillman that "depression opens the door to beauty of some kind". Like Aristotle, and in more recent times psychologist Kay Jamison, he observes links between melancholia and creative genius, enriched by many historical examples.

In essence, Wilson argues that melancholia pushes thinkers into a confused middle ground that requires reconciling antagonistic forces. He asks us to consider the emotions evoked at births, deaths and marriages and suggests that their vitality comes with recognising that joy and sorrow "cannot exist without the other".

Wilson argues that "the happy man is the hollow man"

He argues against the peace that comes from passive acceptance of the status quo and resting comfortably with one particular worldview. The metaphor of the sand being required to make the pearl is invoked for "the melancholic" and the source for a powerful muse of vision, when polarities cohere.

A similar view emerged in *Journeys with the Black Dog*,¹ where many individuals who had experienced melancholia considered – if they were to live their life again – whether they would choose to have depression. Those affirming consistently argued that depression had made them appreciate life more, that they had cut out negativity in their life and negative people, and that they had learned to be more empathic.

CONCLUSION

Wilson argues that a society that fosters total happiness risks a culture of safety, fear and tunnel vision. By contrast, suffering gloom makes life a struggle that is also potentially our salvation, encouraging individuals to strive beyond themselves and explore possibilities via acts of freedom – in "choosing one road instead of another".

Wilson has two key messages: that we should reject the increasing cultural injunctions to seek material state happiness, and that true states of 'wellbeing' require adversity to be truly appreciated.

In essence, he is not against seeking wellbeing, but against many of the materialistic values that are currently propagated in Western communities.

1. *Journeys with the Black Dog*. Wigney T, Eyers K and Parker G (eds). Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2007