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GLST 179

Dr. White

14 April 2020

### The Happiness Hypothesis Book Review

Johnathon Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis* is full of insights that are supposed to make us become better people, or at least be more content with ourselves and our lives. Haidt takes us through 10 of his "Great Ideas," which are born from the ideas of many philosophers and extensive research. In this review I will only touch on the few that I felt strongly towards, but they are all "Great Ideas." The author dives into the idea that anyone can be happy if the right perspective and knowledge is applied. This book is *not* a self-help book, but more geared towards understanding and learning, which is something I truly enjoyed while reading it. It was easy to recognize that he was sharing the knowledge he accumulated over the years instead of force-feeding it to someone. Haidt also provides a variety of ways to achieve happiness – it isn't derived from one singular way. He says you can get there by any way that works for you, there are just many similar fundamental components of each method.

I was under a shelter-in-place order while reading this. I wasn't supposed to leave my house for non-essentials, my job as a server for a catering company was limiting the number of orders to just grocery deliveries so they didn't need a full staff, and it was my first time to be home for longer than a week with my family in over a year – something that was both ominous and a relief. Under these circumstances, I was finding it difficult to find a sense of balance and

happiness due to the stress that felt like a blanket smothering the whole world, and that is something the author talks about in the beginning of the book. Haidt describes four main divisions in life: Mind vs. Body, Left vs. Right, New vs. Old, and Controlled vs. Automatic. He spends more time describing the last one because it is a good representation of the metaphor of the elephant and the rider he uses throughout the book. It is a distinction made between the conflicting parts of the mind. Haidt cites Buddha's teachings in comparing the mind to a wild elephant. The elephant is in control of the unconscious mind and the rider (you) oversees the conscious mind. Sometimes, the elephant will be wild and rambunctious and sometimes you will be in control, but it varies by situation. During the shelter-in-place, I felt like the elephant was in full control. I couldn't focus on anything, even now. Not my assignments, my favorite tv show, cooking, even just sitting and having a conversation was hard. I had completely lost my self-control for at least two weeks, and then I started reading. Once I applied the elephant and the rider metaphor to my life, I felt like I became more determined than ever. I was not going to let this elephant control where my life was going to go, and I was going to be productive. I thought that once I had a sense of purpose again, I would feel better, but something else ended up happening.

As I said, I was determined to be productive during the quasi-quarantine. I was baking, helping my little brothers with school, exercising, and doing all my work suddenly. This was a sharp contrast from just a few days before – when I was having trouble even thinking about doing these things. This is a good example of the adversity hypothesis that Haidt mentions. He says that people need adversity, setbacks, and possibly even trauma to reach the highest levels of strength, fulfillment, and personal development. I was challenged by my whole world being

flipped upside down, and in the face of adversity I seemed to bloom. The problem with this, though, is that I was doing too much to distract myself from the stress I was feeling. My three weeks of wicked productivity and chanting “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger” inevitably was going to crash and burn. Haidt also speaks on this in his book, and despite my attempt to apply what he was writing about to my real life, it passed over my head. He describes a weak and a strong version of the adversity hypothesis, depending on the experience, and I clearly had experienced the weak version. According to Haidt, I should have come out stronger, happier, and improved because of this, but instead I felt a sense of panic and dread. While reflecting on this (yet another one of Haidt’s Great Ideas) I was reminded of an article that was posted to our class discussion on burnout. A quote that stood out to me was “We didn’t try to break the system, since that’s not how we’d been raised. We tried to *win* it” (Peterson, 2019). I saw my difficulties as challenges, I felt like I needed to “win” this moment of my life by coming out stronger and better than ever despite these challenges that were in my way, and it was not working for me. The generation that encompasses me and so many of my peers – millennials – sees productivity as the peak of a life. When I am productive, I feel like I can do anything and everything, but then when I get tired of working on *something* at all hours of the day, I feel completely burned out. We see productivity as the best thing ever, when in reality it is the root of many of our issues. By ensuring a balance between a productive life and a fun life, we can quell these bouts of fear that take hold of us (or at least me) and succeed in being happy in our own ways.

Reflecting on my time reading this book, I think it will definitely have a lasting impact on me. I was able to cultivate new habits and goals from it, and I am trying to keep them with me as we move forward through this trying time.

## Works Cited

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