



POSITIVE WORKPLACE ALLIANCE  
FOUNDER'S GROUP

*The Happiness Hypothesis*  
by Jonathan Haidt

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*The Happiness Hypothesis* by Jonathan Haidt of the University of Virginia was published in early 2006 and offers his take on the ten Great Ideas taken from the Ancients and tested by modern science. The book is interesting, challenging, well-written and well worth reading - and then returning to it from time to time for further thought.

This piece was originally conceived as an abstract. It soon became clear that an abstract would be a great disservice to the reader and the abstracter. Further, it became clear that the best approach beyond reading the book (which I highly recommend) is to have the opportunity to provide some selected highlights from the work overall. So, that is what follows here.

Haidt suggests that the life worth living is really well described in the world's libraries but in a way that there is too much of a good thing. So, he has selected ten great ideas previously discovered by several civilizations which he proposes to present and then analyze based on currently available science. All this with the purpose of developing lessons useful to modern life. He was less interested in the frequency of occurrence of these ten great ideas as the coherence of the ten he presents. And, by the way, he'll discuss the origins of positive psychology in ancient wisdom.

It is an ambitious undertaking, well executed.

The book is divided into five major topics: how the mind works, social life, happiness, flourishing and meaning. Each is then subdivided into a few key topics or great ideas.



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**How the Mind Works:** This section considers two very important premises about the mind. First, that humans have a divided mind, the parts of which are sometimes in conflict with one another. And, second, thinking makes it so. In the words of Buddha: "Nothing is miserable unless you think it so; and on the other hand, nothing brings happiness unless you are content with it."

**Rider and the Elephant:** Haidt starts with a lovely description of the divided mind using the analogy of the rider and the elephant. Long story short, the elephant is the old brain inherited into humankind through the millennia of evolution. This brain works very well, thank you, having gone through the rigors of natural selection. The rider, on the other hand, is the newer brain, a version 1.1 if you will - ie the frontal cortex that has made language, advanced planning, future thinking and other higher order functions possible in humans. This rider brain evolved really to serve the elephant brain and not vice versa. This analogy parallels several philosopher/psychologists' descriptions of the human brain: Plato and the charioteer with two horses, one with good intent and the other with bad; Freud and the ego, superego and id.

Haidt explains: "we are more like a committee whose members have been thrown together to do a job, but who often find themselves working at cross purposes." (5) Our brains are divided in many ways:

- a. mind/body (gut brain which is highly autonomous);
- b. right/left brain hemispheres which based on experiments suggest that one part of the brain will confabulate an explanation for actions taken by the other part without knowledge of why the other part did as it did;
- c. old brain/new brain
- d. automatic processing/controlled processing.



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The old brain begins at the spinal column and moves up and forward: hindbrain, midbrain, forebrain - managing the front sensory organs: hypothalamus (motivation), hippocampus (memory), and amygdale (emotional learning and response) ----altogether the limbic system. The new brain is not function specific. The orbitofrontal cortex supplements the limbic system and is key to decision making. "Human rationality depends critically on sophisticated emotionality." (14)

Automatic processing allows parallel processing on many tasks at the same time. This is the elephant. This is the actor. Controlled processing requires both language and conscious thought and can process one matter at a time. This is the rider. The rider is able to consider the future and advise but not control the elephant. In fact, the mismatch in maturity of the elephant and the rider, the automatic processing and the controlled processing, gives rise to a lack of integration between the rider and the elephant. This may well explain our failures of self-control, our inability to effectively control mental intrusions (try not thinking about something) and our difficulty in winning an argument (many of our decisions are really the elephant responding as it has evolved, the rider then tries to explain the inexplicable). Haidt suggests that really emotional intelligence is a skillful rider who is able to distract the elephant.

**Changing Your Mind:** This chapter is really about our reality being the result solely of how we think about things. In Haidt's metaphor, the elephant has a built in like-a-meter which makes yes/no decisions based on evolutionarily hard-wired knowledge. In fact, real change can only come about by "retraining the elephant." (26) So cognitive attempts at change (the rider in charge) will have limited staying power. Haidt suggests that three strategies work to help us change our mind or retrain the elephant: meditation which tames and calms the elephant, cognitive therapy which addresses Beck's cognitive triad (retraining the elephant away from a negative explanatory style) and various SSRI's (antidepressants) which change the brain chemistry, adjusting for losses in the genetic lottery for happiness set point.



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**Social Life:** This considers two key ideas: the role and importance of reciprocity in human interactions and the inherent hypocrisy in all of us - our ability to see others faults clearly and our own not at all.

**Reciprocity:** Human group expansion could only occur per Haidt with the ability to expand from kin altruism which limits social groups to 150 or so people at a time to ultra-sociality allowing for much larger, more complex groups. Humans, he suggests, have an inherent "mindless reciprocity reflex" (49) which causes them to engage in nonzero sum interactions. This reciprocity is supported in human groups by vengeance (protects you from exploitation) and gratitude (insures ongoing reciprocity). This expands the cooperative circle and increases our connectedness in ways that work to ensure group survival. Interestingly, only three other animals have this ultra-sociality: bees, termites, and mole rats. The 'do unto others' advice is fundamental to human group development and functioning.

**Faults of Others:** Much like Robert Quinn, Haidt advises that we must own and overcome our own hypocrisy which allows us to see others realistically and ourselves less so. Per Ben Franklin: "So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do." (66)

Or Haidt on two points:

"Finding fault with yourself is also key to overcoming the hypocrisy and judgmentalism that damage many relationships." (79)

"By seeing the log in your own eye you can become less biased, less moralistic, and therefore less inclined toward argument and conflict. You can begin to follow the perfect way, the path to happiness that leads through acceptance..."

The myth of pure evil is an interesting but complex discussion in this section.



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**The Pursuit of Happiness:** Haidt reviews the hedonic treadmill that allows humans to continuously adapt to their circumstances. He offers the "progress principle". (84) "Pleasure comes more from making progress towards goals than from achieving them." (84) Buddha suggests that happiness is really a matter of internal discipline and relief from attachments to outcomes. Science offers that happiness is genetic tendency supported by attachments. Haidt offers that happiness is really a bit more complex.

$$H \text{ (happiness)} = S \text{ (set point)} + C \text{ (conditions)} + V \text{ (voluntary activities)}$$

The set point is genetically established. Conditions include things like noise in your environment, commuting time, lack of control, shame, and relationships. Voluntary activities are those that yield flow, allowing us to enjoy both pleasure and gratifications (which comes from strengths per Seligman).

The elephant is still with us. And, he cares about prestige, competition, not happiness. (101)

Selective enjoyment becomes very important - savor and vary your experiences. Or as Haidt suggests, "variety is the spice of life because it is the natural enemy of adaptation." Happiness per Haidt comes both from within and without. (105)

**Flourishing:** This includes three chapters: one on love and attachment, one on adversity theory and the third, virtue.

**Adversity Theory:** The adversity theory seeks to explain how some are able to experience post traumatic growth rather than post traumatic stress disorder following significant adversity. Haidt offers both a weak theory - that people can experience post traumatic growth following adversity - and a strong theory - that people must endure adversity for growth. He ultimately decides on a modified strong theory: that is, adversity in the 20's and 30's may be the best position you for growth. Adversity too early or too late is likely to not result in growth.



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Adversity theory suggests that growth is dependent upon three elements.

"Rising to a challenge reveals your hidden abilities, and seeing these abilities changes your self concept." (138)

It illuminates the benefits of relationships

Trauma changes priorities and your philosophy toward the present and toward other people (140)

From Paul's Letter to the Romans: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." (139)

Further, trauma may knock into place the three levels of personality - basic traits (the elephant), characteristic adaptations (personal goals, defense and coping mechanisms, values, beliefs, and life stage concerns), and our emerging life story (the rider).

Coherence among these three levels, that is, vertical coherence in a high degree, is what yields happiness.

Optimists are more likely to benefit from trauma. They tend to use active coping and reappraisal while pessimists tend to use avoidance coping. (146) Pessimists can, however, benefit from adversity, too, but must actively engage the rider in sense-making about the adversity. Four strategies are recommended: changing cognitive style through meditation, cognitive therapy or prozac; cherishing and building your social networks; religious faith and practice; and, writing or talking it out.

Explicit knowledge, the knowing what to do, rests with the rider. Tacit knowledge, the knowing how to do it, resides in the elephant. Sternberg defines wisdom as tacit knowledge that lets a person balance two things: needs of themselves, others and the future with adaptation (change yourself), shaping (changing the environment), and selection strategies (moving to a new environment). (152)



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**Virtue:** "Aristotle...he was saying that a good life is one where you develop your strengths realize your potential, and become what it is in your nature to become." (157)

"When moral instruction triggers emotions, it speaks to the elephant as well as the rider." (159)

"...virtue resides in a well-trained elephant...moral education must also impart tacit knowledge—skills of social perception and social emotion so finely tuned that one automatically feels the right thing in each situation, knows the right thing to do, and then wants to do it." (160)

Explicit knowledge of virtues educates the rider, but not the elephant.

Haidt then discusses the differences in character ethics, where one knows what is right, and quandary ethics, where one is taught how to reason through ethical questions. He suggests that the modern shift from character ethics to quandary ethics is ineffective in establishing a shared ethical community.

"Trying to make children behave ethically by teaching them to reason well is like trying to make a dog happy by wagging its tail." (165)

Emotions, he suggests, are critical to good judgments. "I saw the right way and approved it, but followed the wrong, until an emotion came along to provide some force." (166)

Further, Haidt suggests the cultivation of virtues is a flow experience: it engages you fully, draws on your strengths, allows you to lose self-consciousness, and improve yourself fully.

Volunteerism enhances happiness more as you age.

Demographic diversity is a good form of diversity. Moral diversity in which all morality is relative, subject to the individual reasoning it through in particular circumstances, has led to anomie (social instability caused by erosion of standards and values.)



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**Meaning:** In this final chapter, Haidt, a self confessed Jewish atheist, uses an analogy to Flatland to describe what he believes is an innate need for divinity, not religion in the traditional sense. In Flatland, the square is introduced by the sphere to a new world moving from two dimensions to three. Similarly, humans operate within two dimensions as well: hierarchy and closeness/liking. The third dimension which runs from animals at its base, humans in its middle and divinity or god at its upper end is divinity or transcendence.

Shweder writing about morality identifies three ethics: autonomy, community, and divinity. Different cultures balance among these three ethics in differing manners. The ethic of autonomy encourages individuals to pursue their own goals and to preserve their individuality. The ethic of community focuses on team or community goals and the integrity of the group; obedience, loyalty and leadership are of paramount importance. The ethic of divinity focuses on protecting the unique person in each of us from degradation - preserving the god within us.

Emerson: "He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity thereby puts on purity. If a man is a heart just, then in so far is he God." (191)

Research by Haidt suggests that in addition to the six basic emotions (joy, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise) there is elevation. Elevation is the emotion identified as being elicited when moral action is observed. Elevation evokes a warm, pleasant feeling and a conscious desire to help others or become a better person. It does not move us, however, to action. It moves us to greater connection with others. Elevation arising from observation of non-moral activities is experienced differently at a physical level: chills and tingling versus a warm, pleasant, heart centered feeling. Haidt speculates that the Vagus nerve is activated during elevation and also during gratitude and appreciation.

Maslow on peak experiences: "The universe is perceived as a unified whole where everything is accepted and nothing is judged or ranked; egocentrism and goal-striving disappear as a person feels merged with the universe (and often with God); perceptions of time and space are altered; and the person is flooded with feelings of wonder, awe, joy, love, gratitude."



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### **Haidt's Conclusion**

Haidt seems to conclude that the constant dynamic interplay between opposites ---- Eastern/Western, science/religion, ancient wisdom/new wisdom, conservative/liberal, self/group/opposite group --- will yield a view that yields the opportunity for happiness.

### **Discussion Seeds**

1. *Haidt's book is an interesting and diverse review of ten key ideas from ancient wisdom analyzed from current science. What idea(s) here would be useful in the positive workplace?*
2. *How do Haidt and Quinn recommend we deal our personal faults and those of others? What does this suggest in the workplace? The Positive Workplace?*
3. *What does the elephant/rider metaphor suggest for us in approaching individual and organizational change?*
4. *What additional reading would you want to undertake to better understand/assess how to deploy Haidt's work into the positive workplace?*
5. *What does the progress principle (the pleasure is in the journey, not the destination) suggest for the positive workplace? Feedback, rewards, focus, etc.?*