

## **CHAPTER THREE**

# **...and The Pursuit of Happiness**

By Jonas Cain

# CHAPTER THREE

## ATTITUDINAL HEDONISM

**DANIEL KAHNEMAN**

In the previous chapter we discussed two forms of hedonism. We'll continue that discussion by exploring a third strand of hedonism espoused by the psychologist Daniel Kahneman, a theory known as modified quantitative hedonism. His theory states that what contributes to happiness varies from moment to moment, regardless of our past experiences and regardless of reality. To support his claim, the psychologist notes a discrepancy in the role of life circumstances to our happiness, believing that our individual life circumstances have a smaller role in our happiness than our inherited temperament and personality.<sup>1</sup> He concludes that (1) no matter what happens to us we will all get along one way or another until we die, and (2) some people have a natural tendency towards positivity or negativity.

Kahneman believes that people with a natural tendency for positivity have a “happiness resilience” that brings them back to a “sense of normalcy” even after distressing circumstances. Kahneman refers to this as the “treadmill effect:” the notion that though individuals may experience emotionally intense reactions to life circumstances that have a major impact on their lives, “these reactions appear to subside more or less completely and often quickly.”<sup>2</sup> Consider the example of what happens when we swim in a cool pool of water. At first the temperature comes as a cold shock to the body, yet over a relatively short period of time the body gradually adapts to the water.

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<sup>1</sup> Mulnix, Jennifer Wilson; Mulnix, M.J. *Theories of Happiness: An Anthology*. Broadview Press, 2015 — p. 36

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. — p. 36

With this in mind, Kahneman suggests there exists a “satisfaction treadmill,” which promotes happiness as a scale of achievement “that lies somewhere between realistic expectation and reasonable hope” noting that “people are always satisfied when they attain their aspiration level.”<sup>3</sup>

## **FRED FELDMAN**

If we are attracted to this idea of a happiness treadmill, and like the idea that carefully directing our focus to achieve happiness, then perhaps we’ll like this thing called attitudinal hedonism, as espoused by the contemporary American professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Fred Feldman, who believes that happiness is “*a positive psychological stance toward some object, which may or may not be accompanied by any felt quality.*”<sup>4</sup> According to Feldman, happiness is understood as taking pleasure in the “states of affairs.”<sup>5</sup> In this way, something may not necessarily “feel” good, but we may still be pleased by the “state of affairs.”

Feldman offers two hypothetical examples to support this theory, of which I will offer a slightly modified version:

(1) Dolores experiences debilitating pain on a regular basis but takes a pain management drug alleviating her pain to a certain degree. Though still in severe pain, Dolores’ pain has subsided significantly and, according to Feldman, this makes her happy due to the “state of affairs.”

(2) Wendell purchases a massage chair that promises to give the greatest massage you can ever imagine. With expectations high, Wendell was disappointed to find that it produced only a mildly pleasing massage. Even while feeling pleasure, Feldman asserts that it cannot be argued that Wendell is

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. — p. 37

<sup>4</sup> Mulnix, Jennifer Wilson; Mulnix, M.J. *Happy Lives, Good Lives: A Philosophical Examination*. Broadview Press, 2015 — p. 62

<sup>5</sup> Mulnix, Jennifer Wilson; Mulnix, M.J. *Theories of Happiness: An Anthology*. Broadview Press, 2015 — p. 65

happy, because they experience did not meet his expectation.<sup>6</sup> He was not happy with the state of affairs.

These examples aside, one problem with Feldman's theory is that it doesn't rely on truth. He argues that "*we can experience pleasure, both in the attitudinal and feeling sense, even when our experiences are illusionary*"<sup>7</sup> because occurrent (or actually occurring) attitudinal pleasures do not rely on truth.<sup>8</sup>

As an example, we can believe something to be true and be comforted by it, but this thing we believe can actually be entirely false. The *experience* of a good lie can positively affect attitudinal pleasure. We may take comfort in believing that we have a loving and faithful spouse, even if the truth of the matter is that the spouse constantly cheats on us. The theory being, "what we don't know won't hurt us."

## DANIEL HAYBRON

If we have trouble supporting a theory of happiness that doesn't rely on truth then perhaps we can look to the St. Louis University Philosopher, Daniel Haybron, who believes that the true source of an individual's happiness is their "emotional state."<sup>9</sup> If one is happy it's because they have a predominance of "joyfulness, high-spiritedness, peace of mind," and the like. Happiness therefore is understood as a "dispositional phenomenon" that reflects an individual's history and potential for future tendencies. But how does one develop such a positive state of mind?

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. — p. 62

<sup>7</sup> Mulnix, Jennifer Wilson; Mulnix, M.J. *Happy Lives, Good Lives: A Philosophical Examination*. Broadview Press, 2015 — p. 98

<sup>8</sup> Mulnix, Jennifer Wilson; Mulnix, M.J. *Theories of Happiness: An Anthology*. Broadview Press, 2015 — p. 70

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. — p. 100

## **RETHINKING POSITIVE THINKING**

There's some misunderstanding about what it really means to be positive. A lot of people think that it's about wearing rose-colored glasses, walking around ignoring reality and believing that everything is fine and dandy even when it isn't. Even when we're clearly in a bad situation yet forge ahead anyway. That's not positivity; that's ridiculous!

## **DEVELOP CONFIDENCE**

When I suggest that we focus on the positive I'm not referring to attitude; rather, I'm referring to confidence. Think about it: when we say that we're positive of something, do we mean that we're not too sure? Do we mean that we only think something is true? Or do we mean that we are confident of it? I suggest that when we say that we are positive we mean that we are confident because we are sure, and we are sure because we know the truth, and we know the truth because we have taken in an honest assessment of reality.

And this brings us to a key point on our pursuit: positivity requires an honest assessment of our circumstances, but we get to choose the frame we use to display our circumstances to ourselves and those around us. This frame is made of the words that we focus on, and these words can either lift us up, or drag us down.

In any given situation there's at least two ways that we perceive what's happening: 1) With negativity and suspicion, or 2) With positivity and excitement. We can choose to see the world as something out there to get us, or we can choose to see the world as an opportunity to grow regardless of circumstances. As leadership expert John Maxwell puts it: *"Sometimes you win,*

*sometimes you learn!*<sup>10</sup> The good news is that we have that choice, and it all depends on what we choose to feed.

## **THE TWO WOLVES**

A Cherokee legend

*A fight is going on inside me. A terrible fight between two wolves.*

*One is evil: doubt, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, ego.*

*The other is good: confidence, peace, love, joy, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, faith.*

*The same fight is going on inside you and inside every other person, too.*

*Which wolf will win? The one you feed.*

We can choose the frame we use to display our circumstances. This frame is made of words that we focus on, and these words can either lift us up, or drag us down. Choosing to feed the good wolf helps us develop confidence to always be happy with the state of our affairs. This is not an easy process but the important thing to remember is to just start: start where you are, start with just one thing, and start with making small changes.

But maybe happiness truly has nothing to do with pleasure. But if not, then what might it entail? Let's turn to Chapter Four to explore our options.

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<sup>10</sup> Maxwell, John. *Sometimes You Win, Sometimes You Learn*. Center Street, 2012

# ABOUT JONAS CAIN

Jonas Cain is an author, corporate magician, and facilitator of fascination working to Engage, Empower, and Encourage corporations and individuals to become positivity leaders that Excel at work, home, and beyond. Through magical keynote presentations, interactive workshops, and one-on-one consulting, Jonas equally performs, informs, and transforms!

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