Stumbling on Happiness by Daniel Gilbert
Study Guide

Introduction

So here's a question that you're probably dying to ask me: Why does Stumbling on Happiness have twelve chapters? Does it have something to do with the number of days of Christmas, the number of tribes in Israel, the number of Apostles, monkeys, eggs, or angry men?

No. But as it happens, twelve is the number of weeks that a seminar at Harvard University typically meets, which means that my book is ideal for teaching. This year I designed and taught a seminar in which my students read one chapter from my book every week (plus a few other readings) and then met to discuss it. I taught one version of the seminar for graduate students and one for undergraduate students, and both seminars were great fun for me. The students seemed to like them, too. At least no one passed out.

In the syllabus, I've described the main idea that each chapter of my book raises, and included a few key points for discussion and references to some supplemental readings that might inform it. Copyright law prohibits me from posting the readings themselves, but you should be able to find them in a library. Feel free to copy this syllabus—use it, change it, rearrange it, or sell it on eBay.

One thing you'll notice about these readings is that they are primarily psychology articles because I am, in point of fact, a psychologist. That's why I say things like "in point of fact." I hope that those of you who read my book will send me suggestions for relevant readings in other fields—such as economics, biology, philosophy, business, the arts—to be included in future seminars.

If you do, I'll post your suggestions here on this website, and together we can build the world's longest reading list, thereby keeping several generations of promising young people from ever finishing college.

Happy stumbling!

Journey to Elsewhen 01

In Chapter 1, I describe how and why the human brain learned to look forward in time. I claim that this ability is uniquely important and uniquely human. But is that true? How do we know that other animals can't think about the future?

The psychologists William Roberts, Thomas Suddendorf, and Janie Busby describe research that attempts to determine whether non-human animals are, in fact, "stuck in time," or whether they (like us) can engage in "mental time travel." These writers conclude that animals cannot think about the long-term future, but the case is far from open-and-shut and their evidence and arguments are provocative.

Question

What could a nonlinguistic animal ever do to prove to us that it can think about the future?

Readings

T. Suddendorf, & J. Busby, "Mental time travel in animals?" Trends in Cognitive Sciences 7, 391-396 (2003).

W.A. Roberts, "Are animals stuck in time?" Psychological Bulletin 128: 473-489 (2002).

The View from in Here 02

In Chapter 2, I begin an examination of the emotional experience we call happiness. The human brain learned to look forward in time so that it could steer us toward happy futures and away from unhappy ones. But is happiness really the only thing we should be aiming for?

Philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham answered that question with a qualified "yes" and their philosophy of "utilitarianism" explains why. Robert Nozick disagreed, arguing that no one would want to spend his life in a virtual reality machine that provided artificial happiness. But is that true? Psychologist Geoffrey Miller speculates about what might happen to a society of individuals who learn how to synthesize happiness rather than "earning" it the old-fashioned way.

Question

Is happiness one of many things a person can value, or is happiness what "valuing" means? In other words, do we ever value anything for any reason other than its potential to bring us happiness in the short or long term?

Readings
"What Utilitarianism Is" in J.S. Mill "Utilitarianism" (1863), in On Liberty, the Subjection of Women and Utilitarianism, in The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill, ed. D.E. Miller (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

"Happiness" in R. Nozick The Examined Life. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989, 102.

G. Miller, "Why we haven't met any aliens,"Seed, April/May, 41-43 (2006).

Outside Looking In 03

In Chapter 3, I dive into the psychological research literature by posing what seems like a simple question: How are you? As it turns out, people can't always answer this question accurately because they don't always know what they are feeling. This is a real problem, because a science of happiness requires that we measure happiness—and if people don't know what they are feeling, then how in the world can they tell us?

In his unbelievably brilliant book, the unbelievably brilliant psychologist Tim Wilson (who just so happens to be my research collaborator, so there is some small possibility I'm biased) explains how and why we are such "strangers to ourselves." The psychologists Norbert Schwarz and Fritz Strack describe some of the perils and pitfalls of measuring happiness.

Question
What can and can't people tell us about their current emotional state, and are the things they tell us the best measure—or perhaps even the only measure—of their happiness?

Readings
"Knowing Why" and "Knowing How We Feel" in T.D. Wilson, Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 93-136.

N. Schwarz & F. Strack, "Reports of Subjective Well-Being: Judgmental Processes and Their Methodological Implications," in Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology, ed. D. Kahneman, E. Diener, and N. Schwarz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 61-84; D. Kahneman, "Objective Happiness," in Well-Being, 3-25.

In the Blindspot of the Mind's Eye 04

In Chapter 4, I pose and begin to answer the book's central question: Why do people make mistakes when they look into their own futures and try to decide what will make them happy? The full answer to this question extends over six chapters that describe the three basic mistakes that people make.

"Reality" is a movie generated by our brains. Because we don't realize this, we are far too confident that the stuff appearing in the movie is actually "out there" in the world when, in fact, it's not. When we imagine the future, we are similary overconfident that it will unfold as we imagine it.

The psychologist Jim Enns explains how our brains produce The Movie That Doesn't Seem Like A Movie. The fact that reality is a movie has important consequences for our personal and social lives, some of which are explored by the psychologists Edward Royzman, Kimberly Cassidy, and Jonathan Baron, and also by the psychologists Less Ross and Andy Ward. (By the way, near the end of their article, Royzman et al take a very clever whack at Nozick's experience machine argument from Chapter 2).

Question
If people are naturally trapped in their own points of view, and if this is the basis of costly errors, then what kinds of individual remedies might we apply?

Readings
J. T. Enns, "What Vision Is Not," in The Thinking Eye, the Seeing Brain (New York: Norton, 2004), 4-13.

E. B. Royzman, K. W. Cassidy, and J. Baron, "I Know, You Know: Epistemic Egocentrism in Children and Adults," Review of General Psychology, 7, 38-65 (2003).

L. Ross and A. Ward, "Naive Realism in Everyday Life: Implications for Social Conflict and Misunderstanding," in Values and knowledge: The Jean Piaget series ed. E. S. Reed, E. Turiel, and T. Brown (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996), 103-135.

The Hound of Silence 05

Chapter 5 continues the discussion from the previous chapter. One problem with the "Reality Movie" is that some of the things that are in the movie aren't in reality itself. But the other problem is that some of the things that are in reality aren't included in the movie.

When we imagine the future, we leave things out, and the things we leave out are important. The psychologists Cheryl Wakslaks, Yaacov Trope, and Nira Liberman review work showing that as the imagined future gets further away from us, we leave out more and more details. This causes us to agree to do things in the future that we don't want to do when the time to do them arrives, such as raking the leaves or visiting the dentist.

The psychologists Roger Buehler, Dale Griffin, and Lee Ross explore another consequence of our brain's tendency to leave some things out of the "Reality Movie," namely, the fact that we overestimate how much we will be able to do in the future.

Question
If the foibles of imagination lead us to commit ourselves to take actions in the far future that we would be too lazy or scared to take in the near future, then should we really think of them as errors?

Readings
C. J. Wakslak, Y. Trope, and N. Liberman, "Transcending the Now: Time as a Dimension of Psychological Distance," in Timing the future, ed. M. Myslobodsky (London: World Scientific/Imperial College, 2006).

R. Buehler, D. Griffin, and M. Ross, "Inside the Planning Fallacy: The Causes and Consequences of Optimistic Time Predictions," in Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment, ed. T. Gilovich and D. Griffin (New York, NY, US: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 250-270.

The Future is Now 06

In Chapter 6, I describe the second mistake we make when we try to estimate our future happiness. People gauge how happy a particular future will make them by imagining it, and then asking themselves how they feel when they do. The problem is that people get their current feelings and their future feelings all mixed up. We buy too much when we shop on an empty stomach because we can't separate how much we want the potato chips right now from how much we will want them tomorrow. Psychologist Leaf van Boven and decision-scientist George Loewenstein explain how and why this happens.

We gauge the goodness of the future (and hence the wisdom of our decision) by asking how we feel when we imagine it, and the neurologist Antonio Damasio describes a case of a brain-damaged man who has no feelings when he imagines the future, which makes it nearly impossible for him to decide what to do next.

Question
We apparently can't do without our prefeelings, and yet, using them leaves us susceptible to a variety of errors. Is there a way to use them more wisely?

Readings
"A modern Phineas Gage" in Descartes' Error, Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain, A.R. Damasio, (New York: Avon Books, 1994) 34-51.

"Cross-Situational Projection," L. Van Boven, and G. Loewenstein in The Self in Social Perception, ed. M. Alicke, D. Dunning, and J. Krueger (New York: Psychology Press, in press).

Time Bombs 07

Chapter 7 extends the ideas presented in the previous chapter. The fact that the present exerts such a strong influence on our ability to imagine the future causes us to make some rather strange choices. For instance, psychologists Dan Ariely and Jonathan Levav show that the way we think about the future causes us to seek more variety than we will actually enjoy. Psychologists Chris Hsee, George Loewenstein, Sally Blount, and Max Bazerman show that choices involve comparisons, but the comparisons we make when we imagine the future are not the comparisons we make when we get there. Economist Dick Thaler and law professor Cass Sunstein discuss the ways in which social institutions might use these errors to promote desirable ends.

Question

Are social policies that promote certain behaviors by capitalizing on the foibles of human judgment more or less insidious and effective than those that promote behaviors by explicitly rewarding and punishing them?

Readings

D. Ariely and J. Levav, "Sequential Choice in Group Settings: Taking the Road Less Traveled and Less Enjoyed," Journal of Consumer Research 27, 279-290 (2000).

C.K. Hsee, G. F. Loewenstein, S. Blount, and M.H. Bazerman, "Preference Reversals Between Joint and Separate Evaluations of Options: A Review and Theoretical Analysis," Psychological Bulletin 125, 576-590 (1999).

R.H. Thaler and C.R. Sunstein, "Libertarian Paternalism," American Economic Review 93, 175-179 (2003).

Paradise Glossed 08

In Chapter 8, I describe the third mistake that prevents us from accurately imagining our future happiness. People are remarkably good at making the best of bad situations—changing their views of the world in order to feel better about the world in which they find themselves. For instance, psychologists Camille Wortman and Roxy Silver show that people cope with loss far better than most of us would expect.

Psychologists Shelley Taylor and Jonathan Brown argue that certain kinds and amounts of self-deception are the cornerstones of mental health. On the other hand, psychologist Roy Baumeister argues that self-deception has a cost, and that people who fool themselves about their own wonderfulness are a threat to themselves and others.

Question
People change their views of reality in order to feel better about it, but should we teach and encourage or discourage such behavior?

Readings
C.B. Wortman and R.C. Silver, "The Myths of Coping with Loss Revisited," in Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping, and Care ed. M. S. Stroebe and R. O. Hansson (Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, 2001) 405-429.

S.E. Taylor and J.D. Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social-Psychological Perspective on Mental Health," Psychological Bulletin, 103, 193-210 (1988).

R.F. Baumeister, "Violent Pride: Do People Turn Violent Because of Self-Hate, or Self-Love?" Scientific American, 284, 96-101 (2001).

Immune to Reality 09

In the previous chapter I argued that people are quite good at changing their views of the world in order to change the way they feel about it. In Chapter 9, I argue that people are typically unaware that they have this talent. This lack of self-insight not only causes people to underestimate their future happiness, but it also causes them to do things that will undermine it, such as shopping in stores with liberal return policies, or seeking information about their secret admirers. Psychologist Daniel Gilbert (who often talks about himself in the third person) suggests that this tendency may even help explain why people believe in God. Psychologist Barry Schwartz asks whether the freedom to choose and to change one's mind might diminish, rather than enhance, happiness.

Question
If people really are happier with choices when they can't undo them, then perhaps divorce should be illegal. How do we balance the costs of too little and too much freedom of choice?

Readings
D. T. Gilbert, "The vagaries of religious experience," Edge, September 27 (2005).

B. Schwartz, "Self-Determination: The Tyranny of Freedom," American Psychologist, 55, 79-88 (2000).

Once Bitten 10

In this and the next chapter I ask whether and how people can overcome the errors that I describe in the previous chapters.

It is easy to understand why people make mistakes when they are doing something they've never done before. But why do people make mistakes when they are doing something they've done a thousand times? In Chapter 10, I argue that we often don't learn from our own experience because we often don't remember that experience accurately.

Psychologist Dan Schacter describes the tricks that memory can play on us, and psychologists Dan Ariely and Ziv Carmon show that memories of emotional experiences tend to leave out information about how long those experiences lasted.

Question

Which is more important—experience or memory of experience? If you could have an hour of ecstasy that you'd forever remember as torture, or an hour of torture that you'd forever remember as ecstasy, which would you prefer?

Readings

"The Sin of Bias" in D.L. Schacter, The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers(New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2001), 138-160.

D. Ariely and Z. Carmon, "Summary Assessment of Experiences: The Whole Is Different from the Sum of Its Parts," in Time and Decision, ed. G. Loewenstein, D. Read, and R. F. Baumeister (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003) 323-49.

Reporting Live from Tomorrow 11

If we don't learn from our own experience, can we learn from the experience of others? In Chapter 11, I claim that (a) we learn a lot from others, and a lot of what we learn is wrong, and (b) we don't learn much from others and much of what we don't learn is right. It sounds like I'm having it both ways, doesn't it? In fact, as I explain in this chapter, these two claims are not contradictory.

Psychologist Susan Blackmore describes the science of memes, which provides a way to think about how ideas (e.g., ideas about happiness) are transmitted from one human mind to another. One of the ideas that people transmit is that happiness comes from material wealth, and the economist Robert Frank explodes that myth. Sort of.

Question
Should we or should we not attempt to debunk the myths that hold societies together but that reduce individual happiness?

Readings
S. Blackmore, "The Origin of Language" and "Meme-Gene Coevolution" in The Meme Machine(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82-107.

R.H. Frank, "How Not to Buy Happiness," Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 133, 69-79.

Afterword 12

This is the chapter in which we hug, say goodbye to each other, and promise to stay in touch but never really do.

But seriously, this chapter is a brief, closing meditation on the book's main theme. It doesn't present new information as much as it attempts to rise up above the old information and see it from a distance. This is the meeting in which I ask students to talk about what they've learned, why they should care about what they've learned, and most importantly, what they didn't learn but wish they had.