For several years philosophy professor Christine Vitrano has been spreading the word in lectures and writing about happiness and its many faces. As you’ll learn below, the visages of happiness have changed over the centuries, and not all of them are the smiley ones of popular psychology books. With a focus on ethics, Vitrano joins the ancient and the modern, and she is now (appropriately enough) working on a book about happiness. At our invitation she agreed – happily! – to write the overview you’ll read here.

The Search for Happiness Should Begin with a Question

By Christine Vitrano, Philosophy

All of us want to be happy, but if asked to explain the nature of happiness, we find that this familiar concept becomes obscure. Perhaps such elusiveness explains the fascination with happiness that extends back to the ancient Greeks.

Although philosophy has had a rich history of theorizing about happiness, today the study of the subject is dominated by empirically minded researchers in other disciplines. The years during which I was writing my dissertation on happiness saw the rise of the positive psychology movement. While I was acquainting myself with the philosophical literature on happiness, I noticed an increasing number of books, magazine articles and television segments focused on this new empirical research. But, although provocative, this new empirical research does not address philosophical questions about the nature and value of happiness. Researchers in this recent field generally assume that the concept of happiness is something that can be measured, and their work usually focuses on the causes of happiness and ways to increase it. In contrast, philosophers adopt a different starting point, beginning with the question: What is happiness?

Through conceptual analysis, philosophers try to provide meaningful accounts of the nature of happiness and the relation of other values such as intelligence and moral character.

Since completing my dissertation, I have continued to work on issues related to happiness, morality and the good life. I have also developed a course on happiness that is now regularly offered by the philosophy
In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says pleasure is not to be equated with happiness:

Now for most men their pleasures are in conflict with one another because these are not by nature pleasant, but the lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and virtuous actions are such . . . Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world, and these attributes are not severed . . .

In his reply to these challenges, Mill introduced the distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Mill argues that all pleasures are not equal, for some pleasures are intrinsically more valuable than others. According to Mill, higher pleasures, which involve the intellect, are intrinsically better than lower pleasures, which arise from bodily sensations and are typically enjoyed by animals. We can evaluate the merits of the two kinds of pleasures by appealing to someone who has experienced both, for, according to Mill, no person would be willing to trade a higher pleasure for the lower, even if the higher is more difficult to obtain.

Mill's introduction of higher and lower pleasures adds an objective element to his view of happiness. Although Mill is a hedonist who reduces happiness to pleasure, his view is closer to the Aristotelian perspective that connects happiness with what is unique about human beings, namely our intellectual and moral capacities. Like Mill, many contemporary philosophers have been influenced by the Aristotelian conception of happiness, and their accounts often include various normative constraints on how one can pursue happiness. My own view is that happiness is best represented by the life satisfaction view, a subjective theory that judges a person as happy when she is satisfied with her life or views it positively. The more positive her outlook, the happier she will be. According to the life satisfaction view, when we say that someone is happy, we imply nothing about the goodness of her life independent of her own perceptions. Happiness represents an independent evaluative domain, which is distinct from a person's moral and intellectual character.

The Aristotelian perspective denies the happiness of anyone who fails to achieve a life of moral and intellectual virtue, but I believe this approach fundamentally misconstrues ordinary people's behavior and motivations, resulting in a theory that is severed from reality. After all, we do find "happy" immoralists, people who knowingly break the rules of society and appear unaffected by it. Furthermore, we frequently understand people's behavior by referring to their belief that such behavior will increase their happiness, even when that behavior is self-destructive or immoral. If we cannot explain their motivation in terms of happiness, how can we explain why they act immorally or contrary to their own well-being?
One reason many philosophers find the Aristotelian perspective appealing is that it makes all immoral behavior irrational. Once you recognize the independence of morality and happiness, you introduce the possibility that one can have rational reasons for behaving immorally, and you must face the dreaded question of why one should be moral, if being moral doesn’t make one happy. The Aristotelian outlook offers an easy reply: Being moral will make you happy. But let’s be realist: Using the terms “moral” and “happy” in a modern context, and linking them in an Aristotelian way, clashes with life as we know it today. People have reasons for acting immorally, and we should not pretend we live in a world in which all happy people are moral, and all immoral people are doomed to unhappiness.

Therefore I believe that recognizing the independence of happiness provides philosophers with the resources needed to characterize accurately people’s motivations and behavior. The claim that happiness is an independent evaluative domain implies that considerations of happiness may provide one with reasons for acting that conflict with other considerations, such as moral or prudential duties. The upshot of the life satisfaction view is that while happiness is widely desired, it is only one good among others.

I would like to conclude by relating an experience I had while traveling in East Africa. Our party had the opportunity to visit a traditional Maasai village in Kenya, and on the way our tour guide gave us a brief lesson on their culture. He explained that the Maasai have a nomadic lifestyle revolving around their cattle. The Maasai live in small huts made out of cow dung and sleep on beds made from the cowhides. The cattle also provide food for the Maasai, whose diet consists of cattle meat, milk and blood. So the wealth of the Maasai is measured solely in terms of their cattle, amassing other material possessions is useless.

As we approached the village, our guide issued a stern warning: “Do not pity these people. They are happy.” I was just completing my dissertation at this time, and I took to heart what he meant. He was urging us not to judge the Maasai on their comparative lack of material possessions but to look instead at how they live, and more importantly, to appreciate their lives from their own perspective. When we met with the Maasai, it was clear they were happy, taking great pride in their traditional lifestyle. In short, the satisfaction they found in their ways is after all the essence of happiness.

We Have Concluded: Brooklyn College Professors Are the Happiest of All

By Ron Howell

I came away from Christine Vitran’s thought-provoking piece believing college professors – lovers of knowledge, music, rocks, canals and pretty much anything else – must be the happiest people around, by the standards of anyone, Aristotelian or hedonistic.

And I also came to believe that the center of academic pleasure was a campus in Brooklyn.

To confirm my theories, I rushed to the outsized virtual Go...

Ellen Fried, Children’s Studies, was a principal speaker at the panel discussion “Modern Slavery: The Trafficking of Women and Children,” as part of the Justice Speaks Lunch Series at New York Law School (October 13, 2010).

Yu Gao, Psychology, received the Young Experimental Scholar Award from the Academy of Experimental Criminology, at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology, held in San Francisco, Calif. (November 19, 2010). Gao also gave a talk, “Early P300 Reduction Predisposes to Criminal Behavior in Adulthood,” at the conference.

Brian Gibney, Chemistry, wrote “Metallopeptides as Tools to Understand Metalloprotein Folding and Stability” in Protein Folding and Metal Ions – Mechanisms, Biology and Disease (CRC Press, 2011) and presented the lecture entitled “Developments of an electrochemical method to predict ferric and ferrous heme binding constants in heme proteins” at the 24th National Meeting & Exhibition of the American Chemical Society on March 27, 2011. He was also elected secretary of the New York Local Section of the American Chemical Society.


[The following entry was omitted inadvertently from the previous newsletter.]


Rosamond King, English, received a 2011-2012 Career Enhancement Fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, which she will use to complete a manuscript entitled “Island Bodies: Transgressive Caribbean Sexualities” (March 2011). Also in March 2011, King gave


Gertrude Lenzer, Children’s Studies and Sociology, spoke at a panel discussion on Children’s Rights hosted by Amnesty International Group in New York City on December 8, 2010, an event that focused on global children’s rights, especially as they pertain to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Lenzer was also a panel participant at The CUNY Black Male Initiative Fifth Annual Conference, which was called to examine “The Politics of Progress from Abolitionist Frederick Douglass to President Barack Obama.” The conference was at LaGuardia Community College on October 1, 2010, and Lenzer’s session was entitled “Mirror to America: The Life and Legacy of John Hope Franklin.”

Tomas Lopez-Pumarejo, Finance and Business Management, wrote “Television and New Media: U.S. WebNovelas,” in Guionactualidad, the online journal of the University of Barcelona’s master’s scriptwriting program, (October 5, 2010); also in Guionactualidad, on October 10, 2010, he wrote “Shopping and the U.S. Hispanic’s Cultural Citizenship,” which was about Brooklyn College Professor Irene Sosa’s documentary, Shopping to Belong. (Sosa is in the Television and Radio Department.) He was a primary source for an article headlined “Expert Forecasts that by 2017 People Will Watch More Series on Cell Phones than on TV,” which ran on the Web site Emol in October 2010. He was also an interviewed source for an article in La Nacion, October 12, that was headlined “Latín America Foresees Better Public Television,” as well as for an ABC News October 13 article titled “By 2017 People Will Watch More Series on Cell Phones than on TV.”


Laura C. Reigada, Psychology, presented “Preparing for and Attending College, Special Considerations for Youth with IBD” at Crohr’s and Colitis Third Annual Research Day, in New York, N.Y. (October, 2010).

Howard Zeng, Physical Education and Exercise Science, attended the 2011 American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance National Convention and presented a research study, “Principals’ Perception of Urban Schools during the G20 Summit in Seoul, South Korea, I February 2011; and “The Impact of Stop and Frisk Policing” with State Assembly member Hakeem Jeffries, at Fort Greene SNAP, Brooklyn, N.Y., in January 2011.


Isabelle Barrière, Speech Communication Arts and Science, co-wrote “Comprehension of infrequent subject-agreement forms: Evidence from French-learning children” with co-authors Geraldine Legendre, Johns Hopkins University; Louise Goyet and Thierry Nazi, Paris Descartes University and CNRS, published in Child Development, 81, 6 (December 2010). She also coauthored “New Evidence of French-Learning Infants’ Sensitivity to Irregular Subject-Verb Agreement at 18 Months” with Goyet, Nazzi, Legendre and Sarah Kresh of the CUNY Courant Centre Evolution of Social Behaviour, in February 2011, in collaboration with board members Dr. Joan Silik (UCLA), Dr. Joanna Setchell (Durham University, U.K.), Dr. Redouan Bshary (Universite de Neuchâtel, Switzerland) and Dr. Robin Dunbar (University of Oxford, U.K.).


Brian Gibney, Chemistry, co-wrote with David R. Benson and Hao Zhu, the University of Kansas, “Study of the individual cytochrome b5 and cytochrome b5 reductase domains of Ncb5or reveals a unique heme pocket and a possible role of the CS domain,” which appeared in the Journal of Biological Chemistry, 285, 30181-30191.

Collaborations

Olympia Hadjiliadis, Mathematics


David Grubbs, Conservatory of Music, performed concerts in Italy in November 2010, and presented a collaborative performance with Susan Howe at Wesleyan University in December 2010. With Columbia University’s Branden W. Joseph, he co-curated the three-evening event “Theoretical Music: No Wave, New Music, and the New York Art Scene, 1978-1983” at ISSUE Project Room in November 2010. His recent public talks include the Goethe-Institut (New York), Wesleyan University, the EMP Pop Conference at UCLA and the CLINY Graduate Center. His solo-guitar composition “To Know a Veil” appears on the soundtrack album Strade Trasparenti (Staubgold, 2011).

[The following entry was omitted inadvertently from the previous newsletter.]

Shang E. Ha, Political Science, co-authored “Yes, But What’s the Mechanism? (Do Not Expect an Easy Answer)” in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 98, no. 4 (2010), with John G. Bullock and Donald P. Green, Yale University (April 2010). He also presented a paper, “Personality Traits and Correct Voting” (co-authored with Richard R. Lau, Rutgers University), at the 2010 Annual Meeting of American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C. (September 2010). He received a Social Science Korea Research Grant (2010-2013) from the National Research Foundation of Korea for a team project on the causes and consequences of inequalities in the Web-based social networks. (The principal investigator is Yong-Hak Kim of Yonsei University, Korea.)

Olympia Hadjiliadis, Mathematics, co-presented “Sequential Classification in Point Clouds of Urban Scenes” with I. Stamos of Hunter College, at the Proceedings of the Fifth International Symposium on 3D Data Processing, Visualization, and Transmission, in Paris, France. The presentations were published by the organizers in October 2010.

Natalie Kacinik, Psychology, co-authored “A bad taste in the mouth: Gustatory disgust influences moral judgment” in Psychological Science, 22, 295-299 (March, 2011), with her doctoral student Kendall Eskine, and Jesse Prince, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the Graduate Center.


Gertrud Lenzer and Loretta Chin, Children’s Studies Center, presented testimony (pgs. 70-74 and 113-119) on behalf of the Children’s Studies Center at the New York City Council Juvenile Justice Committee and General Welfare Committee Public Hearing on “Oversight: The Mayor’s Proposal to Overhaul the New York State Juvenile Justice System,” concerning Bill A00644, for an independent Office of the Child Advocate for New York, requesting the committee to consider “an entity of oversight for the protection of the civil, constitutional and human rights of all children and youth in the systems of dependency and juvenile and criminal justice” (January 26, 2011).


Michael Meagher, Education, presented “When will I learn to be a mathematics teacher?: Alternatively certified teachers, a case study,” with Andrew Brantlinger of the University of Maryland at the 32nd Annual Meeting of the North American Chapter of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education in Columbus, Ohio, in October 2010.

Margaret-Ellen Pipe, Psychology, co-wrote, with Debra A. Poole from Central Michigan University and Maggie Bruck from Johns Hopkins University, “Forensic interviewing aids: Do props help children answer questions about touching?” in Current Directions in Psychological Science, 20, 11-15, 2011; and with Karen Salmon at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand,


Barbara Rosenfeld and Sharon O’Connor-Petruso, Education, contributed “Rudeness in the Classroom: A Survey of College Students’ Perceptions of Inappropriate Use of Technology” in the *Thirty-third Annual Proceedings of Selected Research and Development Papers*, for the 2010 National Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 2, 263-266, October 2010.

Nira Reiss, Children’s Studies Center, and Betty Wolder Levin, Health and Nutrition Sciences, presented a paper at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in New Orleans, La., November 2010, titled “Circulation and the Definition of Death: Coming around to ‘cardiac death’ in the context of organ transplantation.”

Deborah J. Walder, Psychology, co-authored with Maureen P. Daly and Luz Ospina of The CUNY Graduate Center, “The Relationships Among Schizotypal Traits, Dermatoglyphics, and Neurocognition Among Healthy Young Adults,” a presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Research in Psychopathology in Seattle, Washington (October 7-10, 2010).