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Happiness

Book review

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### The Happiness Myth

From going toe to toe with Christianity with her book called *Doubt*, to speaking up on suicide awareness in *Stay*, Jennifer Hecht is starting to build up an impressive resume`. Jennifer Hecht, the author of the 2004 Ralph Waldo Emerson award winning book: *The end of the soul*, seeks to prove that the basic modern assumptions about how to be happy are nonsense. To back up this claim, Hecht uses her skills as a historian and incorporates them into this book by comparing our assumptions on modern myths on happiness with previous historical periods.

Hecht focuses on the four largest topics, or in her case “issues”, of happiness that are made visible through historical studies, these four major issues are, drugs, money, bodies and celebration. Hecht also states that although there are other topics that can be looked at such as: love, faith, and art, they aren’t made visible through historical studies, and are “safe from the chuckles of history” (Hecht 9). To Hecht, these are all topics that are badly controlled by historical whims, and we need to rise above today’s version of mythic prattle about them, but still appreciate what they have to offer. Alongside with wisdom, Hecht divides her book based off of these topics, each receiving its own chapter broken into four different sections. Hecht follows a simplistic style by first stating what our modern society assumes on how each of these topics should be looked at in terms of how they represent happiness, then takes a look at how we’ve looked at them in the past, and finally draws any comparisons between the past and the present.

Just to give a couple of examples towards the book's structure, Hecht starts off with *Wisdom*, and breaks it into four sections: Know yourself, control your desires, take what's yours and Remember death. These are the four doctrines found in all happiness theory from wisdom literature, philosophy, psychology and self-help. Hecht basis this chapter after a passage written by Montaigne in 1576, where he questions "what good can we suppose it did Varo and Aristotle to know so many things?" Asking if such knowledge exempted them from human discomforts? Did it free them from the accidents that oppress a porter? Did they derive from logic some conclusion for the gout? In a nutshell Montaigne asked if any happiness can come from learning, saying that he's seen plowmen and artisans that are way happier than those that look to knowledge. Hecht states that these four doctrines are very difficult to follow, and by trying to follow them can lead to one becoming, detached at the thought of death, passionless by trying to control your desires, and vulnerable by trying to know yourself. Hecht's first section in the section is called *Knowing yourself*. In this section Hecht goes over the three major interpretations involved in this "singular injunction": the first being Socratic, having to do with knowing what you believe, the second being Freudian, and that has to do with knowing who you are, and the third is lonely and has to do with training yourself to take your intellect as your own comparison. In the section *Control your desires*, Hecht states that it is not entirely about repressing said desires, but being able to make decisions that go against one's desires because they're obviously the right thing to do. Hecht uses many historical references: from the Buddha's teachings on mastering our worldly desires, to the ideals of stoicism, to Marcus Aurelius' nine rules of coping with pain and anger. In her section titled *Take what's yours* Hecht explains that we should live everyday as we wished we lived them yesterday, meaning that we should find out what path in

life delivers us the most praise. In her section on *remembering death* Hecht finds it odd how much the idea of death has changed over time, and points out that instead of embracing it, and acknowledging its existence, we instead try to forget about it and turn our heads. Hecht goes over posttraumatic bliss, and how throughout history we have tried to induce posttraumatic stress by reminding ourselves of death. In this section Hecht references, Buddha, Aurelius, and Ecclesiastes when she talks about using the knowledge of death to sort of knock ourselves back into reality, and paying attention to living fully, because by doing so it eliminates the fear of death.

Next Hecht moves into the topic of drugs, stating that it is a modern myth that some drugs are good and some are bad. We have this view that prescribing too many “good” drugs, and indulging in “bad” drugs is a negative thing, why? I mean our individual lives include all sorts of intoxicants, stimulants, antidepressants, and other happiness drugs, so why are we mythically against drug use of any kind? Yes, drugs can be dangerous, and she’s not saying to go out and try every drug out there, but she says that the belief of drugs creating a false happiness, is a prejudice, and an assumption on value. In her first section *What Makes a Good Drug Bad* she dives into why we have this view point. Hecht uses a metaphorical scale on what makes a good drug good, and what makes a bad drug bad, saying that our society sees bad drugs as addictive, but “negative drugs” like Marijuana are relatively easy to quit, and it can be relatively easy to deal with an addiction if the society is in on it with you. Another reason is that we want drugs that can fix our problems and make us productive (Zoloft) and we look down on drugs that mask the problem with a gauze like inebriation (Operates). Hecht then goes into the history of opium and cocaine and shows us how they been transformed from “good drugs” into

“bad drugs”. Then in *religion and revelation* she opens your eyes by showing you that a majority of religions promote the use of drugs, like wine with Christianity and Peyote with Native Americans. Finally, in *Music and solace* she talks about how there is a correlation between the mass market that is music and the need for transcendence into bliss with the use of drugs.

Going onto the next section, Hecht looks at the issues when it comes to money, countering the overall happiness myth that “money doesn’t buy happiness” by saying that it’s a false statement. In *Happily Ever After*, she talks about how we grew up with fairy tales because they were examples of people escaping the poverty line, and keeping the “wolf from the door”. Hecht then goes into *Shopping in Abundance* by saying that the shopping mall provides us with more happiness than we actually realize. Times have changed, back then food shopping wasn’t like it is today, and we are happy that we have the opportunity to buy the food that we want, jumping from “real world scarcity to fairy-tale like abundance”. Shopping for clothes offers us freedom from having to wear family cloths or hand me downs. Money and growth has also cut off certain social ties in families, and communities. More people can afford to buy a television and enjoy it in their private homes instead of just going out and socializing within their respective communities. That may be seen as a negative, isolation due to money, but instead it still brings us together due to family and friends still getting together for television shows like American idol, Sex in The City, and television sports. We hold super bowl parties, and get together to watch the ball drop on T.V do we not? Hecht finally states in *How we buy back what money stole*, that the most desirable trait, aside from the rituals and conveniences that money can provide, is the hunt. Yes, the hunt is what gets people into shopping centers, thrift shops, and malls, she backs this up

with a reference to Michael Bardo's lab rat novelty experiment, in which rats experience surges of dopamine as they explore a new cage. Hecht also references Neuroscientist David Lewis that stated "shopping is enormously rewarding to us.", and through his research has shown that as a shopper hunts for an item, finds it, and makes the purchase, levels of dopamine flowing between nerve cells in the brain rise appreciably (Hecht, 169). So in a way, according to Hecht, money can buy happiness.

As I've stated before Hecht pretty much follows this certain style of, looking into modern society's assumptions on happiness for each of the topics, then shows into how these topics have been viewed historically throughout time, and finally shows us how they correlate between the multiple time periods. Now obviously, it's best to read this book in small doses, the reason being, and I cannot stress this enough, she uses a lot of references, in one section (yes one section) there could be at least seven or eight people that she quotes. I mean sure it's divided into four chapters with four sections each, but it's still rather dense. Also I know I didn't really go into *Bodies* (why we should get out of this health craze) and *Celebration* (Let the good times roll, and being alone is apparently atrocious to her), but I decided not to put those in for a reason. The reason being that I really am conflicted about these two chapters, and I'd rather go over my opinion on those in class, so that you can see the pure frustration I have with those two chapters (or at least with *Bodies*). It's a nice book to read over a break, or on vacation, but would I say that I walked away after reading this feeling like It actually taught me something? No, not really, but I'm just one individual, I'd recommend this book if you have the time to actually sit down and read it. She is a little heavy on the references, but it's a history book in a nutshell, so that is to be expected. Also before I forget, here is my opinion on every chapter that I've discussed so far, *Wisdom* is

my favorite, and it may be because that one was the easiest to relate to, but it was more of her speaking one on one to you, and not handing a sea of references for you to drown in. Her topic on money is good, although she really just uses the obvious “you can’t cry on a jet ski” response, and lastly her argument on *Drugs* reminded me of talking to the average pot head in Potsdam that’s devoted most of their high school career towards researching counter arguments to “haters” instead of actually doing well in school, it was a very good argument, but I don’t think it’ll turn any heads.

Work cited

Hecht, Jennifer Michael. *The Happiness Myth: Why What We Think Is Right Is Wrong: A History of What Really Makes Us Happy*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007. Print.