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Interview by Uliana Lushch-Purii

In Happiness And Contemporary Society : Conference Proceedings Volume (Lviv, March, 20-21, 2021). Lviv:

SPOLOM, 2021. P. 130-133. <https://doi.org/10.31108/7.2021.28>

ISBN 978-966-919-697-2

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In terms of my research, what I am up to these days, I'm currently working on a book on the good life. The idea is to situate happiness in the bigger picture. So there is more of the good life than just being happy. Engaging with excellence and beauty – that is what also matters; and, actually, exhibiting excellence in your own life that is also important. Be a good person is the most important thing of all. So I'm thinking about how all these things fit together and how we get our priorities in order. So thing happiness is still something we really need to be focusing on as civilization for one thing – because happiness is among things that matter in life. In general, good people tend to be happier than people who aren't so good.

I'm doing a couple of psychological studies with collaborators who know more scientific methods and that's really fun: one of them is developing a measure of happiness and the other one is studying ordinary concepts of happiness and well-being. That's really exciting and it's also really challenging because psychology alone or philosophy alone are both a lot simpler to do than when you combine them and try to do them both in one thing and to write it up in a way that a journal that is in one or the other discipline would want. I'm being part of a working group with the Vatican on science and ethics for happiness. That's very promising and also bringing religion, science and ethics together to really think about happiness in a deeper sense and in a way that's more engaged with other things that matter in life. And with the pandemic, it's just so important especially to be thinking about a social side of it because we've learnt in the pandemic that health is not just a personal thing, it's a public, it's a shared matter, it's something we are all in it together. Happiness is like that too. I hope we will come out of this with a better sense of how to build happier societies.

Uliana Lushch-Purii, PhD, Associate Professor, Co-founder of The Ukrainian Institute for Happiness Research: In a case when a person pursues her well-being and happiness at the cost of other people's happiness and well-being, can it really be considered as happiness? Are there some moral limits here, moral framework of happiness?

The word happiness in English originally meant something like a good life or flourishing, sort of what Aristotle meant by eudaimonia. Nowadays in my own work and in most of the scientific work it's really just a term for state of mind and the opposite of depression. To say that somebody is happy in that sense of the word isn't a value judgement. So in that sense it's possible for a terrible person to be happy; and it does happen, I think, especially if you live in, say, a traditional society it's ok to conduct war with people outside your group. It might be you are pretty nice people inside your group but outside sanctioned. Then you might not be unhappy. But that doesn't mean that's a good life and that's a good way to live. Thankfully most philosophers' consensus is that

if you live out of morality or at the expense of other people just for your own sake, that's not a good life.

Some philosophers, like Aristotle, would say that true happiness or flourishing does entail being a good person. I don't agree with them there. I actually think it's possible: Chinggis Khan might have flourished but it doesn't seem he was a very good person. At the same time, one of the nice things that we find from the research is that one of the best means for being happy is to be a good person helping others, caring about others. Just to give an example in terms of Covid, one of the things one can do is try to help others. It's harder now because we are not supposed to leave our houses or apartments but one could volunteer to talk to elderly people on the phone. Maybe, if you have a friend who is struggling, one of my favorite things – I have no research on it but it's clearly beneficial – is giving a person who is struggling a chance to help. So you are actually helping others to help because that gives them a sense of agency and control and it makes them feel valued and meaningful. That's one of the worst things about depression: feeling you do not worth much. So if you have a friend who is struggling, maybe, ask them for advice about something. Most people love to help. So it's possible to be happy and selfish, but I think it's really hard though.

So you can have positive emotions, get more positive than negative emotions leading a kind of selfish life but they tend to be less rewarding, it tends not to be fulfilling. The selfish people whom I've known tend to be angry more and more preoccupied with negative things and with what's bad about people. And if you put your head's space into other people being bad it's not a good way to make yourself a worth person. That's just a terrible way to get through life. You should not turn blind-eyed when people are doing bad things but I don't think it's helpful to dwell on other people's deficiencies.

Uliana Lushch-Purii: Our Institute run a sociological study last year on how the Covid-19 quarantine restrictions impact on happiness of the Ukrainians, and we found out that people of young age (18-23) are much more vulnerable in the face of negative external circumstances, their happiness level decreased dramatically. Whereas happiness of mature people (45 years +) is much more sustainable and they still consider themselves happy even though the income decreases and there is much more discomfort in their lives. I think that one of explanations might relate to different life experience. As for Ukrainian context, young people (18-23) were brought up in quite comfortable conditions, they are used to comfort, they have plenty of things available, that's a different social environment they live in compared to people who are over 45. People over 45 have an experience of living in Soviet Union and in the period of its collapse, these were extremely challenging times. Probably, due to this life experience they understand that external circumstances, some restrictions or a decrease in income are not the most important things. They have other priorities, they understand that both worse or better conditions will change and what really matters for happiness remain. What could you say on different happiness experience of people of different age?

I think that's exactly right. But even before the pandemic the mental health of young people is really going down and mental health services at the universities are have been getting swamped. Social media, internet and increasing social isolation plausibly have a lot to do with that.

One of the problems we have in the US is that people's expectations are out of control. So many people are constantly complaining online about different inconveniences: kids' behavior, cancelled events during lockdown. And I think, "Hey, at least you haven't been hit by a truck!.." I mean, yes, lots of things are not good but what's the point of dwelling on it. So I think that a sense of entitlement is expanded, at least, in my culture.

There's also an interesting thought that, maybe, base line under relatively healthy circumstances younger people would tend to be relatively happier but also they are more fragile; and so when you get something like the pandemic it could just swing the other way, whereas older people have been through a lot, as my Dad says, "A big dog of life has been chewing on you" □

I would like to study how the kind of happiness people experience and also what they value changes in different age. When you are younger, you might value what I might call cheerful type of happiness, a high arousal, excitement; as you get older, you develop better skills for coping and everything is not the end of the world, you might both value and experience more of a lower arousal happiness or tranquility type of happiness. A new measure of happiness that I'm working on distinguishes those different types of happiness. It also relates to culture. For example, in East Asia a lower arousal, tranquility is what's valued more. As Americans, we love to smile and be cheerful as you know.

Uliana Lushch-Purii: What can you advise people to boost their happiness?

One of things is finding ways to make your daily routine more meaningful and feel worthwhile. If you have enough time you can learn a new skill like a language or an instrument. Even an easier thing you can do is just cultivate your own capacity for appreciation, so immerse yourself in art, music, literature. And as I said earlier, help people. My friend Matthieu Ricard, he's a Buddhist monk, wrote a book on altruism. It's a wonderful book about how compassion and caring for others is getting out of your head your own problems. This is one of the best things we can do. Also mind training and meditation, but it's does not work for anybody. Cultivating gratitude, more optimistic way of thinking and a sense of acceptance when things don't go well – different things work for different people. To be happy you need not just one things; generally, it's many things that contribute to your happiness. Try to be a person you want to be, develop yourself. I guess the last thing I would mention is being mindful of what you're doing with your attention, where you are directing your attention. So many people do the reverse – just scrolling through the social media mindlessly. Just put the phone down and pick up a book or slow down. In the US we have the rage industry, Fox News for example. People like being angry for some reason. Anger has a place, of course, sometimes we should be angry; but is you spend a lot of time watching the news that make you feel bad and angry, it's harmful. There are sources and news that aren't making us angry: you can be an informed citizen and not being constantly outraged every day.

Uliana Lushch-Purii: Last year at the beginning of the pandemic and lockdown there were a few pessimists telling us that happiness would not be a relevant issue any more because there were more important things on the agenda, like Covid-19, and people would not care about happiness any more. Nevertheless, we kept working and going further, since we believe that it's easier to be happy under the favorable circumstances,

and it's easier to speak about happiness when everyone is already happy, but it's even more important to share knowledge on happiness when it's not easy to be happy. When circumstances are complicated people have a bigger need to search for knowledge on happiness. For this reason, last summer with Roman Purii, we launched an online course popularizing practical knowledge on happiness among a broad audience. What is your opinion on why it is worthwhile to keep working on happiness under such unfavorable circumstances?

Climate crises and climate change is actually one of the main reasons why I study happiness. Just keeping the civilization going through the next century and beyond might be a challenge. I think we will manage to do it, I tend to be an optimist, but part of the problem is that the way we pursue happiness is so dysfunctional and we are destroying the environment. Five years ago, in Saint Louis where I live a family of four needed at least 70 000 \$ just to pay the most basic bills: insurance and childcare, the rent or mortgage. At the same time their ecological footprint is negative. As for decreasing mental health and social distancing – we already had it before Covid-19 and we are just doing it more extremely. So I think having a better sense of what we really need to be happy which materially isn't that much is among the most important tasks. We need to develop skills to be happy. My friend Matthieu Ricard says, "Happiness is a skill". We need to learn to be more resilient for dealing with difficult things. Now during the quarantine it's really challenging, for instance, there is no substitute for being physically face to face but it won't be the last thing we are dealing with. So it should be an opportunity for us to build a more resilient well-being when we can do ok even when things are really ruff. It is going to be challenging further on, climate is going to make life more expensive, there will be lots of migration that people are going to have to deal with. So we need to be more resilient and also to understand how important building community and relationships is. Nature is getting much more important and valuable than it has ever been before: in the conditions of the quarantine, the least thing we can do is to get out of the room and be out among the trees, with the birds.

One more thing we can do is in the schools: teach children skills for flourishing and thinking about what is important in life. Just ask them what really matters: is it really making a lot of money and being popular? I think happiness is more important now than ever. We've got a happiness crisis on our hands and we need to figure out how to deal with that.

Even a simple thing, I've seen so many people who understand at some level that family is the most important thing and happiness is more important than money and status, but they don't think the culture gives them permission to talk about that. My Dad, he was a college Professor, had a student whom he asked: "What do you want to do for living?" A student replied: "I want to make a lot of money", but eventually, he came out and said: "No, it's just if I say anything else like I want to do something worthwhile than people will think that I'm soft or people will just make fun of me". So we've got to change that in the culture so people feel like they have permission to care about the things they actually care about.