Prompt: "The prompt is in the form of a debate resolution, which you can argue either side of (or take a middle course, if you do not lean strongly in one direction or the other)."
Resolved: Happiness is a pernicious fantasy

Happiness: A Pernicious Fantasy?

In this essay, I argue that Happiness is a fantasy, but not necessarily pernicious. Happiness is a fantasy, as it is ever-changing, defined by both the individual and culture, and unachievable. Indeed, fantasies of happiness are pernicious in many ways: the expectation of it causes harm, it limits the range of human experiences and emotions, and it can be used as a tool to justify oppression, inequality, and poverty amongst other social issues. However, fantasies of happiness do not have to be damaging; they can be necessary, as a way of anchoring us in the world and a framework to organize reality. Happiness fantasies could help us construct a narrative of our lives and thus find an identity.

First, happiness is nebulously defined and changes with time. For example, in *Critical Happiness Studies,* Hill et al. contrast Aristotle and Bentham's theories of happiness. Aristotle categorizes happiness into two types: *hedonia* (pursuit of pleasures and *eudaimonia* (pursuit of virtues)*,* considering the first a slavish and lower form of happiness and encouraging only the pursuit of the latter[1]. Conversely, Bentham views happiness as purely hedonic and comprised of "the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain"[2]. Similarly, after offering a brief history of happiness, Cederström writes that happiness "is contingent on the culture in which it emerges", shaped by social and historical factors[3]. Ahmed too traces the history of happiness, writing about Locke and Kant amongst others. Crisp also names three groups of happiness theories: hedonist, desire and objective list and countless theories within each group. Thus, happiness is a fantasy in as it is always shifting and yet always involve some desire, some optimistic vision of how things could be. Furthermore, happiness is also a fantasy as perfect happiness, by any theory, is unachievable. Whether by Aristotle or Bentham, no human can be completely virtuous or live a painless life. Indeed, the number of competing theories suggests that offer a single definition of happiness, or say that happiness is not a fantasy, may involve an 'axiomatic error'[4] where we seek a definition where there is none.

Happiness is pernicious in its black and white moralizing and condemnation of all that is outside of its boundaries. The fantasy of happiness individuals or societies subscribe to defines their actions and attitudes: "conceptions of happiness are central to the conduct of human lives"[5]. Fantasies of happiness become harmful when it (or a specific theory of it) is seen as a normative universalizing ideal, or as Cederström writes, a moralistic fantasy. Any fantasy does not only involve what we wish to be true but also involves its opposite; our fears and things we want to prevent and avoid.[6] In the context of happiness fantasies, the things to avoid are defined as the

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[1] Hill et al., *Critical Happiness Studies,* p.4
[2] Ibid. p.5
[3] Cederström, *Happiness: A Moralistic Fantasy,* p.27
[4] Hill et al., *Critical Happiness Studies,* p.6. Hill quotes Jugureanu, Hughes and Hughes' suggestion that we are making an epistemological fallacy and assuming that happiness has a kind of essence, when it does not.
[5] Cederström, *Happiness: A Moralistic Fantasy,* p.11
[6] Ibid. p.25

negation of what makes us happy: if X makes me happy, then the lack of X or the opposite of X must be bad for me and make me sad. Thus, moralistic fantasy can be dogmatic and self-righteous, it makes us criticize, fear, and hate objects and people that do not lie within the conventional fantasy. Indeed, even contradictory emotions which are normal to any human experience are not allowed - they become pathologized and feared[7].

The moral dimension of happiness fantasies also instills a mode of self-governance, where we punish ourselves for failure to adhere to the "template for a good life"[8] – failure to be happy becomes a failure to be good. Furthermore, these templates leave no room for individuals whose happiness contradicts the mainstream happiness fantasies – be it feminist 'kill joys', the LGBTQ+, diaspora communities or other minorities "alienated from its promise"[9]. Their happiness violates the cohesiveness of society, so they must assimilate or alienate themselves from society and be 'responsible' for their own unhappiness. (For those who affirm sexist fantasies of happiness, it is feminism that makes women unhappy![10]). Segal suggests the same: "women, homosexuals, people of color and post-colonialists seem to be at greatest risk for melancholy and depression"[11].

Happiness fantasies can also be pernicious in their mechanization and commodification of humans. Cederström discusses the corporate discovery of happiness in the 1980s, where happiness becomes a resource and opportunity for companies to increase productivity and "tap full potential" of its workers[12]. The result has generated an industry towards optimization and increasing productivity through engineering happiness as if a human is a machine and happiness electricity. As Segal writes, not only do labourers become commodified, so do consumers who are "competing to improve their personal value and significance through tireless investment in themselves"[13]. Ironically, in praise of authenticity, it destroys authenticity as everyone scrambles for the same 'happy objects' to endlessly become happier and self-optimized.

Politically, happiness is pernicious as it views happiness as an individual undertaking, thus blaming the individual for all her suffering. The 'gospel' of happiness claims that "1. Happiness is our supreme goal 2. Individual problems stem from psychological problems and 3. The psychological problems that underlie our failures and unhappiness are in fact treatable"[14]. The above is perfectly exemplified by Segal's discussion of endemic depression in Islington, the borough of England with the "highest rate of depression and psychosis"[15]. Despite the happiness industry's agenda of uncoupling happiness from material circumstances, it is undeniable that Islington suffers from poverty and inequality. As Segal writes, it seems that depression in Islington is less related to the strictly personal problems and solutions than the cycles of debt that

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[7] Hill et al., *Critical Happiness Studies,* p.8
[8] Cederström, *Happiness: A Moralistic Fantasy,* p.26
[9] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness,* p.27
[10] Ibid. p.56
[11] Segal, *Radical Happiness,* p.52
[12] Cerderström, *Happiness: A Moralistic Fantasy,* p.30
[13] Segal, *Radical Happiness,* p.93
[14] Hill et al., *Critical Happiness Studies,* p.10
[15] Segal, *Radical Happiness,* p.8

entrap individuals in economic misery[16]. Furthermore, happiness can be used as a justification of norms: the image of the 'happy' housewife is used to counter feminist values.

However, happiness fantasies are not always bad. As Cederström writes "happiness organizes our experience of the good life" and "is an essential way to give meaning to reality" [17]. Precisely because they are unattainable, happiness is powerfully organizing and always provides something to strive towards, thus giving our actions direction. Ahmed's analysis of the film *Bend It Like Beckham* provides an example. Ahmed criticizes Jess's pursuit of playing the British national sport as "leaving Indian culture behind", but without her fantasy of becoming like Beckham, where would Jess be? The happiness fantasy motivates her, gives her enjoyment in playing the sport, and makes her the heroine of a quest. This fantasy relates to Segal's discussion of love: whether for a person, activity, animal or thing, love inspires "a promise of ontological rootedness, what seems to confirm our own existence, enabling us to feel more at one with the world"[18]. Then, as Ahmed writes, happiness is 'end-oriented' and involves intentionality towards this end, such that "some things become happy for us"[19]. Thus, happiness fantasises enable us to love – like how Jess loves soccer – and makes things happy for us. With no fantasy and no love, we become entrapped in meaninglessness, "in some desert-like state of ontological impoverishment."[20]

In conclusion, although fantasies of happiness can be pernicious, they are necessary to living a human life. Without any sort of fantasy for happiness and the hope in the future that it inspires, life would become incomprehensible - an endemic of ennui would assume. Indeed, we should always keep ourselves at a critical distance from the dominant happiness fantasies that government and companies may try to sell us. But we should not be afraid to construct our own happiness fantasies to take control of our reality and identity. Even if happiness as a universal has no essence, we can define the essence of the particular happiness in ourselves.

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[16] Ibid. p.9

[17] Cederström, *Happiness: A Moralistic Fantasy,* p.24

[18] Segal, *Radical Happiness,* p.155

[19] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness,* p.26

[20] Segal, *Radical Happiness,* p.150