



Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy

Eric G. Wilson

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Americans are addicted to happiness. When we're not popping pills, we leaf through scientific studies that take for granted our quest for happiness, or read self-help books by everyone from armchair philosophers and clinical psychologists to the Dalai Lama on how to achieve a trouble-free life: *Stumbling on Happiness*; *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*; *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*. The titles themselves draw a stark portrait of the war on melancholy.

More than any other generation, Americans of today believe in the transformative power of positive thinking. But who says we're *supposed* to be happy? Where does it say that in the Bible, or in the Constitution? In *Against Happiness*, the scholar Eric G. Wilson argues that melancholia is necessary to any thriving culture, that it is the muse of great literature, painting, music, and innovation—and that it is the force underlying original insights. Francisco Goya, Emily Dickinson, Marcel Proust, and Abraham Lincoln were all confirmed melancholics. So enough Prozac-ing of our brains. Let's embrace our depressive sides as the wellspring of creativity. What most people take for contentment, Wilson argues, is living death, and what the majority takes for depression is a vital force. In *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*, Wilson suggests it would be better to relish the blues that make humans people.

Eric G. Wilson is the Thomas H. Pritchard Professor of English at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The recipient of several important awards, including a National Humanities Center year-long fellowship, he is the author of five books on the relationship between literature and psychology. Consumer trends and popular medical and psychological interests indicate that Americans are addicted to happiness. At an increasing rate, they pop pills, seek both clinical and non-traditional therapies, read recent scientific studies that take for granted the population's quest for happiness, or buy self-help books by everyone from armchair philosophers and clinical psychologists to the Dalai Lama on how to achieve a trouble-free life: *Stumbling on Happiness*, *Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*. The titles themselves draw a stark portrait of the war on melancholy.

More than any other generation, Americans today believe in the transformative power of positive thinking. Happiness is considered a liberty, if not an ultimate life goal. But the scholar Eric G. Wilson argues that melancholia is necessary to any thriving culture, that it is the muse of great literature, painting, music, and innovation—and that it is the force underlying original insights. Francisco Goya, Emily Dickinson, Marcel Proust, and Abraham Lincoln—all confirmed melancholics.

What most people take for contentment, Wilson argues, is living death, and what the majority sees as depressive is a vital force that inspires creativity, spurs ambition, and helps people form more intimate bonds with one another. It's time to throw off the shackles of positivity and relish the blues that make us human. "Mr. Wilson's basic thesis is that, without suffering, the human soul becomes stagnant and empty . . . We must live between the poles of sadness and joy and not try to expunge misery from our lives. Mr. Wilson makes a strong case . . . to deny our essential sadness in the face of a tragic world is to suppress a large part of what we are as human beings."—**Colin McGinn, *The Wall Street Journal***

"Utilitarianism is the philosophical doctrine according to which happiness is the sole intrinsic value—the only thing that is good in itself. Although invented by 19th-century Britons, notably Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill, utilitarianism has some claim to be the official philosophy of the U.S.A. or, as a philosopher might

have it, the 'Utilitarian States of America.' In America, happiness is what makes life good, and unhappiness is what makes it bad. We must therefore seize the former and avoid the latter. Eric G. Wilson, a professor of English at Wake Forest University, disagrees, contending that utilitarianism has it the wrong way around. The 'happy types,' as he calls them, are apt to be bland, superficial, static, hollow, one-sided, bovine, acquisitive, deluded and foolish. Sold on the ideal of the happy smile and the cheerful salutation, they patrol the malls in dull uniformity, zombie-like, searching for contentment and pleasure, locked inside their own dreams of a secure and unblemished world, oblivious to objective reality, cocooned in a protective layer of bemused well-being . . . Mr. Wilson's basic thesis is that, without suffering, the human soul becomes stagnant and empty. We can only reach our full potential through pain—not a pathological kind of pain but the kind that comes from a recognition of death, decay and the bad day (or decade). We must live between the poles of sadness and joy and not try to expunge misery from our lives. Mr. Wilson makes a strong case for this anti-utilitarianism, in prose both spare and lavish. (Of Coleridge he writes: 'He was hurt into these sublimities. He was axed into ecstasy.') And indeed, to deny our essential sadness in the face of a tragic world is to suppress a large part of what we are as human beings. It is to retreat into a fearful solipsism, refusing to peep out into the world beyond—an approach to life that is all the more fatuous in that it can never succeed . . . Mr. Wilson's case for the dark night of the soul brings a much needed corrective to today's mania for cheerfulness. One would almost say that, in its eloquent contrarianism and earnest search for meaning, *Against Happiness* lifts the spirits."—**Colin McGinn, *The Wall Street Journal***

"[Wilson has] the passionate soul of a nineteenth-century romantic who, made wise by encounters with his own personal darkness, invites readers to share his reverence for nature and exuberance for life. Providing a powerful literary complement to recent psychological discussions of melancholy . . . this treatment is variously gloomy and ecstatic, infuriating and even inspiring."—**Booklist**

"An impassioned, compelling, dare I say poetic, argument on behalf of those who 'labor in the fields of sadness' . . . a loose and compelling argument for fully embracing one's existence, for it is a miracle itself — a call to live hard and full, to participate in the great rondure of life and to be aware of the fact that no one perspective on the world is ever finally true."—**Minneapolis Star Tribune**

"[A] lively, reasoned call for the preservation of melancholy in the face of all-too-rampant cheerfulness . . . pithy and epigrammatic."—**Bookforum**

"Wilson's argument is important, and he makes it with passion."—**Raleigh News and Observer**

"This slender, powerful salvo offers a sure-to-be controversial alternative to the recent cottage industry of high-brow happiness books. Wilson, chair of Wake Forest University's English Department, claims that Americans today are too interested in being happy. (He points to the widespread use of antidepressants as exhibit A.) It is inauthentic and shallow, charges Wilson, to relentlessly seek happiness in a world full of tragedy. While he does not want to 'romanticize clinical depression,' Wilson argues forcefully that 'melancholia' is a necessary ingredient of any culture that wishes to be innovative or inventive. In particular, we need melancholy if we want to make true, beautiful art. Though others have written on the possible connections between creativity and melancholy, Wilson's meditations about artists ranging from Melville to John Lennon are stirring. Wilson calls for Americans to recognize and embrace melancholia, and he praises as bold radicals those who already live with the truth of melancholy . . . [a] provocative cultural analysis."—**Publishers Weekly**

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