

The Art of Being Unhappy

Dirk De Wachter

An extract

Original title De kunst van het ongelukkig zijn
Publisher Lannoo Campus, 2019

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Laura Vroomen

© Dirk De Wachter/Laura Vroomen/Lannoo Campus/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

Preface

What is happiness?

My late father was a lovely man. My mother's passing left him bereft, robbed of purpose and meaning, isolated from everything he held dear. He willed himself to go on, to dutifully go about his business as usual, albeit without his indispensable other half. Every day, he would read from his meticulously kept diaries to remind himself of everything they had done together during all those beautiful years. As various physical ailments stripped him of more and more faculties, he could soon no longer read or enjoy Mozart, his favourite composer. Yet his mind remained exceptionally sharp and lucid. My brother and I tried to visit or take him out as often as possible. My brother, especially. Few people are as caring as he is. My father was attentive, affable, accommodating, but we were clearly fighting a losing battle. Despite our best efforts, he felt adrift. Every time he would make a point of asking about the possibility of euthanasia, and every time he would conclude that it went against his principles. This helplessness hit me hard, it seemed to get under my skin, like a growth that hampers movement and after a while even hurts when you are at rest. That's life, I realise that only too well; lots of people end up having similar experiences of illness and old age and death. They are not hugely traumatic events of the kind I often hear about in my practice. And yet it left me a little unhappy, like a dissonant note in an otherwise beautiful melody, like a sudden downpour on a sunny day.

It gets you thinking: happiness, what's it all about?

Excerpt from Part 1

Happiness?

Before we can talk about unhappiness, I think it would be good to take a closer look at this happiness we're all pursuing.

When, back in the 1980s, I was working on my doctorate and I would ask the legendary Flemish philosopher Leo Apostel a question, he would always, in a firm but friendly way,

insist on clear definitions before proceeding. He was one of the wisest people I have had the privilege of meeting. Instead of answering my question, he would enquire: 'What exactly to you mean?'

Thinking about this, I decided to consult the dictionary before starting this book, in search of a definition of 'happy'. Oxford Languages, the first search result on Google, offers this:

- 1) feeling or showing pleasure or contentment
- 2) fortunate and convenient

These appear to be two distinct meanings. The first describes 'happy' as a personal and ephemeral feeling, the second as a quality dependent on external factors. It should come as no surprise that it is this duality that we will be talking about. Is happiness highly individual and fleeting, or does our environment have a long-term influence on it?

The biological cause of a moment of happiness has been established: on experiencing pleasure, the hypophysis, or pituitary, an endocrine gland at the base of our brain, secretes endorphins (hormones or neurotransmitters). The effect is short-lived. Even after receiving great news or while enjoying something immensely, the pleasant sensations that originate from complex signals in the brain do not last very long. We are not equipped with a happiness gene that lets us live in a state of permanent bliss. That said, some people are better than others at feeling happy. In a radio series called *Dat heet dan gelukkig zijn* (loosely translated as 'That's happiness for you'), Christine Van Broeckhoven, the grande dame of Belgian molecular genetics, speaks of 'genetic potential' or a 'congenital behavioural personality'. This happiness gene as well as the meaning and purpose gene have attracted a great deal of research. Meike Bartels (Professor in Genetics and Wellbeing) is quoted as saying in a Dutch newspaper: 'Some people have a genetic predisposition to happiness and experience it more readily than others. That's not to say that a certain level of happiness is out of reach for those who are less equipped. They just have to work harder at it (*Trouw*, 10 October 2018).'

This may sound harsh to those who are just that little bit more vulnerable than others. It is those fragile and damaged people among us that I tend to see in my practice – and not typically when they are in high spirits. Sometimes I tell them that they don't always have to fight the sombre feelings. They don't have to put in the 'hard work' non-stop. If you're not ready to return to work, then that's ok. It's good to occasionally ease up on the effort to get better again. It's fine to go with the flow every now and then. When I say that, patients are often visibly relieved. Not only because they're given permission to remain at home and signed off work a little longer, but mainly because they see that I believe them. When you're extra-sensitive, you shouldn't be expected to work harder at your happiness.

This happiness gene that humans possess does not work in isolation. The environment we live in is equally important. Our bodies and genetics are in the world and cannot be understood independently of each other. Or, as Heidegger puts it: *Dasein*, or existence, is *in der Welt sein*, or 'being in the world'. We exist by our presence in the world. With a degree of luck, some material comfort as well as the inherited genetic capacity to be happy, we certainly have a better chance at a good life. Unfortunately, there are people who, despite a healthy parent-child attachment and prosperity, are incapable of living happy lives and who experience depression from an early age. Some children commit suicide because life is too

much for them – and that’s without major trauma. Sometimes even the best psychiatric treatment is not enough. Thankfully, they are the exceptions.

[...]

My work as a psychiatrist confirms that many people are unhappy. I have too much to do, and the waiting lists for mental health services are growing longer and longer. How can this be? I thought we never had it so good? There is no war on our doorstep, and most people do not live in abject poverty. Despite living in a welfare state, relatively few experience well-being. Yet in this culture of ours, which could, without exaggeration, be described as a happiness cult happiness tops wish lists. Everything revolves around the obsessive pursuit of happiness.

‘Happy New Year!’ ‘Happy birthday!’ We keep wishing each other happiness. Since time immemorial, happiness has been the greatest good. We all want it, for ourselves and for our children, sometimes to the point of obsession. As long as you’re happy! Being happy, now and forevermore, has become the ultimate goal in life.

And not just that. It seems that in our western society anyone can realise that goal single-handedly, because we’re convinced that we make our own happiness. This world is saturated with the idea that we can shape our lives and the happiness we expect it to bring. We are all managers of *Me Inc.*, our autonomous and forceful ego. It appears that we want to create paradise right here and now. What else are we to do, now that most of us no longer believe in a paradise beyond this earthly life. ‘It’s over now, the water and the wine. We were broken then, but now we’re borderline,’ as Leonard Cohen sings in the final lines of his final record.

[...]

Metropolitan man

If there is evidence that being around people makes you happy, it follows that loneliness makes you unhappier. This might explain why we are not happier than, say, two hundred years ago, although we are materially better off in large parts of the world.

Schopenhauer thought a person is only truly free when he can be alone with himself. I beg to differ. I see too many lonely people in my practice. They come to me because they struggle to cope with the genuine isolation they experience in the metropolis, without a relationship and without a network. They come unstuck. The connections that family and club life used to give us are crumbling. Secularisation plays a role too: we have abandoned the structures that once gave us meaning. Modern metropolitan man is alone with himself; he has no god, no loved one, no future. But solitary freedom is an illusion, if you ask me. You cannot get by without the other. Man exists in the gaze of the other. That does not mean we should go back to the conservative living arrangements of the past. There are alternatives, many in fact. What is certain is that man is condemned to being with others. Being without others is the end of real life.

Loneliness is the common thread running through all psychiatric pathologies. The subjective feeling of having no one to turn to with your sadness is pervasive. Sometimes people can only talk to their psychiatrist. I have a patient who has been coming to me every week for thirty years. These days she takes a taxi from the hospital and uses a

walking frame. That one hour a week is the only moment she truly exists, she told her doctor on the geriatric ward. That is, quite frankly, a huge responsibility, which occasionally makes me feel lonely in turn since patient confidentiality forces me to be extremely discreet.

Lonely people in my practice feel rejected and misunderstood and have trouble forming attachments. You could argue that my patients' problems do not apply to society as a whole. But I do not see it that way: these are sensitive individuals, who think about things more deeply and feel societal issues more acutely. It is vital to really listen to them, precisely because they give us early warning signs. I always tell my assistants: first and most importantly, listen to the patients. They are the canaries in the coalmine.

Generation lost

Contemporary society is riddled with loneliness. It is a trend that appears to be at odds with the egocentric boastfulness we find on Facebook and Instagram. But there is a direct correlation. The self-centred pursuit of happiness that we see on social media leaves no room for empathy. Many young people appear to lose their way and feel abandoned. Research has shown that one in five first-year students in higher education experience depressive thoughts. In response to these figures, KU Leuven developed a project called MindMates. The university now takes on slightly older students to support new arrivals, to meet up with them and ease their loneliness a bit. Workshops teach these buddies to recognise a depression and to find words for sadness. But above all it teaches them to listen. The premise is simple: without a good connection with another person, life is a struggle. My colleague Paul Verhaeghe at Ghent University has written that what is often lacking is the love for oneself, which is an important condition for attachment: 'The adolescent's excessive self-love conceals immense doubt: am I good enough, good-looking enough, does anyone really see me?' (*Intimiteit (Intimacy)*, p. 17)

We may have near-instant access to one another via the internet, but digital contact is mostly rather superficial. We do not get to talk enough and rarely see one another in person. Yet it is the presence of and interaction with others that gives meaning to life. We should be able to share experiences and ideas, and especially unhappy thoughts, with mutual attentiveness.

The aforementioned National Happiness Study by Lieven Annemans reveals that nearly half (46 per cent) of Belgians feel lonely some or all of the time. This staggeringly high figure also includes young people. Of Belgians in the age category 20 – 34, the majority (54 per cent) feels lonely some or all of the time. A similar study was carried out in the Netherlands by government research platform *Volksgezondheid en Zorg* (Public Health and Health Care). Of those questioned aged between 19 and 85+, 38 to 60 per cent feel lonely. This feeling intensifies with age. And 10 per cent or more feel deeply lonely. People living alone suffer the most.

These figures demand attention. Evidently, having huge numbers of friends on Facebook does nothing to alleviate loneliness. We may have great instant communication channels – Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp – and we are constantly chatting to others behind our screens, but we are no longer meeting up in person. It's not that we should do away with these handy tools, by no means. But they are not fit for purpose. They do not meet our deeply felt need to be surrounded by others. Use them to organise get-togethers in real life, not to cut yourself off.

Some disagree with me and argue that loneliness is of all times, that it is one of mankind's existential inevitabilities. Sure, they may have a point. But since I am working with people in this day and age, I want to explore options and hopeful solutions in our time. New media are extremely focused on the individual, on the aforementioned *Me Inc.*, and this has encroached on our time together. Human life needs both dimensions: the individual – feeling that you can shape your own life – and the communal. I strongly believe we ought to start focusing more on the latter again, on communality. There lies our challenge.

What about policy?

Lieven Annemans sees tackling the rise of loneliness as a shared responsibility between the individual and the government. 'The UK recently appointed a Minister for Loneliness. A clear signal. I believe that in Belgium the local levels of government are closest to the people and therefore in the best position to make a difference' (www.gelukkigebelgen.be). Politics has a role to play, absolutely, as long as the solution is not sought in further excluding the weakest, as some parties tend to do, but in fighting poverty, working on a sustainable and comprehensive social system and providing excellent education for all.

Dutch research has shown that half of people over 75 are lonely. Movisie, the Dutch knowledge institute for social issues, is hoping to understand how best to identify, mitigate and prevent loneliness in the next few years. Such empirical research is important and should give us a clearer picture of just how widespread the phenomenon is. Above all, it shows us that we need to work on forging better and more caring societies. Connections at a micro level, within a familial context and in small communities, are vital. But while all kinds of initiatives are being rolled out to combat loneliness, ranging from neighbourhood Christmas lunches to home visits, I am less convinced by such government-instigated measures aimed at getting neighbours to do fun things together. Wanting to drag someone out of his or her isolation to a party is all very well, but it can be suffocating for that person. Not everybody can be forced out of their shell, nor is it always necessary. It is something I experienced with my dear father, who no longer felt like socialising in his old age. My brother and I planned concerts and other outings and did so with the best intentions. But he only wanted to see us and had no interest in making small talk with other people. Sometimes we must accept that there is little or nothing we can do about loneliness. Instead of fun government-led initiatives, we might do better to incorporate care for others and awareness of people's sadness into our own lives. And accept that life is not all fun.

KU Leuven, the university that developed MindMates, also launched the project *Mango Moment*. The inspiration behind it was a TV programme in which the Flemish journalist Annemie Struyf asked a terminally ill patient whether there was anything she could do for her. The woman's answer was surprisingly simple: she wouldn't mind eating a mango. The next time the journalist visited, she brought a mango, which led to an emotional moment. This kind of small gesture during a personal encounter (far from cameras) is exactly what Emmanuel Levinas had in mind when he spoke of 'the small goodness': something done in the face of the health sector's anonymous large structures, in the face of its dehumanisation. The many testimonies on the website www.mangomoment.be show just how much these little kindnesses mean to both patients and carers. But managements must be wary of appropriating the mango moment. When these kinds of initiatives are pushed from the top down and become part of the recommended care pathway, their effect is undermined. The *petite bonté* happens spontaneously, during a lost moment, free from prescriptions. It is an act of resistance in the well-oiled machine that is healthcare. It happens instinctively and can

even be a sign of powerlessness. This little goodness defies organisation and can be all but invisible.

We live in ever bigger cities, in close proximity, and yet we are strangers to one another. We are atomised, as the French author Michel Houellebecq writes in his book of the same name. We live alone with our laptops within reach, just as we eat in front of our screens instead of communally around a table. I know, I know, man is fundamentally alone; it is intrinsic to our species. But the only way to cope with that is by being with others. These others will never be able to entirely cancel out the alone-ness. They do not have to, either. But they are essential. Without a bond with someone, someone you trust, you can share things with and really talk to, it is incredibly difficult to survive, let alone thrive. Yet this is how many people live these days, clinging to the illusion of the freedom of being alone. But the resulting loneliness hits today's metropolitan man hard. Modern man has been cut off from his community since he started living by himself in a small studio flat.

We must be mindful of this in our society with its over-emphasis on the self, on me-me-me. This me-me-me is ensconced behind a concrete façade without windows, thoroughly insulated. Everybody is left to fend for themselves, sharing too little with others. With a bit of luck, the health or care worker will come and visit.

Human beings may be fundamentally alone, but they are also inherently social. That's why social ties are greatly missed in an individualistic society.

Interesting, as always, and pleasantly confounding is Arnon Grünberg in a column in Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* (2017). His sharp pen manages to capture the fundamental paradox of human existence, and therefore of happiness, when he writes:

Feeling part of a community is wonderful, no doubt about it, but the number of people leaving the West to seek happiness in Togo is tiny. It would appear that a relatively comfortable life with little sense of community is preferable to a hard life with lots of it. [Emily] Esfahani Smith is right in saying that the pressure to be happy is counterproductive. You're allowed to be unhappy.

You're allowed to do many things; you're allowed to feel part of a community, but you don't have to. You're allowed to seek happiness in Togo, or in Dutch suburbia.

[...]

From Part 2

Unhappiness?

Unhappiness makes happy

Would you say that, in spite of everything, you're actually pretty happy? That's great, of course. But it should not lead to complacency. Ideally, in a warm society, you would draw on that positive energy to help others, those less fortunate than you. You can do so by simply being present, or by being socially engaged, even if it means facing up to sadness or misery and inviting unhappiness into your life by another route.

Letting in unhappiness, and someone else's unhappiness at that, means at the very least becoming more humane. Caring for someone else is satisfying and something that deepens relationships. It leaves you feeling happy in an ordinary, everyday kind of way. Knowing that you can rely on help from people around you makes you more resilient in difficult times. And vice versa: being in a position to help people will make you stronger. Setbacks in life lead to both unhappiness and happiness. They can be extremely useful in creating connections and meaning.

At the close of *The Evenings*, Gerard Reve's classic Dutch novel, protagonist Frits van Egters concludes about his life: 'It has been seen, it has not gone unnoticed' (p. 222). I believe that being seen is a basic human need. Not in the sense of having lots and lots of friends on Facebook, but on a smaller, more human scale. Feeling a connection with your environment, caring and being cared for makes us happy in a fundamental way. The fact that human beings are actually very social and in need of connection is something we are threatening to lose sight of in this me-me-me world. In the precarious balance between me and the other, the latter is at risk of being trampled, even though we sorely need that other just to be ourselves.

But that is not the society we live in. Paul Verhaeghe puts it like this in *Intimiteit*:

In order to love someone, I need to be comfortable in my own skin. We are so distanced from who or what we might be, we feel more and more uncomfortable in our own skin, are more prone to illness and have more problems. No wonder then that we are finding it harder and harder to take that step towards the other (p. 11).

L'enfer, c'est les autres, Sartre said. Hell is other people. But I reckon it ought to be *L'enfer, c'est le manque des autres*. Hell is the absence of other people. Especially when times are tough. I admit that my interpretation of Sartre's quote here is a little simplistic, but it seems to me that even difficult people are preferable to being an individual condemned to be by yourself, forced to carry the weight of the world on your own.

Contemporary society fosters alienation and loneliness. This is, in many respects, an anonymous and egocentric world. There are times when we long to go back to a smaller, more intimate society, one where close-knit relationships were the order of the day. But that desire (as expressed by some politicians) is misguided, according to philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Such harmony never existed, and as contemporary society is made up of extremely different people you can no longer simply lump them all together; those differences make us who we are. The longing for a smaller community with a homogeneous social identity is in actual fact a desire for an insular existence. Present-day alienation cannot be eased by a transparent, uniform community. By embarking on a relationship with others (which is the essence of society) you open yourself up. Each individual is important, because each contributes to the meaning of life. Although you exist by the grace of others, this has to happen in a way and in a society that leaves room for individuals to express themselves and to own their otherness.

[...]

From Part 3

Purpose...

Another person's happiness

I'm a pretty happy person. But not because I created my own happiness. I was lucky enough to be born at the right time and in the right country. I had caring parents. I have enough money and count my blessings with my partner and my children. It goes without saying that I have had my fair share of unhappiness, but I like to remind myself that I have had a lot of luck.

The average Belgian gives himself a score of 7 out of 10 on the happiness scale. That is impressive. But this beautiful mark stands in sharp contrast with the growing waiting lists for mental health services. A rising number of children is prescribed psychopharmaceuticals, and 60 to 70 per cent of the elderly take sleeping pills, anti-anxiety medication, antidepressants or antipsychotic drugs. Is that because we don't want to see children and older people as they are, that's to say unhappy? It is certainly a worrying development.

Don't try to measure happiness, just be happy with it. A content life is quite an achievement. Let us not pursue extreme happiness, because it would only lead to a divided society: one of winners and losers, of the successful and the marginalised.

A disproportionate and advanced state of bliss, in the sense of a self-satisfied sense of superiority, ultimately leads to empty nihilism. Stubbornly withdrawing from the imperfect and all too often unjust world results in a feeling of happiness that could be termed ethically reprehensible. It is a usurping happiness, at the other's expense, marking a triumph to power and abuse. That is not to say that the reverse, remaining sensitive to the inescapable injustice in society, will necessarily make you happy. But it does generate an unhappy feeling that is conducive to the good life. An openness to the vulnerability of our fellow man and the engagement that results from it turns this unhappiness into a meaningful act, which in turn leads to a fundamental form of happiness. It is one of the many peculiar paradoxes of human existence: only by being sensitive to injustice and unhappiness can we find a lasting form of happiness in the shape of meaning and care.

French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre said that we only become truly human through social engagement. In the same vein, Stéphane Hessel calls for non-violent engagement and solidarity in his pamphlets *Indignez-vous*, *Engagez-vous* and *Le chemin de l'espérance*. Hessel, one of the few survivors of Buchenwald concentration camp, became a diplomat after the war and helped co-write the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He was a huge inspiration and influence on young people until well into his nineties. Convinced that everybody has something to offer, he pressed for action against injustice. In the final booklet, he proposes possible solutions for making the world a better place. His main message: commit to a cause and do not turn your back on problems and deprivation. I agree with Hessel. Closing your eyes and saying 'I don't want to know about it, I don't want anything to do with it' isn't the right attitude to life. We are in this world, we cannot help but play our part in it. When we all close our eyes to difficulties, society becomes bitter. Escape, whether it is into drugs, the hedonistic culture of wellness or villas in gated communities in poor

neighbourhoods, is not the solution. Erecting hard borders between communities and excluding the other will end in disaster. A system can only survive when its borders are porous, enabling connections with the wider world. This is true for both individuals and society at large. When boundaries are reinforced, the interior will atrophy. In much the same way that pent-up sorrow will away eat at you and make you ill, neglected and hidden suffering in the world will fester too.
