Editorial

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Editorial for Topical Issue "Happiness in Contemporary Continental Philosophy"

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What has become of happiness in contemporary continental philosophy? Talk of happiness, images of it, and people pursuing it are all around us. Yet within continental philosophy, it is a remarkably little-discussed topic. Its absence there is remarkable not only in contrast to the high value attributed to it in everyday Western culture, but also with regard to its own tradition and roots in ancient Greek philosophy. As is well-known, among the ancient philosophers, happiness constituted one of the most esteemed subjects for reflection. Speaking in general terms, one might even say that it was for them the very purpose of philosophy, if not of all human endeavors. By contrast, modern continental philosophy is marked by a certain distrust of happiness. At least since Kant's exclusion of the desire for happiness from the sphere of morality in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, to some, the very call to reflect upon happy life is an indication of bad taste, privilege, or otherworldliness. Who has time to reflect on happiness when there are so many other, more urgent topics that demand our attention, such as climate change, racism, sexism, pandemics, and refugee-crises?

When continental philosophers do engage with the topic, it is mostly through a highly critical lens. Happiness, such seems to be the consensus, has become a commodity within a "Happiness Industry" backed by a "Happiness science" and by positive-thinking movements, which have turned it into an ideological tool for control. Moreover, it has become separated from morality and concerns for social justice to such a degree that, rather than aiding the emancipatory efforts of philosophy, it has become an obstacle that critical thought ought to overcome.

Yet even if one agrees with these rather bleak diagnoses of the contemporary state of happiness, can philosophy really do without constructive consideration and affirmative theorization of happiness? Can we even make sense of the critique of happiness without explicitly or implicitly developing understandings of a more authentic happiness?

Taking such considerations as its cue, this special issue explores the role and value of happiness within contemporary continental philosophy. It poses a challenge to find, also within the philosophies of contemporary thinkers that are mostly considered critical with regards to contemporary happiness, the elements for an affirmative theory. One can say that, overall, it has a post-critical character, loosely understood as working from critical theoretical insights *toward* a constructive philosophical theory of happiness.

In the first article of the issue, "Badiou and Agamben Beyond the Happiness Industry and its Critics," Ype de Boer further articulates the challenge that faces contemporary continental thought with regard to happiness. Employing the work of Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou as case studies, who both in their own ways place happiness again at the center of their philosophy, De Boer asks what a critically informed yet affirmative philosophy of happiness should entail at the structural level. He finds in their work a revival of the ancient ideal of a true, just, and happy life and argues that philosophy cannot do without a notion of "true happiness," which needs to be ontologically founded and understood in relation to justice.

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In order to understand the difference between modern engagement with happiness with respect to ancient philosophy, in "Happiness and the Biopolitics of Knowledge: From the Contemplative Lifestyle to the Economy of Well-Being and Back Again," Antonio Cimino argues that the ideal of happiness as a contemplative lifestyle has in modernity been displaced by what present-day policy-makers call "the economy of well-being." Developing a biopolitical analysis of EU policy documents, Cimino shows that both well-being and knowledge are no longer considered ends in themselves, but have become instrumentalized and subordinated to capitalist models of efficiency and productivity. Without nostalgia for the elitist model of the Aristotelian contemplative life, Cimino calls for a "repurposing" of the contemplative life to suit modern democratic life whilst simultaneously re-establishing it as an end in itself.

Kurt Borg, in his article "Reanimating Public Happiness: Reading Cavarero and Butler Beyond Arendt," investigates Hannah Arendt's idea that in modernity, the "pursuit of happiness" has historically shifted from a public understanding of happiness to an increasingly privatized one. In response to this problem, Borg finds in the works of Cavarero and Judith Butler the elements for a new and politically fertile idea of happiness. It is in the political practice of movements such as *Ni Una Menos*, that Borg finds such an idea forcefully expressed. There, public happiness is reanimated to a degree that transcends some of the limitations of Arendt's, Cavarero's, and Butler's accounts of happiness.

By contrast, in "Thinking from the Home: Emanuele Coccia on Domesticity and Happiness," Evan Edwards analyses the notion of happiness from the perspective of the household. He traces these themes of domesticity and happiness throughout the work of Emanuele Coccia, and explains how for the latter, it is only by taking domestic concerns seriously that philosophy can begin to theorize the possibility of happiness today, claiming that "rather than beginning with the polis, philosophy must think the city from the home, and the home from the kitchen."

In "A strategy for Happiness, in the Wake of Spinoza," Sonja Lavaert argues that, with regard to happiness, we should consider Spinoza as our contemporary. Interpreting his philosophical anthropology as a strategy for happiness, she shows how this strategy is taken up and developed in the work of Alexandre Matheron, Gilles Deleuze, and Étiene Balibar. She shows how a full, active, and free life need not be considered an individualistic life but includes powerful political aspects.

With her article "*Das Unabgeschlossene (das Glück)*. Walter Benjamin's 'Idea of Happiness'," Vivian Liska takes up the challenge of finding an idea of happiness in the work of a modern thinker mostly considered a "doomsayer." Exploring the many detours, incompletions, and indirections in the writings of Walter Benjamin on happiness, she shows how neither the interpretation of Habermas, which states that Benjaminian happiness is politically impotent, nor the interpretation by Agamben, which reads it in a politically destructive manner, are adequate. Benjaminian happiness should, rather, be understood as "messianic sparks" that are able to "save the past and open the future in the present."

Anné Hendrik Verhoef argues in "The Role and Value of Happiness in the Work of Paul Ricoeur" that happiness is a major theme in the work of Ricoeur, mostly known as the philosopher of suffering. Verhoef shows how Ricoeur's dialectical understanding of happiness offers a unique position that avoids the one-sidedness of popular contemporary notions of happiness as well-being and satisfaction, and explicitly accounts for unhappiness and the matter of chance. Additionally, by proposing an understanding of happiness in the "optative" mode, it forms an interesting alternative to happiness in the "elegic" mode as developed by Vivan Liska in her contribution to the work of Walter Benjamin.

The work of Friedrich Nietzsche is likewise mostly understood as highly critical of happiness, as his oft-quoted witty remark on the pursuit of happiness supports: "People don't strive for happiness, only the English do."[1] In "On the 'How' and 'Why': Nietzsche on Happiness and the Meaningful Life," Marta Faustino argues that, nonetheless, his attempt at theorizing a joyful and affirmative disposition toward existence can and should be understood in terms of happiness. That interpretative lens allows not only for a Nietzschean critique of modern happiness theories such as hedonism, satisfaction theory, and objective list theory but also for a better understanding of what Nietzsche's philosophy itself affirms.

1 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Arrows and Epigrams," §12.

Cécilia Andrée Monique Lombard argues in "Albert Camus and Rachel Bespaloff: Happiness in a Challenging World" that even an understanding of existence as absurd allows for powerful ideas and experiences of happiness. Developing a comparative reading of the works of Albert Camus and Rachel Bespaloff, she argues that in the work of the former, happiness can be understood in terms of the enjoyment of quietude, whereas Bespaloff conceptualizes happiness with regard to music and transcendence.

Maciej Huzarski tackles the problem of the absence of a clear notion of happiness in the psychoanalytical theories on humor and comedy in the work of Sigmund Freud and Alenka Zupančič. In "Symptomatic Comedy. On Alenka Zupančič's *The Odd One In* and Happiness" he argues that both Freud and Zupancic cannot properly thematize humor and comedy without a notion of happiness, and that, moreover, the absence of such a notion as "symptomatic." Formulating a psychoanalytical notion of happiness that could fill this gap, Huzarski problematizes the political potential of the notion.

Comedy also plays an important role in Marina Marren's article "Happiness and Joy in Aristotle and Bergson as Life of Thoughtful and Creative Action." Developing first of all the affinity between the thought of Aristotle and that of Bergson with regard to happiness, Marren emphasizes the importance of contemplation and phronesis for the possibility of an active and creative existence. In addition, analyzing Bergson's understanding of humor and comedy, she points out that humor allows for a comedic distance toward the humdrum and highly instrumentalized nature of modern existence. We need comedy to interrupt that ongoing process to reinvigorate contemplative and phronetic capabilities, essential to a full and happy life.

Reference

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.