

JOEL KURTZMAN

Happiness is an Outcome

IF YOU LOOKED AT AN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL-WELFARE GRAPH OF THE PAST FOUR CENTURIES, you would see an almost unbroken line with a strong upward trajectory. True, there would be intervals when growth stopped, even declined – periods of recession, depression and war. But these would be relatively brief compared to the 400-year length of the line itself. The line would show that the advent of universal education and the development of science, technology and math lifted billions out of poverty and, in the industrialized world, tripled our life spans. It would show that fewer of us go hungry and that most of us have access to medical care.

Improvements like that are new in human history. Ancient philosophies put humanity's golden ages in the past. We live in the period after the "Fall of Man."

When our 400-year uptrend got started, philosophers like John Locke, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham and Edmund Burke took

note. They realized that in an era of growth, with commerce expanding and new technologies emerging, we needed to rethink what it means to be human. They reconceptualized the role of the individual, our responsibility to society, what ownership and self-interest mean, and how we should relate to government and each other. They saw individuals as

having initiative. And then Bentham took it a step further, declaring governments should create the greatest happiness for the greatest number (he phrased it in several different ways) and Utilitarian philosophy was born. Not all periods have been quite so upbeat.

In 1942, French philosopher, novelist and Nobel laureate Albert Camus wrote a book called *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He opened the book with these words: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." Not exactly an uplifting start. So why do I bring it up in an issue of *Briefings* focusing on happiness?

Consider Camus's times. Europe was still fighting World War II, and as it did, intellectuals and others who witnessed the conflict struggled to come to grips with carnage on

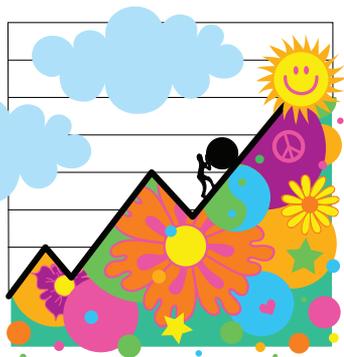
a massive scale. How could "normal" people commit such acts of brutality? Why, in some countries, was heroism in such short supply? How could neighbors turn on neighbors? How could friends, even family members, turn each other in? And how could people believe so many baseless ideas?

Wartime disillusionment brought shame, sorrow and guilt. Many deserted their faiths and philosophies. They asked whether their cultures had anything positive to offer. Why not embrace a philosophy questioning whether life was worth living? Are Camus's views relevant today?

Far from being an "ivory tower" subject, philosophy wrestles with issues of the day. The Stoics, for example, attempted to dampen their feelings and shove aside their emotions because, among other things, the Ancient Greeks didn't have modern painkillers, but they did have pain. Childbirth, toothaches and broken bones hurt as much then as they do today. If you live in a world of hurt, a grin-and-bear-it philosophy makes perfect sense. What other choices did they have?

So what kind of philosophy should govern our time? That's where happiness comes in. I'm not suggesting happiness is a philosophy. It falls far short of that. It's more like an outcome. It's part of something bigger.

Albert Camus wrote during a short, bleak deviation from a 400-year trend. And, while he focused on a wrinkle in an upward-pointing line, we have the luxury of looking at the line in its entirety. From that point of view, happiness is an outcome that makes real sense. //



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