

“The most brilliant and lucid analysis of virtue and well-being in the entire literature of positive psychology. For the reader who seeks to understand happiness, my advice is: Begin with Haidt.” —Martin E. P. Seligman, author of *Authentic Happiness*

JONATHAN HAIDT



The HAPPINESS
HYPOTHESIS

Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom

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Praise for *The Happiness Hypothesis*

“A fresh, serious, elevating guide to living everyday life better.”

—*Library Journal*

“Haidt is a fine guide on this journey between past and present, discussing the current complexities of psychological theory with clarity and humor. . . . Haidt’s is an open-minded, robust look at philosophy, psychological fact and spiritual mystery, of scientific rationalism and the unknowable ephemeral—an honest inquiry that concludes that the best life is, perhaps, one lived in the balance of opposites.”

—*Bookpage*

“An erudite, fluently written, stimulating reassessment of age-old issues.”

—*Publishers Weekly, starred review*

“A sparkling investigation into the psychology of life and happiness.”

—*Daniel Wegner, author of The Illusion of Conscious Will*

“Every page of this book provides gems of insight about the good life and where to look for it.”

—*William Damon, author of The Moral Child*

“In this beautifully written book, Jonathan Haidt shows us the deep connection that exists between cutting-edge psychological research and the wisdom of the ancients. It is inspiring to see how much modern psychology informs life’s most central and persistent questions.”

—*Barry Schwartz, Swarthmore College,
author of The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*

“An intellectual tour de force that weaves into one fabric wisdom that is ancient and modern, religious and scientific, Eastern and Western, liberal and conservative—all with the aim of pointing us to a more meaningful, moral, and satisfying life.”

—*David G. Myers, Hope College,*
author of Intuition: Its Powers and Its Perils

ALSO BY JONATHAN HAIDT

Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived (co-editor)

*The
Happiness
Hypothesis*

FINDING MODERN TRUTH
IN ANCIENT WISDOM



JONATHAN HAIDT

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Introduction:

Too Much Wisdom

WHAT SHOULD I DO, how should I live, and whom should I become? Many of us ask such questions, and, modern life being what it is, we don't have to go far to find answers. Wisdom is now so cheap and abundant that it floods over us from calendar pages, tea bags, bottle caps, and mass e-mail messages forwarded by well-meaning friends. We are in a way like residents of Jorge Luis Borges's *Library of Babel*—an infinite library whose books contain every possible string of letters and, therefore, somewhere an explanation of why the library exists and how to use it. But Borges's librarians suspect that they will never find that book amid the miles of nonsense.

Our prospects are better. Few of our potential sources of wisdom are nonsense, and many are entirely true. Yet, because our library is also effectively infinite—no one person can ever read more than a tiny fraction—we face the paradox of abundance: Quantity undermines the quality of our engagement. With such a vast and wonderful library spread out before us, we often skim books or read just the reviews. We might already have encountered the Greatest Idea, the insight that would have transformed us had we savored it, taken it to heart, and worked it into our lives.

This is a book about ten Great Ideas. Each chapter is an attempt to savor one idea that has been discovered by several of the world's civilizations—to question it in light of what we now know from scientific research, and to extract from it the lessons that still apply to our modern lives.

I am a social psychologist. I do experiments to try to figure out one corner of human social life, and my corner is morality and the moral emotions. I am also a teacher. I teach a large introductory psychology class at the University of Virginia in which I try to explain the entire field of psychology in twenty-four lectures. I have to present a thousand research

findings on everything from the structure of the retina to the workings of love, and then hope that my students will understand and remember it all. As I struggled with this challenge in my first year of teaching, I realized that several ideas kept recurring across lectures, and that often these ideas had been stated eloquently by past thinkers. To summarize the idea that our emotions, our reactions to events, and some mental illnesses are caused by the mental filters through which we look at the world, I could not say it any more concisely than Shakespeare: “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”¹ I began to use such quotations to help my students remember the big ideas in psychology, and I began to wonder just how many such ideas there were.

To find out, I read dozens of works of ancient wisdom, mostly from the world’s three great zones of classical thought: India (for example, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the sayings of the Buddha), China (the Analects of Confucius, the Tao te Ching, the writings of Meng Tzu and other philosophers), and the cultures of the Mediterranean (the Old and New Testaments, the Greek and Roman philosophers, the Koran). I also read a variety of other works of philosophy and literature from the last five hundred years. Every time I found a psychological claim—a statement about human nature or the workings of the mind or heart—I wrote it down. Whenever I found an idea expressed in several places and times I considered it a possible Great Idea. But rather than mechanically listing the top ten all-time most widespread psychological ideas of humankind, I decided that coherence was more important than frequency. I wanted to write about a set of ideas that would fit together, build upon each other, and tell a story about how human beings can find happiness and meaning in life.

Helping people find happiness and meaning is precisely the goal of the new field of positive psychology,² a field in which I have been active,³ so this book is in a way about the origins of positive psychology in ancient wisdom and the applications of positive psychology today. Most of the research I will cover was done by scientists who would not consider themselves positive psychologists. Nonetheless, I have drawn on ten ancient ideas and a great variety of modern research findings to tell the best story I can about the causes of human flourishing, and the obstacles to well being that we place in our own paths.

The story begins with an account of how the human mind works. Not a full account, of course, just two ancient truths that must be understood before you can take advantage of modern psychology to improve your life. The first truth is the foundational idea of this book: The mind is divided into parts that sometimes conflict. Like a rider on the back of an elephant, the conscious, reasoning part of the mind has only limited control of what the elephant does. Nowadays, we know the causes of these divisions, and a few ways to help the rider and the elephant work better as a team. The second idea is Shakespeare's, about how "thinking makes it so." (Or, as Buddha⁴ said, "Our life is the creation of our mind.") But we can improve this ancient idea today by explaining why most people's minds have a bias toward seeing threats and engaging in useless worry. We can also do something to change this bias by using three techniques that increase happiness, one ancient and two very new.

The second step in the story is to give an account of our social lives—again, not a complete account, just two truths, widely known but not sufficiently appreciated. One is the Golden Rule. Reciprocity is the most important tool for getting along with people, and I'll show you how you can use it to solve problems in your own life and avoid being exploited by those who use reciprocity against you. However, reciprocity is more than just a tool. It is also a clue about who we humans are and what we need, a clue that will be important for understanding the end of the larger story. The second truth in this part of the story is that we are all, by nature, hypocrites, and this is why it is so hard for us to follow the Golden Rule faithfully. Recent psychological research has uncovered the mental mechanisms that make us so good at seeing the slightest speck in our neighbor's eye, and so bad at seeing the log in our own. If you know what your mind is up to, and why you so easily see the world through a distorting lens of good and evil, you can take steps to reduce your self-righteousness. You can thereby reduce the frequency of conflicts with others who are equally convinced of their righteousness.

At this point in the story, we'll be ready to ask: Where does happiness come from? There are several different "happiness hypotheses." One is that happiness comes from getting what you want, but we all know (and research confirms) that such happiness is short-lived. A more promising hypothesis is that happiness comes from within and cannot be obtained by making the world conform to your desires. This idea was widespread in

the ancient world: Buddha in India and the Stoic philosophers in ancient Greece and Rome all counseled people to break their emotional attachments to people and events, which are always unpredictable and uncontrollable, and to cultivate instead an attitude of acceptance. This ancient idea deserves respect, and it is certainly true that changing your mind is usually a more effective response to frustration than is changing the world. However, I will present evidence that this second version of the happiness hypothesis is wrong. Recent research shows that there are some things worth striving for; there are external conditions of life that can make you lastingly happier. One of these conditions is relatedness—the bonds we form, and need to form, with others. I'll present research showing where love comes from, why passionate love always cools, and what kind of love is “true” love. I'll suggest that the happiness hypothesis offered by Buddha and the Stoics should be amended: Happiness comes from within, and happiness comes from without. We need the guidance of both ancient wisdom and modern science to get the balance right.

The next step in this story about flourishing is to look at the conditions of human growth and development. We've all heard that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger, but that is a dangerous oversimplification. Many of the things that don't kill you can damage you for life. Recent research on “posttraumatic growth” reveals when and why people grow from adversity, and what you can do to prepare yourself for trauma, or to cope with it after the fact. We have also all heard repeated urgings to cultivate virtue in ourselves, because virtue is its own reward, but that, too, is an oversimplification. I'll show how concepts of virtue and morality have changed and narrowed over the centuries, and how ancient ideas about virtue and moral development may hold promise for our own age. I'll also show how positive psychology is beginning to deliver on that promise by offering you a way to “diagnose” and develop your own strengths and virtues.

The conclusion of the story is the question of meaning: Why do some people find meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in life, but others do not? I begin with the culturally widespread idea that there is a vertical, spiritual dimension of human existence. Whether it is called nobility, virtue, or divinity, and whether or not God exists, people simply *do* perceive sacredness, holiness, or some ineffable goodness in others, and in nature. I'll present my own research on the moral emotions of disgust, elevation,

and awe to explain how this vertical dimension works, and why the dimension is so important for understanding religious fundamentalism, the political culture war, and the human quest for meaning. I'll also consider what people mean when they ask, "What is the meaning of life?" And I'll give an answer to the question—an answer that draws on ancient ideas about having a purpose but that uses very recent research to go beyond these ancient ideas, or any ideas you are likely to have encountered. In doing so, I'll revise the happiness hypothesis one last time. I could state that final version here in a few words, but I could not explain it in this brief introduction without cheapening it. Words of wisdom, the meaning of life, perhaps even the answer sought by Borges's librarians—all of these may wash over us every day, but they can do little for us unless we savor them, engage with them, question them, improve them, and connect them to our lives. That is my goal in this book.

1

The Divided Self

For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

—ST. PAUL, GALATIANS 5:171

If Passion drives, let Reason hold the Reins.

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN^{1,2}

I FIRST RODE A HORSE in 1991, in Great Smoky National Park, North Carolina. I'd been on rides as a child where some teenager led the horse by a short rope, but this was the first time it was just me and a horse, no rope. I wasn't alone—there were eight other people on eight other horses, and one of the people was a park ranger—so the ride didn't ask much of me. There was, however, one difficult moment. We were riding along a path on a steep hillside, two by two, and my horse was on the outside, walking about three feet from the edge. Then the path turned sharply to the left, and my horse was heading straight for the edge. I froze. I knew I had to steer left, but there was another horse to my left and I didn't want to crash into it. I might have called out for help, or screamed, "Look out!"; but some part of me preferred the risk of going over the edge to the certainty of looking stupid. So I just froze. I did nothing at all during the critical five seconds in which my horse and the horse to my left calmly turned to the left by themselves.

As my panic subsided, I laughed at my ridiculous fear. The horse knew exactly what she was doing. She'd walked this path a hundred times, and she had no more interest in tumbling to her death than I had. She didn't

need me to tell her what to do, and, in fact, the few times I tried to tell her what to do she didn't much seem to care. I had gotten it all so wrong because I had spent the previous ten years driving cars, not horses. Cars go over edges unless you tell them not to.

Human thinking depends on metaphor. We understand new or complex things in relation to things we already know.³ For example, it's hard to think about life in general, but once you apply the metaphor "life is a journey," the metaphor guides you to some conclusions: You should learn the terrain, pick a direction, find some good traveling companions, and enjoy the trip, because there may be nothing at the end of the road. It's also hard to think about the mind, but once you pick a metaphor it will guide your thinking. Throughout recorded history, people have lived with and tried to control animals, and these animals made their way into ancient metaphors. Buddha, for example, compared the mind to a wild elephant:

In days gone by this mind of mine used to stray wherever selfish desire or lust or pleasure would lead it. Today this mind does not stray and is under the harmony of control, even as a wild elephant is controlled by the trainer.⁴

Plato used a similar metaphor in which the self (or soul) is a chariot, and the calm, rational part of the mind holds the reins. Plato's charioteer had to control two horses:

The horse that is on the right, or nobler, side is upright in frame and well jointed, with a high neck and a regal nose; . . . he is a lover of honor with modesty and self-control; companion to true glory, he needs no whip, and is guided by verbal commands alone. The other horse is a crooked great jumble of limbs . . . companion to wild boasts and indecency, he is shaggy around the ears—deaf as a post—and just barely yields to horse-whip and goad combined.⁵

For Plato, some of the emotions and passions are good (for example, the love of honor), and they help pull the self in the right direction, but others are bad (for example, the appetites and lusts). The goal of Platonic education was to help the charioteer gain perfect control over the two horses. Sigmund Freud offered us a related model 2,300 years later.⁶ Freud said that the mind is divided into three parts: the ego (the conscious, rational self); the superego (the conscience, a sometimes too rigid

commitment to the rules of society); and the id (the desire for pleasure, lots of it, sooner rather than later). The metaphor I use when I lecture on Freud is to think of the mind as a horse and buggy (a Victorian chariot) in which the driver (the ego) struggles frantically to control a hungry, lustful, and disobedient horse (the id) while the driver's father (the superego) sits in the back seat lecturing the driver on what he is doing wrong. For Freud, the goal of psychoanalysis was to escape this pitiful state by strengthening the ego, thus giving it more control over the id and more independence from the superego.

Freud, Plato, and Buddha all lived in worlds full of domesticated animals. They were familiar with the struggle to assert one's will over a creature much larger than the self. But as the twentieth century wore on, cars replaced horses, and technology gave people ever more control over their physical worlds. When people looked for metaphors, they saw the mind as the driver of a car, or as a program running on a computer. It became possible to forget all about Freud's unconscious, and just study the mechanisms of thinking and decision making. That's what social scientists did in the last third of the century: Social psychologists created "information processing" theories to explain everything from prejudice to friendship. Economists created "rational choice" models to explain why people do what they do. The social sciences were uniting under the idea that people are rational agents who set goals and pursue them intelligently by using the information and resources at their disposal.

But then, why do people keep doing such stupid things? Why do they fail to control themselves and continue to do what they know is not good for them? I, for one, can easily muster the willpower to ignore all the desserts on the menu. But if dessert is placed on the table, I can't resist it. I can resolve to focus on a task and not get up until it is done, yet somehow I find myself walking into the kitchen, or procrastinating in other ways. I can resolve to wake up at 6:00 A.M. to write; yet after I have shut off the alarm, my repeated commands to myself to get out of bed have no effect, and I understand what Plato meant when he described the bad horse as "deaf as a post." But it was during some larger life decisions, about dating, that I really began to grasp the extent of my powerlessness. I would know exactly what I should do, yet, even as I was telling my friends that I would do it, a part of me was dimly aware that I was not going to. Feelings of guilt, lust, or fear were often stronger than reasoning. (On the other hand, I