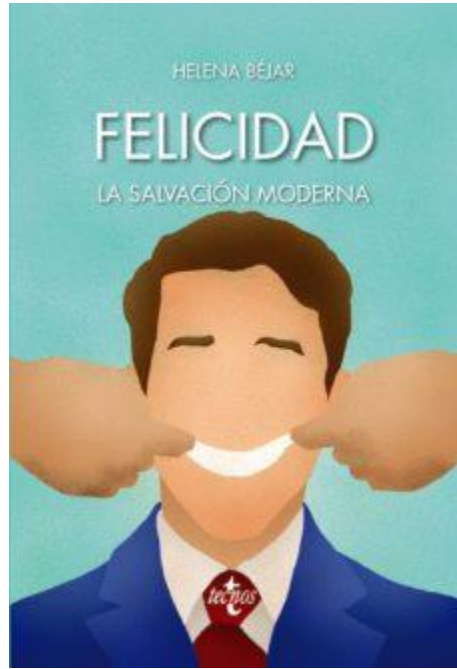


Helena Béjar. *Felicidad. La salvación moderna*. Madrid: Tecnos, 2018. ISBN 978-84-309-7419-1. 252 pgs.

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“Our culture commands us to be happy” is the beginning of Helena Béjar’s excellent book on happiness, interpreted by the author as a modern and contemporary goal, “not an emotion but rather part of a culture” (12), that is the modern ideal of private happiness that seems to pervade our world. Prof. Béjar focuses mostly (although not exclusively) on the development of this concept in the US from the *New Thought* to the *New Age* to the development of contemporary *Positive Psychology*. Divided into two parts that trace the intellectual history of happiness since the 18th century and analyze the self-help literature that developed mostly in the US after Peale, her book analyzes the vagaries of an idea that took root in the contemporary Western world during the French Enlightenment (*repos, bonne heure, ennui*) and went through several (re)definitions until it has turned into a new concept that mixes psychology, religion and science to become *positivity* and *subjective well-being*, that is a sort of technique to achieve salvation. While Antiquity placed happiness in a search for knowledge and inner peace, Christianity projected happiness into the future through the idea of salvation. Rationalistic philosophies in turn created the idea of continuous *progress* (read *improvement*) and societal transformation. Finally, contemporary postmodernity, though, has mixed psychology and immanent religious concepts from Eastern tradition to devise a new ideal of happiness.

In the beginning, we could say, stands the Calvinist *dictum* that salvation is uncertain. The search for certainty (the avoidance of the condemnation from doubt and sin that stems from Luther himself) propels the individual to rely on him/herself through confidence, self-determination, and constancy to believe that thoughts can change the external world and that a positive attitude attracts positive energy and viceversa. But the counterpart to this is that failure and unhappiness are the

result of a weak self and ultimately they are the individual's own doing. As a consequence, positive psychology came to stress an extreme reliance on the power of the will by affirming that personal effort is the key to happiness. This implies a world view that reflects negative and positive approaches to the same problem as understood by Béjar. Among the negative, the scholar distinguishes the long lasting effects of a Stoic influence that has tried to rid human beings of their inner turbulence by adopting a stance based on the famous *substine at abstine*. In addition, Béjar analyzes the influence of Eastern spiritualities on our contemporary world, devoid of their original religious content, that have created the “inspirational literature full of contradictory commands” of positive psychology (229). Thus, within a monist frame, this literature agrees that the mind is something pliable and that it can achieve serenity through the use of several techniques. As opposed to the Stoics' abhorrence of others as a possible source of pain, they claim that guilt does not exist and the individual stands alone in his/her capacity to attain ultimate happiness because others have no power to influence the individual's inner core. Nevertheless, behind such message lies a narrative of the self that sees freedom as choice devoid of sociological influences. Max Weber's analysis of the Protestant ethic has now come full circle to equally embrace work and ethics to create a typical American moral individualism. But the absence of social determinism also results in a reduction of empathy and compassion, as the individual (guided by the values of self-attribution and self-sufficiency) has lost a humanist agenda that used to view others within the scope of his personal horizon. Incidentally, self-reliance engenders conformism as the individual believes that we have what we deserve.

The implications of the old *substine et abstine* as reinterpreted through a materialistic mentality and the newly-acquired ideal of (American) freedom also result in a new concept termed *resilience*. Despite traumas and destabilizing events, this quality is supposed to enable the individual “to continue projecting him/herself into the future” (235). But this individual stands isolated and the promise of progress has turned into disillusionment and alienation. Self-help literature, with a mixture of psychology and Eastern spirituality, makes the individual the sole guarantor of his happiness through the exclusive effort of his will as he focuses solely on the present as the moment when such blissful state can be attained. After reviewing the major trends and authors in her analysis of *modern* happiness (Montesquieu, Fontenelle, Caraccioli, Madame de Staël, Pluquet, Tocqueville, Franklin, James, Trine, Dresser, Wood, Beard, Swedenborg, Quimby, Smiles, and particularly Norman Vincent Peale), Béjar concludes by stating that “modernity undermines little by little all sources of meaning” (241) creating what she calls an always-elusive dream. Béjar has done a thorough research and her book presents a detailed overview of the topic of happiness from the Enlightenment to the present. With a penchant for careful analysis and a finetuned exploration of the interplay of social, philosophical, religious, and psychological ideas, Helena Béjar correctly places *happiness* within the realm of a soteriological search and within the framework of a world that makes the individual (through his will and effort) the new hero of a narrative that tries to make sense of it.

This fluid concept of the *happiness*, which ironically makes the individual retreat to his/her inner self, is a new phase in a development that started with the so-called Protestant mentality. Luther's sinful and tempestuous guilty feeling was projected onto his desire to achieve a certainty of salvation and resulted in the only possible and logical corollary: ethical and rational self-determination. But the avoidance of others as the unstable element of the equation puts the individual in a difficult juncture: as he needs to avoid others and the world as sources of turbulence

and unreliability and he is obliged to retreat to his inner space to guarantee his happiness on his own merits, mutuality and reciprocity give way to isolation and loneliness. Happiness as a virtue has been substituted by happiness as a neurological and aseptic technique with the appearance of scientificity. *El sueño del humanismo*, as coined by Francisco Rico, was based on a *res publica litterarum* where social values still played a significant role. Descartes's and Pascal's cognitive adventure put the individual on a head-on course with those elements outside his/her control. The *Ancient Régime's* demise under the banner of freedom / *liberté* meant two different things in France and in the newly-founded United States, as Tocqueville duly perceived. The dream of personal emancipation has run its course. Bernat Metge's (at the beginning of Humanism) conceived of the suffering individual as an island among tempestuous seas in his *Llibre de Fortuna i Prudència*. Seneca's *substine et abstine* envisioned the individual among the uncontrollable forces of Fate. But if the idea of the Christian God projected happiness onto the future and social responsibilities moderated the ideal of a virtuous, wise existence controlled by rationality, the modern individual stands alone in his attempt to reach heaven. Moved by the forces of a materialistic existence and assailed by stress and depression as the modern enemies, happiness is becoming ironically unattainable while it is being conceived as a present state achievable by the sheer power of will and available to all those who deserve it. 'You shall not be unhappy' is the modern *dictum* that puts a heavy weight on the contemporary individual. In an ironic reversal of trends, Kaiping Peng in his *The Mighty Flow* (Beijing, The Tsinghua Press, in press, transl. Antonio Cortijo) makes an effort to introduce the concept of positive psychology to contemporary Chinese society, albeit claiming that Chinese (and Eastern) thought is at the base of this concept. When reviewing Mihaly's seminal work on happiness, he claims that "Chan Buddhism also contemplated the state of absorption, loss of sense of time and deep enjoyment. Many Chinese psychological scholars have translated this experience into "爽 (utter satisfaction)" "心流 (mind flow)", "极致 (the optimal)", "涅槃 (nirvana)", etc. As Peng claims, "福流 (flow of bliss) is a more accurate equivalent, as flow is the ultimate form of bliss". Happiness, for him, is not elusive, as this flow can be found in our everyday life; the so-called "optimal state of happiness" is a joyful experience in which the body, the mind, and the soul become one.

Happiness as a concept is also inextricably related to socio-economic circumstances. Stoicism (and Christianity) developed as a response to critical circumstances around the Mediterranean basin. So did the novel, the literary genre of the crisis. The advent of Mercantilism and the transformations of medieval economy during the waning of the Middle Ages also meant a critical transformation that affected the redefinition of the ethical meaning of the individual and the achievement of happiness. Urban development and the loss of group identities created a Protestant ethic that insured the individual of his capability to attain a secure salvation. From early modern to postmodern and fluid times, the individual has become even more entrenched within the boundaries of himself and happiness is not projected anymore onto the future but resides within the present and within reach. But while medieval times developed the concept of Purgatory as a state/space onto which one could project both anguish and hope, the American self-made man is not only in "pursuit of happiness" but obliged to attain it. Trying to avoid *guilt* since Luther's Reform, we now feel even more *guilty* than before because we are ultimately responsible of our happiness (while never touching it), and the lack thereof results in feelings of self-accusation, that is stress and depression, a remake of what used to be the doom of condemnation of old times. Uncertain about the (happy) future, we are now encouraged to focus on the present through *mindfulness* in a reframed psychologization and medicalization of life. As Don Quixote realizes in the Cave of Montesinos that salvation depends on himself and that he is called to be his own hero,

modern men have retrieved to the cave of themselves in pursuit of that 涅槃 (nirvana) wherefrom to avoid all suffering. But if love in all its manifestations (*agape, filía, charistía, eros*) never left the Spanish knight-errant in his pursuit of happiness, modern man has been left in his own cave without the help of Montesinos, Durandarte, Merlín, and Dulcinea, invoking happiness while isolated and desperately chained to a desire that requires others to be brought to fruition.