EXPLORING HAPPINESS

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FROM ARISTOTLE TO BRAIN SCIENCE

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I

LUCK

THE MIND REELS AT THE THOUGHT OF THE INFINITESIMAL chances that any one of us had of being born, able to relish even the slightest glimmer of happiness. In my own case, I can pinpoint one of the myriad moments when all such chances would have been eliminated for good. It occurred four years before I was born. Were it not for my young mother's newfangled ideas about happiness, I would never have seen the light of day.

My mother, Alva Myrdal, had come close to death after a traumatic miscarriage, then developed a large uterine tumor. Her doctors had urged her to undergo a hysterectomy to remove the tumor, warning her of the high risks to her life from any future pregnancy. But she had refused point blank to have an operation that would have rendered her sterile. Having studied with the psychologist Alfred Adler, she was convinced that there could be little happiness for parents of lone, often self-centered children in what she called "miniature families."[1] She longed to have siblings for the one child she and my father, Gunnar Myrdal, had at the time – my brother Jan, three years old.

Five decades later, I came across a letter in which my father wrote of his support for her decision to refuse the hysterectomy and instead opt for a more difficult operation to remove only the tumor. "We are putting the outcome in the hand of fate. We have always had magical luck up to now with all that we have undertaken, and I don't understand why that should not be the case again."

As I read that letter, I could see my life, still to come, hanging by a thread, while my mother-to-be, shy and uncertain though she

must have felt when confronted with the doctors' expert opinion, insisted on having her own way. Only thanks to the joint decision that my father describes and the luck he and she hoped would continue to be theirs did I come into this astounding world at all. For that opportunity I continue to be awed and humbly grateful. Many describe the same feeling after coming face to face with death, perhaps on learning that they are in remission from cancer or that they have survived a tornado or an airplane crash.

When I look at my life and those of all others as resulting thus from innumerable accidents I see these lives as strange and unpredictable adventures. It makes no sense, from such a perspective, to settle into the rut of blaming parents, society, or fate for the course one's life has taken; or to feel locked into some particular mold that nothing can help one crack open. Yes, we are buffeted by forces and random events far beyond our control. But this is no reason to stop generating efforts of our own, to alter the situation in which we find ourselves, as my mother did. We become who we are in part by how we respond to the shifting circumstances against which our lives delineate themselves.

Happiness, in such a perspective, is to be sought out, pursued, striven for, as in the myths and folk tales about young persons setting out to seek their fortune. They have no assurance of success, no assurance that happiness is owed to them. They have to traverse unknown regions, encounter seductive lures, take high-stakes risks, sometimes come back empty-handed. They must find the right balance between empathy and resilience – between fellow-feeling and self-protection – as they learn to perceive the humanity and the urgent needs of many a strange-looking creature, while remaining wary of all who claim to know the one and only path to happiness.

The same is true for anyone embarking, as I do in this book, not so much on a quest to *find* happiness, still less to prescribe steps for others to take to achieve it, as to explore what we can learn about its nature and its role in human lives. Not since antiquity have there been such passionate debates as those taking place today about contending visions of what makes for human

happiness. The sixth and fifth centuries BC saw an unparalleled display of such visions by poets, prophets, and thinkers such as Confucius, Buddha, Zoroaster, Lao-Tse, and Socrates, often challenging ordinary perceptions as illusory and describing other, distinctive, paths to true happiness. By the first centuries AD, claims about how to achieve salvation, happiness, and bliss resonated in Eastern cults and mystery religions. They competed not only with Christianity, Judaism, and the worship of Greek and Roman deities but also with secular teachings such as those of Aristotle or Epicurus about earthly happiness as the highest human good.

Now as then, vast populations are on the move, with travelers bringing unfamiliar creeds from distant regions and with migrants, driven by wars and privations, encountering novel visions of the good life. Now as then, the various ideals of happiness carry fundamental moral teachings about how to live. And just as the seekers in myths and folk tales need more than a little luck in order not to return empty-handed, so does anyone examining the role of happiness today. Just as those seekers benefit from combining sympathetic understanding with a dose of healthy skepticism, so too does anyone who ventures into the jungle of claims and counterclaims about happiness – especially when they meet up with conflicting appeals by religious, political, and other authorities to set aside all misgivings and place faith in their dictates.

In setting out to explore the subject of happiness, my aim was twofold. First, I wanted to ask what we can learn about it from bringing together the striking new findings of natural and social scientists with long-standing traditions of reflection by philosophers, religious thinkers, historians, poets, and so many others. Recent decades have witnessed a remarkable growth of scientific studies shedding light on what people say about their experiences of happiness and well-being, on fluctuations in the brain during such experiences, and on the interaction between heredity and the environment. How might we best draw on the new research – linking the past and the present, spanning the various disciplines? Taken together, these different approaches can contribute to a fuller, deeper understanding of the scope of happiness, even as

some among them can point to shallowness, tunnel vision, or errors in others. Examining the divergent conceptions of happiness side by side will allow us to fathom their richness and to weigh the clashing arguments about how to capture the full experience of happiness, what contributes to it or detracts from it, how it might be defined and measured, and how it relates to income, say, or to temperament, sociability, marriage, or religious faith.

My second aim was to consider, against this background, perennial moral issues about how we should lead our lives and how we should treat one another. What are the wisest steps to take in the pursuit of happiness? What moral considerations should set limits to such pursuits? What else should matter in human lives aside from happiness? How should we weigh our own happiness against that of others in a world where we are aware, as never before, of extremes of misery and opulence? How might we best take into account what we are learning about the effects of our individual and collective choices on the prospects for the well-being of future generations? And how should we respond to individuals and groups advocating intolerant or outright inhumane conceptions of happiness or well-being?

Bypassing such moral issues makes it all the easier to give short shrift to assumptions that form the subtext to even the most innocuous-seeming views of happiness. These assumptions concern power – power exerted or defended against, whether in families, communities, or political and religious institutions. Often unspoken, these assumptions are about who has the right to pursue happiness, who does and does not deserve happiness, and whether the happiness of some requires the exclusion or exploitation of others. Today, conflicts over them are playing out on a far larger stage than ever before, reaching billions of individuals across the globe, their fortunes affected by global economic shifts beyond their control, their hopes fanned by mass media promotion of methods for achieving happiness in daily life or for finding the path to eternal bliss.

To refocus attention on the moral dimensions of the pursuit of happiness, I ask, throughout this book, what I call "Yes but" ques-

tions in the face of claims that a particular action or personality trait or belief or way of life will bring greater happiness. Some of these questions are of an empirical nature, asking for evidence to support such claims or voicing caution in the face of their frequently cheery, upbeat appeal. Others are of a moral nature, asking whether it would be right to seek the happiness held out as desirable or to enjoy it, once it was achieved. Will pursuing such happiness involve us in deceit? Will it require that we break a promise? Is it cruel, unjust, exploitative? Does it call for us to blind ourselves to needs we would otherwise feel duty-bound to address? Stepping back to ask such questions creates space for reflection, for seeking to perceive more fully and to deliberate more attentively in the face of the many conflicting claims about what happiness is and how it should be pursued.

As I was beginning to work on this book, some colleagues in the fields of philosophy and public health brought up an objection to the entire undertaking – one so common that it may be a natural first response to hearing that someone is writing about happiness. Why study that subject now? Is it not a luxury to do so, given the anguish and insecurity of our own time and the number of people who live in dire poverty, devastated by wars, threatened by hunger, epidemics, droughts, and floods? Shouldn't my inquiry begin, rather, by focusing on suffering?

Yet it is precisely in times of high danger and turmoil that concerns about happiness are voiced most strikingly and seen as most indispensable. From earliest times, views of human happiness have been set forth against the background of suffering, poverty, disease, and the inevitability of death. The Roman Stoic thinker Seneca wrote his most moving letters on the subject to his friend Lucilius while being hunted by the henchmen of the Emperor Nero who finally forced him to commit suicide. In sixteenth-century France, Michel de Montaigne conveyed his enduring delight in many aspects of daily life, despite having spent most of his years in the shadow of war and pestilence. And when Thomas Jefferson included in the American Declaration of Independence the inalienable rights to "life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness," he surely did so at a time of exceptional insecurity and of massive threats to life and liberty. In our own time, consider the juxtaposition of happiness and grim reality conveyed in the statement by Archbishop Desmund Tutu, describing his feelings in April 1994 when he and millions of black South Africans could finally vote:

> The moment for which I had waited so long came and I folded my ballot paper and cast my vote. Wow! I shouted, "Yippee!" It was giddy stuff. It was like falling in love. The sky looked blue and more beautiful. I saw the people in a new light. They were beautiful, they were transfigured. I too was transfigured. It was dreamlike. You were scared someone would rouse you and you would awake to the nightmare that was apartheid's harsh reality.[2]

More recently still, Ingrid Betancourt, when rescued in July 2008 after six years of being kept as a hostage in the jungles of Colombia by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), described her emotions on embracing her children: "Nirvana, paradise – that must be very similar to what I feel at this moment. It was because of them that I kept up my will to get out of that jungle. It's like being born again. If I live 100 years to be an old lady with gray hair, I'll keep marveling at what I saw, what I lived through yesterday. It's a miracle."[3]

The study of happiness never was a luxury to be postponed until more serene, peaceful times. But exploring it may be needed even more in our time, given the unprecedented shift in how most people perceive the possibility of happiness in their own lives. During the course of the twentieth century, societies the world oversaw dramatic reductions in illiteracy, infant mortality, and premature death. By the end of the twentieth century, average life expectancy even in some of the world's poorest societies, such as Bangladesh, was higher than Britain's at the beginning of that century. Most of the world's peoples now enjoy standards of living and social and political freedoms unimaginable to their great-grandparents. Women have far more opportunities than they had

in the past; and even in societies where they are most severely held back, mistreated, and exploited, increasing numbers are learning that this need not be their condition.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, therefore, ancient notions about the need for submissive acceptance of misery and discrimination are losing their power. In many societies, people would scarcely comprehend claims such as that by Samuel Johnson, echoing Ecclesiastes, that no one could wish to be born who knew beforehand all the miseries that would await him in life. They might disagree as fiercely as ever about what happiness is and about what factors make it more or less likely, but far fewer deny that it is at least possible. The levels of suffering and deprivation that beset so many the world over are rightly seen as the more unjust because they are unnecessary, given the vast resources available to overcome them.

I have approached the subject of happiness from several perspectives: by seeking out accounts of the experience of happiness in its own right; by asking how it has been analyzed by philosophers, theologians, and historians; and by considering the rich scientific resources now becoming available in fields such as psychology, economics, health care, genetics, and the brain sciences. Using the first approach, I have looked for accounts of different experiences of happiness and asked what we can learn about such experiences from introspection, personal narratives, thought-experiments, literature, and art. To neglect these deeper, sometimes more intimate forms of testimony is to waste a precious resource for the study of happiness. After all, we respond so much more directly to what Archbishop Tutu and Ingrid Betancourt say about their experiences of happiness than to dictionary definitions or to statistics comparing age groups or nationalities.

By itself, however, this first approach deprives us of the analysis and the empirical findings shown in contemporary studies and of debates about how to define, measure, and investigate the moral issues happiness raises. These approaches allow us to consider how the new findings challenge or confirm the results of introspection and reflection. Without the analysis and information now available, a perennial temptation has been to issue sweeping

generalizations about the state of human happiness. Theologians contrasting the miseries of earthly existence to heavenly felicity have been as likely to utter grim estimates on this score as secular thinkers who declare that most people lead lives of quiet desperation. Conversely, both secular and religious visionaries through the ages have proclaimed that happiness is within the reach of everyone willing to accept their particular doctrine and to undertake the changes they prescribe. So have a number of self-help guides to a happier life, again both secular and religious, such as Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 best-seller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*.[4] Long before Peale declared that if you say to yourself that life is good and that you choose happiness, you can be quite certain of having your choice, books such as Horace Fletcher's *Happiness as Found in Forethought Minus Fearthought* were among many that promised happiness to those willing to undertake the particular personal changes the authors recommended.[5] By now, countless books and websites invite readers to learn how to find happiness, become rich, find love, and live longer, healthier lives. Many stress the element of individual choice and control in such a process, as in the scores of books with titles inviting readers to "choose happiness," or "choose to be happy."

Surveys of what people the world over actually say about their own experience contradict both dismal and exultant generalizations. Fortunately for humankind, most people do not see themselves as leading lives of quiet desperation; instead, the majority among them, even in poor societies, regard their lives as moderately or very happy. However, it is equally wrong – and indeed sentimental – to imagine that happiness has nothing to do with standards of living, that it can be achieved equally well by all persons in spite of poverty, ill health, or denials of basic human rights; or to assume that levels of happiness alone should count regardless of concern for such rights. Although some people can be happy even in direst penury, individuals in democratic nations with higher average incomes and standards of living are much more likely to report feeling satisfied with their lives than those who live in the poorest and most oppressive societies. On this

point, all empirical studies agree. In fact, researchers have found that economic growth, freedom of choice, respect for human rights, and social tolerance all contribute to greater happiness.[6]

It has given me special pleasure, in preparing this book, to follow different lines of study as if I were in the company of individuals engaged in the same pursuits. Some of their inquiries reach across millennia, as when Teresa of Avila reflected, in her *Life*, on St Augustine's *Confessions* or when Montaigne engaged in imagined exchanges with Socrates, Seneca, Horace, and many others, just as thinkers ever since have done with him. Similar dialogues are taking place today, when neuroscientists, psychologists, and Tibetan Buddhist monks collaborate on studies of consciousness, meditation, and the role of positive and negative emotions; or when economists, sociologists, and psychologists debate the relevance of surveys of life satisfaction in different societies.

Early on, I felt fortunate to encounter books by three authors more attuned to such dialogues than most: the French historian Robert Mauzi's study of the idea of happiness in the eighteenth century, a time when so many thinkers saw the quest for happiness as the great innovation, the glorious discovery of their time; the American philosopher V. J. McGill's *The Idea of Happiness*, the most thorough historical study of philosophical theories of happiness; and the British biographer, memoirist, and historian of art and literature Peter Quennell's *The Pursuit of Happiness*, recounting aesthetic and creative experiences that show how what he calls the gift of exhilarated seeing contributes to our understanding of happiness.[7] Taken together, these books, written before the empirical studies of happiness in recent decades, illuminate much that has been felt and thought and written about happiness in the past. In turn, they help us think about the abundant research findings now coming to the fore – findings that, I believe, the three authors would have found of absorbing interest. Each of the three books, moreover, conveys the author's personal stake in taking on a topic of such scope, along with a measure of hesitation. Should they proceed historically? Or consider particular questions such as that of the relationship between virtue

and happiness? Or perhaps focus on individual authors or artists? It would not be possible to restrict their inquiry in such ways. Instead, unusually alert to the perennial controversies over happiness, they cast their nets widely, shedding new light, in the process, on well-known thinkers and bringing out of obscurity works rarely or never discussed in the context of happiness.

This book is the result of my having set out, years ago, to explore what we can learn about happiness. The more I have had a chance to study the clashing views on the subject and the passionate advocacy it can inspire, the more intrigued I have become by the voices and the personal experiences of those who have embarked on its study – the sages and poets and social theorists and increasingly, in recent decades, the social scientists, health professionals, and neuroscientists. As I have come across one person after another examining the subject, I have recognized similarities in their attempts to define happiness and to consider its relevance to the fundamental philosophical question of how one should live, no matter how profound their disagreement about the answer. I have listened for signs of awareness of such disagreements, with some individuals blithely ignoring challenges from outside their own field of expertise, at times moving to silence all critics, while others relish dialogues with friends and adversaries, present and past, whether in history, philosophy, religion, the arts, or the sciences – and, in so doing, invite us to strive to reach beyond our own perspectives.

II

EXPERIENCE

> How tell what was neither said nor done nor even thought, but only tasted, only felt, without any other object of my happiness than this emotion itself? I rose with the sun and I was happy; I went walking and I was happy; I saw Maman and I was happy; I left her and I was happy; I went through the woods and over the hill-sides, I wandered in the valleys, I read and I loafed; I worked in the garden, I picked fruit, I helped with the housework, and happiness followed me everywhere.
>
> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, 1782[1]

> I have often been asked, by kind friends to whom I have told my story, how I felt when I first found myself beyond the limits of slavery; and I must say here, as I have often said to them, there is scarcely anything about which I could not give a more satisfactory answer. It was a moment of joyous excitement, which no words can describe. In a letter to a friend, written soon after reaching New York, I said I felt as one might be supposed to feel, on escaping from a den of hungry lions. But, in a moment like that, sensations are too intense and too rapid for words. Anguish and grief, like darkness and rain, may be described, but joy and gladness, like the rainbow of promise, defy alike the pen and the pencil.
>
> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855[2]

BLISS, JOY, ELATION, CONTENTMENT, PLEASURE, EUPHORIA, HAPPINESS, ecstasy: how people describe their experience of these states of mind is so much more vivid than efforts to define or explain them.

We need little imagination to enter into the state of mind that Rousseau conveys; or to share, almost viscerally, Frederick Douglass's burst of exultation at finding himself beyond the limits of slavery.

We couldn't even begin to respond to such accounts, however, unless we were able to recall experiences of happiness in our own lives. The recall can be near instantaneous. I have found that when people ask what my book is about, and I tell them, the very mention of the word "happiness" almost invariably leads them to hesitate, as if to look inwards, then recount some intense experience of being overcome by happiness – a great burden lifted, maybe, an unexpected piece of good fortune, a blinding insight, or a deepened awareness of great beauty. A friend told of being caught in a blizzard in her car on a highway, freezing bitterly for hours after her battery died, then feeling flooded with bliss and gratitude at being rescued. For another, the memory that at once came to mind was the feeling of amazed tenderness at the first sight of her newborn baby lying beside her. And a conductor mentioned that his deepest joy would come not while conducting a magnificent piece, as by Beethoven or Mahler, but while sitting quietly going over the score and entering into the music most fully.

Reflecting on such accounts adds to our understanding of the intricate register of feelings and experiences that the very word "happiness" can elicit. Long before we encounter definitions of happiness, joy, and related concepts, most of us learn to distinguish between the nuances and the different durations and intensities in our own awareness of such states of mind. The same is true of sadness, sorrow, melancholy, despair, pain, misery, grief, and agony. The sorting out of the complex shadings and differences among these experiences begins early in childhood. It is aided by responses to other living beings, to nature, to beauty, to the life of the imagination through stories and myths. We gradually come to recognize such distinctions, much as people who dwell in Arctic regions learn to differentiate between a multitude of terms for the varieties of snow and ice.

Unlike distinctions so dependent on climate and natural environment, however, those concerning the many forms of happiness and unhappiness are part of our common *human* environment, regardless of where we live. To be sure, heredity, culture, and sheer luck contribute to differences in how people experience such forms and in turn how they are expressed. True, too, a few individuals seem incapable of perceiving such experiences in others, much less of seeing them as shared. But most people have a rudimentary capacity for feelings of comfort, affection, and joy in interaction with others. We can think of ourselves as wired for such experiences, many of which we also share with a number of animal species. Infants the world over express a range of similar responses of satisfaction, security, even bliss from touch, sound, and smell; and parents everywhere use the same sing-song intonations to elicit such responses.

Charles Darwin held that expressions of basic emotions such as those of joy, anger, disgust, and grief were universal; and that joy, when intense, leads everywhere to movements such as dancing about, clapping hands, and laughing out loud.[3] Psychologist Paul Ekman, expanding on Darwin's observations, has corroborated his conclusions by showing a set of photographs of faces expressing happiness, disgust, surprise, fear, sadness, and anger to people in cultures across the world. A cheerful, broadly smiling face was one that a majority in each society could recognize as happy. The same was true of the pictures that showed sadness and those that showed disgust.[4]

When neuroscientists use brain imaging to track changes in blood flow and neuron activity as people report experiencing pleasure and pain, joy and distress, they also find support for another of Darwin's ideas: namely, that human beings react with empathy on perceiving another's happiness, misery, fear, and other emotions. More generally, recent studies of so-called "mirror neuron systems" in primates and some birds have shown these animals responding to the actions of others as if they themselves were acting thus. Similar mirroring systems at work in the human brain link to the empathy people experience when they witness an emotion such as happiness in others.

Even infants are far better able to respond to facial expressions of shadings of happiness or misery than was once believed. According to Jerome Kagan, "Two year old children have a capacity to infer the thoughts and feelings of another and will show signs of tension if another person is hurt, or may offer penance if they caused another's distress."[5] But while most children are endowed with such a capacity, it is absent in some, due to brain or other impairments; and it can atrophy in others, as a result of abuse or of exposure to unendurable violence. Adolescents already exhibit great differences in their sensitivity to nuances of happiness and unhappiness, as well as in the empathy that enables them to respond to these feelings in others. The same variations occur among adults. Some failures of empathy involve entire categories of people: enemies, for example, or members of racial, religious, and ethnic groups; even half the human race, as when Aristotle and Schopenhauer held that women had less capacity for happiness than men.

By what means do we become capable of perceiving even our own experiences of happiness or well-being? Neurologist Antonio Damasio suggests the metaphor of an ongoing "movie in the brain" that constitutes consciousness: a rough metaphor requiring us to "realize that the movie has as many sensory tracks as our nervous system has sensory portals – sight, sound, taste and olfaction, touch, inner senses, and so on."[6] The experience of happiness can derive from just one or two of these sensory portals or from most of them together. And when people feel unable to experience any form of happiness whatsoever – in so-called states of *anhedonia* – it is as if all such portals were closed to pleasure.

The world's languages convey the different shadings and nuances of words related to experiences of happiness and unhappiness. Every language, of course, has its own set of distinctions, and, as with the translation of any complex words, it is hard to point to an instance of one-to-one correspondence between the terms used in different languages. Most Indo-European words for happiness, such as the English "happiness," the Greek "eutuchia," the German "Glücklichkeit," and the French "bonheur" are based on the concept of "good fortune" which often leads to the feeling

of happiness. But it is impossible to draw sharp lines, an authority on these languages points out, "between the pleasurable emotions expressed by pleasure, joy, delight, gladness, happiness, etc."[7]

With such cautions in mind, it is nevertheless possible greatly to enhance our ability to perceive the many different forms and nuances of happiness. Just as in trying to understand any other aspect of human experience, say friendship or anger, so with the range of experiences of happiness. Some people respond far more deeply, broadly, intensely to what they experience than others, much as some respond more intensely to what they see than those who are color blind or have weak eyesight. Part of seeking to learn about the experience of happiness should involve asking ourselves how we can come to perceive it more vividly in its many forms. As with vision, there are methods and a variety of aids to deepen and extend our perception of happiness or its absence in our own lives and in those of others, including introspection, drawing on autobiographies, journals, and other self-narratives, or on works of art, scientific research, and thought-experiments.

Introspection

Introspective observation, as William James underscored in his *Principles of Psychology*, is what we have to rely on *first, foremost, and always* for insight into how we try to grasp the nature of experience. James, who insisted that introspective observation should be coordinated with psychological research, including neurological studies, would have been fascinated to learn of the collaborative work now being done by neuroscientists and psychologists using so-called "neuro-imaging techniques." By means of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), for example, scientists document the rate of blood flow in different parts of the brain; they can then explore whether images of, or verbal expressions about, particular experiences of pleasure or pain, happiness or unhappiness stimulate specific areas and electrical pathways in the brain.[8] Other researchers have used such techniques to study ways in which damage to certain parts of

the brain can result in impaired self-awareness and how this impairment, in turn, diminishes the ability to recognize emotions such as happiness or sadness in other people's faces.[9]

In recent years, neuroscientists, some invoking James, have also studied the introspective practices of meditation of Tibetan Buddhist monks, examining the brain patterns associated with the monks' reports of attaining exceptionally high and lasting levels of happiness. Since 1992, groups of Buddhist monks have visited the Laboratory of Affective Neuroscience at the University of Madison in Wisconsin, to take part in electroencephalographic studies by psychologist Richard Davidson and his colleagues. In such studies, monks who have undergone training in meditation are asked to meditate in the laboratory, their heads wired with EEG electrodes, along with control subjects who have no such training. The brain patterns of monks are consistently found to differ sharply from those of the control subjects, with the monks managing to bring about and maintain levels of activity in the left prefrontal cortex – an area of the brain associated with positive feeling – far above anything achieved by volunteers. The monks, according to Davidson, "are the Olympic athletes, the gold medalists, of meditation."[10]

One of the monks, Matthieu Ricard, who has worked with Davidson throughout, has been hailed by enthusiastic observers as one of the happiest persons on earth. Owen Flanagan, a philosopher in the forefront of efforts to bridge the gap between Western and Eastern philosophy and social and natural scientists, goes so far as to write that if asked whether Ricard was the happiest person ever to exist, he would say "Yes."[11] Ricard himself was trained as a biologist at the Institut Pasteur in Paris before leaving, at twenty-six, for Darjeeling in India to study with a Tibetan master. He has traveled with the Dalai Lama, serving as his interpreter, and reached large audiences through speaking and writing on Tibetan Buddhism and the search for happiness. In his book *Happiness*, Ricard contrasts his earlier life to the sense of flourishing he has come to experience at every moment of his life – a change that he attributes to his good fortune in meeting remarkable people who were both good and compassionate.[12]

William James did not have today's sophisticated methods of examining the brain. But few students of happiness have drawn more meticulously yet imaginatively than he on introspection, through observation and experimental findings as well as on autobiographical writings and works of art. Exploring "the stream of experience," he saw happiness as its central focus. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James illuminated the various ways in which people focused on happiness and unhappiness through meditation, prayer, and soul-searching in different spiritual traditions. He described how, in some doctrines, mere thoughts of happiness, especially if related to sexuality, were to be shunned as grave sins; and explored the different forms that saintliness could assume, whether related to happiness on earth or after death. How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is for most people, at all times, he held, "the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure."[13] As for himself, he had few religious certainties, though he added, in a Postscript, that he agreed in principle with the Buddhist doctrine of karma.[14]

The problem James faced, he wrote to a friend, was how he might best defend "experience" against "philosophy" as being the real backbone of the world's religious life: all that was immediately and privately felt against the philosophers' high and abstract views of our destiny and the world's meaning.[15] To do so, he drew on his vast library of "human documents" or personal accounts of every sort of experience. He presented excerpts from the self-narratives of Teresa of Avila, Rousseau, Thoreau, Tolstoy, and a wealth of others, exploring them from psychological, religious, medical and philosophical perspectives. A great many more such documents have come to light since his time, invaluable for the study of happiness.

Self-narratives

> [Prince Amu-an-shi] placed me before his children, he married his eldest daughter to me, and gave me the choice of all his land, even among the best of that which he had on the border of the next