CONCLUSION

Happiness, Ethics, Possibility

The word *happiness* does things. This much is clear. Throughout this book, I have considered how happiness holds its place as the object of desire, as the endpoint, the telos, as being what all human beings are inclined toward. As Darrin McMahon observes, happiness has often been described as what you reach at the end of a “well marked path” and as “the *summum bonum*, a highest good, happiness remained a *telos*, an end, and virtue the principal means to guide the way” (2006: 137). Happiness describes not only what we *are* inclined toward (to achieve happiness is to acquire our form or potential) but also what we *should be* inclined toward (as a principle that guides moral decisions about how to live well). Happiness provides as it were a double telos: the end of life, and the end of the good life.

Happiness can be what we want, a way of getting what we want, and a sign that we have got what we want. If we are happy, then we are well; or we have done well. Happiness can also be a judgment that others are doing well, even when we do not presume access to another’s interiority or presume the other’s existence involves interiority. We might say, for instance, that the plant is happy, as a way of saying that the plant is doing well, or flourishing. The association between wellness and feeling can be powerful in such occasions. When I say
the plant is happy, I almost imagine that the plant is feeling cheerful, which in turn makes me feel cheerful about the plant, and even with myself for making the plant cheerful. It is as if the word bestows an affect, as if wellness is full of feeling, or a feeling full. Saying happiness can appear to generate the happiness that is said, or at least it provides us with a fantasy that happiness “is” by being said.

The word happiness is thus motivated and energetic. Given that happiness is a feeling-state or state-of-being that we aspire toward, then the word is often articulated with optimism and hope, as if saying it might mean having it, as if our feelings will catch up with the word, or even as if we will catch the feeling from the word. Creating happiness might even be a matter of spreading the word. Happiness offers what we could call “a hopeful performative.” We hope that the repetition of the word happiness will make us happy. We hope that the word happiness will deliver its promise.

Positive psychology as a field is predicated on this promise: if you say, “I am happy” or make other positive self-declarations (if you practice being optimistic until it is habitual or routine to look on the bright side), then you will become happy. In such a framework, you can talk yourself into being happy by talking about yourself as being happy. There can be a certain truth to the promise. The word happiness could even be described as a happy word. After all, words can bring things into existence; words can do things, even if we don’t always know what it is they will do. And yet, if you say repeatedly “I am happy” it can feel like you are trying to convince yourself about something, such that even if you convince yourself, the very necessity of having to convince yourself demonstrates that you are not really convinced. My question is thus not so much whether we can generate happiness through the repetition of the word but what kind of desire is the desire for happiness in the first place, and what does it mean for subjects to be responsible for generating its effects, or to have a duty to spread the word.

It is the very desire for happiness that is articulated by the repetition of the word. The desire might even censor evidence of its own failure. Given this, to speak happiness is not necessarily to speak of something that exists before us. My own interest in how happiness is put into words was initially sparked by the speech act “I just want you to be happy.” We can imagine the speaker giving up, stepping back, flinging up her arms, sighing. I just. The “just” is a qualifier of the want and announces a disagreement with what the other wants without
making the disagreement explicit. Statements of desire for “just happiness” imply another unspoken utterance state, “I will be happy if you are happy,” which translates into the following: “If you do or are that, then you will be unhappy, so I will be unhappy.” Such a speech act, which secretly worries that unhappiness will follow that, produces the very state that is imagined as being that (just happiness = unhappiness). This is what I would call a “perverse performative”: the speech act brings into existence what it cannot admit that it wants, or even that very thing that it says that it does not want (the unhappiness that shows you that you would only be happy if you did what I wanted you to do). If happiness is performative, it does not always declare what it wants.

In whatever form it takes, which is the form of the whatever, to speak of happiness is certainly part of the fabric of social life; the weave of reciprocity, of civility, of conflict and antagonism, makes happiness a tool, even a missile, as well as an object of love, that is sent out, returned, such that the word itself circulates, moves around, always going somewhere, always busy. We could describe happiness as a buzzword. It creates a sound through being used, such that when you hear the word happiness you are listening to the sound of its busyness.

Happiness as a word is both mobile and promiscuous; it can be articulated lightly, can appear anywhere, even everywhere. Ziyad Marar has argued that “the term happy is so dull and ubiquitous that it has been worn thin; rubbed transparent through constant, casual usage” (2003: 7). While happiness can indicate how we feel about our life situation, or what we hope for, whether we are hoping for ourselves or for others, we can also use the word simply to indicate an attitude, feeling, or preference in the present, and we can do so easily, casually, without any tremors of anxiety, or even without much thought: “so happy to meet you,” “I am happy that,” “this is a happy occasion.” The mobility of this word does not always indicate its capacity to generate fullness wherever it goes. The word can also cover over social occasions; happiness as a word might not always do what it says, which is perhaps what allows us to say it, over and over again. In other words, the capacity for the word to move can make it less as well more affective. Indeed, when the word is detached from self-declarations or judgments about others, it can simply hover in the background, saying little, saying nothing.

So even if happiness holds its place as the object of desire, it does not always signify something, let alone signify the same thing. Happiness may hold its
place only by being empty, a container that can become quite peculiar as it is filled with different things. Jacques Lacan's description of the history of happiness (rethought as the desire to know whether one's object of desire is worthy) as a secondhand clothes store remains timely: “The result is a kind of catalogue that in many ways might be compared to a second-hand clothes store in which one finds piled up the different judgments that down through the ages and up to our time have dominated human aspirations in their diversity and even their chaos” ([1986] 1992: 14). I have suggested that as a container of diverse objects, happiness might also contain the forms in which desire can be realized. The idiosyncratic nature of happy object choices, the intimacy of recognizing each other's likes, is how we share a horizon. There is an order to the chaos of happiness. The very diversity of happy objects helps create happiness as a field of choice (do you like this, or that, or whatever), as an illusion of freedom.

If the objects of happiness are diverse, so are the feelings that gather under its name. Happiness as a positive emotion can suggest the warmth and ease of comfort, or the sharp intensities of joy. It can be a momentary feeling, like a bolt of lightning that interrupts the night sky, only to be gone again, or the calm slow sigh of reflecting on something that has gone well. Happiness can be the beginning or end of a story, or can be what interrupts a life narrative, arriving in a moment, only to be gone again. Happiness can be all these things, and in being all of them, risks being none. If happiness does things, then does it do too much? Does happiness stop doing things by doing too much?

We can certainly witness a fidelity to happiness within philosophy, such that the story of happiness seems a story of fidelity. Happiness might even function as philosophy's foundational tautology: what is good is happy and what is happy is good. John Stuart Mill's model of happiness involves such a tautology: happiness is what we desire, so that whatever we desire we desire because it gives us happiness. He suggests that “men do desire happiness” and that “they desire and command all conduct in others toward themselves by which they think their happiness is promoted” ([1863] 2001: 28). He later suggests that happiness is desirable: “The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable and the only Thing desirable” (35). We desire what is desirable in desiring happiness. Does this formulation tell us anything at all?

In a way, it may tell us something by not telling us anything. Without the word happiness, we would perhaps not have a word that desire could point to: happiness might allow us to avoid the more explicit tautology that we desire
what we desire. Of course, we can use other words, in the empty place left by taking out the word *happiness*. We can desire x or y, or any number of perverse combinations. We can be inventive with our object choices. Such combinations won’t do quite the same trick. Happiness may be our best trick because it can keep its place, as being what we desire in desiring x or y. We can have confidence in x and y by having confidence in happiness as what x and y will give.

Happiness becomes a stopping point; happiness allows us to stop at a certain point, rather like the word *because*. The child asks you questions, or I ask questions in a way that people might say is “childlike.” Why this? If this, then why that? Why that, then why . . .? Anything can take the place of the dots; the empty place that always marks the possibility of another question, the endless deferral that reminds us that all answers beg questions and that to give an answer is to create the condition of possibility for another question. Eventually, you stop. You must stop. You have to stop to put a stop to the questions because there are other things to do with your time. So you say, “because.” Why because? Because “because.” When because becomes an answer to a question the conversation can stop. Happiness provides such a because, a “because because.” We desire things, because of happiness. Because of happiness, we desire things. Happiness is how we can end the conversation about why it is that we desire what we desire. Happiness provides us with a full stop, a way of stopping an answer from being a question.

We can stop the conversation by taking it as self-evident that happiness is what we want or unhappiness is what we don’t want. David Hume focuses more on the latter, providing us with a powerful account of just this kind of conversational stopping point: “Ask a man why he uses exercise; he will answer because he desires to keep his health. If you then enquire, why he desires health, he will readily reply, because sickness is painful. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason why he hates pain, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object” ([1748] 1975: 293). You can end the conversion with such a point, as it does not demand another reference point.

To refer to happiness might suspend obligation to refer to anything else in making good an argument. Happiness becomes our defense; you can defend anything by saying it is necessary for happiness, whether that happiness is the happiness of a certain one, or the happiness of many. You can attack anything by saying that it is the cause of unhappiness. Happiness adds weight to argu-
ments. To be on the side of happiness or to be for happiness (as a way of “being for being for”) means you are on the side of the good. The language of happiness converts swiftly into missionary language, as we saw in chapter 4, as what we give to others, who in being recipients of a happiness that is not their own acquire a happiness duty.

One could say, in rebuttal, that statements about happiness can be true or false. For example, research might show that feminism causes women to be unhappy (by increasing women’s aspirations, by challenging traditional gender roles, and so on), as I discussed in chapter 2. How do we respond? We can respond using the same epistemological commitments implicit in this research by giving evidence that feminism does not cause unhappiness, that feminism makes women happy, or that feminism is indifferent to women’s happiness.

I suspect it is not quite that easy. Happiness is a mobile defense in part because happiness is already mobile. It is difficult to pin down; we depend on correlations, expectations, answers, wishes. Much happiness research, as I discussed in the introduction to this book, proceeds by turning correlations into causalities. The correlation between happiness and marriage is used to indicate that marriage causes happiness and thus that we have a moral obligation to promote marriage. Happiness is affective because you can find it even when it is missing, such that the loss of happiness is explained as the loss of this or that thing that causes happiness. To counter an argument by countering a claim to happiness with a counterclaim to happiness hence leaves you with shaky ground to defend a claim to happiness that counters your own. We may need to defend our arguments by not making happiness our ground, while exposing the shakiness of happiness as a ground. Simone de Beauvoir’s argument in The Second Sex can be described as an exposure of shakiness: “It is always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place [others]” ([1949] 1997: 28).

And yet, despite my concluding comments on “pointless emotions” in chapter 5, it seems overwhelmingly the case that the point of life, the meaning of life, the value, ethics, and potential of life is hard to think without thinking about happiness. This is why to be critical of the claim to happiness still has to deal with happiness as a claim. Happiness is weighty not because of its point, as if it simply had a point, but because happiness evokes a point that lies elsewhere, just over the horizon, in the very mode of aspiring for something. Of all
the words we can think of as “emotion words,” as words that operate as if they are signs of emotion, *happiness* seems the most pointed because happiness has been so closely tied to ethics. For some, the good life is the happy life. Or the virtuous person is the happy person. Or the best society is the happiest society. Happiness becomes not only the thing we want, whatever it is, but a measure of the good, such that happiness becomes a sign that the good must have already been achieved. We need to consider the intimacy of happiness and ethics in order to appreciate more fully the weightiness of happiness as a word.

A Genealogy of Happiness

I offer in conclusion a modest genealogy of happiness by reconsidering how happiness is implicated in what Nietzsche called the genealogy of morals. For Nietzsche, a genealogy of morals teaches us that good and evil as concepts arrive, and they arrive by taking form. To read good and evil we need to give form to their arrival rather than simply read their form. Nietzsche contrasts aristocratic and slave morality as two forms of morality that affirm and negate something. His genealogy of morals could be described as tracking the history of affirmation and negation.

In feminist theory, we are perhaps more familiar with Nietzsche’s critique of slave morality, as a critique of the passivity of *ressentiment* and injury-based forms of identity politics (Brown 1995: 73; Skeggs 2004: 181–87). For Nietzsche, slave morality begins by saying no to what is outside, and is locked inevitably in this gesture of negation, as a being that emerges by being against ([1887] 1996: 22), a being that might even take the shape of againstness. The slave revolt is a reaction of the weak and many against the power and happiness of the strong and the few; the moral psychology of its rebellion involves both the internalization of resentment and the desire for revenge.

Nietzsche argues that while slave morality says no to an outside, “the opposite is the case with the aristocratic mode of evaluation: this acts and grows spontaneously, it only seeks out its antithesis in order to affirm itself more thankfully and joyfully. Its negative concept, ‘low’, ‘common,’ ‘bad’ is only a derived, pale contrast to its positive basic concept which is thoroughly steeped in life and passion—‘we the noble, we the good, we the beautiful, we the happy
ones!” ([1887] 1996: 22). For Nietzsche, the gesture of saying “we the happy ones!” is an admirable gesture, a self-affirmation, a creation of something out of nothing.

Does Nietzsche repeat the gesture of affirmation by affirming the gesture? Nietzsche’s genealogy shows us how the happiness distinction is a reification of a social distinction. His aim is not to call for a return to aristocratic morality. And yet, quite clearly, he identifies with the gesture “we the happy ones” by describing it as purely creative. He suggests that such self-declarations only later create the unhappy, as those who lack or do not have what it is that we have: “one should not fail to notice the almost benevolent nuances present in all the words with which the Greek nobility distinguishes the lower people from itself; how a kind of pity, consideration and forbearance continually intervenes and sweetens, until ultimately almost all the words applied to the common man survive as expressions meaning ‘unhappy’ ‘pitiable’” (23). Nietzsche’s own affirmation (which is not necessary or even obvious) is that the aristocratic speech act “we the happy ones” does not require negation: the others are negated only as a kind of afterthought, becoming objects of pity, becoming pitiful and unhappy over time. It is the others, the negated, who begin with negation, who can only act by saying no.

The limitation of this genealogy of morals is not so much that it locates happiness in good fortune (I think this location helps us to understand what happiness is about) but rather that it identifies fortune with creativity. Nietzsche suggests that the fortune is a feeling that allows the “well-bred” to identify happiness with action. “All this,” he suggests, “is diametrically opposed to ‘happiness’ as understood on the level of the powerless . . . those for whom happiness appears essentially as narcotic, anaesthetic; calm, peace, ‘Sabbath,’ the expansion of feeling and the stretching of the limbs, in a word, as passivity” (23–24). I challenge the idea that to declare happiness from fortune is an affirmation act, or even active, and that it does not from the very beginning involve negation (the “un-happy” as the “in-active”). I think the implication of Nietzsche’s own genealogy is that the declaration “we the happy ones” does not declare very much at all. Or if it does declare something, then the declaration simply reveals that those who have the power to describe themselves as happy tend to describe themselves as happy (and others as not being so). Such a declaration is not well described as an act of novelty or creation.

We can challenge the assumption that those deemed unfortunate do not act:
that their happiness (as *anaesthetics*) as well as unhappiness (as *ressentiment*) are passive. Throughout this book I have examined unhappiness as a form of political action: the act of saying no or of pointing out injuries as an ongoing present affirms something, right from the beginning. And, if anything, I have suggested that the happiness that is valued or affirmed, as signs of human activity and worth, can be reread as involving *anaesthetics*, a loss of the capacity or will to be affected by anything.

Nietzsche allows us to witness the *history of happiness as a genealogy of self-declaration*, in which the capacity to declare “we the happy ones” is taken as sufficient grounds of the truth of the statement. We could say the genealogy of happiness is inseparable from the history of fortune. If we learn from Nietzsche that the fortunate ones declare themselves as being happy, then we can reread happiness as the *displacement of fortune*. As I pointed out in the first chapter, one of the early meanings of the English word *happiness* relates to the idea of fortune, being fortunate or lucky. And yet, the history of happiness involves anxiety that happiness could simply refer to good fortune. We see this anxiety, for instance, in the Stoic tradition. As Seneca famously described, “Fortune can snatch away only what She has given, but virtue she does not give, therefore, she cannot take it away” (cited in DeBrabander 2007: 22). Fortune is personified as a figure of contingency, of the possibility that what has been given can also be taken away. Happiness becomes virtue, as that which each man can achieve without external goods: “It was nature’s intention that there should be no need of great equipment for a good life: every individual can make himself happy” (Seneca 1997: 6). Indeed the happy man is outside the reach of fortune: “No man has been shattered by the blows of Fortune unless he was first deceived by her favours” (7).

The exclusion of fortune from happiness might operate at the same level as the exclusion of the empirical and contingent: all those things that *happen to us*, that cannot as it were be under our control, are excluded from the conditions of happiness. What do contingency, fortune, and the empirical have in common? They all operate under the sign of “the hap.” One history of happiness could be described as the history of the removal of the hap from happiness. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith suggests that we must place our happiness not in the hope of winning but in playing the game well: “If we placed our happiness in winning the stake, we place it in what depended upon causes beyond our power and out of our direction. We necessarily exposed ourselves
to perpetual fear and uneasiness, and frequently to grievous and mortifying disappointments. If we placed it in playing well, in playing fairly, in playing wisely and skilfully, in the propriety of our own conduct, in short, we placed it in what, by proper discipline, education, and attention, might altogether be in our own power, and under our own direction. Our happiness was perfectly secure and beyond the reach of fortune” ([1759] 2000: 410).

We can explore the narrative of “happiness beyond the reach of fortune” in terms of what it promises: it promises that we can secure happiness. We can secure happiness when happiness is under our own direction, as a reference to our own conduct. This fantasy of happiness is a fantasy of self-control, as if we could control happiness by not placing our hopes for happiness in what is outside of our control. The wise and virtuous person will not be fearful, uneasy, or disappointed as his happiness rests on being wise and virtuous. The genealogy of happiness teaches us how happiness is found in the qualities of the fortunate: as Smith describes, in playing well we must have “proper discipline, education, and attention.” Fortune may then accumulate at the very moment it is displaced, becoming simply the capacity to play well, to be the happy and virtuous ones. To put fortune back into happiness is not to say that the fortunate ones are really the happy ones but rather to show how happiness allows the fortunate to think of themselves as good, virtuous, and wise despite their fortune. It is hard now to think of fortune without thinking about wealth. We might want to return to the early meanings of fortune, as a form of luck and chance, in theorizing the intimacy of happiness and fortune. Happiness might be as chancy as fortune.

**Happiness, Passivity, Activity**

Perhaps the genealogy of morality offered by Nietzsche stops too quickly: a genealogy of happiness might also need to offer a genealogy of activity and passivity. Such a genealogy of happiness would not simply explore the reification of the distinction between good and evil, and between lower and higher goods but also how that distinction is aligned with the distinction between active and passive, as well as between action and reaction. The distinction between active and passive accumulates force by being detached from bodies, such that it can be reattached to bodies in the form of different qualities or capacities.
In the first instance, all forms of passion have been viewed as passive; indeed, the word passion and the word passive share the same root in the Latin word for suffering, passio. The active/passive can function quite simply as a distinction between action and passion/emotion. But some forms of emotion become read as “active” in comparison to others. Happiness becomes a form of activity through being contrasted with negative emotions; to be happy would be to be active in the determination of your fate, while to be unhappy would be to suffer your fate. The distinction becomes sharper. Some forms of happiness become seen as more active than others. In Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, the superman is described as both the most joyful and the “happiest man,” whose joy is described as “free from the happiness of serfs” ([1883–85] 1961: 127), and who “smashes their table of values” as “the breaker—the law-breaker—but he is the creator” (51). The perpetual refinement of the distinction between active and passive allows activity and passivity to become properties of bodies. The unfortunate are the emotional ones, the ones who suffer, and if they feel happiness, then their happiness is weak, as anaesthetics.

We can challenge the binary opposition between active and passive by focusing on how the qualities of activity and passivity are distributed. Passivities tend to be located in the bodies of those on whom we have given up. To give something up can be not to see the quality of an action. I would even speculate that the description of the passive voice as a grammatical error involves a kind of giving up. The passive voice is ordinarily applied to that form of the verb in which “the action denoted by it is treated as an attitude of the thing toward which the action is directed.” We learn that we must say that the chicken crossed the road. We must not say that the road was crossed by the chicken. In such a case, the road does nothing, and yet is the grammatical subject of the sentence. We must preserve the fantasy that the subject, even the animal-subject, is the one who acts. The chicken must come first in the sentence.

But does the road do nothing in the event of the crossing? The road is a provider; it provides the point at which we can cross, at which we can go from one side to the other. The road is an effect of past actions, of decisions taken to allow crossing points. Rather than hold on to the binary opposition active/passive, we can challenge the opposition, and we can do so by showing how that which has been deemed as passive, as just there doing nothing, is doing something and even provides the conditions of possibility for doing something. The task is not to redescribe passivity as activity (creating as it were a gener-
alized field of action) but to think of passivities as involving different kinds of action.

One of my projects in this book has been to show how suffering is a kind of activity, a way of doing something. To suffer can mean to feel your disagreement with what has been judged as good. Given this, suffering is a receptivity that can heighten the capacity to act. To move from happiness to suffering—or we might even say to suffer the loss of an idea of happiness through disappointment—can even spring you into action. And happiness can be a way of going along with what you are being asked to do, as Nietzsche himself describes. This is not to say that unhappiness has to be installed as the active against which happiness is passive. No, not that. Not that, at all. We need to develop a language to describe qualitative differences in how we experience activities and passivities. To do this, we must challenge the very separation of active and passive, and how that separation works to secure different classes of being, from happy persons and crossing chickens to suffering souls and inert roads.

We can challenge the distinction between happiness as activity and unhappiness as passivity by showing how the active and passive can switch sides. Consider the Deleuzian reading of Spinoza. For Deleuze, Spinoza belongs in the same affirmative horizon as Nietzsche: “Spinoza’s all-out struggle, his radical denunciation of all the passions based on sadness” is what “places him in a great lineage that goes from Epicurus to Nietzsche” ([1970] 1998: 72). The radical denunciation of sad passions becomes an alternative line of descent within philosophy. By implication, this line of descent is also a line of dissent from those who do not renounce sad passions. And yet, despite this, we have seen how consistently philosophers present happiness as on the side of the good, although happiness is not always defined in terms of passion. If Epicurus, Nietzsche, and Spinoza share a commitment to happiness as that which is good, then such shared commitments would seem to agree rather than disagree with a philosophical inheritance.

For Deleuze, Spinoza’s ethics is ethnology, a description of power, of capacity, of how bodies are affected by other bodies. Deleuze asks: “What can happen if my body is made this way, a certain relation of movement and rest which subsumes an infinity of parts? Two things can happen: I eat something that I like, or else another example, I eat something and collapse, poisoned. Literally speaking, in the one case I had a good encounter, and in the other I
had a bad one” (1978: 6). As I discussed in chapter 1, John Locke also considers what it means to like what you eat. He uses the example of loving grapes because they taste delightful, offering a model of the diversity of tastes as “the agreeableness to this or that palate” ([1690] 1997: 247). For Deleuze the bad encounter takes us beyond the horizon of likes. He does not suggest “I eat something that I like” followed by “I eat something I don’t like.” He creates instead a rather more drastic and dramatic image. The bad encounter is when the subject is poisoned, collapses, and dies. That the “bad encounter” is represented as death tells us something. The encounter with something you like achieves a retrospective optimism as a form of survival (you are not poisoned). I have also suggested that when subjects suffer a radical disagreement which takes us beyond the horizon in which likes can gather as a shared form, they risk their lives.

Deleuze does more than describe the unpalatable effects of disagreement. What is disagreeable about disagreement is that you suffer from it: disagreement is itself framed as a form of passivity. This is why Deleuze says that, for Spinoza, those in power such as the despot or the priest “need the sadness of their subjects” (4). The masses must be weakened through suffering. They must be poisoned by what is disagreeable. So if I suffer a disagreement, it is my life at stake: we could say that death is the failure of the subject to persist in his or her own being; death by eliminating the subject altogether is the radicalization of the threat of passivity.

For Deleuze the good encounter increases the capacity for action: we could describe the good encounter as the agreeable effects of agreement. A good encounter would depend on “relations of agreement between such and such body and my own” (11). In a bad encounter, “this body does not agree with mine” (5). There is no doubt that some things more than others will agree with us. Our likes might be determined at least in part by what can agree with us given what we are already like.

We can still ask how it is that we come to be like what we are like. Deleuze in considering “an encounter” asks what might happen if so and so meets with so and so. In another example from the same lecture, I might “walk down the street,” where I happen upon Pierre and Paul: “I run into Pierre” and “I suddenly see Paul” (3). I meet them by chance on the street and the encounter might be a good or bad encounter. Whether it is a good or bad encounter would depend on how I am affected by Pierre and Paul: when I am pleased or dis-
pleased an idea of Pierre and Paul is given to me. I am tempted to ask whether this encounter is chance; sure, we might happen to meet, but we might happen to meet because we are walking along the street. We have already witnessed the agency of the street. The street provides not only a crossing point (for chickens and other others) but also a meeting point. Even chance encounters, you might say, depend on certain grounds being available for action. We are directed by what grounds our action: the paths that allow us to find our way, even if we don’t know what we will find on our way.

However we encounter each other, I meet Pierre and Paul and the meeting is either agreeable—or not. What does it mean for an encounter to be agreeable? How do some become agreeable for others? My analysis of happiness has offered an alternative vocabulary for describing what is at stake in an agreement. Happiness can involve an immanence of coercion, the demand for agreement. Coercion is usually thought of as an external force that requires the obedience of subjects through the use of threats, intimidation, or pressure. When we think of being coerced we might think of being forced to do something “against our will.” But coercion can shape the very direction of the will, as the will to will. What is agreeable to our will might not always be available as an object of consciousness. Arthur Schopenhauer argues in On the Suffering of the World that “we never really notice or become conscious of what is agreeable to our will” ([1850] 2004: 3). We might not notice others if they are in agreement with our will. An agreement might stop an encounter from being recognized as an encounter. When things are in agreement, they are even behind us. Agreements might take place before such and such a body encounters such and such a body. Each body carries with it a history of agreements, not all of which are revealed, which incline it in a certain way, as the way of the will.

We can return to the example of the palate. Even a philosopher such as John Locke, who embraces the diversity of happy objects, suggests that the palate is correctible. We can acquire good tastes, as I discussed in chapter 1. The possibility of acquisition is a field of immanence, of not only what you can become but what you should become, translated as the duty of the subject to do better. Pleasure or joy might involve not just finding such and such agreeable but the experience of being affirmed because you find the right things pleasing. Those around you “agree” with your agreement. After all, agreement can mean not only “the action of pleasing or contenting” but also “the act of consenting.” The good encounter might involve submission, in the sense of being willing to like
one’s condition, as I explored in my reflections on happiness dystopias in chapter 5. Agreement also describes “accordance in sentiment.” When accordance in sentiment is a goal of social and political life, it would require you to accord with what already exists. Harmony would be a demand for accordance. This is why I would argue that the powers-that-be might want their subjects happy rather than sad.7 And in wanting our happiness, they might forbid recognition of sadness as that which gets in the way, not just of happiness but its want.8

We can thus offer a different slant on the Deleuzian example of the good encounter. The good encounter could be read as being how bodies stay in place, or acquire a place in which they can stay, by agreeing with what they receive. The bad encounter can be read as how bodies refuse to be placed by disagreeing with what they receive. This book has considered unhappiness as judgmental, as an affective point of disagreement. If acts of revolution, of bringing the walls down, can be understood as protests against happiness, we can also describe such acts as protests against the costs of agreement. If to agree is to submit, then good encounters can involve submission—though not necessarily, and not only. We can learn from how that which has been deemed active can be read as passive, and that which has been deemed passive can be read as active. Activities and passivities are ways of framing an encounter rather than describing an encounter as such.9

My reading of happiness offers a reframing of an encounter. We could redescribe the social threat of the killjoy in these terms. The killjoy is the one who comes between bodies that would be, or should be, in agreement.10 The killjoy is the one who gets in the way of an organic solidarity. Or we might say that solidarity becomes organic by locating the disagreement in what gets in the way of an encounter. Solidarity might even take shape by agreeing on what is disagreeable in advance of an encounter. The example of the killjoy teaches us that the nature of organic agreement depends on the localization of disagreement to “whatever” gets in the way. My task in this book has been to refuse the indifference of this whatever.

If ethics is to preserve the freedom to disagree, then ethics cannot simply be about affirmation, or for affirmation, understood as good encounters, as what increases the capacity for action. I would thus extend my critique of happiness to include what we could describe as “the affirmative turn.” The affirmative turn is not reducible to the happiness turn. Much of this literature is at odds with the kind of work within happiness studies; this is philosophical writing
that does not have normative commitments to happiness as the good and virtuous life, and that writes itself in opposition to the moralizing frames of reference that characterize happiness studies. Indeed, many writers working in this vein explicitly refuse the “weighty” language of happiness and privilege instead the positivity of joy (Massumi 2002a; Colebrook 2008). So why speak of the affirmative turn as belonging within the same horizon as the happiness turn? I do so for one simple reason: the affirmative turn shares a commitment to positive feelings—which does not mean in any simple way “good feelings”—as sites of potentiality and becoming.

The affirmative turn has posited what we might call “an affirmative ethics.” Affirmative ethics turns the Deleuzian example of the good encounter into a call for good encounters. In other words, affirmative ethics does not only describe what happens when bodies are in agreement, it also calls for good encounters as giving “more to life,” as more, perhaps, than misery and suffering. Brian Massumi suggests: “Ethical, empirical—and creative, because your participation in this world is part of a global becoming. So it’s about taking joy in that process, wherever it leads, and I guess it’s about having a kind of faith in the world which is simply the hope that it continue. . . . But again it is not a hope that has a particular content or end point—it’s a desire for more life, or for more to life” (2003a: n.p.). Massumi argues carefully that good feelings aren’t necessarily about feeling good. But the word joy evokes experiences of pleasure and delight. Words are sticky; they retain associations even if we use them differently. In a way, by redefining joy as good feeling, as what increases capacity for action, we also increase the power of the word: feeling good becomes good feeling; feeling good becomes what increases your power for action.

Massumi writes here about taking joy in a process. And yet, joy also gives affective shape to this “more to life.” In the affirmative turn, joy is what opens up the potentiality of life. What does it mean to be for joy? Is being for joy different from being for happiness? We need to take care not to collapse joy with happiness; there is no doubt these words have different histories that are attached in some way to what they have been used to refer to. Joy is a less weighty word; it is often used to signify an intensity of feeling that is transitory and must be transitory if it is to be experienced as intensity. But if joy is put in the place of happiness as being what we should aim for, then they might have similar effects. Rosi Braidotti, for example, suggests that “joyful or positive passions and the transcendence of reactive affects are the desirable mode”
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There is so much to admire in Braidotti’s visionary feminism. And yet, I wonder what it means for joy to become a desirable mode, a way of transcending negative passions, which are assumed to be reactive. Braidotti does recognize the importance of pain and suffering within her ethics. For Braidotti, “taking suffering into account is the starting point; the real aim of the process, however, is the quest for ways of overcoming the stultifying effects of passivity, brought about by pain” (8). We can ask whether pain is best described as stultifying passivity (or whether pain is only experienced in such terms) and whether all passivity is stultifying. My aim in even asking such questions is not to affirm pain or other bad feelings in response to this affirmation of good feeling. I would simply suggest that we cannot know in advance what different affects will do to the body before we are affected in this or that way. As I argued in chapter 5, being affected involves the perversity of being twisted and turned.

The affective economy which associates joy with good things and pain with bad things might prematurely hold things in place. If we aim for joy, we aim to move beyond pain. Bad feelings are in the way of what gets beyond: they are described by Braidotti as “black holes” (13). Rather than describe bad feelings as obstacles, as being “in the way,” I have described in this book what follows from bad feelings being understood in such terms. Some more than others are associated with bad feeling, as getting in the way of the promise of happiness. We learn from blockages, and the where and how of their distribution. So rather than presuming “random access to the phenomena the cause pain” (13), I have described how those who refuse the promise of happiness become the causes of bad feeling, which causes unhappiness to take form in specific ways. While sometimes bad things simply happen, while you can be unlucky or misfortunate (as implicit in the saying “to be in the wrong place at the wrong time”), I would argue that our access to the causes of pain is far from random.

We can return to Audre Lorde’s work discussed in chapter 2. As she shows us, the very idea that violence is random is what stops us from seeing what is at stake in an encounter: her mother says to her that the woman who spits is spitting into the wind not spitting at her, a black child, as a way of protecting the child from the pain of racism. It is a desire for protection that is understandable—but it fails to protect. Lorde argues throughout her work that we should not be protected from what hurts. We have to work and struggle not so much
to feel hurt but to notice what causes hurt, which means unlearning what we have learned not to notice. We have to do this work if we are to produce critical understandings of how violence, as a relation of force and harm, is directed toward some bodies and not others. While we can and should follow Raymond Williams (1977) to explore “structures of feeling,” my suggestion here is that we might also want to explore “feelings of structure”: feelings might be how structures get under our skin.

The desire to get over suffering is of course an understandable desire, one that might express a longing to do more than describe social relations of force and harm.12 I have explored throughout this book the limits of this desire (which is not and will not be all that can be said about this desire). To recover can be to re-cover, to cover over the causes of pain and suffering. Rosi Braidotti suggests that “repugnant and unbearable events do happen” but then concludes that “ethics consists however in reworking those events in the direction of positive relations” (13). She argues that “paradoxically, it is those who have already cracked up a bit, those who have suffered pain and injury, who are better placed to take the lead in the process of ethical transformation” (14). Perhaps the relationship between leadership and suffering is only paradoxical if we assume that suffering is stifling. We learn from what Braidotti rightly points out: those who have been undone by suffering can be the agents of ethical transformation.

We might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them but to learn by how we are affected by what comes near, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as an ethical resource. I think what is underestimated by affirmative ethics is the difficulty of giving our attention to—and sustaining our attention on—certain forms of suffering. The desire to move beyond suffering in reconciliation, the very will to “be over it” by asking others to “get over it,” means that those who persist in their unhappiness become causes of the unhappiness of many. Their suffering becomes transformed into our collective disappointment that we cannot simply put such histories behind us. Ethics cannot be about moving beyond pain toward happiness or joy without imposing new forms of suffering on those who do not or cannot move in this way.

The affirmative turn creates a distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. Bad feelings are seen as oriented toward the past, as a
kind of stubbornness that “stops” the subject from embracing the future. Good feelings are associated with moving up, as creating the very promise of a future. This assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed allows historical forms of injustice to disappear. The demand that we be affirmative makes those histories disappear by reading them as a form of melancholia (as if you hold on to something that is already gone). These histories have not gone: we would be letting go of that which persists in the present. To let go would be to keep those histories present.

My aim in this book has been to explore how bad feelings are not simply reactive; they are creative responses to histories that are unfinished (see also Ahmed 2004: 200–202). I am not saying that we have an obligation to be unhappy—it is important to avoid creating a romance or duty out of feelings that can be experienced as unbearable. I am simply suggesting that we need to think about unhappiness as more than a feeling that should be overcome. Unhappiness might offer a pedagogic lesson on the limits of the promise of happiness. If injustice does have unhappy effects, then the story does not end there. Unhappiness is not our endpoint. If anything, the experience of being outside the life-worlds created by passing happy objects around gets us somewhere. We might go further with happiness, if we don’t follow its objects around.

Hap-pier Happiness

Where can we go with happiness? I do not want to offer an alternative definition of happiness (a good happiness that can be rescued from bad happiness), as this would keep in place the very idea that happiness is what we should promote. I want to conclude with a reflection on how happiness can acquire significance if it is taken outside the domain of ethics. Happiness has been weighed down as a sign of the good—of the virtuous subject or of the good life. As I have suggested, happiness becomes an exclusion of possibility, and thus a good defense against crisis, as if the decisions about the future are already made. Happiness as a form of duty is written in the language of freedom, as if want follows freely from wanting to cause happiness or not to cause unhappiness.

If happiness is a defense against crisis, this book has attended to moments in which happiness fails, when a subject does not go along or get along, when
the way someone is going becomes a direction she does not want to go. When there is a crisis, we have to ask the question “which way?” When the way turns into a question, you become aware of possibility. You become aware of how much living the life you live is not necessary. Happiness can be used as a shield against this recognition of possibility. I was struck while doing the research for this book how rarely crisis points are resolved in narrative by the use of the speech act “I must leave this life for happiness,” though it is and will remain possible to speak in this way. I have learned so much about happiness by wondering how it is possible for crisis points to be resolved as “leaving happiness for life.”

The unhappy archives I have read in this book teach me what it means for ethics to be a crisis. You are living a life, and you realize you do not want to live the life you are living. The act of leaving a life can be an ethical act, even if it involves causing unhappiness. You might have to be willing to be the cause of unhappiness. This is not to say that causing unhappiness should become an ethical right or a necessary good. It can be right or wrong for this person or that—depending. Dependence involves the necessary task of asking what we should do, without turning to happiness as if it provides the answer to the question.

If we do not assume that happiness is what we must defend, if we start questioning the happiness we are defending, then we can ask other questions about life, about what we want from life, or what we want life to become. Possibilities have to be recognized as possibilities to become possible. This is why embracing possibility involves going back or even “feeling backward,” as Heather Love (2007) describes very well. Embracing possibility involves returning to the past, recognizing what one has, as well as what one has lost, what one has given, as well as what one has given up. To learn about possibility is to do genealogy, to wonder about the present by wondering about the how of its arrival. To learn about possibility thus involves a certain estrangement from the present. Other things can happen when the familiar recedes. This is why affect aliens can be creative: not only do we want the wrong things, not only do we embrace possibilities that we have been asked to give up, but we create life worlds around these wants. When we are estranged from happiness, things happen. Hap happens.

I would not say that unhappiness is necessary. But I would say that unhappiness is always possible, which makes the necessity of happiness an exclusion
not just of unhappiness but of possibility. As Søren Kierkegaard describes so beautifully: “This possibility that is said to be so light is commonly regarded as the possibility of happiness, fortune etc. But this is not possibility. . . . No, in possibility all things are equally possible, and whoever has truly been brought up by possibility has grasped the terrible as well as the joyful” ([1844] 1980: 156). Possibility means grasping terror as well as joy. Possibility for Kierkegaard is where equality is actual.

A stance toward possibility might be a happenstance. As Jean-Luc Nancy describes poetically: “Neither happiness nor unhappiness, there is happenstance, the sense of the happenstance [Ni bonheur, ni malheur, il y aurait l’heur, le’sens de l’heur], of the good and bad encounter or confrontation, of the possibility—incessantly renewed—that there could be a good or bad happenstance, that it could be necessary to choose one against the other, but, first of all, to choose to have this choice and not to have it, not to master the sense of the happenstance, the fractal combinatory of events that make up the world” ([1993] 1997: 151). To have a sense of the happenstance would involve being open to the possibility of good and bad things happening. We could say that happiness would be a possibility kept open by happenstance, such that the condition of possibility for happiness includes other possibilities. If we think of happiness as a possibility that does not exhaust what is possible, if we lighten the load of happiness, then we can open things up. When happiness is no longer presumed to be a good thing, as what we aim for, or as what we should aim for, then we can witness happiness as a possibility that acquires significance by being a possibility alongside others. We can value happiness for its precariousness, as something that comes and goes, as life does.

When I think of what makes happiness “happy” I think of moments. Moments of happiness create texture, shared impressions: a sense of lightness in possibility. Just think of those moments where you are brought to life by the absurdity of being reminded of something, where a sideways glance can be enough to create a feeling that ripples through you. Two people burst out with laughter by the recollection of an event. Just a word can prompt such recollection, a gesture, anything. As Clarissa, who inherits the sadness of Mrs. Dalloway as well as taking her name, describes in The Hours: “I remember one morning. Getting up at dawn. There was such a sense of possibility. You know that feeling. So this is the beginning of happiness. This is where it starts and of course there will always be more. It never occurred to me that it wasn’t
the beginning. It was happiness. It was a moment right then.” Happiness might not simply provide a sense of possibility; it is a sense of possibility. To turn happiness into an expectation is thus to annul its sense of possibility. When happiness is not something that we promise to another, is not something that we imagine is due to us or which we have a duty toward, is not something that we anticipate will accumulate from certain points, other things can happen, which involves a certain kind of openness to the possibility of an encounter.

A rethinking of happiness as possibility might also allow us to care for those forms of happiness that are directed in the wrong way. I explored misdirected happiness in my reflections on being happily queer in chapter 3. Some forms of happiness are viewed as less worthy because they do not involve the accumulation of points, creating a line that can be followed. Silliness might be another example of a worthless happiness. The etymology of silliness is striking. It comes from the word sael, originally meaning blessed, happy, or blissful. The word mutates over time; from blessed to pious, to innocent, to harmless, to pitiable, to weak and feeble. From the blessed to the feeble: we learn from the depressing nature of the genealogy of silliness.

An example of an attempt to revalue silly forms of happiness is offered by the film *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008, dir. Mike Leigh). This film follows the life of Poppy (Sally Hawkins), as she cycles around London, has fun with her female flatmate Zoe (Alexis Zegerman), her unconventional sister Dawn (Andrea Riseborough) and her assortment of friends, teaches kids she loves at her primary school, learns to drive, and visits her rather more conventional sister Suzy (Kate O’Flynn) in the suburbs. Poppy is a “happy-go-lucky” character; she seems (at least in the first instance) quite annoyingly persistent in her cheerfulness, chattering to strangers who do not want to have a conversation, who might want to be alone in their misery, or laughing and giggling when unpleasant things happen. We learn from her encounters that “inappropriate” expressions of happiness are far from contagious, that being cheerful in a certain way, at a certain moment, can cause irritation (as an irritation with happiness). Poppy seems at first to embody the cost of happiness, of the labor or effort to persist in happiness, as a way of covering over bad things. But over time, the film encourages us to identify with Poppy, through her responsiveness to the suffering around her: she reaches out to a schoolboy who has been bullied; she listens to her violent racist angry driving instructor; she strikes up a conversation with a homeless man with uncanny ease. In all these examples,
she refuses to keep her distance from suffering. The film shows that passivity can be an ethical capacity: you have to be willing to be affected by others, to receive their influence.

We can ask whether the film promotes happiness through idealizing the example of Poppy’s cinematic life. The director Mike Leigh has spoken about how he wanted to direct a film that was “anti-miserabilist.” And yet, by following Poppy around, the film does not suggest that the response to unhappiness is to be happy or to persist in an idea of happiness. To persist in such an idea would be to remove yourself from what is around you. After all, Poppy’s life is not shaped by what I have called happy objects (she does not own her house, she is not married, and she does not have children). Poppy goes to see her sister Suzy in the suburbs (who has or is about to have all these things). Suzy asks her when she is going to become responsible, saying, “I just want you to be happy, that’s all,” to which Poppy replies, “I am happy.” When her sister doubts her right to describe herself in this way, Poppy explains, “I love my life. Yeh, it can be tough at times, that’s part of it. I’ve got a great job, brilliant kids, got lovely flat, got her to look at, got amazing friends. I love my freedom. I’m a very lucky lady, I know that.” Her sister becomes upset at this life-affirmation, saying that Poppy is “rubbing it in.” Suzy might be upset not because she is unhappy with Poppy’s happiness but because Poppy exposes the unhappiness of Suzy’s happiness. We are shown what you give up by doing the right thing, in aspiring to have a good life, to reach its points of ceremony.

At one level, this film seems limited by its preoccupation with psychology as a solution (as if change is simply about having a better attitude). So Poppy asks her angry and unhappy driving instructor about his family, taking on the role of therapist who seeks to explain unhappiness by returning to a primal scene, as an explanation which can also explain unhappiness away. And yet Happy-Go-Lucky reflects on how the promotion of an idea of happiness, of the good life, means giving up a certain freedom, a certain sense of being able. After all, the happy-go-lucky person is not a conventional figure of happiness. Poppy is happy with her life not despite not following happy objects around but because she does not; she goes wherever her desire, interest, or curiosity takes her. To live life in such a way is to be creative and inventive with your object choices. Indeed this film is quite remarkable for its presentation of the longevity of female friendship, which is not depicted as a route to a heterosexual future, nor a supplement, but as a life world, a world with its own rhythms and con-
tingencies. The film thus gives most value to ties of affection that are outside conventional forms of intimacy. Returning to my discussion in chapter 5 of boats as utopic forms, it is noteworthy that the final scene of *Happy-Go-Lucky* ends with a boat, with Poppy on a boat with Zoe. The film’s utopia is expressed in terms of the ease and good humor of their intimacy.

We can thus recognize how a critique of happiness can be offered as an affirmative gesture. We would not be calling for an affirmative approach to life, or calling for affirmation as an ethics. Rather we would be affirming the possibilities of life in whatever happens; we would be opening up possibilities that are negated by the very demand that we live our lives in the right way. Silliness—and all those forms of happiness that are deemed superficial—can thus be instructive. In coming to value that which is not valued, and in finding joy in places that are not deemed worthy, we learn about the costs of value and worth. The happy-go-lucky character might seem unweighed by duty and responsibility; she might seem light as a feather. She might seem careless and carefree. But freedom from care is also a freedom to care, to respond to the world, to what comes up, without defending oneself or one’s happiness against what comes up.

I am not suggesting here that a response to my critique of happiness is to become happy-go-lucky. Rather, we can recognize that the figures of the feminist killjoy, unhappy queer, and melancholic migrant have a rather queer kinship with being happy-go-lucky. Unhappiness with and rage about injustice may even be on a continuum with good feelings that are read as careless and silly. To embrace silliness is to embrace affects that would not ordinarily participate in an affirmative or happiness ethics. Our unhappy archives are unsurprisingly full of silliness and other inappropriately positive affects, as Lauren Berlant’s reflections on the “counterpolitics of the silly object” might suggest (1997: 12). The freedom to be unhappy, which I explored in the last chapter, would thus include the freedom to be happy in inappropriate ways. Such freedoms would lighten the happiness load. The freedom to be unhappy would thus not leave happiness behind us. We would aim to put the hap back into happiness.

We have to struggle for such freedoms, and we inherit the labor of such histories of struggle. The struggle against happiness as a necessity is also a struggle for happiness as a possibility. I now think of political movements as hap movements rather than happiness movements. It is not about the unhappy ones becoming the happy ones. Far from it. Revolutionary forms of political
consciousness involve heightening our awareness of *just how much* there is to be unhappy about. Given that the desire for happiness can cover signs of its negation, a revolutionary politics has to work hard to stay proximate to unhappiness. And yet, a politics of the hap does not simply hold on to unhappiness or turn unhappiness into a political cause. Just recall that one of the definitions of the wretch is “a poor or hapless being.” Perhaps we could separate the hapless from the wretched. The wretched ones might be full of hap, might be hapfull, *because* they deviate from the paths of happiness, because they live in the gaps between its lines. To be full of hap is to make happen. A politics of the hap is about opening up possibilities for being in other ways, of being perhaps. If opening up possibility causes unhappiness, then a politics of hap will be thought of as unhappy. But it is not just that. A politics of the hap might embrace what happens, but it also works toward a world in which things can happen in alternative ways. To make hap is to make a world.
worlds where you would refuse proximity to unhappiness in order to protect your happiness.

As I have already suggested, Schopenhauer’s pessimism offers unhappiness as a telos, as being the endpoint of all human action. My critique of happiness does not involve such pessimism. I am not calling for optimism (the happiness telos) or pessimism (the unhappiness telos) as a foundations of politics. I would call instead for a politics without foundation, a politics without endpoints that are assumed to govern action. Such a politics will offer a queer mix of optimism and pessimism, hope and despair: what we mix up will depend on what gets thrown up.

My thanks to Tony Birch for an inspirational paper delivered at the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies conference in 2007. Birch referred to Freedom Dreams, and his paper encouraged me to be more hopeful about hope.

Žižek’s optimism about the boat recalls Foucault’s own reflection on the boat as “heterotopia par excellence” (1986: 27). As Foucault explained, “The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilisation, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (I have not been speaking of that today) but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination” (26). We learn from Foucault’s description how much the technologies of utopia are also technologies of capital and empire.

It is useful to note here that Daniel Gilbert’s reflection on happy futures turns to the boat in the following way: “We want — and we should want — to control the direction of our boat because some futures are better than others,” although he suggests that “the truth is that much of our steering is in vain” as “the future is fundamentally different than it appears through the prospectoscope” (2006: 23). An instrumental relationship to the future — and to happiness — might involve a fantasy that we can control our boats: that we know where we are going, where we want to be going, and how to get there.

Conclusion

Jean-Paul Sartre describes this process of convincing yourself of feeling in more phenomenological terms. He argues, “If I make myself sad, it is because I am not sad — the being of the sadness escapes me by and in the very act by which I affect myself with it” ([1965] 1993: 170–71). Even though you can
make yourself sad, the value of such a feeling “stands as a regulative meaning of my sadness, not as its constitutive modality” (171). So you make yourself happy insofar as you are not happy—and in becoming happy or being affected happily the being of happiness escapes. Happiness becomes a regulative meaning and not a modality.

Despite this, happiness remains quite slippery for John Stuart Mill. After all, he argues that some forms of happiness are better than others, which he describes as a “difference of quality in pleasures” ([1863] 2001: 8), a controversial idea some would argue takes him outside a utilitarian and hedonic framework (for a good discussion of Mill’s “qualitative hedonism,” see West 2004). It is interesting to note how quickly these different qualities of feeling become attached to different qualities of persons: “a being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy” (9), which leads Mill to his famous conclusion that “it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (10). Such a statement could be read as a rejection of the principle that happiness is necessarily good (it is better to be wise and unhappy than happy and foolish) and also points to some limitations of happiness, perhaps as a way of being satisfied with what exists (a lowering of horizons). But we should note how quickly the moral distinction between good and bad happiness becomes a social distinction between those who are worth more and less.

For an excellent essay on feminist uses of ressentiment to describe feminism’s own attachments, see Stringer 2000. I have articulated some concerns about the critique of feminist ressentiment in chapter 8 of The Cultural Politics of Emotion (2004).

It is interesting to consider the role of the passive/active distinction in Kant’s arguments about inclination and the moral law. In Critique of Practical Reason Kant describes all feelings as passive and pathological, as ways of being affected or under influence ([1788] 2004: 79). But he qualifies this argument by describing respect as a moral feeling which is produced simply by reason (80). Respect is moral insofar as it is respect for the moral law (83). In a footnote in Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant defends this distinction in the following way: “It might be here objected to me that I take refuge behind the word respect in an obscure feeling, instead of giving a distinct solution of the question by a concept of reason. But although respect is a feeling, it is not a feeling received through influence, but is self-wrought by a rational concept, and, therefore, is specifically distinct from all feelings of the former kind, which may be referred either to inclination or fear” ([1785] 2005: 62). Passive feelings—those that are received through influence—refer to inclination or fear. Respect is “self-wrought.” Respect provides Kant with a fantasy that the rational subject is not affected or under influence. I would argue that this subject is precisely under the influence of the law.
I challenge the idea that the happiness of the over-man can transcend the
happiness of serfs. As Mari Ruti has observed, authenticity is often defined
against the “auspices of conformity” (2006: 121). The philosopher-subject
might aim to disassociate an “I” from the horror of “they.” Authentic hap-
piness would here be the happiness of one defined against the many. This
fear or hatred of conformity against which an “I” can appear might return us
to the question of equality. I noted in the introduction to this book that the
origins of political economy are premised on happiness: the move from the
equality of what Adam Smith called “the miserably poor” to a division of labor
in which ever the poorest have more than what “any savage” could acquire
([1776] 1999: 105). I would suggest that in contemporary political discourse
we have an inheritance of this view in the very perception of equality and
equal opportunity as misery devices or leveling devices: a way of bringing
others down (the mediocre and the miserable are conflated), of getting in the
way of a happiness that is presumed by right to belong to those above (their
happiness is naturalized as merit). The struggle for equality is rewritten as the
generalizing of the state of misery. Redressing inequality thus already functions
as a challenge to happiness and the terms of its appeal.

I am well aware that this is a counter-intuitive argument. The re
finement of the distinction between active/passive surely depends on the mobility of
the terms activity and passivity and thus upon their detachment from specific
bodies? I would suggest that the more such terms are detached from bodies,
the more they move around, the stickier they become. So we can take up these
terms “as if” they do not have a referential function, which allows words to
acquire more rather than less affective force. We can then have an elitism
that does not locate its referent in literal bodies or in social categories: in my
view, such an elitism is as “embodied” as the forms of elitism that explicitly
attach the value system of active/passive (and with it higher/lower) to differ-
ent kinds of bodies. Perhaps the desire for Nietzsche that we can witness in
some contemporary theory is also a form of identification, a way of being in
“an elite” that does not rely on social categories of privilege: identifying with
Nietzsche is a way of being among “the higher ones.” We could safely describe
this kind of politics as an avant-gardism (see Bauman 2008: 121 for a rather
cryptic but related reading of Nietzsche’s “present-day popularity”). Please
note in describing such an elitism I am not suggesting that Nietzsche is not
an important and helpful philosopher to think with: in this book I have drawn
on his work on affect and causality and his genealogical method, as well as his
critique of utilitarian happiness.

To follow Deleuze and Spinoza more loyally one might say here that my argu-
ment in this book suggests that happiness might be sanctioned as a positive
emotion, and social good, but that it can be a sad affect insofar as happiness
decreases the capacity for action (although see chapter 1, note 1, for a dis-
discussion of the problems of relying on an affect/emotion distinction). It is my view that at this moment in time we need to challenge the very association of positive and negative affects with increasing and decreasing powers of action. Having said this, and turning to Spinoza directly, I would not deny that sad affects play a role in governance. Spinoza focuses on the use of fear (and hope, which he relates to fear) in rule by superstition, which “rail[s] at vice” rather than teaches virtue ([1677] 2001: 210). Such focus is understandable given the context in which he was writing. For contemporary readers, we need an understanding of governance as operating not only through fear and hope but also as an incitement to be good, joyful, and happy. Another history of affect would thus be a history of joy as decreasing capacities for action, though there will be and should be other “other histories” of joy (see, for example, Ehrenreich 2007). At one point in Ethics Spinoza hints at how joy and sorrow can operate similarly as forms of governance: “Parents, by reprobabating what are called bad actions, and frequently blaming their children whenever they commit them, while they persuade them to what are called good actions, and praise their children when they perform them, have caused the emotions of sorrow to connect with the former, and those of joy with the latter” (152). For me, this is a wonderfully astute analysis of the relation between affect, habit, and custom: and we can follow Spinoza here in thinking about how sorrow and joy are caused (in a confused and inadequate way) by being assumed to be caused by specific actions.

8 Theodor Adorno exposes how “admonitions to be happy” can be a form of dominance in Minima Moralia ([1951] 1978: 62). He describes how “it is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it reproduces” (63). Or we might say that forms of suffering and sadness are permitted as long as they do not involve recognition of domination.

9 I offer this reading as a reframing of the good encounter described in Deleuze’s encounter with Spinoza (which is not the only way we can encounter Spinoza). It is not intended as a negative critique but instead a different angle on the processes Deleuze is describing. For other ways of encountering Deleuze and Spinoza that turn specifically on the question of joy and good encounters, see Macherey 1996 and Hardt 1993. Macherey asks whether Deleuze is true to Spinoza in his suggestion that joyful passions can help “leap” to adequate ideas insofar as all passions are based on inadequate ideas (153). Hardt suggests that “become joyful” is the “Spinozian mandate” (95), although I think “becoming blessed” would be the more accurate description.

10 Another example of the killjoy as the one who gets in the way of an organic agreement is “theory.” How many times when I was a student of literature in the late 1980s did we have discussions in classroom about how theory gets in the way between readers and their enjoyment of texts! Theory “stops” the organic nature of such and such a reader liking such and such a text. Theory
gets in the way of the rhythm of reading. Theory becomes like poison, leading
to indigestion, leading even to the death of literature.

For another example, see the work of Ben Anderson. He argues that “being
political affectively must therefore involve building a protest against the a-
ffectivities of suffering into a set of techniques that also aim to cultivate ‘good
encounters’ and anticipate ‘something better’” (2006: 749). Good encounters
are something we must cultivate, as a set of techniques. When ethics aims for
good encounters, suffering might be located in those who do not submit to
this aim, those who have not cultivated the right techniques. I should note
here that Anderson has a caveat to his argument which acknowledges that af-
firmation is not always positive. As he carefully describes, “There are numer-
ous occasions when the enactment of hope catalyses relations of injustice”
(749).

Eric G. Wilson’s argument “against happiness” is that “to desire only happiness
in a world undoubtedly tragic is to become inauthentic” (2008: 6). Although
he says that he does not want to romanticize clinical depression (7), he also
suggests that unhappiness can make us creative (106). I share some of Wil-
son’s concerns but my argument does not rest on concepts of authenticity
or inauthenticity, which lead to Wilson becoming scathingly critical of those
whom he calls “happy types” who come to represent the inauthenticity he
ascribes to happiness. I submit that if unhappiness cannot be willed away by
the desire for happiness, then the desire for happiness can conceal signs of
unhappiness or project them onto others who become symptoms of the fail-
ure to be happy. To desire only happiness in a world that involves tragedy is to
ask others to bear the burden of that tragedy.

I should signal how my argument is different from Kant’s given that he ques-
tions the good of happiness. Kant separates inclination from duty and sug-
gests that happiness is the basis of a pragmatic law. All men have “already
the strongest and most intimate inclination to happiness, because it is just
in this idea that all inclinations are combined in one total” ([1785] 2005: 60;
emphasis added) The pragmatic law based on “the motive of happiness” tells
us “what we have to do, if we wish to become possessed of happiness” ([1781]
1990: 452). The moral law, based on motives presented by reason alone, tell us
“how we ought to act in order to deserve happiness” (452) or how to “do that
which will render thee worthy of happiness” (454). For Kant, happiness becomes
a meta-inclination, combining all inclinations in one total, and is thus sepa-
rated from the moral law. My argument has explored how happiness works
not only as inclination but also involves the language of duty. Indeed, I would
describe happiness as a “switching point” between duty and inclination. While
Kant argues that you cannot make a duty out of an inclination, I suggest that
happiness becomes a duty because happiness is not simply or only an incli-
nation. Kant does qualify his separation of happiness and duty by suggesting
that we have an indirect duty to promote the happiness of others. Given that I have an indirect duty to promote the happiness of others, Kant makes two further qualifications. First, he suggests that others can decide what belongs to their happiness: “It is for them to decide what they count as belonging to their happiness” ([1797] 1996: 151). And second, he suggests that I can disagree with their decision: “It is open to me to refuse them many things that they think will make them happy but that I do not” (151). We learn about happiness by noticing how quickly the duty to promote the happiness of others is translated into a duty to promote my idea of their happiness for them. I have found Kant’s “Fragment of a Moral Catechism” especially useful for considering the relationship between virtue and happiness. Here, the Teacher tells the Pupil that what we want is happiness and then demonstrates how duty must be separated from happiness. The Teacher explains how promoting the other’s happiness would not be acceptable if that person’s happiness conflicts with the good, asking rhetorical questions: “Would you really give a lazy fellow soft cushions so that he could pass his life away in sweet idleness? Or would you see to it that a drunkard is never short of wine and whatever else he needs to get drunk? Would you give a swindler a charming air and manner to dupe other people? And would you give a violent man audacity and strong fists so that he could crush other people? Each of these things is a means that somebody wishes for in order to be happy in his own way” (224). So Kant suggests that you would not promote happiness of others if their happiness is not good, if their happiness compromises their virtue. The catechism concludes with the argument articulated by the (now wise) Pupil that the good can still hope for happiness: “For we see in the works of nature, which we can judge, a wisdom so widespread and profound that we can explain it to ourselves only by the inexpressibly great art of a creator of the world. And with regard to the moral order, which is the highest adornment of the world, we have reason to expect a no less wise regime, such that if we do not make ourselves unworthy of happiness, by violating our duty, we can also hope to share in happiness” (225). The good can hope for a share in happiness by not being unworthy of happiness. Kant thus restores the relationship he severs between happiness and the good. For an excellent discussion of Kant on happiness and ethics, see Chalier 2002.

It might seem ironic that I am aiming to lighten happiness by associating happiness with possibility rather than duty, given that Kierkegaard argues for possibility as a heavy rather than light category ([1844] 1980: 156). Kierkegaard is defending possibility as heavy in order to show how possibility is not simply about good things happening. Possibility is thus more serious than actuality, which might or might not involve bad things (bad things are always possible but not always actual). What makes possibility heavy for Kierkegaard is what makes it light for me. Possibility is light in the sense that in possibility one is
open to being blown this way or that, to being picked up by what happens, which can include being picked up in a good or bad way.

My thanks to a member of the audience at the last paper I gave on happiness before completing this book, at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, CUNY, February 6, 2009, who suggested I think about the stance of happenstance. Thanks also to my good friend Elena Loizidou, who recommended on February 8, 2009, that I read Jean-Luc Nancy on unhappiness, in which, it turns out, he develops the idea of happenstance. It is thus happenstance that I stumbled on happenstance: not just a chance event (or coincidence of events) but the chance of an event. The word happenstance derives from the amalgamation of happening (“an event, occurrence, a chance”) and circumstance (“standing around, surrounding condition, to stand”). A philosophy of the happenstance (such as offered by Nancy) would thus be one of accounting for how our surroundings happen to surround us, which would at once offer a stance or orientation toward our surroundings as happenings in which certain things become possible (or not).

The idea of happiness as precarious has a long history. Precariousness would most commonly be described as “dependent on chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable.” So we would be saying that happiness is as chancy as life, always exposed to what happens, which makes the idea that you can secure your happiness a fantasy. Another (now rare) meaning of precarious refers to “Esp. of a right, tenancy, etc.: held or enjoyed by the favour of and at the pleasure of another person; vulnerable to the will or decision of others.” Happiness that is dependent on the will of others is viewed as precarious. The OED offers two eighteenth-century uses of this idea: “This little Happiness is so very precarious, that it wholly depends on the Will of others” and “As a precarious loan may be recalled at the lender’s pleasure, even at a time that may prove hurtful to the borrower.” To value precarity in this sense would be to give value to how others can affect our happiness, to allow ourselves to be recalled by the other’s pleasure. We would not make our happiness dependent on others (which may require a coincidence of will) but would be willing to be affected by what happens to others.

Thanks to Eileen Joy for helping me to rethink the affirmative in happy moments.

The relationship between happiness and envy is complex. It is interesting to note that Spinoza defines envy as hatred at that which disposes a man “so that he rejoices over the evil and is saddened by the good which befalls another” ([1677] 2001: 117). Arguably, envy is a disposition that is attuned to the competitive logics of capitalism (or to be more accurate that capitalism encourages such an attunement), in which fortune is translated from chance to wealth, as something that is not only distributed but finite: such that someone
having more fortune means someone else having less. Envy would refer to the experience of the fortune of others as a theft of one’s own fortune (you want their misery, and you don’t want their happiness as a way of holding on to your own). I contend that in this film there is a relationship between the experience of happiness and the desire for the other to be envious (as a desire for the other to want what one has). It is Suzy who “wants” Poppy to be envious (which is how her speech act “I just want you to be happy” can be translated) because her own happiness is precarious, because it rests on what she has given up. Certain forms of happiness might depend on both emulation and envy of others who don’t have the “right things” and are assumed to want “the right things” for themselves. In other words, the “have nots” are understood as necessarily envious and unhappy as a way of keeping the value of “having” intact. When Poppy refuses to be envious (about the mortgage, the house, the baby-to-be, the pension, the husband) and is confident about her own good fortune (“I am a lucky lady, I know that”), Suzy’s happiness turns into rage (“stop rubbing it in”). Poppy has not taken Suzy’s happiness away but exposed how Suzy’s happiness depends on others to confirm its value. Perhaps the desire for another to be envious becomes envy of that other’s refusal to invest in the competitive logics of envy.

My appreciation to Judith Halberstam, whose lecture “Bees, Bio-Pirates, and the Queer Art of Cross-Pollination” delivered at Birkbeck College, May 15, 2008, explored the silly nature of queer archives.