

# “The Happiness Hypothesis” by Jonathan Haidt.

## Verinder’s Summary

“What should I do, how should I live, and whom should I become?” are questions that we all ask ourselves. Jonathan Haidt tries to help us find answers by examining 10 great ideas. The book is loaded with a lot of scientific evidence and thoughtful discourse. In this short summary, I focus on the key things that really made me think.

### **1. The Elephant and the Rider – The Divided Self**

This is the “foundational idea” of the book. The *Elephant* is the evolution of the body over millions of years. It works on automatic pilot: think about driving your car to the airport. Virtually everything – the steering, checking the traffic, knowing what time you have to be at the airport essentially occurs without much thinking. The elephant controls 99% of our actions, including our emotions.

The *Rider* – the brain - is of recent vintage. It has given us the gift of thinking, organizing, planning, and worrying. It believes it can control the elephant, but it does not. Rather it acts more like a lawyer for the elephant, making excuses for its behavior. It does not seek the truth; rather it looks for justification.

“We assume that there is one person in each body, but in some ways we are each more like a committee whose members have been thrown together to do a job, but who often find themselves working at cross purposes.” These divisions include Mind vs. Body, Left vs. Right Brain, New (Brain) vs. Old (Elephant), Controlled (mainly Rider) vs. Automatic (Elephant).

We are at conflict with ourselves on many fronts. This is why willpower is so hard to exercise and most of our self-improvement resolutions fall by the wayside. The Rider would like to do those things, but the Elephant is in command and it does what it wants to do, which is generally what it is conditioned to do and what it always has done.

### **2. Changing Our Minds**

*“What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind”.* —BUDDHA. This is indeed profound, but how successful are we in controlling our minds, or changing our thoughts?

*“Epiphanies can be life-altering, but most fade in days or weeks. The rider can’t just decide to change and then order the elephant to go along with the program. Lasting change can come only by retraining the elephant, and that’s hard to do.”*

“The most important words in the elephant’s language are ‘like’ and ‘dislike,’ or ‘approach’ and ‘withdraw.’ We humans have a like-o-meter too, and it’s always running... The elephant reacts instinctively and steers the rider toward a new destination.” It does not want to do what it does not like.

We also have a negativity bias, because human survival has depended on sensing danger. “In marital interactions, it takes at least five good or constructive actions to make up for the damage done by one critical or destructive act. In financial transactions and gambles, the pleasure of gaining a certain amount of money is smaller than the pain of losing the same amount.”

So, how do we change our minds, how do we conquer “it?” The age-old practice of meditation is one of the things that can work. Haidt suggests that cognitive therapy and Prozac can also do the job.

### **3. Reciprocity**

“Reciprocity is an all-purpose relationship tonic. Used properly, it strengthens, lengthens, and rejuvenates social ties. It works so well in part because the elephant is a natural mimic. For example, when we interact with someone we like, we have a slight tendency to copy their every move, automatically and unconsciously. People who are subtly mimicked are then more helpful and agreeable toward their mimicker, and even toward others. Waitresses who mimic their customers get larger tips. Reciprocity, like love, reconnects us with others.”

### **4. Others are Wrong and I am a Hypocrite**

Machiavelli: “*the great majority of mankind are satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and are often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are.*” Unfortunately, this happens to be true. It turns out that we are structured to care more about appearances than reality. Our inner lawyer can then always give us the rationale for our actions.

Social life becomes one of comparisons. Also “We judge others by their behavior, but we think we have special information about ourselves—we know what we are “really like” inside, so we can easily find ways to explain away our selfish acts and cling to the illusion that we are better than others.”

“It’s no wonder, then, that in a study of 1 million American high school students, 70 per cent thought they were above average on leadership ability, but only 2 percent thought they were below average. (College professors are less wise than high school students in this respect—94 percent of us think we do above-average work.)”

“*The two biggest causes of evil are two that we think are good, and that we try to encourage in our children: high self-esteem and moral idealism.* Having high self-esteem doesn’t directly cause violence, but when someone’s high esteem is unrealistic or narcissistic, it is easily threatened by reality...Threatened self-esteem accounts for a large portion of violence at the individual level, but to really get a mass atrocity going you need idealism—the belief that your violence is a means to a moral end. The major atrocities of the twentieth century were carried out largely either by men who thought they were creating a utopia or or else by men who believed they were defending their homeland or tribe from attack. Idealism easily becomes dangerous because it brings

with it, almost inevitably, the belief that the ends justify the means. If you are fighting for good or for God, what matters is the outcome, not the path.”

The answer lies in understanding our makeup and our tendencies. We must take life, and ourselves, less seriously (as the Hindus would say), try to look at the event from the other’s point of view, or as Jesus suggested, we look at the log in our eyes before we focus on the specks in the eyes of others.

## **5. The Pursuit of Happiness**

Sages, the Eastern ones in particular, have emphasized that happiness comes from within. Haidt believes this is only half the equation. *“Some things are worth striving for, and happiness comes in part from outside of yourself, if you know where to look.”*

Let’s take a look at what makes us happy. It does not come from achieving goals. Happiness is not found in the destination but in the trials and tribulations along the way. Furthermore, we tend to adapt to our situations pretty quickly. Quadriplegics and lottery winners return to the same level of happiness that they had about two years after the event. After a certain base amount of money, additional money does not seem to buy us happiness.

The Happiness Formula is:  $H=S+C+V$ , where “H” is happiness. “S” is the genetic set point, meaning some people are just born happier or unhappier. “C” is the life conditions, and “V” reflects the voluntary activities we pursue. (I have read elsewhere that  $S=50\%$ ,  $C=10\%$ , and  $V=40\%$ .)

“C” includes things such as noise, commuting, lack of control, shame and relationships. However, “The condition that is usually said to trump all others in importance is the strength and number of a person’s relationships. Good relationships make people happy, and happy people enjoy more and better relationships than unhappy people”

The other big variable is “V,” the voluntary activities. This can include quieting the self with the help of meditation.

But another key element is Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “Flow...where he discovered that there are two different kinds of enjoyment. One is physical or bodily pleasure. At meal times, people report the highest levels of happiness, on average... But you can’t enjoy physical pleasure all day long. By their very nature, food and sex satiate...(his) big discovery is that there is a state many people value even more than chocolate after sex. It is the state of total immersion in a task that is challenging yet closely matched to one’s abilities. It is what people sometimes call “being in the zone.” Csikszentmihalyi called it “flow” because it often feels like effortless movement: Flow happens, and you go with it.

“The keys to flow: There’s a clear challenge that fully engages your attention; you have the skills to meet the challenge; and you get immediate feedback about how you are doing at each step (the progress principle).

“The elephant (automatic processes) is doing most of the work, running smoothly through the forest, while the rider (conscious thought) is completely absorbed in looking out for problems and opportunities, helping wherever he can.”

The elephant cares about the outer world, the social comparisons: that is what must be tamed. It is worth remembering that “*Activities connect us to others; objects often separate us.*”

Haidt believes that Buddha had it right when he explained that the world was just a passing illusion and that the mind had to be tamed through meditation and a certain way of living. But he was only half right. The outer world in the form of Relationships and Flow matters. Haidt also asks a marvelous question. Prince Siddhartha (before he became Buddha) assumed that old age and poverty led to a life of suffering. What if he had actually asked these people whether actually unhappy instead of just assuming it? It turns out that money does not make people happy; also older people are generally happier than young people.

## **6. Love and Attachments**

We – children, adults, and even monkeys - all need nurturing and love. “Children need love to develop properly, (Bowlby) argued; children need mothers... Attachment theory begins with the idea that two basic goals guide children’s behavior: safety and exploration. A child who stays safe survives; a child who explores and plays develops the skills and intelligence needed for adult life.”

But what is love? “As I see it, the modern myth of true love involves these beliefs: True love is passionate love that never fades; if you are in true love, you should marry that person; if love ends, you should leave that person because it was not true love; and if you can find the right person, you will have true love forever.”

In reality there are two kinds of love – passionate and companionate. “...passionate love is a wildly emotional state in which tender and sexual feelings, elation and pain, anxiety and relief, altruism and jealousy coexist in a confusion of feelings...passionate love is a drug—literally a drug—it has to wear off eventually. Passionate love is the love you fall into... Companionate love grows slowly over the years as lovers apply their attachment and caregiving systems to each other, and as they begin to rely upon, care for, and trust each other. If the metaphor for passionate love is fire, the metaphor for companionate love is vines growing, intertwining, and gradually binding two people together.”

We all need relationships. “If you want to predict how happy someone is, or how long she will live, you should find out about her social relationships. Having strong social relationships strengthens the immune system, extends life, speeds recovery from surgery, and reduces the risks of depression and anxiety disorders... Aristophanes was right: We need others to complete us.”

## 7. The Uses of Adversity

Adversity can benefit us. “The **first** benefit is that rising to a challenge reveals your hidden abilities, and seeing these abilities changes your self-concept... The **second** class of benefit concerns relationships...(adversity) doesn’t just separate the fair-weather friends from the true; it strengthens relationships and it opens people’s hearts to one another. The **third** common benefit: Trauma changes priorities and philosophies toward the present (“Live each day to the fullest”) and toward other people.”

We all develop life stories and adversity adds color, interest, and drama to these stories. “(the) stories are ‘fundamentally about the vicissitudes of human intention organized in time.’ You can’t have a good life story without vicissitudes...”

“Marcel Proust said: *We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness which no one else can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world.*” That wisdom may include embracing the Serenity prayer as we deal with the inevitable setbacks of life: “*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.*”

## 8. The Felicity of Virtue

“The wisdom literature of many cultures essentially says, ‘Gather round, I have a tonic that will make you happy, healthy, wealthy, and wise! It will get you into heaven, and bring you joy on earth along the way! Just be virtuous!’ Young people are extremely good, though, at rolling their eyes and shutting their ears.”

“What was Ben Franklin’s secret? Virtue. Not the sort of uptight, pleasure-hating Puritanism that some people now associate with that word, but a broader kind of virtue that goes back to ancient Greece. The Greek word *aretē* meant excellence, virtue, or goodness, especially of a functional sort. The *aretē* of a knife is to cut well; the *aretē* of an eye is to see well; the *aretē* of a person is . . . well, that’s one of the oldest questions of philosophy: What is the true nature, function, or goal of a person, relative to which we can say that he or she is living well or badly? Thus in saying that well being or happiness (*eudaimonia*) is “an activity of soul in conformity with excellence or virtue...”

“Franklin, as a young printer and entrepreneur, embarked on what he called a ‘bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. He picked a few virtues he wanted to cultivate, and he tried to live accordingly. He discovered immediately the limitations of the rider: ‘While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason.’ He wrote out a list of thirteen virtues, each linked to specific behaviors that he should or should not do.” While he did not achieve every virtue on his list (e.g. humility), it is safe to say that he was a virtuous, happy, and successful man.

All cultures try to teach virtue- from the Confucian philosophy to Buddha’s Eightfold Noble path. But virtue theories have long lists, and science prefers brevity, and in the

process the notion of virtue and character have been overtaken by teaching “quandary ethics.”

“I believe that this turn from character to quandary was a profound mistake, for two reasons. First, it weakens morality and limits its scope. Where the ancients saw virtue and character at work in everything a person does, our modern conception confines morality to a set of situations that arise for each person only a few times in any given week: tradeoffs between self-interest and the interests of others.”

“The second problem with the turn to moral reasoning is that it relies on bad psychology. Many moral education efforts...take the rider off of the elephant and train him to solve problems on his own....the child learns how (not what) to think. Then...the rider gets back on the elephant, and nothing changes... Trying to make children behave ethically by teaching them to reason well is like trying to make a dog happy by wagging its tail. It gets causality backwards.”

“Virtue sounds like hard work, and often is. But when virtues are re-conceived as excellences, each of which can be achieved by the practice of several strengths of character, and when the practice of these strengths is often intrinsically rewarding, suddenly the work sounds more like Csikszentmihalyi’s flow and less like toil.”

“In his provocative book *The Death of Character*, Hunter traces out how America lost its older ideas about virtue and character. Before the Industrial Revolution, Americans honored the virtues of “producers”—hard work, self-restraint, sacrifice for the future, and sacrifice for the common good. But during the twentieth century, as people became wealthier and the producer society turned gradually into the mass consumption society, an alternative vision of the self arose—a vision centered on the idea of individual preferences and personal fulfillment. The intrinsically moral term “character” fell out of favor and was replaced by the amoral term “personality”.”

Virtue, Morality, and Character continue to be dumbed down so as to not offend anyone. In the process, something fundamental to life is being eroded.

## **9. Divinity With or Without God**

“Our life is the creation of our minds, and we do much of that creating with metaphor. We see new things in terms of things we already understand: Life is a journey, an argument is a war, the mind is a rider on an elephant. With the wrong metaphor we are deluded; **with no metaphor we are blind.**”

“Purity is not just about the body, it is about the soul. If you know that you have divinity in you, you will act accordingly: You will treat people well, and you will treat your body as a temple...Emerson: ‘He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God.’”

“In my academic work, I discovered that the ethic of divinity had been central to public discourse in the United States until the time of the World War I, after which it began to

fade...But as science, technology, and the industrial age progressed, the Western world became 'desacralized.'"

We are missing the third dimension of "Flatland"; we are like the square unable to see the totality of the sphere. Divinity, being awe struck, getting a sense of something bigger than us is this third dimension. Religion can give us this as can peak experiences or when we are enraptured by the immensity of nature or the universe. The "aha" moment is divine, with, or without, a belief in any god. This belief in divinity also seems to bring us comfort, happiness, and serenity.

## 10. Happiness Comes from Between

Let's reframe the question: "What is the meaning of life" to something more practical – "How ought I to live? What should I do to have a good, happy, fulfilling, and meaningful life?"

"Aristotle asked about aretē (excellence/virtue) and telos (purpose/goal), and he used the metaphor that people are like archers, who need a clear target at which to aim. Without a target or goal, one is left with the animal default: Just let the elephant graze or roam where he pleases. And because elephants live in herds, one ends up doing what everyone else is doing. Yet the human mind has a rider, and as the rider begins to think more abstractly in adolescence, there may come a time when he looks around, past the edges of the herd, and asks: Where are we all going? And why?"

"If people are like plants, what are the conditions we need to flourish? In the happiness formula...,  $H(\text{appiness}) = S(\text{etpoint}) + C(\text{onditions}) + V(\text{oluntary activities})$ , what exactly is *C*? *The biggest part of C...is love. The second most important part of C is having and pursuing the right goals, in order to create states of flow and engagement. Love and work are, for people, obvious analogues to water and sunshine for plants.*"

"More recent research finds that most people approach their work in one of three ways: as a job, a career, or a calling....(A job) is only done for the money. In a (career) you have larger goals of advancement, promotion, and prestige. The pursuit of these goals often energizes you... You might occasionally see your work as a rat race... If you see your work as a calling, however, you find your work intrinsically fulfilling—you are not doing it to achieve something else. You see your work as contributing to the greater good... You have frequent experiences of flow during the work day...You would continue to work, perhaps even without pay, if you suddenly became very wealthy."

Flow is not related to higher paying or lower paying, or more or less respected jobs. More often than not, it is related to your *attitude*. So, "If you can engage your strengths, you'll find more gratification in work; if you find gratification, you'll shift into a more positive, approach-oriented mindset; and in such a mindset it will be easier for you to see the bigger picture—the contribution you are making to a larger enterprise—within which your job might turn into a calling."

Flow can turn into “vital engagement (which) does not reside in the person or in the environment; it exists in the relationship between the two. *It’s a matter of alignment. When doing good (doing high-quality work that produces something of use to others) matches up with doing well (achieving wealth and professional advancement) this condition emerges.*”

“To understand ourselves fully we must study all three levels—physical, psychological, and sociocultural. ***People gain a sense of meaning when their lives cohere across the three levels of their existence.***”

“We are the rider and we are the elephant, and our mental health depends on the two working together, each drawing on the others’ strengths...”

“The final version of the happiness hypothesis is that happiness comes from between. Happiness is not something that you can find, acquire, or achieve directly. You have to get the conditions right and then wait. Some of those conditions are within you, such as coherence among the parts and levels of your personality. Other conditions require relationships to things beyond you: Just as plants need sun, water, and good soil to thrive, people need love, work, and a connection to something larger. It is worth striving to get the right relationships between yourself and others, between yourself and your work, and between yourself and something larger than yourself. If you get these relationships right, a sense of purpose and meaning will emerge.”

## **11. Conclusion: On Balance**

*“All things come into being by conflict of opposites.* —HERACLITUS. The ancient Chinese symbol of yin and yang represents the value of the eternally shifting balance between seemingly opposed principles.”

“Religion and science, for example, are often thought to be opponents, but ...the insights of ancient religions and of modern science are both needed to reach a full understanding of human nature and the conditions of human satisfaction. Psychology and religion can benefit by taking each other seriously, or at least by agreeing to learn from each other while overlooking the areas of irreconcilable difference.”

“Happiness requires changing yourself and changing your world. It requires pursuing your own goals and fitting in with others. Different people at different times in their lives will benefit from drawing more heavily on one approach or the other.”

“A good place to look for wisdom, therefore, is where you least expect to find it: in the minds of your opponents. You already know the ideas common on your own side. If you can take off the blinders of the myth of pure evil, you might see some good ideas for the first time.... We can’t simply select a destination and then walk there directly—the rider does not have that much authority. But by drawing on humanity’s greatest ideas and best science, we can train the elephant, know our possibilities as well as our limits, and live wisely.”

## Verinder's final thoughts

I have been looking for these answers for a long time, and this book puts together several pieces of the puzzle. I admire Mr. Haidt, his search for the truth, and his willingness to suspend his own blinders. While I do not agree with him on all things, I have learned much: some new things and some reinforcement of previous ideas.

- The metaphor for the elephant and rider is an epiphany. It explains so much of life, what we do, why we behave the way we do, and why change is so hard.
- The elephant likes to be liked which explains much of human behavior. The rider is not looking for the truth; rather it is a lawyer that develops plausible excuses.
- We are all hypocrites; we have a very hard time changing our minds.
- We all need being held and love. The differences between passionate and companionate love are extraordinarily insightful.
- Adversity can make us stronger. We need to reframe the situation.
- The loss of virtue is tragic. The rider makes excuses. The focus is on the "self," and the notion of virtue, character, and hard work have been subsumed by the focus on self-gratification. Science, Academia, Governmental institutions, and the weakening of religious institutions have all contributed to this.
- Whether we believe in God or not, we need divinity in our lives, something much bigger than us. We need to feel awe and a sense of gratitude. We need the metaphor, without which there is no reason to be.
- $H = S + C + V$ . A fair bit of happiness lies within our grasp. The "C" speaks to having strong relationships, love in our life, and a coherence between what we do and what we want to do. The "V" relates to voluntary activities from meditation to helping others. In serving others, often the reason "to be" can be found.

Haidt, the Jewish atheist, found the need for a divinity even in the absence of a religious god. He believes that the Buddha had it only half right; the focus on conquering the self is inadequate. We need to love, have relationships, develop a coherent life, and serve others. And, yes, listen to the people who disagree with us.

He has given me much to think about and I believe he is right on (virtually) all he has to say. Now, what will I do with this gift?

Verinder Syal