

Response to Three Components of Happiness by Professor Masuo Koyasu

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In his poem *The world is too much with us* William Wordsworth bemoans the instrumentality and materialism of modern life and our distancing from nature. The opening lines are as follows:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
(Wordsworth, 1802/2000, p. 270)

Professor Koyasu's paper, '*Three components of happiness; Synthesising a sense of competence, a vital sense of life, and a sense of accomplishment*', highlights the difficulties facing humanity by virtue of the conditions of our existence in modern societies. These problems are exemplified in the practices to be found in the failure of many contemporary educational institutions to develop the capabilities of learners.

This failure, he tells us, 'raise[s] a serious question concerning the state of the human mind.' He directs our attention to the role of education in actualising human capacities, a process that at its best goes far beyond a mere acquisition of information to developing a 'sense of capability through the acquisition of knowledge and skill, and a vital sense of life through connection with nature and society.' His recognition of the poverty of much institutional practice that goes under the name of education contrasts with the 'academic atmosphere of freedom; one that values self-study and self-learning rather than the mere inculcation of knowledge', the sort of atmosphere he contends that provided the conditions for the many Nobel Laureates at Kyoto University (Koyasu, 2010).

In my reading of Professor Koyasu's paper two themes stood out in relation to philosophy and education; first, his emphasis on academic freedom and self-motivated learning; and second, his study of optimism/pessimism, positive orientations, and feelings of happiness.

I read his reference to self study/self learning and its opposition to the mere inculcation of knowledge as a signal to a conception of learning and intellect that takes us far beyond any popular notion of individual study. It is a reference to a vitality ('vital minds and non-vital minds') that might be best understood in terms of self-determination—a self motivation that cannot be grasped simply by reference to a liberal atomist conception of autonomy. The critical literature on happiness research (my colleague Judith Suissa's paper is one such example) quite rightly takes issue with a narrow emphasis on technique or prescription of skills that gives only superficial regard to the development of our capacities through the rich textures of each of our lives. Professor Koyasu highlights a richer notion of our engagement with

the world. The development of human capacities through a process of education cannot be easily separated from more fundamental questions relating to self motivation and self-determination and in turn these cannot be separated from the notion of freedom and the academic freedom he refers to. To grasp this richer sense of self learning and self determination as opposed to 'the mere inculcation of knowledge' it is helpful to consider an illustration provided by philosopher, Robert Pippin's address to undergraduates starting their degrees at Chicago:

In his address, Pippin takes up the question self determination, and its embeddedness in the texture of our lives, calling upon his audience to consider on what basis they might be sitting in front of him at that moment. He asks them to dwell on why they had come to study. A free choice—he reflects—or a more guarded decision following parental pressure? He proceeds to ask them to consider what being free might mean in such an educational context. He suggests that unless they have a better idea of why they might be listening to him then they had not come 'freely'. More provocatively, he suggests that the reason to come to the University of Chicago might be to find out their reason to come. His point is that his audience may not have made a free decision in this sense but rather experienced a degree of alienation in so far as the decision to come is 'part of your life, [yet] while it was in fact produced by you, does not truly reflect the "you" that you understand yourself to be and identify with, and so this decision cannot in the deepest sense be yours' (Pippin, 2000).

In alerting new students to the question of what it means to become educated, Pippin is communicating a counterintuitive notion of the development of our capacities as the actualisation of freedom steeped in the tradition of philosophy unfamiliar to the utilitarianism that informs programmes attempting to foster happiness in schools. To learn is also a process of which becoming free is an intrinsic part, for to be educated is not to 'know' a range of positions and perspectives (or to be inculcated as Professor Koyasu puts it), but rather to understand the reasons for holding particular beliefs and rejecting others. As Pippin illustrates with a story inspired by the writer David Lodge:

... imagine all of us playing a version of the game where we try to name an idea crucial to our understanding of ourselves and of the modern world, and which has played a critical role in some of our decisions, some of the policies we have formulated, and many of the judgments and even condemnations we have formulated about others, but which we have no clue how to define and, no matter how much we have relied on it, no clue at all how to defend the idea from objections. Examples come easily to mind to all of us. What, after all, is a 'right'? (Pippin, 2000)

In such a scenario we would not be familiar with the reasons for our actions and judgments and therefore we would be subject to them rather than in control of them: '[A] better form of self-understanding might make it possible to say that you led a life more "your own" ' (Pippin, 2000).

In this sense education is a freedom-enhancing process, to know the reasons why I act is to be a cause of myself rather than to be the subject of extraneous determinations. The responsibility of a learner to interrogate and attempt to understand the reasons for a belief or perspective is developmental to both mind and free will:

One way of understanding the possibility of a free life—‘your own life’—is to consider which of your past decisions you could truly be said to be able to ‘stand behind,’ where that means being able to defend or justify them when challenged, or even which you could claim to understand. ‘Having reasons’ in this sense for what you did, having something to say about ‘why,’ is a general condition for some event being considered an action of yours at all, and not having any reasons means it is very hard to understand any link between you and what conduct you engage in (Pippin, 2000).

This deeper notion of capability and self-determination is recognised by Professor Koyasu when he reminds us that: ‘the best research in the world is ... conducted autonomously by researchers and shaped by their own academic interests.’ He emphasises the importance of a vibrant research culture not governed by compliance but emphasising freedom and involving ‘a sense of capability, a vital sense of life and a sense of achievement’. He goes on to refer to the notion of ‘vitality’ in the eastern tradition, a notion that values the connection between nature and society—and we might translate this concept of vitality in Aristotelian terms as *energeia* or in the language of Spinoza as *conatus*—involving an embedded idea of self determination and striving, far removed from a shallow modern liberal possessive conception of individual will that informs simplistic approaches to happiness.

A second theme of philosophical interest in Professor Koyasu’s paper concerns questions of realism and of our notions of reality. Professor Koyasu reports a psychological study carried out with his colleagues to explore the relationships between optimism/pessimism, positive orientations, and feelings of happiness. A good deal of research on happiness points to the importance of positive attitudes as these are observed as more common in mentally healthy individuals than in depressed individuals and, as a result, are viewed as adaptive (Taylor & Brown, 1988). In contrast to the ‘depressive realism’ of depressed individuals ‘positive illusions’ are seen as healthy. Professor Koyasu brings to our attention research on positive illusions but he suggests a modification to the phrase, ‘positive illusion is too strong to designate everyday cognition of ordinary people. Therefore, we will use the term positive orientation’.

This area is interesting philosophically not merely due to the relationship between research into happiness and contemporary psychological research but in particular to more fundamental questions about veracity or truthfulness highlighted by findings on the adaptivity of positive illusions. In this area psychological research touches on questions normally found in the realm of epistemology. In probing the nature of realism the research addresses our common sense conceptions of what is real.

Recent revisions to research on what is termed ‘depressive realism’ indicate the extent to which what we take to be veridical (truthful) is contestable. What was once considered to be the ‘realism’ of depressives at odds with the adaptive illusions of well adjusted people, is now being rethought as findings have shown a more subtle relation between so called ‘positive illusions’ and realism. Recent research on depressive realism (Msetfi, Murphy & Simpson, 2007) contests the assumption that depression could be explained by the ‘realism’ of the depressed person, i. e. that a depressive outlook involves a more realistic assessment of the world. In effect the description of realism or veracity assumed in original research in the area was insufficiently complex. Research has shown that rather than making a more accurate judgement ‘depressed people were less sensitive to differences in contingency and contextual exposure’ (Msetfi, Murphy & Simpson, 2007, p. 461). Msetfi and her colleagues ‘propose that a context-processing difference between depressed and non-

depressed people removes any objective notion of “realism” that was originally employed to explain the depressive realism effect’. Their research suggests that so called positive illusions might not be quite so illusory. In a similar vein Professor Koyasu’s provides critical insight into recent research on dispositional optimism suggesting far greater complexity than was initially assumed. Drawing on his own research with colleagues in Kyoto he states ‘that it is not clear whether optimism and pessimism are symmetrical or mutually independent’ and argues for the need for further research in the area.

Professor Koyasu’s paper touches many points of interest spanning the disciplines and pointing in directions beyond his own research in psychology. As such it provides a fitting opening for this conference by pointing to the value of interdisciplinary research fostered by events such as this colloquium.

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