Stumbling on Happiness

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CHAPTER 2

The View from in Here

> But, O, how bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's eyes!
>
> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

LORI AND REBA SCHAPPEL may be twins, but they are very different people. Reba is a somewhat shy teetotaler who has recorded an award-winning album of country music. Lori, who is outgoing, wisecracking, and rather fond of strawberry daiquiris, works in a hospital and wants someday to marry and have children. They occasionally argue, as sisters do, but most of the time they get on well, complimenting each other, teasing each other, and finishing each other's sentences. In fact, there are just two unusual things about Lori and Reba. The first is that they share a blood supply, part of a skull, and some brain tissue, having been joined at the forehead since birth. One side of Lori's forehead is attached to one side of Reba's, and they have spent every moment of their lives locked together, face-to-face. The second unusual thing about Lori and Reba is that they are happy—not merely resigned or contented, but joyful, playful, and optimistic.[1] Their unusual life presents many challenges, of course, but as they often note, whose doesn't? When asked about the possibility of undergoing surgical separation, Reba speaks for both of them: "Our point of view is no, straight out no. Why would you want to do that? For all the money in China, why? You'd be ruining two lives in the process."[2]

So here's the question: If this were your life rather than theirs,

how would *you* feel? If you said, "Joyful, playful, and optimistic," then you are not playing the game and I am going to give you another chance. Try to be honest instead of correct. The honest answer is "Despondent, desperate, and depressed." Indeed, it seems clear that no right-minded person could *really* be happy under such circumstances, which is why the conventional medical wisdom has it that conjoined twins should be separated at birth, even at the risk of killing one or both. As a prominent medical historian wrote: "Many singletons, especially surgeons, find it inconceivable that life is worth living as a conjoined twin, inconceivable that one would not be willing to risk all—mobility, reproductive ability, the life of one or both twins—to try for separation."[3] In other words, not only does everyone know that conjoined twins will be dramatically less happy than normal people, but everyone also knows that conjoined lives are so utterly worthless that dangerous separation surgeries are an ethical imperative. And yet, standing against the backdrop of our certainty about these matters are the twins themselves. When we ask Lori and Reba how they feel about their situation, they tell us that they wouldn't have it any other way. In an exhaustive search of the medical literature, the same medical historian found the "desire to remain together to be so widespread among communicating conjoined twins as to be practically universal."[4] Something is terribly wrong here. But what?

There seem to be just two possibilities. Someone—either Lori and Reba, or everyone else in the world—is making a dreadful mistake when they talk about happiness. Because we are the everyone else in question, it is only natural that we should be attracted to the former conclusion, dismissing the twins' claim to happiness with offhand rejoinders such as "Oh, they're just saying that" or "They may think they're happy, but they're not" or the ever popular "They don't know what happiness really is" (usually spoken as if we do). Fair enough. But like the claims they dismiss, these rejoinders are also claims—scientific claims and philosophical claims—that presume answers to questions that have vexed scientists and philosophers for millennia. What are we all *talking* about when we make such claims about happiness?

Dancing About Architecture

There are thousands of books on happiness, and most of them start by asking what happiness *really* is. As readers quickly learn, this is approximately equivalent to beginning a pilgrimage by marching directly into the first available tar pit, because happiness *really* is nothing more or less than a word that we word makers can use to indicate anything we please. The problem is that people seem pleased to use this one word to indicate a host of different things, which has created a tremendous terminological mess on which several fine scholarly careers have been based. If one slops around in this mess long enough, one comes to see that most disagreements about what happiness *really is* are semantic disagreements about whether the word ought to be used to indicate *this* or *that,* rather than scientific or philosophical disagreements about the nature of *this* and *that.* What are the *this* and the *that* that happiness most often refers to? The word *happiness* is used to indicate at least three related things, which we might roughly call *emotional happiness, moral happiness,* and *judgmental happiness.*

Feeling Happy

Emotional happiness is the most basic of the trio—so basic, in fact, that we become tongue-tied when we try to define it, as though some bratty child had just challenged us to say what the word *the* means and in the process made a truly compelling case for corporal punishment. Emotional happiness is a phrase for a *feeling,* an *experience,* a *subjective state,* and thus it has no objective referent in the physical world. If we ambled down to the corner pub and met an alien from another planet who asked us to define that feeling, we would either point to the objects in the world that tend to bring it about, or we would mention other feelings that it is like. In fact, this is the only thing we *can* do when we are asked to define a subjective experience.

Consider, for instance, how we might define a very simple subjective experience, such as yellow. You may think yellow is a color, but it isn't. It's a psychological state. It is what human beings with work-

ing visual apparatus *experience* when their eyes are struck by light with a wavelength of 580 nanometers. If our alien friend at the pub asked us to define what we were experiencing when we claimed to be *seeing yellow,* we would probably start by pointing to a school bus, a lemon, a rubber ducky, and saying, "See all those things? The thing that is common to the visual experiences you have when you look at them is called *yellow.*" Or we might try to define the experience called *yellow* in terms of other experiences. "Yellow? Well, it is sort of like the experience of orange, with a little less of the experience of red." If the alien confided that it could not figure out what the duck, the lemon, and the school bus had in common, and that it had never had the experience of orange or red, then it would be time to order another pint and change the topic to the universal sport of ice hockey, because there is just no other way to define yellow. Philosophers like to say that subjective states are "irreducible," which is to say that nothing we point to, nothing we can compare them with, and nothing we can say about their neurological underpinnings can fully substitute for the experiences themselves.[5] The musician Frank Zappa is reputed to have said that writing about music is like dancing about architecture, and so it is with talking about yellow. If our new drinking buddy lacks the machinery for color vision, then our experience of yellow is one that it will never share—or never know it shares—no matter how well we point and talk.[6]

Emotional happiness is like that. It is the feeling common to the feelings we have when we see our new granddaughter smile for the first time, receive word of a promotion, help a wayward tourist find the art museum, taste Belgian chocolate toward the back of our tongue, inhale the scent of our lover's shampoo, hear that song we used to like so much in high school but haven't heard in years, touch our cheek to kitten fur, cure cancer, or get a really good snootful of cocaine. These feelings are different, of course, but they also have something in common. A piece of real estate is not the same as a share of stock, which is not the same as an ounce of gold, but all are forms of *wealth* that occupy different points on a scale of *value.* Similarly, the cocaine experience is not the kitten-fur experience, which is not the promotion experience, but all are forms of *feeling*

that occupy different points on a scale of *happiness*. In each of these instances, an encounter with something in the world generates a roughly similar pattern of neural activity,[7] and thus it makes sense that there is something common to our *experiences* of each—some conceptual coherence that has led human beings to group this hodgepodge of occurrences together in the same linguistic category for as long as anyone can remember. Indeed, when researchers analyze how all the words in a language are related to the others, they inevitably find that the positivity of the words—that is, the extent to which they refer to the experience of happiness or unhappiness—is the single most important determinant of their relationships.[8] Despite Tolstoy's fine efforts, most speakers consider *war* to be more closely related to *vomit* than it is to *peace*.

Happiness, then, is the you-know-what-I-mean feeling. If you are a human being who lives in this century and shares some of my cultural conditioning, then my pointing and comparing will have been effective and you will know *exactly* which feeling I mean. If you are an alien who is still struggling with yellow, then happiness is going to be a real challenge. But take heart: I would be similarly challenged if you told me that on your planet there is a feeling common to the acts of dividing numbers by three, banging one's head lightly on a doorknob, and releasing rhythmic bursts of nitrogen from any orifice at any time except on Tuesday. I would have no idea what that feeling is, and I could only learn the name and hope to use it politely in conversation. Because emotional happiness is an experience, it can only be approximately defined by its antecedents and by its relation to other experiences.[9] The poet Alexander Pope devoted about a quarter of his *Essay on Man* to the topic of happiness, and concluded with this question: "Who thus define it, say they more or less / Than this, that happiness is happiness?"[10]

Emotional happiness may resist our efforts to tame it by description, but when we feel it, we have no doubt about its reality and its importance. Everyone who has observed human behavior for more than thirty continuous seconds seems to have noticed that people are strongly, perhaps even primarily, perhaps even single-mindedly, motivated to feel happy. If there has ever been a group of human beings who prefer despair to delight, frustration to satisfaction, and

pain to pleasure, they must be very good at hiding because no one has ever seen them. People want to be happy, and all the other things they want are typically meant to be means to that end. Even when people forgo happiness in the moment—by dieting when they could be eating, or working late when they could be sleeping—they are usually doing so in order to increase its future yield. The dictionary tells us that to prefer is "to choose or want one thing rather than another *because it would be more pleasant,*" which is to say that the pursuit of happiness is built into the very definition of desire. In this sense, a preference for pain and suffering is not so much a diagnosable psychiatric condition as it is an oxymoron.

Psychologists have traditionally made striving toward happiness the centerpiece of their theories of human behavior because they have found that if they don't, their theories don't work so well. As Sigmund Freud wrote:

> The question of the purpose of human life has been raised countless times; it has never yet received a satisfactory answer and perhaps does not admit of one. . . . We will therefore turn to the less ambitious question of what men show by their behavior to be the purpose and intention of their lives. What do they demand of life and wish to achieve in it? The answer to this can hardly be in doubt. They strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so. This endeavor has two sides, a positive and a negative aim. It aims, on the one hand, at an absence of pain and displeasure, and, on the other, at the experiencing of strong feelings of pleasure.[11]

Freud was an articulate champion of this idea but not its originator, and the same observation appears in some form or another in the psychological theories of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Mill, Bentham, and others. The philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal was especially clear on this point:

> All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is

> the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.[12]

Feeling Happy Because

If every thinker in every century has recognized that people seek emotional happiness, then how has so much confusion arisen over the meaning of the word? One of the problems is that many people consider the desire for happiness to be a bit like the desire for a bowel movement: something we all have, but not something of which we should be especially proud. The kind of happiness they have in mind is cheap and base—a vacuous state of "bovine contentment"[13] that cannot possibly be the basis of a meaningful human life. As the philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question."[14]

The philosopher Robert Nozick tried to illustrate the ubiquity of this belief by describing a fictitious virtual-reality machine that would allow anyone to have any experience they chose, and that would conveniently cause them to forget that they were hooked up to the machine.[15] He concluded that no one would willingly choose to get hooked up for the rest of his life because the happiness he would experience with such a machine would not be happiness at all. "Someone whose emotion is based upon egregiously unjustified and false evaluations we will be reluctant to term happy, however he feels."[16] In short, emotional happiness is fine for pigs, but it is a goal unworthy of creatures as sophisticated and capable as we.

Now, let's take a moment to think about the difficult position that someone who holds this view is in, and let's guess how they might resolve it. If you considered it perfectly tragic for life to be aimed at nothing more substantive and significant than a *feeling,* and yet you could not help but notice that people spend their days seeking happiness, then what might you be tempted to conclude? Bingo! You might be tempted to conclude that the word *happiness*

does not indicate a good feeling but rather that it indicates a very *special* good feeling that can only be produced by very special means—for example, by living one's life in a proper, moral, meaningful, deep, rich, Socratic, and non-piglike way. Now *that* would be the kind of feeling one wouldn't be ashamed to strive for. In fact, the Greeks had a word for this kind of happiness—*eudaimonia*—which translates literally as "good spirit" but which probably means something more like "human flourishing" or "life well lived." For Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and even Epicurus (a name usually associated with piggish happiness), the only thing that could induce that kind of happiness was the virtuous performance of one's duties, with the precise meaning of *virtuous* left for each philosopher to work out for himself. The ancient Athenian legislator Solon suggested that one could not say that a person was happy until the person's life had ended because happiness is the result of living up to one's potential—and how can we make such a judgment until we see how the whole thing turns out? A few centuries later, Christian theologians added a nifty twist to this classical conception: Happiness was not merely the *product* of a life of virtue but the *reward* for a life of virtue, and that reward was not necessarily to be expected in this lifetime.[17]

For two thousand years philosophers have felt compelled to identify happiness with virtue because that is the sort of happiness they think we *ought* to want. And maybe they're right. But if living one's life virtuously is a cause of happiness, it is not happiness itself, and it does us no good to obfuscate a discussion by calling both the cause and the consequence by the same name. I can produce pain by pricking your finger with a pin or by electrically stimulating a particular spot in your brain, and the two pains will be *identical* feelings produced by different means. It would do us no good to call the first of these *real pain* and the other *fake pain*. Pain is pain, no matter what causes it. By muddling causes and consequences, philosophers have been forced to construct tortured defenses of some truly astonishing claims—for example, that a Nazi war criminal who is basking on an Argentinean beach is not really happy, whereas the pious missionary who is being eaten alive by cannibals is. "Happiness will not tremble," Cicero wrote in the first century BC, "however much it

is tortured."[18] That statement may be admired for its moxie, but it probably doesn't capture the sentiments of the missionary who was drafted to play the role of the entrée.

Happiness is a word that we generally use to indicate an experience and not the actions that give rise to it. Does it make any sense to say, "After a day spent killing his parents, Frank was happy"? Indeed it does. We hope there never was such a person, but the sentence is grammatical, well formed, and easily understood. Frank is a sick puppy, but if he says he is happy and he looks happy, is there a principled reason to doubt him? Does it make any sense to say, "Sue was happy to be in a coma"? No, of course not. If Sue is unconscious, she cannot be happy no matter how many good deeds she did before calamity struck. Or how about this one: "The computer obeyed all Ten Commandments and was happy as a clam"? Again, sorry, but no. There is some remote possibility that clams can be happy because there is some remote possibility that clams have the capacity to feel. There may be something it is like to be a clam, but we can be fairly certain that there is nothing it is like to be a computer, and hence the computer cannot be happy no matter how many of its neighbor's wives it failed to covet.[19] Happiness refers to feelings, virtue refers to actions, and those actions can cause those feelings. But not necessarily and not exclusively.

Feeling Happy About

The you-know-what-I-mean feeling is what people ordinarily mean by *happiness,* but it is not the only thing they mean. If philosophers have muddled the moral and emotional meanings of the word *happiness,* then psychologists have muddled the emotional and judgmental meanings equally well and often. For example, when a person says, "All in all, I'm happy about the way my life has gone," psychologists are generally willing to grant that the person is happy. The problem is that people sometimes use the word *happy* to express their beliefs about the merits of things, such as when they say, "I'm happy they caught the little bastard who broke my windshield," and they say things like this even when they are not feeling anything vaguely resembling pleasure. How do we know when a person is expressing a point of view rather than making a claim

about her subjective experience? When the word *happy* is followed by the words *that* or *about,* speakers are usually trying to tell us that we ought to take the word *happy* as an indication not of their feelings but rather of their stances. For instance, when our spouse excitedly reveals that she has just been asked to spend six months at the company's new branch in Tahiti while we stay home and mind the kids, we may say, "I'm not happy, of course, but I'm happy that you're happy." Sentences such as these make high school English teachers apoplectic, but they are actually quite sensible if we can just resist the temptation to take every instance of the word *happy* as an instance of emotional happiness. Indeed, the first time we utter the word, we are letting our spouse know that we are most certainly not having the you-know-what-I-mean feeling (emotional happiness), and the second time we utter the word we are indicating that we approve of the fact that our spouse is (judgmental happiness). When we say we are happy *about* or happy *that,* we are merely noting that something is a potential source of pleasurable feeling, or a past source of pleasurable feeling, or that we realize it ought to be a source of pleasurable feeling but that it sure doesn't feel that way at the moment. We are not actually claiming to be experiencing the feeling or anything like it. It would be more appropriate for us to tell our spouse, "I am not happy, but I understand you are, and I can even imagine that were I going to Tahiti and were you remaining home with these juvenile delinquents, I'd be *experiencing* happiness rather than admiring yours." Of course, speaking like this requires that we forsake all possibility of human companionship, so we opt for the common shorthand and say we are happy *about* things even when we are feeling thoroughly distraught. That's fine, just as long as we keep in mind that we don't always mean what we say.

New Yeller

If we were to agree to reserve the word *happiness* to refer to that class of subjective emotional experiences that are vaguely described as *enjoyable* or *pleasurable,* and if we were to promise not to use that same word to indicate the morality of the actions one might

take to induce those experiences or to indicate our judgments about the merits of those experiences, we might still wonder whether the happiness one gets from helping a little old lady across the street constitutes a different kind of emotional experience—bigger, better, deeper—than the happiness one gets from eating a slice of banana-cream pie. Perhaps the happiness one experiences as a result of good deeds *feels* different from that other sort. In fact, while we're at it, we might as well wonder whether the happiness one gets from eating banana-cream pie feels different from the happiness one gets from eating coconut-cream pie. Or from eating a slice of *this* banana-cream pie rather than a slice of *that* one. How can we tell whether subjective emotional experiences are different or the same?

The truth is that we can't—no more than we can tell whether the yellow experience we have when we look at a school bus is the same yellow experience that others have when they look at the same school bus. Philosophers have flung themselves headlong at this problem for quite some time with little more than bruises to show for it,[20] because when all is said and done, the only way to measure precisely the similarity of two things is for the person who is doing the measuring to compare them side by side—that is, to *experience* them side by side. And outside of science fiction, no one can actually have another person's experience. When we were children, our mothers taught us to call that looking-at-the-school-bus experience *yellow,* and being compliant little learners, we did as we were told. We were pleased when it later turned out that everyone else in the kindergarten claimed to experience yellow when they looked at a bus too. But these shared labels may mask the fact that our actual experiences of yellow are quite different, which is why many people do not discover that they are color-blind until late in life when an ophthalmologist notices that they do not make the distinctions that others seem to make. So while it seems rather unlikely that human beings have radically different experiences when they look at a school bus, when they hear a baby cry, or when they smell a former skunk, it *is* possible, and if you want to believe it, then you have every right and no one who values her time should try to reason with you.

Remembering Differences

I hope you aren't giving up *that* easily. Perhaps the way to determine whether a pair of happinesses actually feel different is to forget about comparing the experiences of different minds and just ask someone who has experienced them both. I may never know if *my* experience of yellow is different from *your* experience of yellow, but surely I can tell that my experience of *yellow* is different from my experience of *blue* when I mentally compare the two. Right? Unfortunately, this strategy is more complicated than it looks. The nub of the problem is that when we say that we are mentally comparing two of our own subjective experiences, we are not actually *having* the two experiences at the same time. Rather, we are at best having one of them, having already had the other, and when an interrogator asks us which experience made us happier or whether the two happinesses were the same, we are at best comparing something we are currently experiencing with our *memory* of something we experienced in the past. This would be unobjectionable were it not for the fact that memories—especially memories of experiences—are notoriously unreliable, a fact that has been demonstrated by both magicians and scientists. First the magic. Look at the six royal cards in figure 4, and pick your favorite. No, don't tell me. Keep it to yourself. Just look at your card, and say the name once or twice (or write it down) so that you'll remember it for a few pages.

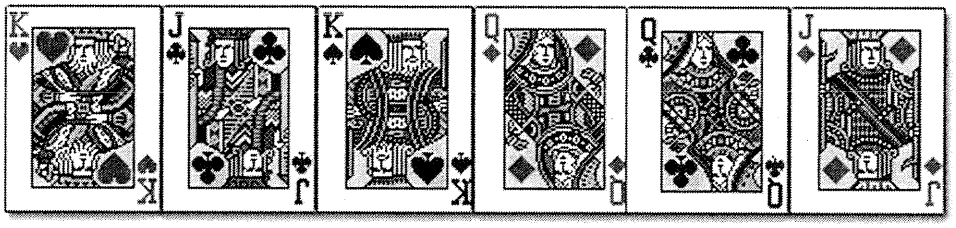

Fig. 4.

Good. Now consider how scientists have approached the problem of remembered experience. In one study, researchers showed volunteers a color swatch of the sort one might pick up in the paint

aisle of the local hardware store and allowed them to study it for five seconds.[21] Some volunteers then spent thirty seconds describing the color (describers), while other volunteers did not describe it (nondescribers). All volunteers were then shown a lineup of six color swatches, one of which was the color they had seen thirty seconds earlier, and were asked to pick out the original swatch. The first interesting finding was that only 73 percent of the nondescribers were able to identify it accurately. In other words, fewer than three quarters of these folks could tell if *this* experience of yellow was the same as the experience of yellow they had had just a half-minute before. The second interesting finding was that describing the color impaired rather than improved performance on the identification task. Only 33 percent of the describers were able to accurately identify the original color. Apparently, the describers' verbal descriptions of their experiences "overwrote" their memories of the experiences themselves, and they ended up remembering not what they had experienced but what they had *said* about what they experienced. And what they had said was not clear and precise enough to help them recognize it when they saw it again thirty seconds later.

Most of us have been in this position. We tell a friend that we were disappointed with the house chardonnay at that trendy downtown bistro, or with the way the string quartet handled our beloved Bartók's Fourth, but the fact is that we are unlikely to be recalling how the wine actually tasted or how the quartet actually sounded when we make this pronouncement. Rather, we are likely to be recalling that as we left the concert, we mentioned to our companion that both the wine and the music had a promising start and a poor finish. Experiences of chardonnays, string quartets, altruistic deeds, and banana-cream pie are rich, complex, multidimensional, and impalpable. One of the functions of language is to help us palp them—to help us extract and remember the important features of our experiences so that we can analyze and communicate them later. *The New York Times* online film archive stores critical synopses of films rather than the films themselves, which would take up far too much space, be far too difficult to search, and be thoroughly useless to anyone who wanted to know what a film was like without actually seeing it. Experiences are like movies with several added dimen-

sions, and were our brains to store the full-length feature films of our lives rather than their tidy descriptions, our heads would need to be several times larger. And when we wanted to know or tell others whether the tour of the sculpture garden was worth the price of the ticket, we would have to replay the entire episode to find out. Every act of memory would require precisely the amount of time that the event being remembered had originally taken, which would permanently sideline us the first time someone asked if we liked growing up in Chicago. So we reduce our experiences to words such as *happy,* which barely do them justice but which are the things we can carry reliably and conveniently with us into the future. The smell of the rose is unresurrectable, but if we know it was *good* and we know it was *sweet,* then we know to stop and smell the next one.

Perceiving Differences

Our remembrance of things past is imperfect, thus comparing our new happiness with our memory of our old happiness is a risky way to determine whether two subjective experiences are really different. So let's try a slightly modified approach. If we cannot remember the feeling of yesterday's banana-cream pie well enough to compare it with the feeling of today's good deed, perhaps the solution is to compare experiences that are so close together in time that we can actually watch them change. For instance, if we were to do a version of the color-swatch experiment in which we reduced the amount of time that passed between the presentation of the original swatch and the presentation of the lineup, surely people would have no problem identifying the original swatch, right? So what if we reduced the time to, say, twenty-five seconds? Or fifteen? Ten? How about a fraction of *one*? And what if, as a bonus, we made the identification task a bit easier by showing volunteers a color swatch for a few seconds, taking it away for just a fraction of a second, and then showing them one test swatch (instead of a lineup of six) and asking them to tell us whether the single test swatch is the same as the original. No intervening verbal description to confuse their memories, no rival test swatches to confuse their eyes, and only a sliver of a slice of a moment between the presentation of the original and test swatches.

Gosh. Given how simple we've made the task, shouldn't we predict that everyone will pass it with, um, flying colors?

Yes, but only if we enjoy being wrong. In a study conceptually similar to the one we just designed, researchers asked volunteers to look at a computer screen and read some odd-looking text.[22] What made the text so odd was that it alternated between uppercase and lowercase, so that it lOoKeD lIkE tHiS. Now, as you may know, when people seem to be staring directly at something, their eyes are actually flickering slightly away from the thing they are staring at three or four times per second, which is why eyeballs look jiggly if you study them up close. The researchers used an eye-tracking device that tells a computer when the volunteer's eyes are fixated on the object on the screen and when they have briefly jiggled away. Whenever the volunteers' eyeballs jiggled away from the text for a fraction of a second, the computer played a trick on them: It changed the case of every letter in the text they were reading so that the text that lOoKeD lIkE tHiS suddenly LoOkEd LiKe ThIs. Amazingly, volunteers did not notice that the text was alternating between different styles several times each second as they read it. Subsequent research has shown that people fail to notice a wide range of these "visual discontinuities," which is why filmmakers can suddenly change the style of a woman's dress or the color of a man's hair from one cut to the next, or cause an item on a table to disappear entirely, all without ever waking the audience.[23] Interestingly, when people are asked to predict whether they would notice such visual discontinuities, they are quite confident that they would.[24]

And it isn't just the subtle changes we miss. Even dramatic changes to the appearance of a scene are sometimes overlooked. In an experiment taken straight from the pages of *Candid Camera,* researchers arranged for a researcher to approach pedestrians on a college campus and ask for directions to a particular building.[25] While the pedestrian and the researcher conferred over the researcher's map, two construction workers, each holding one end of a large door, rudely cut between them, temporarily obstructing the pedestrian's view of the researcher. As the construction workers passed, the original researcher crouched down behind the door

and walked off with the construction workers, while a new researcher, who had been hiding behind the door all along, took his place and picked up the conversation. The original and substitute researchers were of different heights and builds and had noticeably different voices, haircuts, and clothing. You would have no trouble telling them apart if they were standing side by side. So what did the Good Samaritans who had stopped to help a lost tourist make of this switcheroo? Not much. In fact, most of the pedestrians failed to notice—*failed to notice that the person to whom they were talking had suddenly been transformed into an entirely new individual.*

Are we to believe, then, that people cannot tell when their experience of the world has changed right before their eyes? Of course not. If we take this research to its logical extreme we end up as extremists generally do: mired in absurdity and handing out pamphlets. If we could never tell when our experience of the world had changed, how could we know that something was moving, how could we tell whether to stop or go at an intersection, and how could we count beyond one? These experiments tell us that the experiences of our former selves are *sometimes* as opaque to us as the experiences of other people, but more important, they tell us when this is most and least likely to be the case. What was the critical ingredient that allowed each of the foregoing studies to produce the results it did? In each instance, volunteers were not *attending* to their own experience of a particular aspect of a stimulus at the moment of its transition. In the color-swatch study, the swatches were swapped in another room during the thirty-second break; in the reading study, the text was changed when the volunteer's eye had momentarily jiggled away; in the door study, the researchers switched places only when a large piece of wood was obstructing the volunteer's view. We would not expect these studies to show the same results if burnt umber became fluorescent mauve, or if **this** became **t h a t**, or if an accountant from Poughkeepsie became Queen Elizabeth II while the volunteer was looking right at her, or him, or whatever. And indeed, research has shown that when volunteers are paying close attention to a stimulus at the precise moment that it changes, they do notice that change quickly and reliably.[26] The point of these studies is not

that we are hopelessly inept at detecting changes in our experience of the world but rather that unless our minds are keenly focused on a particular aspect of that experience at the very moment it changes, we will be forced to rely on our memories—forced to compare our current experience to our recollection of our former experience—in order to detect the change.

Magicians have known all this for centuries, of course, and have traditionally used their knowledge to spare the rest of us the undue burden of money. A few pages back you chose a card from a group of six. What I didn't tell you at the time was that I have powers far beyond those of mortal men, and therefore I knew which card you were going to pick before you picked it. To prove it, I have removed your card from the group. Take a look at figure 5 and tell me I'm not amazing. How did I do it? This trick is much more exciting, of course, when you don't know beforehand that it's a trick and you don't have to wade through several pages of text to hear the punchline. And it doesn't work at all if you compare the two figures side by side, because you instantly see that none of the cards in figure 4 (including the one you picked) appears in figure 5. But when there is some possibility that the magician knows your chosen card—either by sleight of hand, shrewd deduction, or telepathy—and when your jiggly eyes are not looking directly at the first group of six as it transforms into the second group of five, the illusion can be quite powerful. Indeed, when the trick first appeared on a website, some of the smartest scientists I know hypothesized that a newfangled technology was allowing the server to guess their card by tracking the speed and acceleration of their keystrokes. I personally removed my hand from the mouse just to make sure that its subtle movements were not being measured. It did not occur to me until the third time through that while I had *seen* the first group of six cards, I had only *remem-*

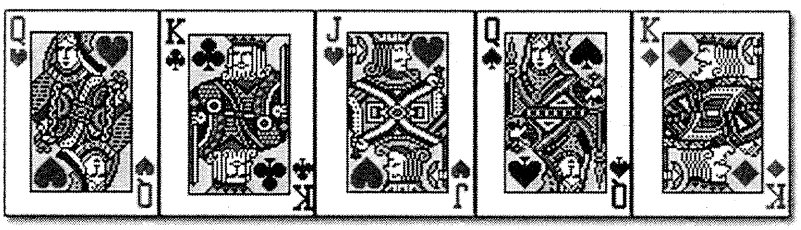

Fig. 5.

bered my verbal label for the card I had chosen, and hence had failed to notice that all the other cards had changed as well.[27] What's important to note for our purposes is that card tricks like this work for precisely the same reason that people find it difficult to say how happy they were in their previous marriages.

Happy Talk

Reba and Lori Schappell claim to be happy, and that disturbs us. We are rock-solid certain that it just *can't* be true, and yet, it looks as though there is no foolproof method for comparing their happiness with our own. If they say they are happy, then on what basis can we conclude that they are wrong? Well, we might try the more lawyerly tactic of questioning their ability to know, evaluate, or describe their own experience. "They may *think* they're happy," we could say, "but that's only because they don't know what happiness really is." In other words, because Lori and Reba have never had many of the experiences that we singletons have had—spinning cartwheels in a meadow, snorkeling along the Great Barrier Reef, strolling down the avenue without drawing a crowd—we suspect they may have an impoverished background of happy experiences that leads them to evaluate their lives differently than the rest of us would. If, for instance, we were to give the twins a birthday cake, hand them an eight-point rating scale (which can be thought of as an artificial language with eight words for different intensities of happiness), and ask them to report on their subjective experience, they might tell us they felt a joyful *eight*. But isn't it likely that their *eight* and our *eight* represent fundamentally different levels of joy, and that their use of the eight-word language is distorted by their unenviable situation, which has never allowed them to discover how happy a person can really be? Lori and Reba may be using the eight-word language differently than we do because for them, birthday cake is as good as it gets. They label their happiest experience with the happiest word in the eight-word language, naturally, but this should not cause us to overlook the fact that the experience they call *eight* is an experience that we might call *four and a half*. In short, they don't mean *happy* the way we mean *happy*. Figure 6 shows how an impov-

erished experiential background can cause language to be squished so that the full range of verbal labels is used to describe a restricted range of experiences. By this account, when the twins say they are ecstatic, they are actually *feeling* what we feel when we say we are pleased.

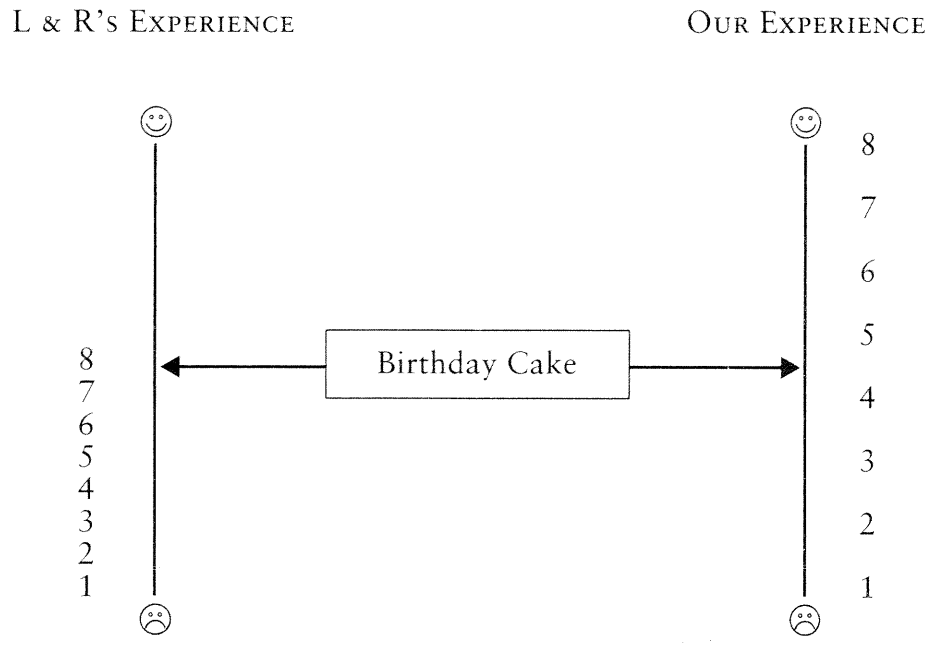

Fig. 6. The *language-squishing hypothesis* suggests that when given a birthday cake, Lori and Reba feel exactly as you feel but talk about it differently.

Squishing Language

The nice things about this *language-squishing hypothesis* are *(a)* it suggests that everyone everywhere has the same subjective experience when they receive a birthday cake even if they describe that experience differently, which makes the world a rather simple place to live and bake; and *(b)* it allows us to go on believing that despite what they say about themselves, Lori and Reba aren't *really* happy after all, and thus we are perfectly justified in preferring our lives to theirs. The less nice things about this hypothesis are numerous, and if we worry that Lori and Reba use the eight-word language differently than we do because they have never enjoyed the thrill of a cartwheel, then we had better worry about a few other matters too. For

instance, we had better worry that we have never felt the overwhelming sense of peace and security that comes from knowing that a beloved sibling is always by our side, that we will never lose her friendship no matter what kind of crummy stuff we may say or do on a bad day, that there will always be someone who knows us as well as we know ourselves, shares our hopes, worries our worries, and so on. If they haven't had our experiences, then we haven't had theirs either, and it is entirely possible that *we* are the ones with the squished language—that when we say we feel overjoyed, we have no idea what we are talking about because we have never experienced the companionate love, the blissful union, the unadulterated agape that Lori and Reba have. And all of us—you, me, Lori, Reba—had better worry that there are experiences far better than those we have had so far—the experience of flying without a plane, of seeing our children win Academy Awards and Pulitzer Prizes, of meeting God and learning the secret handshake—and that everyone's use of the eight-word language is defective and that *no one* knows what happiness really is. By that reasoning, we should all follow Solon's advice and *never* say we are happy until we are dead because otherwise, if the real thing ever does come along, we will have used up the word and won't have any way to tell the newspapers about it.

But these are just the preliminary worries. There are more. If we wanted to do a thought experiment whose results would demonstrate once and for all that Lori and Reba just don't know what happiness really is, perhaps we should imagine that with a wave of a magic wand we could split them apart and allow them to experience life as singletons. If after a few weeks on their own they came to us, repudiated their former claims, and begged not to be changed back to their former state, shouldn't that convince us, as it has apparently convinced them, that they were previously confusing their fours and eights? We've all known someone who had a religious conversion, went through a divorce, or survived a heart attack and now claims that her eyes are open for the very first time—that despite what she thought and said in her previous incarnation, she was never *really* happy until now. Are the people who have undergone such marvelous metamorphoses to be taken at their word?

Not necessarily. Consider a study in which volunteers were

shown some quiz-show questions and asked to estimate the likelihood that they could answer them correctly. Some volunteers were shown only the questions (the question-only group), while others were shown both the questions and the answers (the question-and-answer group). Volunteers in the question-only group thought the questions were quite difficult, while those in the question-and-answer group—who saw both the questions ("What did Philo T. Farnsworth invent?") and the answers ("The television set")—believed that they could have answered the questions easily had they never seen the answers at all. Apparently, once volunteers knew the answers, the questions seemed simple ("Of course it was the television—everyone knows that!"), and the volunteers were no longer able to judge how difficult the questions would seem to someone who did not share their knowledge of the answers.[28]

Studies such as these demonstrate that once we have an experience, we cannot simply set it aside and see the world as we would have seen it had the experience never happened. To the judge's dismay, the jury cannot disregard the prosecutor's snide remarks. Our experiences instantly become part of the lens through which we view our entire past, present, and future, and like any lens, they shape and distort what we see. This lens is not like a pair of spectacles that we can set on the nightstand when we find it convenient to do so but like a pair of contacts that are forever affixed to our eyeballs with superglue. Once we learn to read, we can never again see letters as mere inky squiggles. Once we learn about free jazz, we can never again hear Ornette Coleman's saxophone as a source of noise. Once we learn that van Gogh was a mental patient, or that Ezra Pound was an anti-Semite, we can never again view their art in the same way. If Lori and Reba were separated for a few weeks, and if they told us that they were happier now than they used to be, they might be right. But they might not. They might just be telling us that the singletons they had become now viewed being conjoined with as much distress as those of us who have always been singletons do. Even if they could remember what they thought, said, and did as conjoined twins, we would expect their more recent experience as singletons to color their evaluation of the conjoined experience, leaving them unable to say with certainty how conjoined twins who

had never been singletons actually feel. In a sense, the experience of separation would make them *us,* and thus they would be in the same difficult position that we are in when we try to imagine the experience of being conjoined. Becoming singletons would affect their views of the past in ways that they could not simply set aside. All of this means that when people have new experiences that lead them to claim that their language was squished—that they were not really happy even though they said so and thought so at the time—they can be mistaken. In other words, people can be wrong in the present when they say they were wrong in the past.

Stretching Experience

Lori and Reba have not done many of the things that for the rest of us give rise to feelings near the top of the happiness scale—cartwheels, scuba diving, name your poison—and surely this must make a difference. If impoverished experiential backgrounds don't necessarily squish language, then what do they do instead? Let's assume that Lori and Reba really do have an impoverished experiential background against which to evaluate something as simple as, say, the dutiful presentation of a chocolate cake on their birthday. One possibility is that their impoverished experiential background would squish their language. But another possibility is that their impoverished experiential background would not squish their language so much as it would stretch their experience—that is, when they say *eight* they mean exactly the same thing we mean when we say *eight* because when they receive a birthday cake they feel exactly the same way that the rest of us feel when we do underwater cartwheels along the Great Barrier Reef. Figure 7 illustrates the *experience-stretching hypothesis.*

Experience stretching is a bizarre phrase but not a bizarre idea. We often say of others who claim to be happy despite circumstances that we believe should preclude it that "they only think they're happy because they don't know what they're missing." Okay, sure, *but that's the point.* Not knowing what we're missing can mean that we are truly happy under circumstances that would not allow us to be happy once we have experienced the missing thing. It does *not* mean that those who don't know what they're missing are *less*

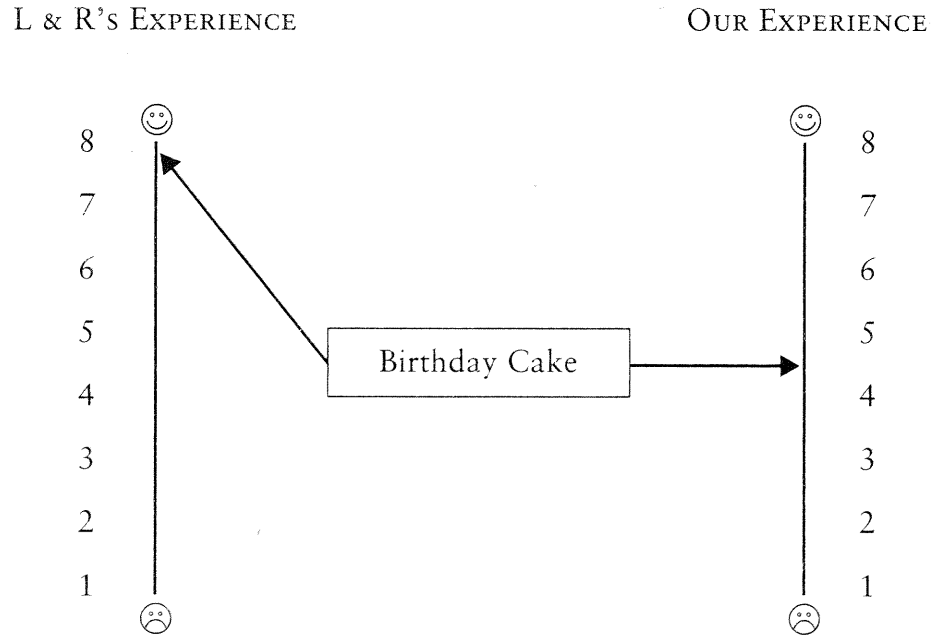

Fig. 7. The *experience-stretching hypothesis* suggests that when given a birthday cake, Lori and Reba talk about their feelings the same way you do but feel something different.

happy than those who have it. Examples abound in my life and yours, so let's talk about mine. I occasionally smoke a cigar because it makes me happy, and my wife occasionally fails to understand why I must have a cigar to be happy when she can apparently be just as happy without one (and even happier without me having one). But the experience-stretching hypothesis suggests that I too could have been happy without cigars if only I had not experienced their pharmacological mysteries in my wayward youth. But I did, and because I did I now know what I am missing when I don't, hence that glorious moment during my spring vacation when I am reclining in a lawn chair on the golden sands of Kauai, sipping Talisker and watching the sun slip slowly into a taffeta sea, is just not quite perfect if I don't also have something stinky and Cuban in my mouth. I could press both my luck and my marriage by advancing the language-squishing hypothesis, carefully explaining to my wife that because she has never experienced the pungent earthiness of a Montecristo no. 4, she has an impoverished experiential background and therefore does not know what happiness really is. I would lose, of course, because I always do, but in this case I would deserve it.

Doesn't it make better sense to say that by learning to enjoy cigars I changed my experiential background and inadvertently ruined all future experiences that do not include them? The Hawaiian sunset was an eight until the Hawaiian sunset à la stogie took its place and reduced the cigarless sunset to a mere seven.[29]

But we've talked enough about me and my vacation. Let's talk about me and my guitar. I've played the guitar for years, and I get very little pleasure from executing an endless repetition of three-chord blues. But when I first learned to play as a teenager, I would sit upstairs in my bedroom happily strumming those three chords until my parents banged on the ceiling and invoked their rights under the Geneva Convention. I suppose we could try the language-squishing hypothesis here and say that my eyes have been opened by my improved musical abilities and that I now realize I was not *really* happy in those teenage days. But doesn't it seem more reasonable to invoke the experience-stretching hypothesis and say that an experience that once brought me pleasure no longer does? A man who is given a drink of water after being lost in the Mojave Desert for a week may at that moment rate his happiness as eight. A year later, the same drink might induce him to feel no better than two. Are we to believe that he was wrong about how happy he was when he took that life-giving sip from a rusty canteen, or is it more reasonable to say that a sip of water can be a source of ecstasy or a source of moisture depending on one's experiential background? If impoverished experiential backgrounds squish our language rather than stretch our experience, then children who say they are delighted by peanut butter and jelly are just plain wrong, and they will admit it later in life when they get their first bite of goose liver, at which time they will be right, until they get older and begin to get heartburn from fatty foods, at which time they will realize that they were wrong then too. Every day would be a repudiation of the day before, as we experienced greater and greater happiness and realized how thoroughly deluded we were until, conveniently enough, now.

So which hypothesis is correct? We can't say. What we *can* say is that all claims of happiness are claims from someone's *point of view*—from the perspective of a single human being whose unique collection of past experiences serves as a context, a lens, a back-

ground for her evaluation of her current experience. As much as the scientist might wish for it, there isn't a view from nowhere. Once we have an experience, we are thereafter unable to see the world as we did before. Our innocence is lost and we cannot go home again. We may remember what we thought or said (though not necessarily), and we may remember what we did (though not necessarily that either), but the likelihood is depressingly slim that we can resurrect our experience and then evaluate it as we would have back then. In some ways, the cigar-smoking, guitar-playing, pâté-eating people we become have no more authority to speak on behalf of the people we used to be than do outside observers. The separated twins may be able to tell us how they *now* feel about having been conjoined, but they cannot tell us how conjoined twins who have never experienced separation feel about it. No one knows if Reba's and Lori's eight feels like our eight, and that includes all the Rebas and Loris that will ever be.

Onward

On the morning of May 15, 1916, the arctic explorer Ernest Shackleton began the last leg of one of history's most grueling adventures. His ship, the *Endurance,* had sunk in the Weddell Sea, stranding him and his crew on Elephant Island. After seven months, Shackleton and five of his crewmen boarded a small lifeboat in which they spent three weeks crossing eight hundred miles of frigid, raging ocean. Upon reaching South Georgia Island, the starving, frostbitten men prepared to disembark and cross the island on foot in the hope of reaching a whaling station on the other side. No one had ever survived that trek. Facing almost certain death that morning, Shackleton wrote:

> We passed through the narrow mouth of the cove with the ugly rocks and waving kelp close on either side, turned to the east, and sailed merrily up the bay as the sun broke through the mists and made the tossing waters sparkle around us. We were a curious-looking party on that bright morning, but we were feeling happy. We even broke into song, and, but for our

> Robinson Crusoe appearance, a casual observer might have taken us for a picnic party sailing in a Norwegian fjord or one of the beautiful sounds of the west coast of New Zealand.[30]

Could Shackleton really have meant what he said? Could his *happy* be our *happy,* and is there any way to tell? As we've seen, happiness is a subjective experience that is difficult to describe to ourselves and to others, thus evaluating people's claims about their own happiness is an exceptionally thorny business. But don't worry—because before business gets better, it gets a whole lot thornier.

missing information and proceeds to fill in the scene—and the part of your visual experience of your cheese-dipping brother-in-law that is caused by real light reflecting off of his real face and the part that your brain just made up look *exactly alike* to you. You can convince yourself of this by closing your left eye, focusing your right eye on the magician in figure 8, and then bringing the book slowly toward you. Stay focused on the magician, but notice that when the earth moves into your blind spot, it seems to disappear. You will suddenly see whiteness where the earth actually is because your brain sees whiteness all around the earth and thus mistakenly assumes there is whiteness in your blind spot as well. If you keep moving the book toward you, the earth will reappear. Eventually, of course, your nose will touch the rabbit and you will commit an unnatural act.

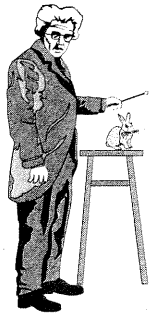

Fig. 8. If you stare at the magician with your right eye and move the book slowly toward your nose, the earth will disappear into your blind spot.

The filling-in trick is not limited to the visual world. Researchers tape-recorded the sentence *The state governors met with their respective legislatures convening in the capital city.* Then they doctored the tape, substituting a cough for the first *s* in *legislatures.*[11] Volunteers heard the cough all right, but they heard it happening *between* the words because they heard the missing *s* too. Even when they were specifically instructed to listen for the missing sound, and even when they were given thousands of trials of practice, volunteers

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