2022

Orwell and the Quest for Happiness

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While Eric Blair, or as he is more widely known, George Orwell, is most commonly remembered for his popular allegory *Animal Farm* and his dystopian novel *1984*, he has also left behind a legacy of being one of the best political writers of his time. His elaborate and often contentious views are clearly seen in both of his most popular pieces, but he has just as many ideas hidden in his other works, waiting to be discovered. One passage in *The Road to Wigan Pier* seems to be particularly compelling, especially when one applies it to the social and economic views of our contemporary capitalist society. The passage, in short, proposes a question of who is more likely to be happy: a man that is a manual worker or an educated man. While it is important to note that the circumstances that caused Orwell to reach this conclusion are almost entirely different from what someone experiences today (both in the lifestyle of the manual worker and the educated man), the principle of his claim still remains applicable. However, I believe Orwell is mistaken to conclude that the manual worker has a better chance of being happy than that of the educated man. Because of his peculiar upbringing and relationship to wealth, coupled with his misinterpretation of the relationship between work, education, and the economy, Orwell arrives at a conclusion that is fundamentally unfounded and ultimately shaped by his unique experiences, not fact.

Around halfway through *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell presents a rather startling claim: "I should say that a manual worker if he is in steady work and drawing good wages– an 'if' which gets bigger and bigger—has a better chance of being happy than an 'educated' man."[1]

[1] Orwell, 117

After many months of intense observation, and sometimes firsthand experience, Orwell has provided the public with an interesting and unconventional take. One would assume, given his detailed experiences with incredibly disgusting and unpredictable problems with the lower and middle class, he would hope to escape that lifestyle and default back to his life in the "lower-upper-middle class". What then, causes him to believe that a happy life is more obtainable for a working man? One possibility is that those in the working class feel as though they are behaving in a more productive manner. Orwell explains that, at first, he thought that having to work at the age of fourteen would be a terrible burden. Instead, he found that working-class children actually look forward to their working days: "Of course I know now that there is not one working-class boy in a thousand who does not pine for the day when he will leave school. He wants to be doing real work, not wasting his time on ridiculous rubbish like history and geography. To the working class, the notion of staying at school till you are nearly grown-up seems merely contemptible and unmanly."[2] Even now, this statement holds some real truth to it. If someone is told that they must choose between sitting all day and listening to abstract theories and foreign concepts they may be a bit hesitant; other than knowledge, what tangible skills or practices are you gaining? What is more attractive to some, and as Orwell argues, more likely to inspire happiness, is the option to work and produce tangible goods, along with receiving monetary compensation and providing for a family.

In order to properly assess the entirety of the passage, though, it is important to look back at some of the factors that may have led Orwell to think this way. Instead of looking at the amount of happiness work can produce versus studying, it is perhaps more productive to look at a few details of what Orwell is saying that are often overlooked. Directly before arriving at his

[2] Ibid, 116

claim that a manual worker "has a better chance of being happy", Orwell states: "you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which it is not so easy to find elsewhere" (this is referring to the home of a manual worker).[3] While this sentence can easily be glossed over, it may actually reveal something more. In a biography titled *Orwell: Life and Art* written by Jeffrey Meyers, there begins a conversation about Orwell's (as the title of the first chapter suggests) painful childhood. Meyers starts the chapter by stating: "Orwell was always extremely reticent about his personal affairs".[4] Throughout the entirety of Orwell's publications, there is very little said about his relationships. When they are mentioned, however, they are overwhelmingly negative. Meyers provides two quotes from Orwell which portray this idea of negativity particularly well: "my early childhood had not been altogether happy…One ought to love one's father, but I knew very well that I merely disliked my own father" and "...I do not believe that I ever felt love for any mature person, except my mother, and even her I did not trust."[5] These startling words reveal just a fraction of the trouble Orwell went through as a child. While it is notable that Orwell was able to identify his estranged relationship with his parents, I believe he let his traumas influence his opinions a great deal, most likely, without his knowledge. With that being said, I draw your attention to Meyer's opinion on the topic, "An archetypal image of a warm and secure family hearth, which Orwell never had and always wanted, appears again and again in his works as an idealized domestic portrait that reflects his deprivation".[6] Now, keeping this thought in mind, let us look at the passage that follows Orwell's claim that manual workers have a better chance of being happy:

> Especially on winter evenings after tea, when the fire glows in the open range and dances mirrored in the steel fender, when Father, in shirt-sleeves sits in the rocking chair at one side of

[3] Ibid, 117
[4] Meyers, 3
[5] Ibid, 4
[6] Ibid, 4

the fire reading the racing finals, and Mother sits on the other with her sewing, and the children are happy with a pennorth of mint humbugs, and the dog lolls roasting himself on the rag mat–it is a good place to be in,[7]

It appears that some of Orwell's longing for a different, or maybe even "better," childhood is, in some way or another, influencing his opinion on what makes someone happy. What is most peculiar about this, though, is that he aligns the happiness of the man in the picture with the fact that he is a manual worker, not any other factors.

Looking at Orwell's passage now, in this new light, it becomes relevant to explore how much of the happiness in the manual worker's life comes from his work and not, for example, his relationships. Orwell states that the worker's happiness is conditional on "steady work and drawing good wages".[8] So, what happens during a period of economic crisis? Dora Gudrun Gudmundsdottir, a public health director for Iceland and researcher at the University of Cambridge, published a journal article called: The Impact of Economic Crisis on Happiness. In this study, the impacts of the 2009 economic crisis in Iceland (consistently found to be one of the happiest countries in the world) were analyzed. From her findings, Gudmundsdottir found that there was only one factor that impacted happiness in a significantly negative way, the ability of someone to make ends meet.[9] This conclusion is entirely consistent with Orwell's idea that for the manual worker to be happy, there must be steady work. Conversely, the study also found that "…social relationships (satisfaction with relationships with family and friends) had the strongest correlation with happiness".[10] Most importantly, though, and likely to Orwell's dismay, the study discovered "Small but significant correlations between education and happiness have often been

[7] Orwell, 117
[8] Ibid, 117
[9] Gudmundsdottir, 1090
[10] Ibid, 1092

found".[11] Orwell states that the happiness of the manual worker is conditional on wages and employment, but in an economic crisis with no employment or relatively low wages, the main indicator of what makes someone happy is in their relationships. So, if we look back at the scene Orwell provides us in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, it becomes all the more clear that he is likely drawing the wrong conclusions about the very theoretical situation he himself curates. The fascination he has with the manual worker is not with the qualities of the individual but rather with the community. The man is simply seen enjoying time with his family; there is no reason why an educated man can not do that. Even if the educated man can not have a family, simply the act of being married or with a committed partner is seen to raise one's happiness, yet another thing that both an educated man and a manual worker can do.[12] Looking more closely at Orwells theoretical, isolated situation of the employed manual worker compared to the educated man, we can see that it all relies on one important requirement that Orwell briefly highlights: that the work be accessible to the man and that his wages are paid. Depending on the work available and the amount of money that employers are able to pay their manual laborers, the working class will notice their lifestyle fluctuating. But, this is a moot point. Orwell is not debating about the unemployed but rather the prosperous homes of the working class. Essentially, he is comparing two isolated examples: one where the manual worker is compensated fairly for his efforts and one where an educated man enjoys the certain luxuries associated with that lifestyle. How then, can we possibly determine which situation allows for more happiness? At the end of the day, it may be too arbitrary of a question to establish a "correct" answer, especially when presented with such a subjective term as happiness. What makes one man or another happy varies dramatically.

[11] Ibid, 1088
[12] Ibid, 1092

However, even though there is no one right answer to the subjective question of happiness, there are indeed empirical ways to compare a manual worker to an educated man. The best way to do this is to look at the impact income has on someone's level of happiness. Let us assume for now that in a situation where a manual worker and an educated man are both employed, the educated man's income will most likely be greater than the manual workers. With that in mind, let us look at a study written by Petri Böckerman and Pekka Ilmakunnas. Their study, conducted on Finland's economy in the 1990s, is titled: Elusive Effects of Unemployment on Happiness. Although the data follows unemployment, it also looks at the ways Finland's various citizens were impacted by how much they made. They found, unsurprisingly, that: "Low income has a clear negative effect on both happiness and life satisfaction".[13] Even with equal levels of employment, both drawing steady wages, the individual who makes more is found to be happier. So why then, would anyone argue that it is better to make less money if it is proven that there is a direct correlation with lower levels of happiness?

While Orwell does not specifically state that the educated man makes more money, it can be reasonably assumed that this would be the case. Of course, this begs the question of why he did not compare the manual worker to someone in the upper class. This is a worthwhile inquiry. For the most part, comparing work to study is like comparing apples to oranges. Work is a means to make money. Studying is a means to obtain something else like a higher-level job. So why then is this comparison being made? I believe it comes back to Orwell's, again, strained relationship with the upper class.

In a piece critically assessing Orwell's essay *Such, Such Were the Joys,* written by Robert Pearce called, "Truth and Falsehood: George Orwell's Prep School Woes", Pearce shines a light

[13] Böckerman, 161

on Orwell's growing resentment toward the people that raised him. Pearce points out that Orwell only trusts biographies if they reveal something disgraceful and we certainly see the disgrace come through in his attack on his prep school experience.[14] Orwell explains that from a young age he was taught to be ashamed of his lack of wealth and was constantly reminded of his peers' financial superiority.[15] I would argue that because of his horrible experiences at school, he has associated the educated man with the snobby upper class people he grew to hate. This grudge was built so intensely in his formative years, it is relatively safe to assume that some of that has carried over to his adult life, especially when considering the essay was written towards the end of his life, the hatred still present. With all of this animosity built up, the connection Orwell draws between the educated and the upper class grows more apparent and with it, his reasoning for not associating happiness with wealth.

Even though Orwell may resent the upper class, he would most likely agree with the notion that the educated may actually have more opportunities to live a happy life than the working man. The determining factor for whether or not a manual worker is happy, using Orwell's logic, ultimately falls onto the work available and the wages rewarded to its workers. If you are able to create a situation where the man does not need to worry about the availability of work and the money he must make, then he has all the time in the world to find what makes him happy. The educated man, more likely than not, will have this opportunity for a number of reasons. First off, because of the way our economic system is structured, and was structured at the time this book was written, the educated man has more opportunities to establish wealth and with it allocate time to do what he would like. Simply put, having the option to do something, and having the option of how to spend your time, will allow for moments of happiness. But, it

[14] Pearce, 371
[15] Ibid, 368

would be more beneficial to an individual to assume that it is true because the benefits greatly outweigh the possible downsides.

"In a working-class home–I am not thinking at the moment of the unemployed, but of comparatively prosperous homes…"[16] I believe that from the get-go, Orwell's argument is based too much on hope and is therefore doomed. All of his subsequent claims are built on the foundation that there must be employment for the manual worker to be happy. Beyond the glaring obviousness of this point, Orwell fails to acknowledge just how unlikely it is for this situation to occur frequently enough to justify his stance. Sure it is reasonable to conceive of that family sitting by the fire in times of peace, harmony, and employment. But, if even those most threatened by unemployment are employed, that likely means it is a fairly prosperous time for all. Due to the simple fact that the educated man has more money and opportunity, it is hard to find a way that Orwell arrived at his conclusion without succumbing to his biases. The most fundamental thing that has been found to make people happy, no matter the society they live in or their class is and always has been relationships. The beauty of relationships is that they can be had anywhere, by anyone, at any time. Why then would one want to be in a position where, if they become unemployed, they will become less happy?

Based on the theory of hedonic adaptation, even after a negative or positive event, an individual will return to a similar baseline level of happiness.[17] No matter where one is situated in life, one will adapt and find a way to be happy. The point Orwell misses is the security that the upper class has. The safety net that is formed by their wealth allows them to navigate through life in a manner that is unlike that of the manual worker. "The underprivileged were harder hit than the more privileged groups, both with regard to living conditions and psychological well-

[16] Orwell, 116-117
[17] Gudmundsdottir, 1097

being."[18] When a crisis does occur, unfortunately, the family resting by the fire on a cold winter's night will be hit first and the hardest. As much as it would rattle Orwell to the core, the boy who multiplies Orwell's father's income by two hundred likely has an equal opportunity at happiness.[19] The main difference, and the one I am sure Orwell is aware of even if he does not admit it, is that the Russian boy's family is more likely to sustain their happiness through times of economic disruption.

One may be lucky enough to live in a time where no major crisis occurs. During that time, disregarding the likeliness, I can understand Orwell's train of thought. It is in the other anomalies, however, where I am not able to convince myself that his claims are well-founded or even factually accurate. I am, however, able to convince myself that Orwell's childhood played a larger role in shaping his opinions than some may suspect. Simply based on the fact that he tries to compare work and study, two fundamentally different activities, goes to show the peculiar similarities he has likely drawn between the educated and snobby elites of his time. His emotions, while not misplaced, take over and seep into his claims, taking away from the overall validity of his argument. His resentment is well founded and I can only imagine the psychological effects of being "molded by the system he wished to reject".[20] But, his ultimate failure to acknowledge these impacts or at least practice some introspection, lead to his claims downfall.

[18] Ibid, 1086
[19] Meyers, 5
[20] Pearce, 368

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