An Art History of Happiness: Western Approaches to the Good Life through the Last 1000 Years, As Illustrated in Art

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Abstract

A prominent criticism of positive psychology is that it has been shaped by its Western context, and yet that this 'situatedness' often remains unacknowledged. Consequently, this paper offers an archaeological analysis of conceptualisations of happiness in the West. More specifically, the paper explores the emergence of significant ideas relating to the good life through the innovative device of studying artworks, on the premise that being featured in art is an effective signifier of when a given idea rose to prominence. Taking a time span of 1,000 years, one artwork per century has been selected to illustrate the emergence of a particular stream of thought during that centennial period. The paper elucidates the roots of current ideas around happiness in fields like positive psychology, and in the West more generally. It is hoped this type of 'consciousness-raising' activity may help such fields acknowledge and overcome any limitations arising from their cultural situatedness.

Keywords

Happiness, history, art, and philosophy.

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One of the most powerful ways of understanding a culture is to look at the historical currents that have helped shape it. Of course, given the enormity of such an endeavour, scholars have tended to elucidate only selected dimensions of a given culture (and even then reconciling themselves with producing a narrative that is inevitably partial). For instance, Charles Taylor's (1989) influential Sources of the Self analysed the ideas that have helped form the dominant modes of self-identity in the West. Richard Tarnas' (1991) Passion of the Western Mind identified the philosophical tributaries that have flowed throughout Western thought over the past two millennia. Likewise, in Happiness: A History, Darrin McMahon (2006) traced the ways in which happiness and wellbeing have been constructed in the West historically, from the Beatitudes of Christ to the rationality of the Enlightenment. Inspired by this latter example, the current paper aims to contribute to an understanding of how the 'good life' has been conceptualised in Western culture over the past 1,000 years.

The term 'good life' refers to issues such as how people ought to live, what it means to flourish, what happiness consists in, and where it can be found. More specifically, this paper aims to explore the emergence of significant ideas relating to the good life at particular points in history. As will be seen here, current conceptualisations of happiness in the West – as promulgated by fields like positive psychology – have arisen from the confluence of various streams of thought, from the teleological ideas of Christianity, to the existentialist emphasis on meaning. This paper, then, endeavours to identify the epochs in which these streams first rose to prominence. Moreover, it does this through the innovative device of studying works of art. The central premise here is that one way of identifying just such a 'rise to prominence' is through noting when a given idea was first represented in art. As Hauser (1999) outlined in his multi-volume Social History of Art, while the seeds of an idea may have been planted at any prior point in time, to have been selected as a theme for an artwork signifies having reached a certain level of cultural significance or prominence.

In considering this history of ideas, this paper limits itself to the time-frame of the past 1,000 years. More specifically, one artwork per century has been selected, with each being used to illustrate the emergence of a particular stream of thought during that centennial period. In saying that, in the spirit of reflexivity (Cutcliffe, 2003), it must be acknowledged that the choice of artworks is inevitably selective. It would be impossible to identify any one artwork as being the most representative or significant of a given epoch. Therefore, the narrative here of the emergence of ideas – which these artworks are being used to represent – is likewise partial and selective. In any one time period, there will be many ideas being born and/or coming to fruition (as this paper tries to indicate). Even the lengthiest multi-volume encyclopaedia would struggle to do justice to all these developing patterns of thought.

Nevertheless, the kind of endeavour undertaken in this paper is still worth it. It is important and valuable to engage in historiological analyses in order to better understand one's current situation and understanding of the world, even if these analyses are partial and fragmentary. More specifically, in the context of the present paper, it is worth examining the streams of thought that have combined to form prevailing perceptions and conceptualisations of the good life. For instance, recent years have seen the emergence of fields like positive psychology, which aim to study notions such as happiness and flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As valuable as such fields are,

critics have argued that the dominant concepts in these paradigms are culturally specific, reflecting a rather Western-centric perspective (Becker & Marecek, 2008), as addressed further in the concluding section below. As such, historiological analyses like the one here serve as a 'consciousness-raising' activity, highlighting the sources that have helped shape understanding in the West generally, and in fields such as positive psychology more specifically.

Ten works of art have been selected, one per century, as an idiosyncratic prism through which to examine emergent ideas relating to the good life. How were the works selected? In one sense, there was an element of arbitrariness to the process, in that many other works could have been chosen instead, and may have served equally well, albeit that some would have generated an alternative narrative to the one presented here. That said, considerable thought went into their selection, based on a reading of historical and philosophical literature, and an understanding of the history of ideas. With that in mind, the story begins in the 11th century.

11th Century: The Last Chapter of the Dark Ages

The narrative in this paper starts with the 11th century, at the close of what is often referred to pejoratively as the 'Dark Ages,' a period stretching roughly from 500 to 1200 CE. This negative coinage derives from the Italian scholar Petrarch (1304-1374)– discussed below in connection with humanism – to reflect a supposed near absence of independent or critical thought (which Petrarch thus juxtaposed with the supposed 'light' of humanism). The term is regarded by many contemporary scholars as rather misleading, as there were examples of openness and creativity throughout Europe during that period (Eco, 2002). However, notwithstanding these caveats, this period is characterised by the relative lack of what might be called free-thinking – the challenging of accepted ideas – and a paucity of curiosity and creativity. With exceptions such as Bede (673-735) and Alcuin (735-804), scholarship generally consisted of studying the Bible and other Christian texts, while literature mostly comprised writing down old oral tales like Beowulf (sometime in 700-1000). Visual art was predominantly either for church decoration or jewellery, with little evidence of artistic 'creativity' as the term would be used today, nor any particular curiosity about the physical world per se (Effros, 2005).

On the whole – insofar as generalisations are meaningful and useful – Western peoples' psychological and spiritual outlook was dominated by the '*weltanschauung*'- of the Christian church-. (Although, there were of course other subsidiary currents of thought, such as what Van Engen (1986) refers to as native strains of 'folklore' and superstition). For this reason, the artwork selected for this century is an image of Christ, from a medallion hailing from Istanbul - at the borders of the Western world- circa 1000 CE. (The letters on it are from the first and last letters of IHCOYC XPICTOC, i.e., 'Jesus Christ' written in Greek.) That this picture is not especially renowned or well-known is itself a reflection of the paucity of artworks from this era. This does not merely mean that surviving artworks are rare, but that there was relatively little 'art' per se at all, and what little there was pertained almost exclusively to Christianity (Wells, 2009).

Figure 1. Medallion from Istanbul showing Christ, c.1000 CE

The central point, from the perspective of this paper, is that this cultural context strongly shaped perspectives at the time regarding what happiness is and how it could be obtained (McMahon, 2006). In particular, the overarching message of the Catholic church during this era was that attaining happiness on earth was problematic, if not impossible, and that life itself was merely a preparation or test for the hereafter (where happiness could potentially be found; Tarnas, 1991). Of course, Christianity is a complex tapestry, woven together from many different perspectives and schools of thought that emerged over the centuries. In that respect, the 'dark ages' cast their own particular shadow over Christianity, and its stance on the possibility of attaining happiness. In that respect, a particularly desperate version of this doctrine of the impossibility of worldly happiness was advocated by no less a figure than Pope Innocent III (1161-1216). In The Misery of the Human Condition, it was his bleak assessment that '[M] an is born to toil. All his days are full of toil and hardship. Rich or poor, master or slave, married or single, good and bad alike—all suffer worldly torments and are tormented by worldly vexations' (cited in Perry, 2008, p.288).

However, it should not be inferred that any period discussed in this paper was uniform or homogenous in its outlook. Indeed, all epochs can arguably be seen as embodying the kind of dialectical process identified by Hegel (1812), namely thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Innocent's bleak outlook could be regarded as the antithesis to new modes of thinking that were beginning to arise around this time (or possibly vice versa). More specifically, in contrast to this dominant Christian pessimism, there was an emergent optimism that humans could apply their reason to understand and improve the world (Tarnas, 1991). This nascent 'proto-humanism' then truly began to take root in the 12th century.

12th Century: The Birth of the Free Mind

In contrast to the dominant eschatological fatalism of the church – that 'happiness' of a sort was only possible in the afterlife, if at all – a spirit of rational enquiry into improving life on earth began to flower in the 12th century (Tarnas, 1991). This was evident in the founding of the first universities: Bologna (1088), Paris (1150), and Oxford (1167). Scholarship had previously been controlled or dominated by the church, taking place almost entirely under its auspices (Nelson, 2008). But with the new universities, while many still had close ties to the church, there was also a distinct movement of separation. For instance, the University of Bologna was initially a law school, concerned with the revival of *ius gentium*, the Roman law protecting the rights of incipient nations (e.g., against the church), which was increasingly in demand across Europe (Banchich, Marenbon, & Reid Jr, 2015). As such, the 12th century heard the first rumblings of the 'Renaissance' – a word coined by the 19th Century historian Jules Michelet (1855) to describe the revival of learning from the 13th century onwards. This revival was based in large part on the re-discovery of texts from the 'classical' world (i.e., roughly from 500 BCE to 500 CE). Indeed, the revival of *ius gentium* is one such example. Another is the artwork selected for this epoch: a print from a 12th century publication of De Institutione Musica by Boethius, a Roman senator and philosopher who lived from 480-524.
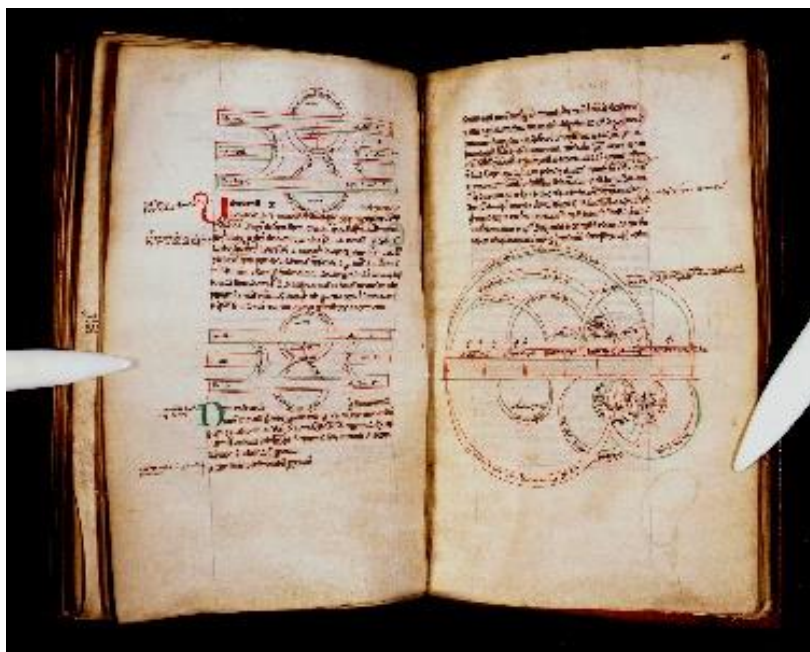
Figure 2. 12th-century version of De Institutione Musica by Boethius

The book is a study of musical theory and practice, which is apt, given that music was one of the seven main liberal arts taught in medieval universities, along with rhetoric, logic, grammar, astronomy/astrology, arithmetic and geometry (King, 2014). This spirit of enquiry was in direct contrast – as thesis is to antithesis – to the fatalistic doctrines of earthly damnation offered earlier by church leaders like Innocent III. That said, Europe was still suffused with Christianity, which dominated public and private life. However, in a dialectical process, syntheses were beginning to

emerge that, while remaining within the bounds of Christianity, nevertheless embraced this 'proto-renaissance' spirit. Such synthesis was embodied by celebrated theologian Peter Abelard (1079-1142), who argued against the dogma of original sin, and against the idea that only through baptism might one be saved. Rather, his view was that, through free will and rational enquiry, one could live a fulfilling life, and indeed one which was acceptable to God. This tolerant openness is exemplified in his remark that, 'It is by doubting that we come to investigate, and by investigating that we recognize the truth' (cited in Reid, 1995, p.191). This kind of synthesis – of Christianity and rationality – then began to really flower in the 13th century.

13th Century: The Application of Reason

Moving into the 13th Century, new streams of thought began to flow. As alluded to above, scholars in Europe were finding their horizons expanded through the increasing availability of Greek and Roman classical works, as well as through access to writings from Islamic scholars. Access to these works bore many fruits, but perhaps above all, this epoch can be characterised by an embrace of rationality, in contrast to an acceptance of dogma. This nascent rationality then manifested in various ways. This includes, for instance, an emerging interest in mathematics and empiricism, as exemplified by Witelo (c. 1230-1300), a Polish friar, theologian, and natural philosopher (Montgomery & Kumar, 2015). He is perhaps best known for his book Perspectiva – itself based on the work of the Persian polymath Ibn al-Haytham (965-1040) – featuring ground-breaking analyses pertaining to optics, which influenced later scientists such as Johannes Kepler. As such, the artwork for this epoch is a page from a 13th century edition of Perspectiva, featuring Witelo himself.


Figure 3. Manuscript engraving from a 13th Century edition of Perspectiva, by Witelo

Of course, despite this emerging empiricism and rationality, scholars were generally still operating within a Christian framework. Consequently, this generated syntheses in which Christian theology was increasingly viewed through a rationalist prism, and in which efforts were made to integrate it with the rediscovered classical writings. This synthesis is embodied in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the Italian Dominican friar, philosopher and theologian, particularly his magnum opus Summa Theologia (1273). Aquinas sought to integrate established church teaching both with the nascent humanist outlook, and with the classical ideas – particularly the works of Aristotle (384-322 BCE) – that were driving this very humanism. For instance, among Aristotle's many influential ideas was that of a Prime Mover, where he argued that any causal chain of events must lead back to something which moves other things but is itself unmoved. In a remarkable act of synthesis, Aquinas equated this Prime Mover with the Christian creator God (Davies, 1992). However, as powerful as Aquinas' integrative efforts were, dynamics had been set in motion in which scholars would no longer feel compelled to retain a connection to Christian theology, but could allow reason and empiricism to flourish on their own terms, as shall be seen next.

14th Century: The Emergence of Humanism

It was in the 14th century that the seeds of 'humanism' – which had been planted in the preceding centuries – truly started to bear fruit. Humanism can be characterised as the appreciation and even glorification of the reason and dignity of humankind, and of the possibility of finding happiness on earth (not merely in the afterlife; Barber, 2008). As noted above, humanism had begun to take shape in earlier centuries, through the work of scholars like Abelard. However, these thinkers had invariably remained rooted within the matrix of Christian belief. What was then particularly new and striking about the 14th century was the way humanistic perspectives began to slowly become extricated from this matrix, and tentatively allowed by some bold scholars to stand on their own terms (Tarnas, 1991).

This new independent (i.e., from Christianity) spirit is epitomised by Petrarch, the Italian poet, who is often regarded as the 'first' humanist (Quillen, 1998). For instance, an epochal and celebrated event in 1336, when Petrarch climbed Mont Ventoux in the Italian Alps simply for the view, to appreciate the natural world for its own sake. In previous centuries, the dominant stance of the church was that humankind's proper role was one of humble piety in the face of God, with pleasure for its own sake regarded as improper self-indulgence. However, humanism ushered in radically secular visions of the good life, including permitting people to engage in their own pursuit of truth (i.e., independent of sanctioned church teachings), and engaging in acts such as appreciation of nature (O'Connell, 1983). Given Petrarch's pivotal role in this process, the selected picture for this century is an artwork from his 1336 book Virgil, painted by Simone Martini.
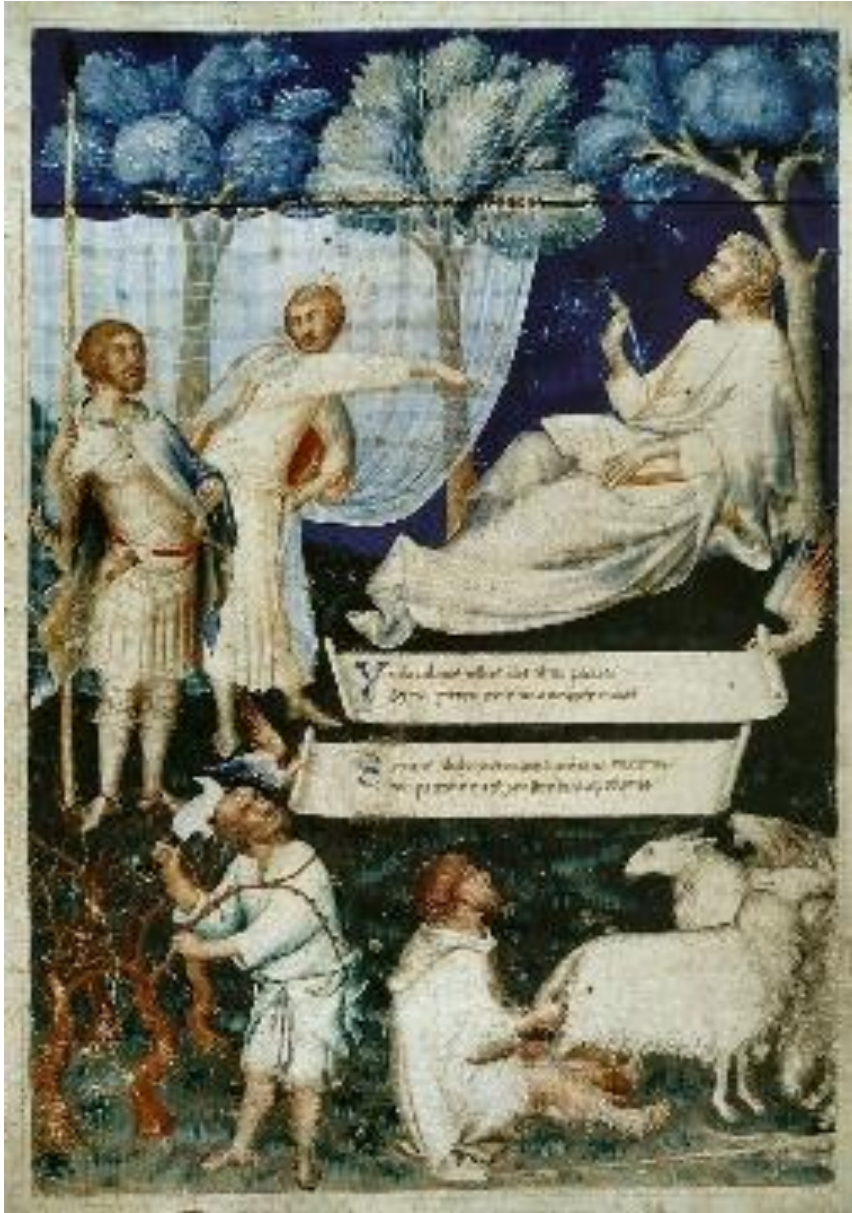
Figure 4. Painting (1336) by Simone Martini, printed in Virgil by Petrarch

Just as significant as the author of the work is its topic, namely recently rediscovered poems by the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BCE), with the picture above showing Petrarch drawing back a curtain to reveal him to the world. It was Petrarch who instantiated the idea that the long centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire – the 'Middle Ages' (approx. 500-1200 AD), a phrase also coined by him – constituted a 'Dark Age.' Although he recognized that thinkers of genius had existed, he argued that they had been constrained and 'surrounded by darkness and dense gloom' (cited in Spearing, 1985, p.8). Specifically, this 'gloom' was the rigid fatalistic dogma that Petrarch felt had been imposed by the hegemony of the church, as epitomised by Innocent III. As such, Petrarch

sought to invert the view of history that had been promulgated by many Christian thinkers (prior to scholastics such as Aquinas). Christians had tended to regard the classical world as unenlightened, since it had been unable to avail itself of the succour offered by Christ (Kallendorf, 1996). However, Petrarch reversed this, describing the classical era as the age of 'light' because of its cultural achievements. He thus celebrated the growing awareness of classical works, which having begun to filter into Europe over preceding centuries, were becoming increasingly available. This availability then reached a 'critical mass' in the following century, inaugurating what is now referred to as the 'Renaissance.'

15th Century: The Blooming of the Renaissance

As noted above, the term 'Renaissance' was coined by Michelet (1855) to describe the 're-birth' of the humanistic vision of the classical world (with scholars differentiating between an Italian Renaissance, which emerged in the 14th century, and a Northern Renaissance, in which the Italian movement began to spread North in the 15th century; Silver, 1986). This re-discovery of the classical world – its literature, philosophy, history, architecture, science, and so on – prompted 'new' (i.e., newly encountered) streams of thought pertaining to the good life. For instance, an importance 'Renaissance moment' was the re-discovery (during Petrarch's time) of the writings of the Roman philosopher Lucretius (96-55 BCE), such as his influential work On the Nature of the Universe. In this, Lucretius's discussed the ideas of Epicurus (341-270 BCE), who taught that human beings are entirely physical products of the universe, and will cease to exist after death. Epicurus thus argued that the goal of life should be 'pleasure' (in the sense of freedom from pain, i.e., 'ataraxia,' rather than self-indulgence) (Rosenbaum, 1990). Thus, the 15th century saw secular belief becoming increasingly prominent, albeit still very radical, given that Christianity remained hegemonic (Kirkpatrick, 2014). This nascent secularism began to manifest in many quarters, including in creative endeavours, as reflected in the painting below by Jan van Eyck (1390-1441).

Van Eyck exemplifies the creative spirit of the Renaissance. Freed from the constraints and over-watchful eye of the church, and no longer totally dependent on church commissions (given the emergence of a merchant class who could commission their work), artists like van Eyck experimented with new methods and subjects (Carroll, 1993). A good example is his portrait below of the merchant Arnolfini. This was innovative for numerous reasons. Firstly, van Eyck was one of the first artists to harness the newly available methods of oil paints and canvas. It is also remarkable for displaying the newly discovered sense of perspective in Western art, which is considered to reflect the emergence of recently 'modes of cognition,' including a commitment to empiricism and mathematic precision (Ward & Carleton, 1983). However, perhaps most striking is that it is possibly the first 'ordinary' portrait painting in Europe. Before the 15th century, the church was generally the only patron of the arts, and naturally the subjects commissioned were religious. In lacking any overt religious content, this portrait thus was one of the first artistic reflections of the nascent secularism that was beginning to spring up across Europe (Carrier, 1987).

Figure 5. The Arnolfini Portrait, by Jan van Eyck (1434)

16th Century: Science, Occultism and the Grand Scheme

Moving into the 16th century, the burgeoning spirit of secular enquiry that had been awoken over previous centuries began to generate new modes of thought and practice. Perhaps above all, most prominent and influential were the first major stirrings of empiricism (Tarnas, 1991). It is striking, for instance, that the two figures most associated with the birth of Western science – Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) – were born just a few years apart, and began to both flourish as the century drew to a close. Their scientific endeavours represented a significant new stream in the West's approach to the good life, inaugurating the notion that human wellbeing and prosperity could be influenced by empirical study of the natural world. However, given the on-going hegemony of the church, this emergent scientific enquiry had to negotiate an uneasy relationship with Christian teachings – needing to be careful not to challenge these too directly – as exemplified by Galileo's trials. Nevertheless, even while this new empiricism was diverging from church teachings, it was still not truly secular; rather, these early scientific endeavours remained within a spiritual matrix that has been labelled the 'Grand Scheme' (Lovejoy, 1964).

This Scheme involved the belief that all aspects of the cosmos cohere in some way, as reflected in the saying 'As above, so below' (Crowley, 2009, p.46). Micro-level patterns observed in the natural world were thought to reflect macro-level processes at work in the universe, and vice versa. Thus, for instance, personality and health were regarded as being connected to the movements of the planets, and as such, astrology was deemed one of the most important 'sciences' of the time. Indeed, many leading scientific figures were immersed in the 'occult' (from the Latin *occultus,* meaning hidden), involving the study of the inner, deeper, and/or spiritual aspects of phenomena. For example, one of the most prominent figures of the era was John Dee (1527-1609), the English mathematician, astronomer, astrologer, philosopher, and adviser to Elizabeth I, who devoted much of his life to the study of alchemy, divination, 'Hermetic' philosophy, and numerology (Clucas, 2006). He was one of many 16th century learned people who attempted to blend all these fields into one Grand Scheme, as reflected in the artwork below, a diagram from Gafurius's 1496 Practica Musice. This depicts Apollo, the Muses, planetary spheres and musical ratios, thus linking Greek mythology, Pythagorean mysticism, music, and astronomy.
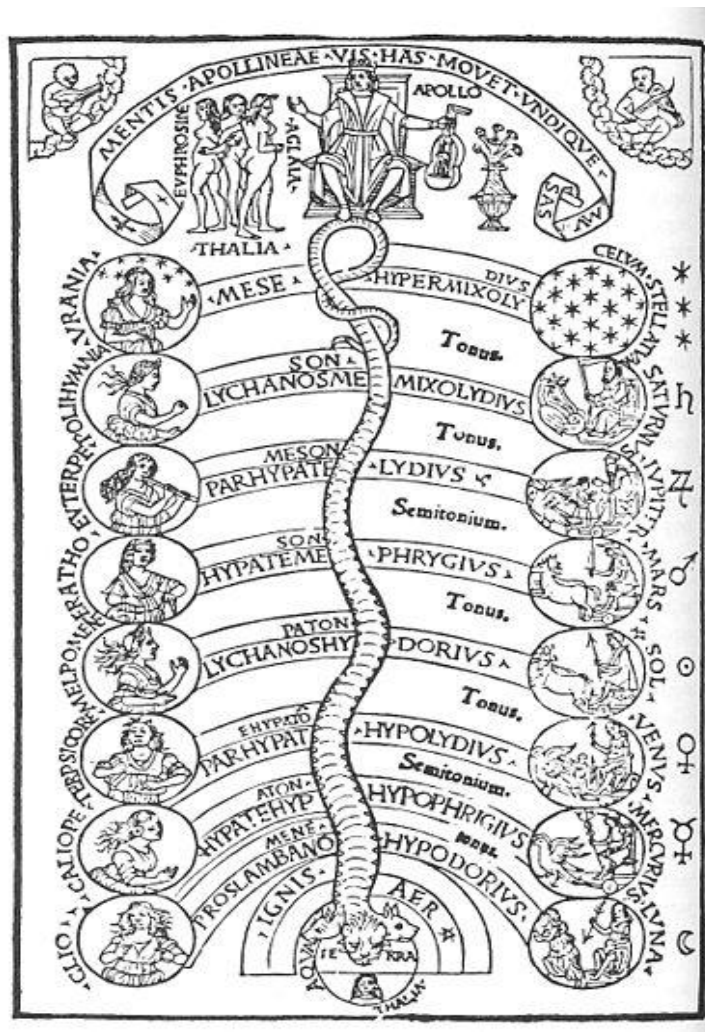
Figure 6. Diagram from Gafurius's Practica Musice (1496)

However, the 16th century was the high point of occultism – although it still persisted in influential quarters, not least with Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) – and of efforts to develop a Grand Scheme, after which these concerns retreated towards the margins of scholarship. This decline is perhaps attributable to the other streams of thought emerging during this period, illustrating the fact that every epoch is characterised by multiple trends, many of which exist in tension with one another (in the mode of thesis-antithesis-synthesis). For instance, the reformation triggered by Martin Luther (1483-1546) re-invigorated the church, and in turn prompted the counter-reformation, which aggressively forbade any deviation from traditional Catholic teaching (Reinhard, 1989). And, neither 'wing' tolerated any indulgence of the Occult, thus serving to neuter its prominence. Rather, these schismatic movements initiated their own streams of thought and practice, which had bearings on conceptualisations of the good life. For instance, Weber (1905) drew attention to the way that Protestantism engendered a 'sanctification of ordinary life,' in which wellbeing was seen to be found through down-to-earth activities such as hard work and devotion to the family.

17th Century: Narratives of Progress

As Europe entered the 17th century, a bold concept began to seize the collective imagination: progress. Indeed, the widespread emergence of this narrative – indeed, this temporal mindset – marked the transition into what is referred to as 'modernity' (Therborn, 2003). Previously, the dominant Christian time orientation had been a powerful combination of: (a) retrospective yearning for a lost 'golden age' (e.g., the Garden of Eden); and (b) eschatological belief in a future redemption (e.g., paradise). Of course, some Christian thinkers – like Aquinas – had argued that it was possible for people and society to make 'progress' (e.g., becoming better at cultivating Christian virtues). However, they had tended to eschew the notion that life on earth could be perfected as such. In contrast, during this epoch, driven by advancements in science, technology, and economics, a powerful new belief emerged in the linear and indeed inexorable improvement of the human condition (Maier, 2000).

This spirit of progress was epitomised by Sir Francis Bacon's 1626 utopian novel New Atlantis. This portrayed a vision of a mythical island, whose inhabitants exuded 'generosity and enlightenment, dignity and splendour, piety and public spirit,' and which featured 'Solomon's House,' envisioned much like a modern research university (cited in Van Santen, Khoe, & Vermeer, 2010, p.268). People also latched on to 'working models' of progress that were unfolding at that time, one of the most prominent being the Dutch republic (Prak, 2005). Despite the turmoil in the wake of the reformation, the place was a magnet for scholars, artists and scientists. Indeed, great efforts were made there to forge a prosperous and harmonious society, facilitated in part by the wealth generated by vastly increased trade passing through Dutch ports (Unger, 1980). This harmony is often symbolised in artworks by music, such as people playing music in well-ordered households. The selected work here is thus The Music Lesson (1665), by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675).

Figure 7. The Music Lesson (1665), by Johannes Vermeer

Moreover, this harmony and prosperity itself generated further streams of thought that would bear fruit over subsequent centuries. As Bertrand Russell (1945, p.559) noted in A History of Western Philosophy, 'It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of Holland in the seventeenth century, as the one country where there was freedom of speculation.' For instance, it was in Holland that pivotal Enlightenment figures such as John Locke (1632-1704) and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) took refuge from the persecution and suppression they faced in less open societies, and similarly where revolutionary theorists like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) were able to publish their epochal tracts, such as Hobbes's ground-breaking political philosophy treatise Leviathan. The ideas set in motion by such scholars would then help shape the following century, and beyond.

18th Century: The Perfecting of Society

The notion of progress that was inaugurated in the 17th century truly began to take hold in the 18th Century. This is epitomised by the Encyclopaedists- scholars and activists who were members of the French Société des Gens de Lettres. Under the guidance of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, between 1751 and 1765 these scholars undertook the ambitious task of creating The Encyclopaedia. This was a massive project, comprising 28 volumes, involving the efforts of over 150 people, who collectively became known as the *philosophes*. They advocated for the advancement of science, secularism, tolerance, rationality, and open-mindedness, with the epoch consequently becoming referred to as the 'Enlightenment.' Thus, the chosen artwork for this era is the front page of the Encyclopaedia, published in 1756.

Figure 8. Painting from the front-page of The Encyclopaedia (1756)

This richly symbolic picture depicts the triumph of learning over ignorance. Beneath an Ionic Temple – the 'Sanctuary of Truth' – truth can be seen, veiled, yet radiating light that disperses clouds of ignorance. To the right, Reason is raising Truth's veil, while Philosophy is tearing it away. Surrounding these figures are other symbolic representations, including various physical sciences (such as Geometry, Astronomy, and Physics), the creative arts (different genres of Poetry, together with Music, Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture), as well as Imagination, positioned to the left of Truth, ready to adorn and crown her. The overarching message here was the good life can be found on earth, above all through the cultivation of learning and the pursuit of truth (McMahon, 2004).

Moreover, the Enlightenment was not just a question of individuals being encouraged to pursue the good life independently. There were concomitant efforts to facilitate this pursuit in a collective, systemic way. There emerged the powerful notion that society itself could be re-structured to better enable people to flourish, as reflected in the revolutions in America (1776) and France (1789). Of course, history had been replete with wars and political upheavals which had overturned societies, but these tended to be a result of people attempting to seize riches or power for self-gain. In contrast,

the American and French revolutions purported to be driven by loftier ideals. The American Declaration of Independence famously enshrined the 'unalienable rights' to 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,' while the French uprising was founded on a belief in 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.' Of course, these revolutions had their fair share of violence which arguably undermined their high-minded ideals to some extent (Arendt, 1963). Nevertheless, even if the methods and outcomes of these movements were flawed, it was still a striking evocation of the times that they had striven to instantiate these Enlightenment ideals in the first place.

19th Century: The Search for the Self

However, as captivating as the grand vision of the Enlightenment was, perhaps inevitably, it began to provoke counter-reactions. These may have been prompted by various factors, such as distaste and even horror at the way the French revolution had unfolded (Arendt, 1963), or concerns with how the quest for progress had generated the dehumanising processes of the industrial revolution (Engels, 1845), leading to a certain disenchantment with grand efforts to 'perfect' society. It may also have reflected the more general pattern of thesis-antithesis-synthesis which had been operative throughout earlier epochs, being one strand of a more general 'counter-Enlightenment' movement (McMahon, 2002). Either way, as the 19th century took shape, the Enlightenment optimism began to be superseded by a 'darker' introspective movement known as romanticism (Berlin, 2013). This was led by luminaries such as Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), whose influential Confessions was embraced by a populace ready for new modes of self-understanding (Taylor, 1989).

To the Enlightenment's thesis of order, harmony, and rationality, romanticism valorised introspection, subjectivity, and emotionality, exalting emotion over reason, senses over the intellect, the individual over society, and nature over civilisation. This created significant new dynamics in terms of the pursuit of flourishing. In contrast to enthusiastic efforts to perfect society, romanticism fostered a preoccupation with the 'self'– exploring one's 'inner nature,' and becoming 'authentic' (Taylor, 1989). Within this overarching context, other streams of thought then emerged. For instance, the 19th century saw the first stirrings of existentialism, pioneered by thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who plunged into vertiginous and often troubling explorations of the 'human condition.' Similarly, in art, the romantic spirit was captured by the early 'expressionists,' who sought to explore their inner feelings, representing these in unconventional ways. These two strands of existentialism and impressionism are perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in Edouard Munch's iconic 1893 painting The Scream.

Figure 9. The Scream, by Edvard Munch (1893)

In Munch's own testimony, the inspiration for this came as he was walking at sunset, when 'suddenly the sky turned blood red,' whereupon he 'stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature' (cited in Bleakley, 2015, p.226). This feeling had previously been captured by Kierkegaard in The Concept of Dread (1834) and Fear and Trembling (1843), and indeed by subsequent existentialist thinkers, many of whom focused on the notion of existential 'angst.' Kierkegaard argued that unlimited possibility, 'the dizziness of freedom,' can be troubling, as people must continually make choices that irrevocably determine their fate, and moreover assume responsibility for the consequences. Such insights would then be explored in depth in the 20th Century by thinkers like Camus (1942) and Sartre (1952). And it is with this century that our narrative finishes.

20th Century: The Rise of Individualism

Finally, then, the strands above culminate in the 'present day' of the 20th century. (The 21st is still too young to permit any kind of overarching retrospective.) Again, as with all previous centuries, there is no single defining perspective in this epoch, no unitary narrative capable of containing all its tensions and complexities. Nevertheless, it is possible to point to significant trends, and in this respect, one of the most dominant is individualism. This partly refers to the belief that the self is an autonomous unit, 'a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe' (Geertz, 1983, p.59). Perhaps more importantly, it also refers to the phenomenon whereby people are primarily concerned with their individual being (rather than with any group that they may belong

to). This notion of individualism had been germinating for centuries in the West, and is often credited as first emerging with the work of René Descartes (1596-1650). The statement *cogito ergo sum* in his Meditations (1641) is seen as pivotal in establishing the idea of 'monological consciousness' – the 'reification of the disengaged first-person-singular self,' as Taylor (1995, p.59) puts it – that came to dominate Western thinking over subsequent centuries, to the extent that this individualised sense of selfhood is frequently referred to as the 'Cartesian I.'

However, it was arguably only in the 20th century, spurred on by the 19th century tailwinds of romanticism and existentialism, that individualism became hegemonic in the West, the uncontested 'natural' way of viewing people (Jelen, 1999). There are various ways of substantiating this claim, but in the context of this paper, a potent source of validation can be found in art. Many dominant 20th century trends in art, particularly later postmodernist ones, take the individual self – indeed, the individual artist – as their reference point (Featherstone, 2007). These involved the artist attempting to explore and depict his or her own individual existence (as opposed to trying to 'objectively' study a particular topic, such as a historical figure or event, as previous generations of artists had tended to do). A famous example of this is Tracey Emin's 1998 installation My Bed, shown below.

Figure 10. My Bed, by Tracy Emin (1998)

The piece was reportedly a re-creation of a low point in her life when she had lain in bed for days. This type of confessional piece does have its predecessors of sorts in earlier centuries, such as the unsparing self-portraits of Rembrandt (1606-1669) (Rothenberg, 2008). However, in its unabashed solipsism and self-assertiveness, it is surely a work that would have only been possible in the 20th century. It rejected the need for qualities such as aesthetic beauty, or even artistic 'skill' (apart from the ability to conceive of and install the work), and simply advocated the value of 'self-expression,' portraying one's existence in all its raw unmediated beauty and ugliness. Moreover, it also tapped into other themes that characterise the 20th century, like the commodification of the self as encouraged by late capitalism (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). The piece thus not only reflects the dominance of the individualistic mode of identity, but is arguably emblematic of the age more generally.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the emergence and development of ideas in the West over the past 1,000 years, focusing specifically on ideas relating to the good life. The premise was that such analyses, while interesting in their own right, are particularly valuable in helping us to understand the West's present outlook, to see how this has been shaped by these historical currents. For instance, there has been much interest over the past two decades in the new field of positive psychology, which studies topics such as happiness and wellbeing. However, the field has attracted various critiques, such as that its conceptualisations of wellbeing are rather culturally-specific – reflecting the Western context in which the field emerged – and yet it presents these as if universally applicable (Lomas, 2015a). Although its concepts have largely been derived from research with 'WEIRD' participants – Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) – the field has tended to adopt a universalist perspective, presuming that these findings can be generalised to other cultures. However, the type of analysis above allows us to see how its dominant concepts are rooted in particular ways of thinking that have been influential in the West over past centuries.

By way of example, this concluding section will briefly touch upon three different facets of positive psychology, showing that these all have their roots in the streams of thought outlined above. Firstly, there is the foundational notion that happiness is an outcome that can (and should) be sought and found, which underpins the entire field. It could be argued that this goal constitutes a secular re-framing of the salvation narratives promulgated by Christianity in earlier centuries (Miller, 1975). While hope of an afterlife may have eroded, the belief in the attainment of a desired goal state can be seen as having been transferred to the secular 'holy grail' of health and happiness (which consequently have inherited features of religiosity, including ritual, taboo, and transgression) (Williams, 1998). At the risk of indulging in 'orientalism' (Said, 1995), this type of Western teleology stands in contrast to Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism, which advocate acceptance (Hayes, 2002). Indeed, Buddhism argues that it is the desire for life to be other than it is which causes the very dissatisfaction from which one hopes to escape. Of course, philosophies of acceptance have also been promulgated in the West, such as by Stoicism (Wong, 2006). Nevertheless, on the whole, this sense of pursuing happiness is a concern particularly associated with the West.

The second way in which positive psychology has its roots in the streams above is in its operationalisation of happiness itself. It has become conventional – albeit not uncontested (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008) – to differentiate between two overarching 'types' of happiness: hedonic happiness, also known as 'subjective wellbeing' (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999); and eudaimonic happiness, also known as 'psychological wellbeing' (Ryff, 1989). The former essentially refers to pleasure and satisfaction, while the latter pertains to fulfilment and purpose. This distinction can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle (350 BCE, p.110), whose Nichomachean Ethics took a dim view of the former ('a life suitable to beasts'), while valorizing the latter (the 'activity of the soul in accordance with virtue'). The distinction accordingly re-surfaced during the Renaissance, with the two types subsequently being embraced by various thinkers. For instance, John Locke (1689, p.258) emphasised a more hedonic perspective in his motivational theory of human psychology, describing happiness simply as 'the utmost pleasure we are capable of.' In contrast,

romantic and existentialist thinkers tended towards a more eudaimonic stance, emphasising the importance of factors like authenticity, self-development, and meaning in life

Finally, positive psychology has been accused of developing a rather 'individualistic' notion of wellbeing, reflecting the more general cultural trend of individualism (Becker & Marecek, 2008). For a start, happiness is constructed as a private, inner, mental state – as opposed to, for example, operationalising it as a property of a harmonious social collective, as some other cultures are believed to (Izquierdo, 2005). Then, the field has tended to downplay socio-cultural factors that impinge upon wellbeing. For instance, an influential model developed by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) suggests that approximately only 10% of the variance in happiness is shaped by social circumstances. However, although the figures in the model express population variance, it is common to find the 'ecological fallacy' being propagated, whereby these figures are regarded as being true for every person. Thus, the fact that some people's wellbeing – particularly those who are disadvantaged – may be hugely affected by social context is often neglected in favour of more 'psychological' explanations and remedies (Lomas, 2015b). This lacuna has been strongly critiqued Becker and Marecek (2008, p.1771) who write that 'To suggest that self-help exercises can suffice in the absence of social transformation is not only short sighted but morally repugnant.'

However, in recent years, positive psychology has begun to be more reflexive about its cultural bias, and indeed more open to other cultural models of wellbeing. For instance, regarding the first point above, there is an increasing dialogue within the field around the pitfalls of 'pursuing' happiness (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011), and greater engagement with notions of acceptance derived from Eastern philosophies (Ivtzan & Lomas, 2015). Likewise, there has been interest in other 'types' of happiness, such as Wong's (2011) concept of 'charonic' happiness, which draws on non-Western notions of spirituality. Finally, the field is becoming more attuned to the socio-cultural dimensions of wellbeing, as reflected in the emergence of 'positive social psychology' (Lomas, 2015b). As such, in undertaking an 'archaeology' (Foucault, 1972) of conceptualisations of happiness, this paper can hopefully help fields like positive psychology – and people in the West more generally – to appreciate their biases, and perhaps even to transcend them.

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