

Brendan Lavender (dbl26)
Dean's Scholar application 02/28/07

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*I hereby waive access to my faculty
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Abstract

One of the most pervasive and widely criticized aspects of modern capitalist society is the state of constant desire which it engenders. Running parallel to the rise of this desire is, ironically, a concern over contentment—how to be happy in a perpetually dissatisfied world. Where happiness was once something incidental or assigned by fate, the contemporary conception thereof sees happiness as a normative state, and considers the lack of it reason for concern. The irony is that the apparent cure for the personal destabilization which makes happiness so difficult to achieve—modern psychology—is itself sprung from the same tradition that works to inculcate unceasing desire. With this in mind, I propose to examine the tension between the decadent movement in art and literature and contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers, specifically with respect to their conceptions of happiness and sensuousness. The pre-Freudians, and later Freud himself, represent a stabilizing and psychologizing force while the decadents act as the psychologized destabilizing counterbalance. Even while they are in competition, however, they hint at ironies and parallels which anticipate the coming development of consumer society. I would like to consider in-depth not only the respective conceptions of happiness and stability constructed by both camps, but also how they are informed by past thinkers—Darwin and Nietzsche, for example—and how they ultimately expanded and disseminated the values of both decadence and the psychoanalytic thinking of the period. Lastly, I would like to see how the tensions between decadence and the codified mental well being implied by psychoanalysis anticipated and were confused by their annexation into consumer society by figures such as Edward Bernays.

A Brief Biography

My academic life began in earnest when I dropped out of Hawaii Preparatory Academy after my sophomore year. This was neither as bold nor rebellious as it sounds; I had been homeschooled up through freshman year and only enrolled because my parents, both of whom were newly employed by the academy, insisted it would ease the transition from the Rocky Mountains to the islands. It probably did, and I'm glad for the experience—freshman year at Cornell would have been a shock without it. At the time, however, the year of dress codes and Saturday classes only reminded me just how valuable self-directed learning was. I earned high enough grades to prove that I could handle classroom instruction, and then returned to poaching textbooks from the campus store and browsing the shelves at the library for an education.

My family moved around a fair amount; teaching high-school can be surprisingly unstable when a new administration comes in. I have always been extremely fortunate with those moves, and Hawaii was no exception. Thanks to the observatories on Mauna Kea there was ample opportunity for hands on experience in engineering. I earned my scuba certification and then joined up with my ex-school's sea turtle conservation program. I had rainforest gorges almost literally in my backyard, and white beaches down the road.

For the most part, I spent more time inside with a book than in either of those locations, although the gorges offered some good rock climbing. For all the disorganization to which self-directed learning is susceptible, I strove to maintain a healthy diversity of subject matter without spreading myself too thin. I did end up with a fairly patchwork education, but also managed to construct a few areas of study I would not otherwise have been able to; my existentialism kick was fairly normal, but I was one of only two people I knew with any expertise in CGI, and was for that reason conscripted by friends to do post-production for a very adolescent, but exceedingly well produced, internet show. Granted, there were some downsides to the go-with-your-interests style of learning; I audited an AP Calculus class without taking the prereqs, and had to play catch up for the entire semester. Or, more pertinent to my major therefore more embarrassing, I am apparently the only English major at Cornell who has not read *Macbeth*. It's on my list, sandwiched between Pale Fire and Remembrance of Things Past. Some things I simply overlooked.

Cornell was obviously quite a change, although to be honest, I prefer snow to sand. The first semester freshman year was challenging, to say the least. I took too many credits, and hadn't yet learned that sometimes it was better to skip class and catch up on sleep. Needless to say, I did not produce my best work. I did, however, begin to notice that I learned at least as much from my friends as I did from any of my classes. Thanks to meeting the right people, I have, to name a very few, grown fascinated by the interaction of politics and culture, developed an appreciation for pop art, even acquired a genuine interest in economics. My appreciation for such friends has only grown as I meet more of them in class or Olin café or an anonymous, dim apartment; hopefully by the end of summer I'll be able to interest them all in conceptions of happiness.

Proposal

Happiness today is something of a first-world obsession. It exists not as the outgrowth of virtue or piety, or even simple luck, but as an end to be sought in and of itself, often in spite of or perpendicular to virtue or piety. The always robust demand for self-help books and other guides towards personal contentment has recently been echoed in academia with a surge of interest in happiness. Witness, for example, Harvard's frequently referenced course Positive Psychology, or the recent studies over relative wealth and how it affects mental well-being. Books such as Richard Layard's Happiness: Lessons From a New Science, Jonathan Haidt's The Happiness Hypothesis, or Gregg Easterbrook's The Progress Paradox all purport to speak to contemporary anxiety from the vantage of "happiness studies," and somewhere between academia and popular culture we find discussions of modern happiness such as the BBC documentary The Century of the Self. Happiness and the lack thereof has long been a subject of popular interest, but the current discussion is somehow unique. The modern conception of happiness places contentment just as often in the hands of psychology as theology; the unhappy today are less likely to turn of the local parish than to scientifically established therapy.

I first became interested in conceptions of happiness when I learned that valuing happiness for its own sake was in many ways a distinctly modern conceit. Darrin McMahan's Happiness: A History has been both informative and invaluable in learning about how and why conceptions of happiness have changed since their classical inception. After assimilating a general overview I am eager to examine in greater depth the social function of contemporary conceptions of happiness, and how they were created. Specifically, I would like to examine happiness as it was understood at the

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inception of modern psychoanalytic thought; ie, how it was grasped by Freud and his predecessors, and how he used it to pathologize certain conceptions of pleasure, such as those explored by the decadent art and literature of the time, and to legitimate what they saw as socially stable mentalities. Especially interesting how the conception of happiness as mental stability was first defined, then contested, then deployed as tools of normalization, and ultimately usurped.

While the conceptions of happiness I wish to examine are in some ways historically distinct, understanding their place on a continuum of thought is critical. For example, an Aristotelian happiness would be one of perfect balance in things physical, mental, sensual, and moral, while an Augustinian might argue that worldly happiness can never be more than unsatisfied longing for the divine, and true happiness remains unknown until the afterlife—for practical purposes, both can be obtained by a select few. In many cases, happiness is nearly synonymous with virtue; it often seems to be nothing more than a name given to the achievement of certain cultural values—a brave but humble man is a happy man, or happy is the woman who submits to her husband. Happiness, in other words, is to properly fill a role, not so much a pleasant state of mind as a word which serves to structure one's life.

An idea common to all early conceptions of happiness is that only a select few *could* be happy, and that the rest of humanity was simply assigned an unlucky fate. It is telling that the word 'happy' shares a root with 'happenstance' and 'haphazard;' it was only with the advent of the Enlightenment that happiness became democratized, something potentially available to all people, and thus took on connotations of pleasure and contentment. Prior to that, resignation played the role we sometimes give happiness

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today; in a world such as feudal Europe, when the vast majority of people were without the hope of changing their position, to be happy in the way it is imagined today might demand a meek acceptance of one's lot in life, as in Camus' reimagining of Sisyphus. Resignation was the normal state of mind. Happiness was being born into the right family.

To understand the shift from happiness as fate to happiness as biology or personal goal, Darwin and Nietzsche are invaluable. In The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals Darwin saw emotions across the mammalian spectrum as evidence for descent with modification, and acknowledged the distinction between pleasure/pain and happiness/sadness. Such an idea simultaneously solidifies the human interior as something biological and anticipates trouble over the sensual versus the emotional. In The Descent of Man, he argues that "no doubt the welfare and happiness of an individual usually coincide; and a contented, happy tribe will flourish better than one that is discontented and unhappy" (100). Nietzsche, in The Will to Power, acknowledged the shaky foundations of traditional understandings of happiness: in the traditional understanding, "what is unfailingly the means to happiness? Answer: virtue.—why virtue?" (238).

I am particularly interested in contrasting the psychoanalytic formulations of happiness (especially happiness as psychological health) of Freud and his predecessors with what can almost be seen as the Decadent rejection of a psychologized happiness. While the turn of the previous century is not contemporary, it is an important moment with respect to contemporary conceptions of happiness. It represents the foundation-laying of a way of thinking about the human interior which, while much more refined,

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survives today in ways its progenitors could not have anticipated. However ultimately unscientific they may have been, Freud and his contemporaries did two important things with regards to happiness and decadence. The first was to normalize happiness, or at least codify it as what should be the standard mental state, one born of biology and achievable through psychiatry. Eventually, happiness became the expected norm rather than the fortunate exception it had been in times past. The second was to pathologize anything in opposition to happiness and apply psychoanalysis as a tool to normalize that pathology—the decadents were criticized not as moral failures, but as mentally decrepit. Sexuality and sensuality were two of the most frequent targets both of criticism and pathology. Or more specifically, deviant sexuality. With the creation of psychiatry, mental deviance becomes the product not of sin but sickness.

This is something of an exaggeration; psychoanalysts of the time were working in an ill-defined field, and disagreement was common; nor was the scientific diction mobilized by critics of decadence such as Max Nordau always employed scientifically. The discourse did change, however, from sin to pathology, such as when Nordau psychoanalyzes the “ideal decadent” in Degeneration and finds him not an aesthete but a man subconsciously addicted to contrarianism. One need not argue with agents of social discord when they can be sent to the psychoanalyst's couch.

Approaching decadence with happiness in mind seems somewhat absurd; happiness, for all its virtue, has something of the pleasant and the banal, and it contrasts harshly with the irony and cynicism of decadence. My aim is to examine the decadent stance as an alternative to the conceptions of happiness put forward by contemporary psychoanalytical thought, or as a foil to help define happiness in psychiatry at the time.

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Pleasure and happiness have an ambivalent, but undeniably close relationship which I can use as a bridge between decadence and psychoanalysis, especially with regards to gender and sexuality. I also intend to examine contemporary defenses of decadence, from Oscar Wilde's defense at his trial, which potentially brings in classical conceptions of happiness, to Vernon Lee's criticism of his legal treatment, and maybe even Bernard Shaw's "The Sanity of Art."

The first aim of my research then would be to map out the relationship between the early psychologists and decadence, and explore competing conceptions of happiness. Decadent literature and art, and the criticism I also anticipate finding a number of complications and parallels between them, especially as psychoanalysts such as Havelock Ellis stand somewhat in opposition to Nordau or Lombroso. There is a wealth of primary material in this area, as well as a good deal of existing scholarship (The McMahon text mentioned above is joined by books such as From Dawn to Decadence by Jacques Barzun, Passionate Discontent by Patricia Mathews, and others). My thesis in the broadest sense is that when happiness is normalized, it becomes a social descriptor much the same as it was in classical Greek conception, where the word happiness seems to refer more to a correct state of mind (or virtue) and body endowed by bringing oneself in line with social values. It is different, however, in that the classical or religious conceptions always towards an unearthly or a priori understanding of virtue and the good life to define and bestow happiness. The post-enlightenment word, as Nietzsche noted, this became a meaningless measure.

McMahon says that "important themes in [Freud's] work have much in common with Nietzsche's" (440). Both saw that you could no longer understand life through

supernatural decrees, and neither had any illusions about a sense of overarching moral purpose to life. In some ways he was darker than Nietzsche. He aimed to “cure gratuitous or self-imposed suffering—neurosis—in order to restore ‘common’ or ‘ordinary’ unhappiness” 422. Nevertheless, even this rather cynical take on psychoanalysis served to cement in popular imagination happiness, or at least a lessening of unhappiness, as a universal goal to be achieved through psychiatry. That creation of pathologies discussed above is only half of the equation. Happiness becomes something stabilizing, and a rejection or corruption of happiness becomes a force of both psychic and social instability.

Again, psychologists at the time were hardly of one mind, and Freud himself was somewhat ambivalent towards the utility of his own methods. Even so, that Ellis' Sexual Inversion displays a much more liberal concept of sexuality than Degeneration does, or that Freud himself can be in some ways read as parallel to decadence, I think enriches rather than confounds my imagining of psychoanalysis and decadence as representing competing ideas of stability/instability. Although each camp is fragmented and sometimes quarrelsome, they can nonetheless be usefully delineated along lines of pathology and artistry.

I have discussed briefly how I intend to contextualize and anticipate the rise of psychoanalytic thought through the ideas of thinkers such as Darwin and Nietzsche. I am even more excited about studying the ideas that came after: how psychoanalysis was adapted in ways never intended by its progenitors and applied to society at large. I am thinking specifically of Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays, the two figures credited with creating the business of public relations. Bernays in particular is interesting. He used

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Freud's theories not to bring stability to individual psyches but to manipulate the worlds of commerce and politics. He did so from a somewhat privileged position of access to those ideas; Freud was his uncle.

One example of this is how he accomplished his first and arguably most famous coup: convincing women to smoke. The cigarette was a symbolic penis, he understood, but it was a male penis. In order to make women smoke, the penis had to be regendered. In other words, he intended to finally assuage women's longstanding envy by giving them a female penis filled with tobacco. The campaign, featuring beautiful, young models smoking 'freedom torches' in a 4th of July parade, probably did not succeed because he used psychoanalytic techniques. But it did succeed, and Bernays did continue to construct a theory of social control via psychology. Freud saw his theories as a chance of stability not only in society but in the self, and saw psychiatry (for part of his life) as a path towards that stability and away from the pathologies identified by himself and his predecessors. Bernays also had stability in mind, but emotional (or physical) health did not factor into it; he used psychoanalytic theories to invoke, appeal to, and manipulate exactly the kinds of things that had been pathologized by the progenitors of those theories.

In this area I have to admit to some speculation. I have read up on Bernays and his influence, but have not explored his writings. He wrote three books (famously used by the Nazis), the most important of which was Propaganda. I intended to contrast these texts with both those of his psychological predecessors and determine exactly how the discourse between the decadents (or perhaps more accurately of the psychologists about the values and pathologies embodied by the decadents) anticipated and was confused by

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Bernays. I also intend to privileged Bernays over Lee as a ready adopter, and in some ways usurper, of his uncle's theories.

I have in summation three main areas of investigation, and I know I run the risk of diluting my focus because of it. After three years at Cornell, I am also aware of exactly how important it is to be flexible during the formulation of a thesis. However, I feel that all three areas are important, and each adds something to the overall investigation.

Freudian and pre-Freudian psychoanalysis serves as the initial definition of happiness and hopefully will reveal something of its social function. The decadents act as a foil to the psychoanalysts, as well as a reference point for illuminating some of the parallels and ironies in the way Bernays reconfigured Freud's theories, as well as providing alternative modes of stability. Bernays himself serves both to highlight the way in which earlier conceptions of happiness were marshaled as agents of social stability, much in the way he applied Freud's theories to form an alternative means of stability, one in which, ironically, happiness is of necessity absent. What this ultimately means for conceptions of happiness is what I hope to map out.

I intend to stay in Ithaca for most of the summer, so as to have ready access to Cornell's resources. I stayed here and worked full time these past two summers, and by now I'm fairly well practiced at living cheaply in collegetown. Even if I find it necessary to get a part time job, I do not anticipate it impinging on my ability to do research. I do, however, mean to begin examining some of the texts listed well before summer, both to allow for more time in the event I need to get a supplementary job, and to satisfy personal curiosity.

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Bibliography

Please note that I have only listed one book from each author. Most authors, Freud and Havelock for example, have multiple relevant works. Of course, I also anticipate discovering many additional authors in the course of my research.

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Budget

Staying in Ithaca will hopefully keep costs down. I'm confident that I can find an apartment for \$400 a month, plus about \$40 a month for utilities. I can eat comfortably on \$60 a week, or \$240 a month. Obviously I would have minimal travel expenses, so I think I can cover miscellaneous and other costs with about \$250 for the whole summer. While one of the benefits of staying in Ithaca is that I would have access to the library, I would also like to buy at least the primary texts I would be studying so that I am free to mark them up, fall asleep on them, and so forth. I estimate about \$200 total for books.

My total budget is:

Rent x 3:	\$1200
Food x 3:	\$720
Miscellaneous:	\$250
Books:	\$200
Total:	\$2370

If necessary, I can also get a part time job to supplement the above.