

I HAPPY OBJECTS

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I might say, “You make me happy.” Or I might be moved by something, in such a way that when I think of happiness I think of that thing. Even if happiness is imagined as a feeling state, or a form of consciousness that evaluates a life situation achieved over time (Veenhoven 1984, 22–3), happiness also turns us toward objects. We turn toward objects at the very point of “making.” To be made happy by this or that is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject who may use the word to describe a situation.

In this essay, I want to consider happiness as a happening, as involving affect (to be happy is to be affected by something), intentionality (to be happy is to be happy about something), and evaluation or judgment (to be happy about something makes something good). In particular, I will explore how happiness functions as a promise that directs us toward certain objects, which then circulate as social goods. Such objects accumulate positive affective value as they are passed around. My essay will offer an approach to thinking through affect as “sticky.” Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects.

My essay contributes to what has been described by Patricia Clough (2007) as “the affective turn” by turning to the question of how we can theorize positive affect and the politics of good feeling. If it is true to say that much recent work in cultural studies has investigated bad feelings (shame, disgust, hate, fear, and so on), it might be useful to take good feeling as our starting point, without presuming that the distinction between good and bad will always hold. Of course, we cannot conflate happiness with good feeling. As Darrin McMahon (2006) has argued in his monumental history of happiness, the association of happiness with feeling is a modern one, in circulation from the eighteenth century onward. If happiness now evokes good feeling, then we can consider how feelings participate in making things good. To explore happiness using the language of affect is to consider the slide between affective and moral economies. In particular, the essay will explore how the family sustains its place as a “happy object” by identifying those who do not reproduce its line as the cause of unhappiness. I call such others “affect aliens”: feminist kill-joys, unhappy queers, and melancholic migrants.

Affect and Intentionality

I do not assume there is something called affect that stands apart or has autonomy, as if it corresponds to an object in the world, or even that there is something called affect that can be shared as an object of study. Instead, I would begin with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near. It is useful to note that the etymology of “happiness” relates precisely to the question of contingency: it is from the Middle English “hap,” suggesting chance. The original meaning of happiness preserves the potential of this “hap” to be good or bad. The hap of happiness then gets translated into something good. Happiness relates to the idea of being lucky, or favored by fortune, or being fortunate. Happiness remains about the contingency of what happens, but this “what” becomes something good. Even this meaning may now seem archaic: we may be more used to thinking of happiness as an effect of what you do, as a reward for hard work, rather than as being “simply” what happens to you. Indeed, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi argues that “happiness is not something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random choice, it is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather on how

we interpret them. Happiness, in fact is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated and defended privately by each person” (1992, 2). Such a way of understanding happiness could be read as a defense against its contingency. I want to return to the original meaning of happiness as it refocuses our attention on the “worldly” question of happenings.

What is the relation between the “what” in “what happens” and the “what” that makes us happy? Empiricism provides us with a useful way of addressing this question, given its concern with “what’s what.” Take the work of the seventeenth-century empiricist philosopher John Locke. He argues that what is good is what is “*apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us*” (Locke 1997, 216). We judge something to be good or bad according to how it affects us, whether it gives us pleasure or pain. Locke uses the example of the man who loves grapes. He argues that “when a man declares in autumn, when he is eating them, or in spring, when there are none, that he loves grapes, it is no more, but that the taste of grapes delights him” (215). For Locke happiness (as the highest pleasure) is idiosyncratic: we are made happy by different things, we find different things delightful.

Happiness thus puts us into intimate contact with things. We can be happily affected in the present of an encounter; you are affected positively by something, even if that something does not present itself as an object of consciousness. To be affected in a good way can survive the coming and going of objects. Locke is after all describing the “seasonal” nature of enjoyment. When grapes are out of season, you might recall that you find them delightful, you might look forward to when they will be in season, which means that grapes would sustain their place as a happy object in the event of their absence. However, this does not mean that the objects one recalls as being happy always stay in place. As Locke argues, “Let an alteration of health or constitution destroy the delight of their taste, and he can be said no longer to *love grapes*” (216–17). Bodily transformations might also transform what is experienced as delightful. If our bodies change over time, then the world around us will create different impressions.

To be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things. To give value to things is to shape what is near us. As Edmund Husserl describes in the second volume of *Ideas*, “Within the joy we are ‘intentionally’ (with feeling intensions) turned toward the joy-Object as such in the mode of affective ‘interest’” (1989, 14). Some things you might say capture our attention. Objects we do things with generate what Husserl might call “our near sphere” or “core sphere” (2002,

149–50), as a sphere of practical action. This sphere is “a sphere of things that I can reach with my kinestheses and which I can experience in an optimal form through seeing, touching etc.” (149).

Happiness might play a crucial role in shaping our near sphere, the world that takes shape around us, as a world of familiar things. Objects that give us pleasure take up residence within our bodily horizon. We come to have our likes, which might even establish *what we are like*. The bodily horizon could be redescribed as a horizon of likes. To have our likes means certain things are gathered around us. Of course, we do encounter new things. To be more and less open to new things is to be more or less open to the incorporation of things into our near sphere. Incorporation maybe conditional on liking what we encounter. Those things we do not like we move away from. Away-ness might help establish the edges of our horizon; in rejecting the proximity of certain objects, we define the places that we know we do not wish to go, the things we do not wish to have, touch, taste, hear, feel, see, those things we do not want to keep within reach.

To be affected “in a good way” involves an orientation toward something as being good. Orientations register the proximity of objects, as well as shape what is proximate to the body. Happiness can thus be described as *intentional* in the phenomenological sense (directed toward objects), as well as being *affective* (contact with objects). To bring these arguments together we might say that happiness is an orientation toward the objects we come into contact with. We move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them. After all, note the doubling of positive affect in Locke’s example: we *love* the grapes if they taste *delightful*. To say we love what tastes delightful is not to say that delight causes our love, but that the experience of delight involves a loving orientation toward the object, just as the experience of love registers what is delightful.

To describe happiness as intentional does not mean there is always any simple correspondence between objects and feelings. I suspect that Robin Barrow is right to argue that happiness does not “have an object” the way that other emotions do (1980, 89). Let’s stay with Locke’s example of the man who loves grapes. Grapes acquire meaning for us, as something we can consume, grapes can be tasted and “have” a taste, even though we cannot know whether my grape taste is the same as yours. The pleasure evoked by the grapes is the pleasure of eating the grapes. But pleasures are not only directed toward objects that can be tasted, that come into a sensuous proximity with the flesh of the body, as a meeting of flesh. We can just recall

pleasure to experience pleasure, even if these pleasures do not involve exactly the same sensation, even if the impressions of memory are not quite as lively.¹ Pleasure creates an object, even when the object of pleasure appears before us.

We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things. An object can be affective by virtue of its own location (the object might be *here*, which is *where* I experience this or that affect) and the timing of its appearance (the object might be *now*, which is *when* I experience this or that affect). To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to “whatever” is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival. What is around an object can become happy: for instance, if you receive something delightful in a certain place, then the place itself is invested with happiness, as being “what” good feeling is directed toward. Or if you are given something by somebody whom you love, then the object itself acquires more affective value: just seeing something can make you think of another who gave you that something. If something is close to a happy object then it can become happy by association.

Happiness can generate objects through proximity. Happiness is not then simply about objects, or directed toward objects that are given to consciousness. We have probably all experienced what I would call “unattributed happiness”; you feel happy, not quite knowing why, and the feeling can be catchy, as a kind of brimming over that exceeds what you encounter. It is not that the feeling floats freely; in feeling happy, you direct the feeling to what is close by, smiling for instance, at a person who passes you by. The feeling can also lift or elevate a proximate object, making it happy, which is not to say that the feeling will survive an encounter with anything. It has always interested me that when we become conscious of feeling happy (when the feeling becomes an object of thought), happiness can often recede or become anxious. Happiness can arrive in a moment and be lost by virtue of its recognition. Happiness as a feeling appears very precarious, easily displaced not only by other feelings, but even by happiness itself, by the how of its arrival.

I would suggest that happiness involves a specific kind of intentionality, which I would describe as “end orientated.” It is not just that we can be happy *about* something, as a feeling in the present, but some things become happy *for us*, if we imagine they will bring happiness *to us*. Happiness is often described as “what” we aim for, as an endpoint, or even an end in itself. Classically, happiness has been considered as an end rather than as a means.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes happiness as the Chief Good, as “that which all things aim at” (1998, 1). Happiness is what we “choose always for its own sake” (8). Anthony Kenny describes how, for Aristotle, happiness “is not just an end, but a perfect end” (1993, 16). The perfect end is the end of all ends, the good that is good always for its own sake.

We don’t have to agree with the argument that happiness is the perfect end to understand the implications of what it means for happiness to be thought in these terms. If happiness is the end of all ends, then *all other things become means to happiness*.² As Aristotle describes, we choose other things “with a view to happiness, conceiving that through their instrumentality we shall be happy” (1998, 8). Aristotle is not talking here about material or physical objects, but is differentiating between different kinds of goods, between instrumental goods and independent goods. So honor or intellect we choose “with a view to happiness,” as being instrumental to happiness, and the realization of the possibility of living a good or virtuous life.

If we think of instrumental goods as objects of happiness then important consequences follow. Things become good, or acquire their value as goods, insofar as they point toward happiness. Objects become “happiness means.” Or we could say they become happiness pointers, as if to follow their point would be to find happiness. If objects provide a means for making us happy, then in directing ourselves toward this or that object we are aiming somewhere else: toward a happiness that is presumed to follow. The temporality of this following does matter. Happiness is what would come after. Given this, happiness is directed toward certain objects, which point toward that which is not yet present. When we follow things, we aim for happiness, as if happiness is what we get if we reach certain points.

Sociable Happiness

Certain objects become imbued with positive affect as good objects. After all, objects not only embody good feeling, but are perceived as necessary for a good life. How does the good life get imagined through the proximity of objects? As we know, Locke evokes good feeling through the sensation of taste: “For as pleasant tastes depend not on the things themselves, but their agreeability to this or that palate, wherever there is great variety; so the greatest happiness consists in having those things which produce the greatest pleasure” (1997, 247). Locke locates difference in the mouth. We have different tastes insofar as we have different palates.

We can see here that the apparent chanciness of happiness—the hap of

whatever happens—can be qualified. It is not that we just find happy objects anywhere. After all, taste is not simply a matter of chance (whether you or I might happen to like this or that), but is acquired over time. As Pierre Bourdieu showed in his monumental *Distinction*, taste is a very specific bodily orientation that is shaped by “what” is already decided to be good or a higher good. Taste or “manifested preferences” are “the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference” (1984, 56). When people say, “How can you like that?!” they make their judgment against another by refusing to like what another likes, by suggesting that the object in which another invests his or her happiness is unworthy. This affective differentiation is the basis of an essentially moral economy in which moral distinctions of worth are also social distinctions of value, as Beverley Skeggs (2004) has shown us. What “tastes good” can function as a marker of having “good taste.”

We can note here the role that habit plays in arguments about happiness. Returning to Aristotle, his model of happiness relies on habituation, “the result of the repeated doing of acts which have a similar or common quality” (1998, vii). The good man will not only have the right habits, but his feelings will also be directed in the right way: “a man is not a good man at all who feels no pleasure in noble actions; just as no one would call that man just who does not feel pleasure in acting justly” (11). Good habits involve work: we have to work on the body such that the body’s immediate reactions, how we are impressed upon by the world, will take us in the “right” direction. It is not only that we acquire good taste through habits; rather, the association between objects and affects is preserved through habit. When history becomes second nature (Bourdieu 1977), the affect becomes literal: we assume we experience delight because “it” is delightful.

The circulation of objects is thus the circulation of goods. Objects are sticky because they are already attributed as being good or bad, as being the cause of happiness or unhappiness. This is why the social bond is always rather sensational. Groups cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight. If the same objects make us happy—or if we invest in the same objects as being what should make us happy—then we would be orientated or directed in the same way. Consider that the word “promise” comes from the Latin *promissum* “to send forth.” The promise of happiness is what sends happiness forth; it is what allows happiness to be out and about. Happy objects are passed around, accumulating positive affective value as social goods.

Is happiness what passes? If we were to say that happiness was passed

around, we could be suggesting that happiness is contagious. David Hume's approach to moral emotions in the eighteenth century rested precisely on a contagious model of happiness. He suggests that "others enter into the same humour, and catch the sentiment, by a contagion or natural sympathy" and that cheerfulness is the most communicative of emotions: "the flame spreads through the whole circle; and the most sullenly and remorse are often caught by it" (1975, 250–51; see also Blackman 2008).³ A number of scholars have recently taken up the idea of affects as contagious, drawing on the work of the psychologist of affect, Silvan Tomkins, among others (Gibbs 2001, Sedgwick 2003, Brennan 2004, Probyn 2005). As Anna Gibbs describes it, "Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear—in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion" (2001, 1). Thinking of affects as contagious does help us to challenge an "inside out" model of affect by showing how affects pass between bodies, affecting bodily surfaces or even how bodies surface. However, I think the concept of affective contagion tends to underestimate the extent to which affects are contingent (involving the hap of a happening): to be affected by another does not mean that an affect simply passes or "leaps" from one body to another. The affect becomes an object only given the contingency of how we are affected, or only as an effect of how objects are given.

Consider the opening sentence of Teresa Brennan's book, *The Transmission of Affect*: "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'?" (2004, 1). Brennan writes very beautifully about the atmosphere "getting into the individual," using what I have called an "outside in" model, which is also very much part of the intellectual history of crowd psychology and the sociology of emotion (Ahmed 2004a, 9). However, later in the introduction she makes an observation that involves a quite different model. Brennan suggests here, "If I feel anxiety when I enter the room, then that will influence what I perceive or receive by way of an 'impression'" (Brennan 2004, 6). I agree. Anxiety is sticky: rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up whatever comes near. Or we could say that anxiety gives us a certain kind of angle on what comes near. Anxiety is, of course, one feeling state among others. If bodies do not arrive in neutral, if we are always in some way or another moody, then what we will receive as an impression will depend on our affective situation. This second argument challenges for me Brennan's first argument about the atmosphere being what is "out there"

getting “in”: it suggests that how we arrive, how we enter this room or that room, will affect what impressions we receive. After all, to receive is to act. To receive an impression is to make an impression.

So we may walk into the room and “feel the atmosphere,” but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point. The pedagogic encounter is full of angles. Many times have I read students as interested or bored, such that the atmosphere seemed one of interest or boredom (and even felt myself to be interesting or boring) only to find students recall the event quite differently. Having read the atmosphere, one can become tense, which in turn affects what happens, how things move along. The moods we arrive with do affect what happens: which is not to say we always keep our moods. Sometimes I arrive heavy with anxiety, and everything that happens makes me feel more anxious, while at other times, things happen that ease the anxiety, making the space itself seem light and energetic. We do not know in advance what will happen given this contingency, given the hap of what happens; we do not know “exactly” what makes things happen in this way and that. Situations are affective given the gap between the impressions we have of others, and the impressions we make on others, all of which are lively.

Think too of experiences of alienation. I have suggested that happiness is attributed to certain objects that circulate as social goods. When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated—out of line with an affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good. The gap between the affective value of an object and how we experience an object can involve a range of affects, which are directed by the modes of explanation we offer to fill this gap. If we are disappointed by something that we expected would make us happy, then we generate explanations of why that thing is disappointing. Such explanations can involve an anxious narrative of self-doubt (why am I not made happy by this, what is wrong with me?) or a narrative of rage, where the object that is “supposed” to make us happy is attributed as the cause of disappointment, which can lead to a rage directed toward those that promised us happiness through the elevation of this or that object as being good. We become strangers, or affect aliens, in such moments.

So when happy objects are passed around, it is not necessarily the feeling that passes. To share such objects (or have a share in such objects) would

simply mean you would *share an orientation toward those objects as being good*. Take for instance the happy family. The family would be happy not because it causes happiness, and not even because it affects us in a good way, but because we share an orientation toward the family as being good, as being what promises happiness in return for loyalty. Such an orientation shapes what we do; you have to “make” and “keep” the family, which directs how you spend your time, energy, and resources.

To be orientated toward the family does not mean inhabiting the same place. After all, as we know from Locke, pleasures can be idiosyncratic. Families may give one a sense of having “a place at the table” through the conversion of idiosyncratic difference into a happy object: loving “happily” means knowing the peculiarity of a loved other’s likes and dislikes. Love becomes an intimacy with what the other likes and is given on condition that such likes do not take us outside a shared horizon. The family provides a shared horizon in which objects circulate, accumulating positive affective value.

What passes through the passing around of happy objects remains an open question. After all, the word “passing” can mean not only “to send over” or “to transmit,” but also to transform objects by “a sleight of hand.” Like the game Telephone, what passes between proximate bodies might be affective precisely because it deviates and even perverts what was “sent out.” Affects involve perversion, and what we can describe as conversion points.

One of my key questions is how such conversions happen, and “who” or “what” gets seen as converting bad feeling into good feeling and good into bad. When I hear people say “the bad feeling is coming from ‘this person’ or ‘that person’” I am never convinced. I am sure a lot of my skepticism is shaped by childhood experiences of being the feminist daughter in a conventional family home. Say your childhood experiences were like mine. Say you are seated at the dinner table with your family, having polite conversations, where only certain things can be brought up. Someone says something you consider offensive. You respond, carefully, perhaps. You say why you think what that person has said is problematic. You might be speaking quietly, but you are beginning to feel “wound up,” recognizing with frustration that you are being wound up by someone who is winding you up. However you speak in this situation, you, as the person who speaks up or out as a feminist, will be read as *causing the argument*, as if you just have a point to pick.

Let us take seriously the figure of the feminist kill-joy. Does the feminist kill other people’s joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she

expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy? The feminist is an affect alien: she might even kill joy because she refuses to share an orientation toward certain things as being good because she does not find the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising.

We can place the figure of the feminist kill-joy alongside the figure of the angry black woman, explored so well by black feminist writers such as Audre Lorde (1984) and bell hooks (2000). The angry black woman can be described as a kill-joy; she may even kill feminist joy, for example, by pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics. As Audre Lorde describes: "When women of Color speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are 'creating a mood of helplessness,' 'preventing white women from getting past guilt,' or 'standing in the way of trusting communication and action'" (1984, 131). The exposure of violence becomes the origin of violence. The black woman must let go of her anger for the white woman to move on.

Some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness, which I would re-describe as the social pressure to maintain the signs of "getting along." Some bodies become blockage points, points where smooth communication stops. Consider Ama Ata Aidoo's wonderful prose poem, *Our Sister Killjoy*, where the narrator, Sissie, as a black woman, has to work to sustain the comfort of others. On a plane, a white hostess invites her to sit at the back with "her friends," two black people she does not know. She is about to say that she does not know them, and hesitates. "But to have refused to join them would have created an awkward situation, wouldn't it? Considering too that apart from the air hostess's obviously civilized upbringing, she had been trained to see the comfort of all her passengers" (1977, 10).

Power speaks here in this moment of hesitation. Do you go along with it? What does it mean not to go along with it? To create awkwardness is to be read as being awkward. Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies "go along with it," to agree to where you are placed. To refuse to be placed would mean to be seen as trouble, as causing discomfort for others. There is a political struggle about how we attribute good and bad feelings, which hesitates around the apparently simple question of who introduces what feelings to whom. Feelings can get stuck to certain bodies in the very way we describe spaces, situations, dramas. And bodies can get stuck depending on what feelings they get associated with.

I have suggested that when we share happy objects, we are directed in the right way. But how do we find such objects? Returning to Locke, we might describe his story of happiness as quite casual. We happen upon the grapes, and they happen to taste delightful. If others happen upon them in the same way, then we would share an object of delight. But if happiness involves an end-orientated intentionality, then happiness is already associated with some things more than others. We arrive at some things *because* they point us toward happiness.

To explain how objects can be affective before they are encountered, we need to consider the question of affect and causality. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche argues that the attribution of causality is retrospective (1968, 294–95). We might assume that the experience of pain is caused by the nail near our foot. But we only notice the nail when we experience an affect. We search for the object: or as Nietzsche describes, “a reason is sought in persons, experiences, etc. for why one feels this way or that” (354). The very tendency to attribute an affect to an object depends upon “closeness of association,” where such forms of closeness are already given. We apprehend an object as the cause of an affect (the nail becomes known as a pain-cause, which is not the only way we might apprehend the nail). The proximity of an encounter can survive an encounter. In other words, the proximity between an affect and object is preserved through habit.

Nietzsche helps us to loosen the bond between the object and the affect by recognizing the form of their bond. The object is not what simply causes the feeling, even if we attribute the object as its cause. The object is understood retrospectively as the cause of the feeling. I can just apprehend the nail and I will experience a pain affect, given that the association between the object and the affect is already given. The object becomes a feeling-cause. Once an object is a feeling-cause, it can cause feeling, so that when we feel the feeling we expect to feel we are affirmed. The retrospective causality of affect that Nietzsche describes quickly converts into what we could call an *anticipatory causality*. We can even anticipate an affect without being retrospective insofar as objects might acquire the value of proximities that are not derived from our own experience. For example, with fear-causes, a child might be told not to go near an object in advance of its arrival. Some things more than others are encountered as “to be feared” in the event of proximity, which is exactly how we can understand the anticipatory logic of the discourse of stranger danger (see Ahmed 2000).

So rather than say that what is good is what is apt to cause pleasure, we could say that what is apt to cause pleasure is already judged to be good. This argument is different from Locke's account of loving grapes because they taste delightful: I am suggesting that the judgment about certain objects as being "happy" is already made. Certain objects are attributed as the cause of happiness, which means they already circulate as social goods before we "happen" upon them, which is why we might happen upon them in the first place.

In other words, we anticipate that happiness will follow proximity to this or that object. Anticipations of what an object gives us are also expectations of what we should be given. How is it that we come to expect so much? After all, expectations can make things seem disappointing. If we arrive at objects with an expectation of how we will be affected by them, then this affects how they affect us, even in the moment they fail to live up to our expectations. Happiness is an expectation of what follows, where the expectation differentiates between things, whether or not they exist as objects in the present. For example, a child might be asked to imagine happiness by imagining certain events in the future, such as his or her wedding day, "the happiest day of your life." This is why happiness provides the emotional setting for disappointment even if happiness is not given: we just have to expect happiness from "this or that" for "this and that" to be experienceable as objects of disappointment.

The apparent chanciness of happiness can be qualified: we do not just find happy objects anywhere. As I argued in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), for a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. The promise of happiness thus directs life in some ways rather than others.

Our expectations come from somewhere. To think the genealogy of expectation is to think about promises and how they point us somewhere, which is "the where" from which we expect so much. We could say that happiness is promised through proximity to certain objects. Objects would not refer only to physical or material things, but also to anything that we imagine might lead us to happiness, including objects in the sense of values, practice, and styles, as well as aspirations. Doing x as well as having x might be what promises us happiness. The promise of happiness takes this form: that if you have this or have that or do this or do that, then happiness is what follows.

Happiness is not only promised by certain objects, it is also what we

promise to give to others as an expression of love. I am especially interested in the speech act, “I just want you to be happy.” What does it mean to want “just” happiness? What does it mean for a parent to say this to a child? In a way, the desire for the child’s happiness seems to offer a certain kind of freedom, as if to say: “I don’t want you to be this, or to do that; I just want you to be or to do ‘whatever’ makes you happy.” You could say that the “whatever” seems to release us from the obligation of the “what.” The desire for the child’s happiness seems to offer the freedom of a certain indifference to the content of a future decision.

Take the psychic drama of the queer child. You could say that the queer child is an unhappy object for many parents. In some parental responses to the child coming out, this unhappiness is not so much expressed as being unhappy about the child being queer, but about *being unhappy about the child being unhappy*. Queer fiction is full of such moments, as in the following exchange that takes place in the lesbian novel *Annie on My Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden:

“Lisa,” my father said, “I told you I’d support you and I will . . . But honey . . . well, maybe it’s just that I love your mother so much that I have to say to you I’ve never thought gay people can be very happy—no children for one thing, no real family life. Honey, you are probably going to be a very good architect—but I want you to be happy in other ways, too, as your mother is, to have a husband and children. I know you can do both. . . .” I am happy, I tried to tell him with my eyes. I’m happy with Annie; she and my work are all I’ll ever need; she’s happy too—we both were until this happened. (1982, 191)

The father makes an act of identification with an imagined future of necessary and inevitable unhappiness. Such an identification through grief about what the child will lose reminds us that the queer life is already constructed as unhappy, as a life without those “things” that would make you happy (husband, children). The desire for the child’s happiness is far from indifferent. The speech act “I just want you to be happy” can be directive at the very point of its imagined indifference.

For the daughter, it is only the eyes that can speak; and they try to tell an alternative story about happiness and unhappiness. In her response, she claims happiness, for sure. She is happy “with Annie,” which is to say that she is happy with *this* relationship and *this* life that it will commit her to. She says we were happy “until” this happened, where the “until” marks the moment

when the father speaks his disapproval. The unhappy queer is here the queer who is judged to be unhappy. The father's speech act creates the very affective state of unhappiness that is imagined to be the inevitable consequence of the daughter's decision. When "this" happens, unhappiness does follow.

The social struggle within families involves contradictory attributions of "what" makes people unhappy. So in situations where feelings are shared or are in common (we might all be unhappy), antagonism is produced through the very explanation of that unhappiness, which attributes the causes of bad feeling differently (which is the point of conversion), which in turn locates responsibility for the situation in different places. The father is unhappy as he thinks the daughter will be unhappy if she is queer. The daughter is unhappy as the father is unhappy with her being queer. The father witnesses the daughter's unhappiness as a sign of the truth of his position: that she will be unhappy because she is queer. The happy queer becomes unhappy at this point. In other words, the unhappy queer is made unhappy by the world that reads queers as unhappy. And clearly the family can only be maintained as a happy object, as being what is anticipated to cause happiness, by making the unhappiness of the queer child the point.

We can turn to another novel, *Babyji* by Abha Dawesar (2005). Set in India, this novel is written from the point of view of Anamika Sharma, a fun, smart, spirited, and sexy teenager who seduces three women: an older divorcee she names India, a servant girl called Rani, and her school friend Sheela. In this book, we do not notice happiness being used as the reason why Anamika should give up her desire. Instead, the first use of happiness as a speech act is of a rather queer nature: "'I want to make you happy,' I said as I was leaving. 'You do make me happy,' India said. 'No, I don't mean that way. I mean in bed'" (31). Anamika separates her own desire to make her lover happy from "that way," from the ordinary way, perhaps, that people desire to make others happy by wanting to give them a good life. Instead she wants to make India happy "in bed," to be the cause of her pleasure. Anamika refuses to give happiness the power to secure a specific image of what would count as a good life.

Babyji is certainly about the perverse potential of pleasure. This is not to say that Anamika does not have to rebel or does not get into trouble. The trouble centers on the relationship between the father and the queer daughter and again turns to the question of happiness. Anamika says to her father: "You like tea, I like coffee. I want to be a physicist, and Vidur wants to join the army. I don't want to get married, and mom did. How can the same

formula make us all happy?," to which he replies, "What do you mean you don't want to get married?" (177). Anamika recognizes what I have called the idiosyncratic nature of happy object choices; different people are made happy by different things, we have a diversity of likes and dislikes, including marriage as one happy object choice among others. The inclusion of marriage as something that one might or might not like is picked up by the father, turning queer desire into a question that interrupts the flow of the conversation.

The exchange shows us how object choices are not equivalent, how some choices such as marrying or not marrying are not simply presentable as idiosyncratic likes or dislikes, as they take us beyond the horizon of intimacy, in which those likes can gather as a shared form. Although the novel might seem to articulate a queer liberalism, whereby the queer subject is free to be happy in her own way, it evokes the limits of that liberalism by showing how the conflation of marriage with the good life is maintained as the response to queer deviation. While the queer might happily go beyond marriage, or refuse to place her hope for happiness in the reproduction of the family, it does not follow that the queer will be promised happiness in return. Although we can live without the promise of happiness, and can do so "happily," we live with the consequences of being a cause of unhappiness for others.

Happiness, Freedom, Injury

The speech act, "I just want you to be happy" protects the happy family by locating the causes of unhappiness in the failure to reproduce its line. This is not to say that happy families only locate happiness in reproduction. I want to explore how the family can sustain its place as a happy object by creating the very illusion that we are free to deviate from its line. Let's take the film *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), a happy "feel good" film about a migrant family. One of the most striking aspects is how the conflict or obstacle of the film is resolved through this speech act, addressed from father to daughter, that takes the approximate form: "I just want you to be happy." How does this speech act direct the narrative?

To answer this question, we need to describe the conflict of the film, or the obstacle to the happy ending. The film depicts generational conflict within a migrant Indian Sikh family living in Hounslow, London. Jess, one of the daughters, is good at football. Her idea of happiness would be to bend

it like Beckham, which requires that she bend the rules about what Indian girls can do. Her parents want her to be a good Indian girl, especially as their other daughter, Pinkie, is about to get married. The happy occasion of marriage requires the family to be imagined in a certain way, as reproducing its inheritance. The generational conflict between parents and daughter is also represented as a conflict between the demands of cultures: as Jess says, "Anyone can cook Alo Gobi but who can bend the ball like Beckham?" This contrast sets up "cooking Alo Gobi" as commonplace and customary, against an alternative world of celebrity, individualism, and talent.

It is possible to read the film by putting this question of cultural difference to one side. We could read the story as being about the rebellion of the daughter, and an attempt to give validation to her re-scripting of what it means to have a good life. We might cheer for Jess as she "scores" and finds happiness somewhere other than where she is expected to find it. We would be happy about her freedom and her refusal of the demand to be a happy housewife. We might applaud this film as showing the happiness that can follow when you leave your parents' expectations behind and follow less well-trodden paths. Yet, of course, such a reading would fall short. It would not offer a reading of "where" the happiness of this image of freedom takes us.

The climactic moment of the film is when the final of the football tournament coincides with Pinkie's wedding. The coincidence matters: Jess cannot be at both events at once. Unhappiness is used to show how Jess is "out of place" in the wedding. She is unhappy as she is not where she wants to be; she wants to be at the football match. We want her to be there too and are encouraged to identify with the injustice of being held back. At this point, the point of Jess's depression, her friend Tony intervenes and says she should go. Jess replies, "I can't. Look how happy they are, Tony. I don't want to ruin it for them." In this moment, Jess accepts her own unhappiness by identifying with the happiness of her parents: she puts her own desire for happiness to one side. But her father overhears her, and says, "Pinkie is so happy and you look like you have come to your father's funeral . . . if this is the only way I am going to see you smiling on your sister's wedding day then go now. But when you come back, I want to see you happy on the video." Jess's father lets her go because he wants to see her happy, which also means he wants to see others witness the family as being happy, as being what causes happiness.

Jess's father cannot be indifferent to his daughter's unhappiness: later he says to his wife, "Maybe you could handle her long face, I could not." At one level, this desire for the daughter's happiness involves a form of indifference



Jess and Joe at a "conversion point" (video still from *Bend It Like Beckham*).

to the "where" that she goes. However, from the point of view of the film, the desire for happiness is far from indifferent: indeed, the film works partly by "directing" the apparent indifference of this gift of freedom. After all, this moment is when the father "switches" from a desire that is out of line with the happy object of the film (not wanting Jess to play) to being in line (letting her go), which in turn is what allows the film's happy ending. Importantly, the happy ending is about the coincidence of happy objects. The daughters are happy (they are living the lives they wish to lead), the parents are happy (as their daughters are happy), and we are happy (as they are happy). Good feeling involves these "points" of alignment. We could say positive affect is what sutures the film, resolving the generational and cultural split: as soon as Jess is allowed to join the football game, the two worlds "come together" in a shared moment of enjoyment. While the happy objects are different from the point of view of the daughters (football, marriage) they allow us to arrive at the same point.

And yet, the film does not give equal value to the objects in which good feelings come to reside. Jess's happiness is contrasted to that of her sister, Pinkie, who is ridiculed throughout the film as not only wanting less, but as being less in the direction of her want. Pinkie asks Jess why she does not want "this." Jess does not say that she wants something different; she says it is because she wants something "more." That word "more" lingers, and frames the ending of the film, which gives us "flashes" of an imagined future (pregnancy for Pinkie, photos of Jess on her sports team, her love for her football

coach, Joe, her friendship with Jules). During the sequence of shots as Jess gets ready to join the football final, the camera pans up to show an airplane. Airplanes are everywhere in this film, as they often are in diasporic films. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, they matter as technologies of flight, signifying what goes up and away. Happiness in the film is promised by what goes “up and away.” The desire to play football, to join the national game, is read as leaving a certain world behind. Through the juxtaposition of the daughter’s happy objects, the film suggests that this desire gives a better return.

In reading the “directed” nature of narratives of freedom, we need in part to consider how the film relates to wider discourses of the public good. The film locates the “pressure point” in the migrant family that pressures Jess to live a life she does not want to live. And yet, many migrant individuals and families are under pressure to integrate, where integration is a key term for what they now call in the United Kingdom “good race relations.” Although integration is not defined as “leaving your culture behind” (at least not officially), it is unevenly distributed, as a demand that new or would-be citizens embrace a common culture that is already given. In this context, the immigrant daughter who identifies with the national game is a national ideal; the “happy” daughter who deviates from family convention becomes a sign of the promise of integration. *The unconventional daughter of the migrant family may even provide a conventional form of social hope.*

It is the father who is represented as the cause of unhappiness. By identifying with the daughter’s happiness, we also identify the cause of unhappiness as his unhappiness. The point of the film is thus to convert the father. What are the conversion points in the film? We can focus here on two speeches made by Jess’s father: the first takes place early on in the film, and the second at the end:

When I was a teenager in Nairobi, I was the best fast bowler in our school. Our team even won the East African cup. But when I came to this country, nothing. And these bloody gora in the club house made fun of my turban and set me off packing. . . . She will only end up disappointed like me.

When those bloody English cricket players threw me out of their club like a dog, I never complained. On the contrary, I vowed that I would never play again. Who suffered? Me. But I don’t want Jess to suffer. I don’t want her to make the same mistakes her father made, accepting life, accepting situations. I want her to fight. And I want her to win.

In the first speech, the father says she *should not play* in order not to suffer like him. In the second, he says she *should play* in order not to suffer like him. The desire implicit in both speech acts is the avoidance of the daughter's suffering, which is expressed in terms of the desire not to repeat his own. I would argue that the father is represented in the first speech as melancholic: as refusing to let go of his suffering, as incorporating the very object of his own loss. His refusal to let Jess go is readable as a symptom of melancholia: as a stubborn attachment to his own injury, or as a form of self-harm (as he says, "Who suffered? Me"). I would argue that the second speech suggests that the refusal to play a national game is the "truth" behind the migrant's suffering: the migrant suffers because he or she does not play the game, where not playing is read as a form of self-exclusion. For Jess to be happy he lets her be included, narrated as a form of letting go. By implication, not only is he letting her go, he is also letting go of his own suffering, the unhappiness caused by accepting racism, as the "point" of his exclusion.

The figure of the melancholic migrant is a familiar one in contemporary race politics. The melancholic migrant holds onto the unhappy objects of differences, such as the turban, or at least the memory of being teased about the turban, which ties it to a history of racism. Such differences become sore points or blockage points, where the smooth passage of communication stops. The melancholic migrant is the one who is not only stubbornly attached to difference, but who insists on speaking about racism, where such speech is heard as laboring over sore points. The duty of the migrant is to let go of the pain of racism by letting go of racism as a way of understanding that pain. The melancholic migrant's fixation with injury is read not only as an obstacle to his or her own happiness, but also to the happiness of the generation to come, and to national happiness. This figure may even quickly convert in the national imaginary to what I have called the "could-be-terrorist" (Ahmed 2004a). His anger, pain, and misery (all understood as forms of bad faith insofar as they won't let go of something that is presumed to be already gone) become "our terror."

To avoid such a terrifying endpoint, the duty of the migrant is to attach to a different, happier object, one that can bring good fortune, such as the national game. The film ends with the fortune of this reattachment. Jess goes to America to take up her dream of becoming a professional football player, to a land that makes the pursuit of happiness an originary goal. This reattachment is narrated as moving beyond the unhappy scripts of racism. We should note here that the father's experience of being excluded from the

national game is repeated in Jess's own encounter with racism on the football pitch (she is called a "Paki"), which leads to the injustice of her being sent off. In this case, however, Jess's anger and hurt do not stick. She lets go of her suffering. How does she let go? When she says to Joe, "You don't know what it feels like," he replies, "Of course I know how it feels like, I'm Irish." It is this act of identification with suffering that brings Jess back into the national game (as if to say, "we all suffer, it is not just you"). The film suggests that whether racism hurts depends upon individual choice and capacity: we can let go of racism as "something" that happens, a capacity that is attributed to skill (if you are good enough, you will get by), as well as the proximate gift of empathy, where the hurt of racism is reimagined as a common ground.

The love story between Jess and Joe offers another point of reattachment. The acceptance of interracial heterosexual love is a conventional narrative of reconciliation, as if love can overcome past antagonism and create what I would call "hybrid familiarity": *white with color, white with another*. Such fantasies of proximity are premised on the following belief: *if only we could be closer, we would be as one*. Proximity becomes a promise: the happiness of the film is the promise of "the one," as if giving love to the white man would allow us to have a share in this promise.

In the film, we end with the happy family: a hybrid family, where difference is reconciled. The family of the film could be understood as the multicultural nation, reimagined as a space of peace and love, where "fellow feeling" is translated into a feeling of fellowship. Given this, the father in the film originally occupies the place of the bad child, the one who must be taught to overcome bad feeling, by reproducing the family line. Just take the final scene of the film, which is a cricket scene. As we know, cricket is an unhappy object in the film, associated with the suffering of racism. Jess's father is batting. Joe, in the foreground, is bowling. He smiles as he approaches us. He turns around, bowls, and gets the father out. In a playful scene, Joe then celebrates and his body mimics that of a plane, in a classic football gesture. As I have suggested, planes are happy objects in the film, associated with flight, with moving up and away. By mimicking the plane, Joe becomes the agent that converts bad feeling (unhappy racism) into good feeling (multicultural happiness). It is the white man who enables the father to let go of his injury about racism and to play cricket again. It is the white man who brings the suffering migrant back into the national fold. *His body is our conversion point.*

Beyond the Affirmative Gesture

We need to question what is appealing in the appeal to happiness and good feeling. And yet, some critics suggest that we have paid too much attention to melancholia, suffering, and injury and that we need to be more affirmative. Rosi Braidotti, for example, suggests that the focus on negativity has become a problem within feminism, calling for a more affirmative feminism. She offers a bleak reading of bleakness: "I actively yearn for a more joyful and empowering concept of desire and for a political economy that foregrounds positivity, not gloom" (2002, 57).

What concerns me is how much this affirmative turn actually depends on the very distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. Bad feelings are seen as orientated toward the past, as a kind of stubbornness that "stops" the subject from embracing the future. Good feelings are associated here with moving up and getting out. I would argue that it is the very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear. The demand that we be affirmative makes those histories disappear by reading them as a form of melancholia (as if you hold onto something that is already gone). These histories have not gone: we would be letting go of that which persists in the present. To let go would be to keep those histories present.

I am not saying that feminist, anti-racist, and queer politics do not have anything to say about happiness other than to point to its unhappy effects. I think it is the very exposure of these unhappy effects that is affirmative, that gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or better life. If injustice does have unhappy effects, then the story does not end there. Unhappiness is not our endpoint. If anything, the experience of being alienated from the affective promise of happy objects gets us somewhere. Affect aliens can do things, for sure, by refusing to put bad feelings to one side in the hope that we can "just get along." A concern with histories that hurt is not then a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return. If anything we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good.

Notes

- 1 See David Hume's discussion of the relationship between ideas and impressions in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1985, 49–55). Memory and imagination are described as the two faculties in which we "repeat our impressions" (56), involving the connection or association between ideas in the form of contiguity and resemblance. Hume offers a rich reflection on what we might call empirical psychology and the habits of sense making. See Deleuze's (1991) excellent analysis of Hume's contribution. Also note how much the Freudian concern with displacement and condensation and the Lacanian concern with metaphor and metonymy are consistent with Hume's associationism. English empiricism and psychoanalysis could be described as potentially productive bedfellows.
- 2 The way in which a teleological model of happiness makes "all other things" "happiness means" is explicit in John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism. As he puts it, "The utilitarian doctrine is that happiness is desirable and the only thing desirable, as an end; *all other things being only desirable as means to that end*" (1906, 52, emphasis added).
- 3 David Hume's model of affective contagion contrasts in interesting ways with Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2000). Both stress the importance of sympathy or compassion, as what Smith calls "fellow-feeling," where you feel with others and are affected by how others feel. In the case of happiness, to be sympathetic would be to feel happy when another is happy. Sympathy is expressed by *returning feeling with like feeling*. In Smith's model, sympathy is more explicitly conditional: you enter into another's happiness if you agree with it, in the sense that you think his or her happiness is appropriate and is expressed appropriately. As he describes quite dramatically, "it gives us the spleen, on the other hand, to see another too happy, or too much elevated, as we call it, with any little piece of good fortune. We are *disobliged even with his joy*; and, because we cannot go along with it, call it levity and folly" (2000, 13, emphasis added). So for Smith, to be affected sympathetically is dependent on whether emotions "appear to this last, just and proper, and suitable to their objects" (14). I would also argue that sharing emotion involves conditional judgment. But rather than saying that we share happiness if we agree with its object (which makes the agreement secondary), I would say that to share in the happiness of others is how we come to have a direction toward something, which is *already* an agreement that the object is appropriate. To get along, in another words, is to share a direction.