

AFFECTIVE FORECASTING

Daniel Gilbert's views on happiness

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Daniel Gilbert, professor of psychology at Harvard University, is well known for his work on 'affective forecasting', which investigates how people make predictions about the emotional impact of future events. This is the theme behind his best-selling book "Stumbling on Happiness", which won the 2007 Royal Society Prize for Science Books.

My book isn't meant to make people happy. It is meant to make them smart about happiness by telling them what science has discovered

As Gilbert insists, this is not a how-to-be-happy manual; instead, he takes us on an entertaining journey into the science of well-being to explore the brain's capacity to predict what makes us happy. Weaving together a mix of science, anecdote and humour, he demonstrates that when it comes to our perceptions about happiness, we really are stumbling around in the dark.

All in the Imagination

Gilbert's tour of the brain takes us into the frontal lobe - in evolutionary terms the most recent part of the human brain to develop. The frontal lobe is the time machine that allows us to leave the present and experience the future before it happens. Its two characteristics of note are its capacity for anxiety and planning, both intimately connected to thinking about the future.

It is the ability to imagine, according to Gilbert, which is the brain's greatest achievement. Humans are able to think about their future in a way that no other mammal can. The human brain works as an 'anticipation machine', adding the past to the present to create its concept of the future and all this happens without the need to engage conscious thought. Gilbert calls this 'nexting' – our brains are continuously making predictions about our future without our awareness.

The Way We Weren't

The imagination may be one of our most powerful tools but like all tools it has its shortcomings which much of the book explores. Imagination is what trips us up when it comes to our conceptions about what will make us happy. One of the brain's biggest tricks is in the way it handles memory. If you have ever wondered how the memory is able to recall a lifetime's worth of experiences, the truth, according to Gilbert, is that it isn't doing that at all. "Our brains quickly reweave the tapestry by fabricating – not by actually

retrieving – the bulk of the information that we experience as memory. This fabrication happens so quickly and effortlessly that we have the illusion that the entire thing was in our heads the entire time”. Gilbert likens the memory to a “collection of impressionist paintings rendered by an artist who takes considerable licence with his subject”.

In this respect the brain operates just like the blind spot of an eye, by filling in the gap with material from around the area. Gilbert gives an example of being invited by your partner to accompany them to a party. The brain might instantly manufacture an image of a dull cocktail party in some anonymous hotel with bored waiters carrying trays of canapés past a bored harpist. In essence:

we predict our reaction to the imagined event with a yawn that sets new records for duration and jaw extension. What we generally fail to consider is how many different types of party there are – birthday celebrations, gallery openings, first nights, orgies, wakes – and how different our reactions would be to each. So we tell our spouse that we’d rather skip the party, our spouse naturally drags us along and we have a marvellous time. Why? Because the party involved cheap beer rather than classical music and was precisely our style. We liked what we predicted we’d hate because our prediction was based on a detailed image that reflected our brain’s best guess, which was in this case wrong.

When we think we are using our memories of past events to imagine future events we often do so in the blind spot of our mind’s eye. This tendency can cause us to mis-imagine the future event whose emotional consequences we are attempting to weigh.

Gilbert details many other ways in which our brains fool us, such as being wired to notice the presence of something but ignore it’s absence. So, for example, we notice the pigeon which successfully takes a dump on us but not the hundreds of thousands that leave us alone. Our brains perform a leaving-out trick as well as a filling-in one so that when we are constructing the future, we include some details that the brain has made up and lack others that the brain has ignored. The problem is that our brains do this so well that we don’t even realise it is going on. We accept the brain’s products uncritically and expect the future to unfold with only the details that it has imagined.

Feeling the Way to the Future

As well as misleading the way we think, Gilbert reveals how the imagination is also performing tricks on the way we feel. If one of the hallmarks of a visual experience is that we can tell whether it’s a product of a real or imagined object, this is not the case with an emotional experience which frequently blurs the distinction between real and imagined. Although we think we can predict how we will feel in any given situation – to pre-feel it – again Gilbert demonstrates from a wealth of scientific research how often we are mistaken.

We tend to confuse the feelings activated by current events with the pre-feelings generated by the memory of similar events in the past. We also have a tendency to imagine our future emotions based on what we are currently feeling although we are blind to the fact we're doing it. So, for example, if you've had a bad day – the washing machine broke down and the cat peed on the rug – and then you try to imagine how much you're going to enjoy being out with your friend Nick tomorrow night, you may mistakenly attribute feelings that are due to the misbehaviour of your real pets and real appliances ('I feel annoyed') to your friend ('I don't think I'll go because Nick always annoys me'.) This is reassuring for anyone experiencing depression, who struggles in their attempts to feel positive emotions about the future like hope, optimism, faith and trust. The truth, according to Gilbert, is that we cannot feel good about an imaginary future when we are busy feeling bad about the actual present. Imagination does not easily transcend the emotional boundaries of the present even if we like to think it does.

Psychological Immunity

One of the most interesting concepts that Gilbert puts forward is that of a 'psychological immune system' which defends the mind against unhappiness in much the same way that the physical immune system defends the body against illness. A healthy psychological immune system strikes a balance that allows us to feel good enough to cope with our situation but bad enough to do something about it.

The psychological immune system comes into its own when we experience a significant trauma. It takes intense suffering to trigger it – an experience which is inescapable, inevitable and irrevocable - whereas it won't be stimulated for a minor calamity. What this means, paradoxically, is that we may be able to make a better recovery from a major emotional trauma than a minor one. People generally overestimate how awful they'll feel and usually revert to their normal happiness set-point at some point after the trauma.

Immune to Reality

Gilbert tackles many of the myths surrounding happiness, such as our capacity to experience it if we have a significant disability, are incarcerated or suffer a humiliating fall from grace. He deconstructs two of the biggest myths of all, about the role played by money and parenthood in our happiness. Though the scientific evidence exists that shows that neither being rich nor being a parent do much for us in terms of happiness, he describes these as super-replicating false beliefs that humanity maintains in order to preserve the status quo.

Stumbling on Happiness is a witty collection of research that points out the many flaws of foresight. Gilbert has a gift for taking the science and explaining it in an easy, accessible style as though you're chatting with him over coffee. Ultimately, as Gilbert himself admits, he has a tendency to point out problems without offering solutions which might frustrate

the seeker of happiness. However if you want to understand how the brain works in its attempts to construct a happy future, then this is the perfect read.