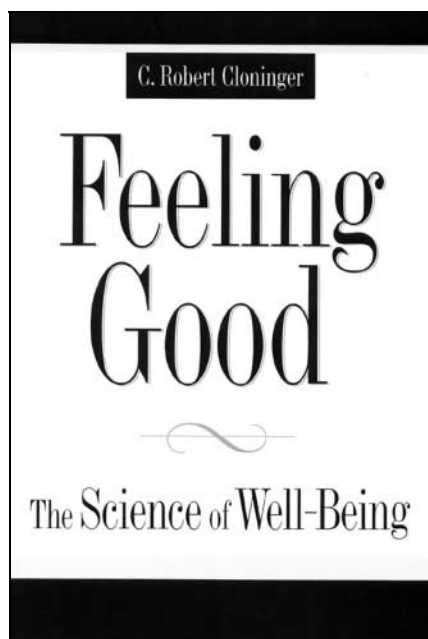


Book reviews

EDITED BY SIDNEY CROWN, FEMI OYEBODE and ROSALIND RAMSAY

Feeling Good: The Science of Well-Being

By C. Robert Cloninger. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2004. 374 pp. £24.95 (hb). ISBN 0 195 05137 8



Cloninger, a distinguished US psychiatrist, starts this book with the question, 'why is it so difficult to be happy?' He is critical of conventional scientific psychiatry's approach to the answer to this question, and throughout the book invokes concepts which science finds it difficult to grapple with – like 'coherence'. He ranges with profound insight widely over philosophy and history plus many other sciences, including mathematics, to take an intelligent stab at the central problems of well-being.

At the heart of the dilemma over human well-being, Cloninger argues, is one of many fundamental conflicts, like that between reason and emotion. Freud also believed the good life arrived when we used our reason to overcome emotion; indeed he advocated a 'combative' stance indicating the vigorous and active nature of the clash at the centre of our quest for betterment.

Whatever you might think about Cloninger's conclusions, which include the argument that the very reductionism at the heart of science confounds its ability to unlock the secret of human happiness, he is making a vital more general point about a fundamental predicament at the heart of our profession. Psychiatrists trying to heal depression or other forms of suffering without a clear sense of where well-being is located, are a bit like someone giving directions to the lost, but by knowing only where you don't want to go.

Certainly again, Cloninger is surely right that contentment must have something to do with our relationship with others and with the wider material world. We have to live in some kind of harmony with our social and physical environment.

Unlike many others who consider happiness seriously this book takes a more strategic view. That I do this thing this decade, and that thing another decade, in order to arrive at a place eventually resembling happiness. The strategic view involves incredible foresight and very long-range planning – something economists are much more used to in their theorising than modern psychiatrists preoccupied with cognitive-behavioural therapy.

Cloninger has also devised a unique technique for 'measuring thought' which grades the quality of one's thoughts along a continuum from baser, more unhappy-oriented thinking – characterised by lack of trust and lack of flexibility – to higher levels denoted by coherence, patience, compassion, reverence for God (piety) and awe of God. He shows how his technique can be applied to the writings and speeches of others and demonstrates how a personal journey toward fulfilment can therefore be charted.

Many secular practitioners might find this otherwise useful book's concern with spirituality difficult, but the key conundrum for me with the work is the lack of more explicit engagement with an obvious paradox at the heart of well-being. In the long and tortuous journey towards the achievement of any worthwhile ambition,

from which contentment subsequently derives, there is usually an enormous amount of suffering – it is the ability to tolerate and not be afraid of pain that actually underpins true bliss. Yet the very obsession with pleasure that characterises modern society is an indicator of intolerance for and rejection of distress. The paradox at the heart of happiness is that you are going to have to experience anguish in order to get there – you need to embrace the one thing you are trying so desperately to avoid.

Distinguished scholars like Cloninger are perhaps persuaded by publishers to sugar the pill by obscuring this central truth, after all the upbeat title of this book is *Feeling Good*. Maybe at a fundamental level our very corporate culture is unable to engage with and promulgate key truths about the human predicament.

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Hidden from the Holocaust: Stories of Resilient Children Who Survived and Thrived

By Kerry Bluglass. Westport, CT: Praeger. 2003. 250 pp. £32.25 (hb). ISBN 0 275 97486 3

Conventional wisdom, propagated repeatedly by the media, is that once damaged, distorted or deviant, you stay that way. This was also very much the doctrine of our late-19th century forbears in psychiatry. More recently, healthy antidotes to this pessimistic nihilism have come, for adults, from George Brown's work on protective factors and, for children, Michael Rutter's on psychosocial resilience. Even though damaged, some people make a good lifelong adjustment.

Kerry Bluglass has not set out to write a psychiatric text but any psychiatrist will benefit from reading it. *Hidden from the Holocaust* contains extended interviews with 15 adults who, as Jewish children in occupied Europe, were saved from certain execution by being hidden, usually by Christians. The accounts concentrate upon their memories from childhood and then trace their subsequent lives to the present in terms of relationships, emotions, memories, work and family life. The childhood stories are terrifying but their lives since then have

been extremely positive. They now, in their 70s, are all stable, creative and often humorous people. Through their employed work, charitable involvement and most of all their families, they have brought great benefit to the well-being of those around them, and through their stories they counter the destructive, prevailing pessimism of our society.

I do not want to spoil your enjoyment by telling you the stories. Suffice it to say that once into a story I could not put it down, and it followed me round into every room in the house. Kerry Bluglass wears her psychiatric persona lightly, but it is always there. The interviews themselves are insightful and skilful, and her commentary

relates this group to the more general body of work on resilience.

This qualitative follow-up study emerged from the author's internationally recognised work on bereavement. At a conference in Brussels she met and made a friend of a colleague in the same area of interest. As her friend's personal story unfolded, so her own views and preconceptions concerning victims and their long-term disabilities were rectified, and from this first story, the rest of the study developed.

For the general reader this is a heart-warming account of the triumph of the human spirit. For the European citizen (including me) it is part of our history,

which we must never forget. For the psychiatrist these accounts should make us think again when we are tempted to abandon our recalcitrant patients to the consequences of their heredity and early environment. One thriver wrote: 'While it is important to remember the past, it is equally important to look forward to the future, celebrating the indomitable spirit of the Jewish people to survive. Most of us who survived have endeavoured to lead as full a life as possible'.

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