Happiness Is the Fuel

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> Slavoj Žižek says happiness is an unethical category and that love is, in a formal sense, evil. He means something more careful than it sounds, and on one point he is right: happiness is a bad thing to aim at. But when he asks what happiness does once it is there, he looks only at a society kept comfortable and easy to manage. He never looks at what it does for the person who goes on to work and to care for others. For me it has been fuel, and that changes what you are allowed to call it. This essay states his argument as fairly as I can, shows where it breaks, and offers one case study, mine, for whatever a single case is worth.

Words worth knowing

The words this essay leans on, each explained twice: first in plain English, then in one line for the expert.

unethical category

When Žižek calls happiness an unethical category, he does not mean happy people are bad. He means happiness is the wrong measure of a good life, because serious commitment, in his view, means being ready to suffer for something whether or not it makes you happy.

> FOR THE EXPERT Žižek's claim (Big Think, 2012) that happiness cannot serve as an ethical criterion, since on his Lacanian account it depends on not confronting one's desire, while ethical commitment is fidelity to a cause regardless of satisfaction.

formal sense

Using a word for the shape of a thing, not its usual moral weight. When Žižek calls love evil in a formal sense, he means love breaks the even balance by choosing one person over everyone else. He does not mean love is wicked. The essay argues the word ends up doing both jobs.

> FOR THE EXPERT A sense fixed by the structure of a relation rather than its moral valence; Žižek's 'formal' evil is love's partiality, its break with impartial, universal measure, which the essay argues trades on the moral sense of the word.

grace

A gift you did not earn and could not plan. The word comes from religion, where it means a free gift from God. Žižek uses it to say happiness may arrive, but you cannot make it a target.

> FOR THE EXPERT Borrowed from theology (unmerited favor); Žižek uses it to say happiness can only arrive unbidden and is never a proper goal, which the essay concedes about where happiness comes from, not about what it does.

wanting something and liking it

Psychologists found that wanting a thing and enjoying it once you have it are separate processes in the brain. That is why you can crave something, get it, and feel less than you expected. Wanting is the pull toward it; liking is the pleasure itself.

> FOR THE EXPERT Berridge and Robinson's distinction between incentive salience ('wanting', strongly dopamine-dependent) and hedonic impact ('liking'), which can be separated experimentally.

Greek ideal

The ancient Greek idea of a happy life, eudaimonia, often translated as flourishing. For Aristotle it was not a warm feeling or comfort. It was a life of doing things well: being good, having friends, seeking truth and facing danger with courage.

> FOR THE EXPERT Eudaimonia, in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: activity of the soul in accordance with virtue over a complete life, a matter of living and acting well rather than of pleasant feeling.

cannot lose

A claim that no possible evidence could ever count against. That sounds strong, but it is a weakness: if every result, good or bad, proves you right, the claim tells you nothing about the world. A claim worth testing says what would show it is wrong.

> FOR THE EXPERT The essay's charge is unfalsifiability in Popper's sense: a theory compatible with every possible observation, including objections reread as confirmation, makes no empirical prediction.

by-product

Something that comes from doing something else, the way sawdust comes from building a table. The essay agrees with Žižek that happiness should not be the aim: it tends to arrive while you are busy with work and people.

> FOR THE EXPERT The view, also found in Mill and Frankl, that happiness is reached indirectly through the pursuit of other ends and that aiming at it directly is self-defeating; the essay accepts this about its origin and disputes what follows about its function.

sample of one

Evidence from a single person. It can show that something is possible, but not how common it is or what caused it. In the essay, a marriage, new tools and a new schedule arrived together, so the author cannot say which one made the difference.

> FOR THE EXPERT An n = 1 case study: useful as an existence proof or counterexample, with no basis for estimating prevalence, and here confounded because several changes coincided.

counterexample

One case that breaks a general rule. If someone says all swans are white, one black swan is a counterexample. The essay offers its author's life as one against the idea that happiness and serious work sit apart, and admits one case cannot prove a rule of its own.

> FOR THE EXPERT A case that meets a general claim's conditions but violates its conclusion; one counterexample refutes a universal claim but supports no generalization of its own.

partial

Choosing one person over others instead of treating everyone the same, like a parent who runs to their own child first. The philosopher Bernard Williams argued that kind of choice needs no moral excuse, which is the essay's point: partiality is ordinary, not evil.

> FOR THE EXPERT Partiality: giving special weight to particular people because of one's relationship to them, against impartialist theories that weigh all persons equally; Williams's 'one thought too many' argues partial reasons need no impartial justification.

What he actually says

It would be easy to quote the wildest lines and laugh. That would be unfair, and it would also lose.

So here is Slavoj Žižek's position on happiness, as carefully as I can put it. What we say we want is not what we really desire. Our wants are shaped by the people and culture around us, and they stay alive only as long as we do not get them. Getting the thing usually disappoints. So the state we call happiness depends on not looking too hard: on a comfortable distance from our own desire, someone to blame, and somewhere else to dream about. His example is late communist Czechoslovakia, where people had enough but not too much, a Party to blame, and a West to imagine. In a way, he says, they really were happy. From there he concludes that happiness is hypocritical, that truth and happiness do not go together, and that in serious work happiness does not come into it at all: you are ready to suffer for the thing itself. In his own words, "Happiness is, for me, an unethical category." At most it arrives as a kind of grace. It is never a proper goal.

His position on love is easier to misread. When he calls love violent, and in a formal sense evil, he is not against it. He means that love is not fair. It does not weigh everyone by the same measure. It picks one imperfect person out of the whole world and says you, more than everything. That breaks the balance of things, and he thinks that break is exactly what makes it love. Following the philosopher Alain Badiou, he says it begins with a fall you cannot plan, and that dating services promise love without the fall. More recently he has said that the true skill is not in the falling but in the staying.

He calls himself an old romantic. I believe him.

What he gets right

Three things, and I want to give them up front.

People are bad at predicting what will satisfy them. Psychologists have shown this many times. We adapt to what we get, and wanting something and liking it once we have it turn out to be separate things.

Chasing happiness directly tends to backfire. There are studies showing that people who put the most value on being happy end up less so. On the question of what to aim at, he and I agree: not at happiness.

And love is not a response to a list of good qualities. Nobody loves a résumé. Philosophers far from his tradition have said the same thing.

So my claim is not about what to aim at. It is about what happiness is and does once you have it, and whether the words he uses for it, hypocritical and unethical, can survive that.

Where the happiness argument breaks

He attacks one meaning of the word and lets the verdict fall on all of them. The happiness he attacks is contentment, and the politics of measuring and selling it. Against that target he lands real blows. But he calls happiness a pagan category, and he means it as a rejection of the Greek ideal. The Greek ideal was never mere comfort. For Aristotle a happy life was an active one. It included virtue, friendship, the pursuit of truth and the courage to face danger. The creative fever Žižek praises is closer to that active life than he admits. He rejects the deep version by name, but his arguments only ever touch the shallow one.

His central claim cannot lose. He says we do not really want what we think we want. Suppose someone gets what they wanted and is glad for thirty years. As far as I can tell, his account would have to call that fantasy, or a failure to look. Suppose they are disappointed. That confirms it. I cannot think of anything a person could report that would count against the claim. I know what a follower of his would say to me: that insisting I know my own mind is exactly what the theory predicts. That is the problem. A theory that reads every objection as more evidence for itself has stopped being about the world.

His one concrete case is a story. He offers Czechoslovakia as an illustration, but it is doing the work of evidence. There are no published, comparable surveys of how satisfied people there were with their lives in the 1970s and 1980s. He is entitled to the illustration. It cannot carry a conclusion about the human condition.

And he looks in only one direction. This is the one that matters most to me. His main question is whether happiness should be our aim. Goal, or by-product that arrives as grace. He answers that question well. And when he asks what happiness does once it arrives, he looks at citizens kept comfortable and manageable, never at the person it sends back to work.

What it does next

Something does happen. Happiness goes to work.

The evidence for this is not the research on chasing happiness, which I have already given him. A review of 225 studies covering more than 275,000 people found that happiness tends to come before success, not just after it. Happier people go on to do better work, keep their health longer and build stronger ties. And one of the longest studies of adult life ever run, which followed two groups of American men for more than eighty years, found that warm relationships predicted who stayed healthy and happy better than money, intelligence or class did.

A defender of his will say this only confirms him: happiness helps when you are not aiming at it. Fine. I accept that it came unbidden. But look at what the evidence does to his adjectives. If happiness were the comfort of not facing what you really want, it should make people duller, safer and less truthful. Instead it

reliably comes before the harder work, the better health and the closer ties. That is not what a hiding place does. He could say the psychologists measure a different happiness from his. Then his verdict covers less than his language claims.

And when he does put love and happiness in the same room, he sets them against each other. Love, he says, is a catastrophe from the point of view of anyone counting up well-being, and he endorses it anyway. The evidence says the opposite. Close, lasting relationships, the staying he now praises, are among the strongest predictors of the happiness he dismisses. The thing he admires most is one of the main roads to the thing he distrusts most.

One case study

Here is the only data I own. It is a sample of one, and I will not pretend it is more.

For most of my life I did not have much of either thing. I have written elsewhere about failing confidently for years: nearly thrown out of schools, a first job that was too hard, a company that worked and then did not, money lost trading, friends lost for good. I was not happy for a long time, and I was not especially productive either. Whatever unhappiness was doing for me, it was not fuelling the work.

Then I met my wife. I wrote her a song before we were married and showed it to her two days before the wedding. We married this fall.

This fall I have also published nine essays, built a set of free tools for people fighting medical bills, insurance denials and drug prices, released music with two of my closest friends, and run a small company and a game studio. I am not working from desperation or from a wound. I get up wanting to make things because I am happy and loved, not in order to become happy and loved.

I should be honest about what this does not show. A new marriage, new tools and a new schedule all arrived in the same season, and I cannot separate them. One man's fall proves nothing about the human condition. It is exactly as strong as his Czechoslovakia story.

But it is a counterexample to an idea his language invites: that happiness and serious work sit apart. His own words are only that happiness does not enter the work. Mine say it was what fed it. If he answers that I am deceiving myself, the theory has once again explained everything and predicted nothing.

Where the love argument breaks

The word "evil" is doing two jobs. Read in his formal sense, the claim that love is evil means only that love is partial: it chooses one. That is true and it is close to a definition. Read in the moral sense, the sense the word actually has, it is false, and by his own lights it is false, because he praises love throughout his work. He gets the force of the second meaning while only ever defending the first.

Partiality is not evil in any sense worth the word. His imbalance is formal: love refuses to weigh everyone by the same measure. But nothing in that means love must take from anyone else. He says himself that love must leave room for your vocation. For me it did more than leave room. The tools I built this fall are for people I will never meet. Bernard Williams said that a man who needs a moral excuse to save his own wife has one thought too many. Žižek would agree. That is the point. If choosing one person needs no excuse, calling it evil is borrowing a heavy word for an ordinary fact.

His popular talks overstate the fall. If the true skill of love is staying, then how two people met is the least important fact about them. Yet he directs his critique at dating services for promising love without the fall. The evidence does not share the worry. In one large American study, couples who met online were slightly more satisfied and slightly less likely to split. In another, about four in ten people married more than ten years said they were still very intensely in love. Badiou, whose argument this is, holds that love is an encounter followed by years of construction. Žižek says the same now. He should let the second half of that sentence correct the first.

The best reply, and why it does not save him

He would say I have made his point. I did not chase happiness. I found a person and a vocation, and happiness arrived as grace. By-product, exactly as advertised.

That is fair, and on where it came from I concede it completely.

But calling it a by-product says where it came from. It says nothing about what it does next, and what it does next is the part his account gets wrong. When he says happiness is not an ethical category, he means it cannot be the measure of a good life. I agree it is not the measure. But if it reliably powers good work and care for other people, it belongs in any honest account of how ethical lives are actually lived. Hypocritical is the wrong word for something that sends people toward harder work and closer ties, and unethical is the wrong word for something that makes generosity affordable.

There is also a plainer objection. For most people, a life with enough peace in it to love someone and do decent work is not an illusion to be seen through. It is the entire hope, and they are right to hold it.

What I would say to him

You are right that we should not chase happiness, and right that love is not a calculation. You are wrong about what happiness is once it arrives, and wrong to borrow the word evil for something you yourself defend.

I was unhappy for a long time, and it did not make me more productive or more honest with myself. Then I was loved, and I got happy, and I have not stopped working since.

Happiness is not the goal. It may well be a grace. But it does not just sit there. It is fuel, and love is where most of us fill up.

Sources and a note on method

Žižek's views on happiness are taken from his own article "Happiness? No, Thanks!" in *The Philosophical Salon* (April 2, 2018), which includes the Czechoslovakia example and the claim that truth and happiness do not go together, and from his 2012 Big Think interview, which is the source of the one sentence quoted directly here and of his remark that happiness does not enter creative work. The description of happiness as a kind of grace and not a valid goal is from the 2019 Toronto debate with Jordan Peterson, as reported at the time; Peterson largely agreed that happiness should not be the goal. His views on love are taken from the opening of the 2005 documentary *Žižek!* (as transcribed in print; I have not checked the transcript against the film), his interviews on love as an encounter and on dating services, an argument he takes from Alain Badiou's *In Praise of Love*, and a 2025 podcast conversation with Peter Singer in which he calls love a catastrophe in utilitarian terms, endorses it, and says the true art is the staying. Everything other than that one sentence is my paraphrase, and I have tried to state each position in a form his defenders would accept. Two lines often attributed to him are not used here because I could not trace them to him: that happiness is for opportunists, and the question of why one would be happy when one could be interesting, which is a headline written by an editor.

What he gets right: the research on mispredicting what will satisfy us (Gilbert and Wilson), on wanting and liking being separable (Berridge and Robinson), and on the pursuit of happiness backfiring (Mauss and colleagues, 2011). That love does not respond to a list of qualities is argued by Harry Frankfurt in *The Reasons of Love* (2004).

Against him: Aristotle's account of happiness as an active life is in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. That happiness tends to precede success is from Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, "The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect," *Psychological Bulletin* (2005). The finding on relationships is from the Harvard Study of Adult Development, described in Waldinger and Schulz, *The Good Life* (2023); its original participants were American men, it covers warm relationships of all kinds and not only marriage, and it shows association, not proof of cause. A state institute did survey public opinion in Czechoslovakia before 1990, but its results were mostly unpublished, and no comparable life-satisfaction series from those years has been published. On couples who met online: Cacioppo and colleagues, *PNAS* (2013), a study funded by a dating company whose lead author sat on that company's scientific advisory board; the effects were small. On long-married people still intensely in love: O'Leary and colleagues (2012), 40 percent of 274 people married more than ten years in a national sample, and 29 percent in a second sample. The remark about one thought too many is Bernard Williams's, from his essay "Persons, Character and Morality."

The case study is my own life, told as it happened, and it is a sample of one. My wife is the reason for most of it.

I used AI to research and draft this, under my direction, with a standing instruction to tell me where I was wrong before telling me where I was right. A first draft was then handed to a reviewer told to argue Žižek's side and embarrass me. It found nine places where I had been unfair to him or wrong on the facts, including my original thesis, which claimed more than it could hold. Those are corrected here.