The Promise of Happiness. By SARA, AHMED. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010.

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It is commonplace among philosophers to describe happiness as the ultimate object of our desires. Although not everyone has the same desires, we all desire happiness, both for ourselves and for those we care for. In ethical philosophy, the desire for happiness is more than a utilitarian foundational assumption; even Immanuel Kant, whose moral theory uncouples happiness and ethics, observes that "happiness is necessarily the wish of every finite rational being, and this, therefore, is inevitably a determining principle of its faculty of desire" (Kant 1788/2004, 24). If humanity fundamentally desires happiness, it is not surprising that we find it hard to think about the purpose and value of life without thinking about happiness.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed takes on the long-standing philosophical affinity for happiness in exposing ways in which the concept of happiness functions to justify oppression and to recast social norms and human goods. Her book offers a wide-ranging critique of happiness as it appears in philosophy, literature, film, and the emerging interdisciplinary field of happiness studies. For Ahmed, the perspectives of those who are outsiders relative to happy communities—including feminist killjoys, unhappy queers, and melancholy migrants—provide a powerful challenge to the happiness archives inherited from the history of philosophy. Perspectives of outsiders illuminate how appeals to happiness, particularly on the part of those seeking to direct or place others somewhere, serve to narrow horizons, maintain injustices, and whitewash discriminatory or exclusionary social practices. Throughout the book, Ahmed builds upon the discussions of happiness, feelings, objects, affects, social goods, and social wrongs in her previous monographs, which include *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), *Strange Encounters* (2000), and *Differences that Matter* (1998).

To begin, the author exposes deeply problematic assumptions in happiness studies, in which indicators of happiness are measured through self-reporting, using instruments that are sometimes referred to as "hedonimeters," on the assumptions that happiness correlates with feeling good and that feelings are objectively measurable, transparent, and normative: for happiness studies researchers, we know how we feel, feelings form the basis of well-being, and "if something is good, we feel good" (6).[1] Happiness studies have "shown," among other things, that women are happier as housewives than as workers and that the primary indicator of happiness is marriage, which translates into a recommendation for maximizing happiness by getting married (6–7, 53). In response, Ahmed argues that it is not the case that happy objects like marriage are goods because they are apt to be associated with positive feelings; rather, objects that are widely perceived as causes of happiness already circulate in communi-

ties as social goods, thus drawing people to happen upon them in the pursuit of happiness. Moreover, moving from measuring good feelings to promoting happiness-causes not only fails to put social ideals into question but also reveals happiness studies as a performative enterprise: "by finding happiness in certain places, it generates those places as being good, as being what should be promoted *as* goods. Correlations are read as causalities, which then become the basis of promotion" (6).

Rather than retooling the concept of happiness or reviving what the wisdom of the ages counsels about the right pursuit of happiness, *The Promise of Happiness* works primarily to reveal the dark side of happiness and suggests that we suspend belief in happiness as a human *telos*. Ahmed shifts away from the classic question "what is happiness?" to pursue the questions "what does happiness do?" and "how does happiness function?" Both within and outside of philosophical discourses, happiness scripts function as straightening devices, as when, for example, parents express a fear of unhappiness in response to a queer child and say "I just want you to be happy, dear, and it is such an unhappy life" (92). Happiness discourses also function to direct individuals into life paths that promote the good of others, as when Rousseau writes—in a passage of *Sophie* that perversely still resonates in the public mind—that the happiness of a woman is found in the happiness of a good man, and thus the basic aims of women are "to be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of women for all time.. .. The further we depart from this principle, the further we shall be from our goal, and all our precepts will fail to secure her happiness or our own" (Rousseau 1762/1993, 393). Ahmed notes that happiness scripts are powerful even when we do not follow them, as the scripts speak a truth that deviating from the well-worn path of the good life can indeed threaten unhappiness for feminists, queers, and others who are willing to risk the consequences of deviation.

The concept of happiness also serves to support inequitable normalcy and restrict alternative possibilities for living, as when programs like *The Happiness Formula* offer a nostalgic image of a small village in which people lack social mobility and stay put over generations as "the happiest possible way of living together" (121). Such nostalgic visions of happiness, Ahmed argues, involve a tacit nostalgia for whiteness, "for a community of white people happily living together with other white people" (121), whereas a more critical feminist perspective teaches that the happiness of a community comprised of only particular types of people can constitute an injustice. The happiness of the straight world can be a form of injustice, for example, when it is based on an unthinking exclusion of queers whose differences are narrated as deprivations. Appeals to happiness also mask injustices in the figure of the happy housewife, whose labors of love enable greater freedom and leisure for men: "how better to justify an unequal distribution of labor than to say that such labor makes people happy?" (50). Such discourses on happiness bring to mind remarks of Simone de Beauvoir, which resonate deeply with Ahmed's main point: "it is not too clear just what the word *happy* really means and still less what true values it may mask. There is no possibility of measuring the happiness of others, and it is always possible to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place them" (Beauvoir 1949/1997, 28).

In one of the most important and eye-opening sections of *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed considers how the promotion of happiness functions in the classic ethical philosophy most closely associated with happiness: utilitarianism. For philosophers who developed utilitarianism in the Victorian era, the philosophy provided a way of defending the British Empire and its colonial rule in India. In the 1800s, "the colonies were widely perceived as costing more than they earned" and a cost-benefit analysis of colonization in economic terms could not justify British imperial rule of India (124). In response, philosophers including Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, Henry Sidgwick, and John Stuart Mill used the principle of maximizing happiness in moral cost-benefit analyses for the purpose of defending the nation's imperial rule.[2] For the Mills especially, the fundamental tenets of utilitarianism, including the greatest happiness principle, the principle of impartiality, the duty of philanthropy, and the cultivation of civilized pleasures and manners, are necessary elements of an ideological defense of colonialism. In utilitarian moral logic, if our basic imperative is to maximize happiness throughout the world, and if the natives are widely miserable in their uncivilized and childlike state of existence, colonialism becomes a moral duty for the British. Colonialism becomes philanthropic self-sacrifice for the colonizer, who brings a gift of European happiness to transform crude and uneducated savages into cultivated and properly morally trained, happy human beings (123–30).

Ahmed's discussion of the role of nineteenth-century utilitarianism in justifying colonialism is an addition to a surprisingly slim postcolonial literature on utilitarianism and empire. It is well known and often acknowledged among North American philosophers that James Mill and John Stuart Mill worked for the East India Company, but to date, connections between utilitarianism and the Mills' work for the East India Company remain largely unexplored. As the editors of *Utilitarianism and Empire* point out (Schultz and Varouxakis 2005), postcolonial and poststructuralist writers have tended to focus on liberalism rather than utilitarianism in critiquing colonial discourses, although we have some key historical works on utilitarianism and imperialism that have influenced postcolonial discourses, such as Eric Stokes's *The English Utilitarians and India* (1959). Ahmed's work, and that of other scholars working on utilitarianism and empire, may change the way we approach and teach utilitarianism, which is typically presented in ethics textbooks as a progressive philosophy developed to systematize a hodgepodge of British laws. Even if progressive social reform is part of the originating purpose of utilitarianism, this moral theory has a dark past, and it merits serious consideration that, for its primary developers, utilitarianism was essential in defending colonial rule of non-European people.

The Promise of Happiness is richly valuable not only for its discussion of utilitarianism but also for its broader deconstruction of the workings of happiness in a range of works of philosophy, literature, and social science. Whereas other feminist theorists also occasionally cast a critical eye toward happiness, or raise consciousness of female unhappiness, Ahmed has produced a volume that is unparalleled in its sustained and extensive exposé of the entanglements between discourses of happiness and oppression. The book enhances feminist philosophical understanding of this classic "master's tool" while reaching beyond philosophical audiences to unmask happiness for a plu-

rality scholars interested in the concept. In this review I have been able to provide only a flavor of the strong cumulative case against happiness artfully developed by Ahmed; I recommend her book not only to feminist philosophers but also to all philosophers.

Notes

1. Works in happiness studies discussed by Ahmed include, among others, Argyle 1987; Frey and Stutzer 2002; Layard 2005; and Nettle 2006.

2. Ahmed includes Jeremy Bentham among thinkers who contributed to a diversity of utilitarian defenses of empire (123). Notably, however, the work of Jennifer Pitts challenges this characterization of Bentham, as Pitts argues that it was primarily James Mill and John Stuart Mill who developed utilitarianism into a rationale for imperialism, whereas Bentham was largely skeptical about the ethical acceptability of colonialism and, in contrast to the Mills, confident about non-European peoples' capabilities for self-governance. Pitts notes, however, that "Bentham's views on conquest, expansion and colonial rule were not entirely consistent, as is to be expected given his remarkably long career" (Pitts 2005, 58).

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