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Article:

Withington, P. (2016) *The art of medicine: Utopia, health, and happiness*. *The Lancet*, 387 (10033). pp. 2084-2085. ISSN 0140-6736

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)30532-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)30532-3)

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Utopia, Health and Happiness

Phil Withington

The anniversaries keep on coming – the death of Shakespeare this year, Luther's Theses next, the defeat of Napoleon last. One that might get lost in the crowd is the first publication of *Utopia*. It was in Leuven in Belgium in 1516 that a clever and ambitious lawyer called Thomas More published a little book, at once playful and provocative, that outlined the society and culture of an imaginary people called the Utopians. The first editions were in Latin and aimed at a select audience – one who would get the many jokes ('Utopia' means 'no place') and be able to recognize the impressive array of classical learning on display (More's primary model was Plato's *The Republic*). But the book quickly became something of a literary phenomenon. It was translated into German in the 1520s and into English, by Ralph Robinson, in 1551. Robinson made another translation in 1556 and this was republished three times in the next eighty years. In 1684 the Whig cleric and historian Gilbert Burnet decided to translate the Latin text anew, into what he called 'modern English'. By this time, other writers were creating their own 'Utopias' and 'Utopianism' was becoming the label for idealized thinking about perfect societies that we know today.

On *Utopia's* 500th birthday it seems apposite to ask what can we learn from this funny and artful text about two of modern life's great preoccupations: health and happiness.

Health is straightforward because More had a section dedicated explicitly to it. Like many passages of *Utopia*, this drew on attitudes and practices that were current in England at the time and gave them a sharp and idealized twist – so that Utopians demonstrated, as it were, the perfected version of contemporary reality. In the case of health, this meant that Utopians upheld all the virtues of the 'humoural medicine' that was then practiced in England. Humoural medicine was inherited from ancient Arabic, Greek and Roman authorities and understood people to be constituted by mixtures of the four humours and their related complexions: bile/choleric, phlegm/phlegmatic, blood/sanguine, black bile/melancholic. Bodily and mental health involved keeping these humours and complexions, and the organs associated with them, in balanced equilibrium: through preventative measures like diet, environment, lifestyle, and good sociability; and through interventionist actions like prescribed medicines and forms of induced purgation (for example bloodletting and vomiting). The Utopians epitomized a number of this system's main characteristics. First, 'health is a sovereign pleasure' (162): it was an end in itself and the basis for what

Utopians took to be the good life.¹ Second, health was maintained not with ‘bitter potions and sour medicines’ but through a diet and lifestyle that was attuned to each person’s physiological and mental dispositions. For Utopians it was better ‘to avoid sickness than to wish for medicines’ and to ‘drive away and put to flight careful griefs than to call for comfort’ (163). They accentuated preventative rather than interactive measures in which ‘the delights of eating and drinking [were] much to be desired, but no other ways than for health’s sake’ (163). Third, it was one in which the supply of good diet was a social achievement and responsibility. Although ‘their soil be not very fruitful nor their air very wholesome, yet against the air they so defend them with temperate diet, and so order and husband their ground with diligent travail, that in no country is greater increase in corn and cattle, nor men’s bodies of longer life and subject or apt to fewer diseases’ (164).

What we learn, in short, is that while Utopians did not have the medical technologies and pharmaceuticals of modern medicine, what they did have was an integrated and holistic conception of ‘health’ that was broadly in line with medical assumptions at the time; assumptions that might – just might – give modern readers food for thought.

‘Happiness’ in *Utopia* is much more complicated than ‘health’ and requires us to think of the book less as a stable and definitive ‘thing’, more as a text that was altered each time it was translated or re-edited. Doing this reveals something of a literary puzzle. It emerges that ‘happiness’ is absent from the first English translations of *Utopia*, by Ralph Robinson in the 1550s, and remained absent in new editions of his translation in the seventeenth century. But when Gilbert Burnet made his new translation of *Utopia* in 1684, ‘happiness’ appears no less than nineteen times. For eighteenth-century readers, that is, *Utopia*, as a discussion about what makes an ideal society was also a book about ‘happiness’. This was most definitely not the case for readers of *Utopia* before 1684.

Explaining this change requires looking at the more general history of the word ‘happiness’. When Robinson made his translations of *Utopia* in the 1550s, happiness was a relatively rare English word with a quite restricted and limited set of meanings. It derived from the Old Norse noun ‘hap’, meaning luck or fortune, and was in all likelihood coined in the mid-15th century (Geoffrey Chaucer did not know it, for example).² For writers of

¹ All quotations from *Utopia* are taken from Thomas More, *Utopia*, edited and introduced by David Harris Sacks (London, 1556; London, 1999).

² Phil Withington, ‘The Invention of Happiness’ in Michael Braddick and Joanna Innes, eds., *Suffering and Happiness in England 1550-1850: Narratives and Representations. A Collection to Honour Paul Slack* (Oxford, 2016, forthcoming).

Robinson's generation the semantics of 'happiness' were largely informed by this provenance: happiness indicated the quality and state of hap – i.e. fortune – or the circumstances and phenomena that exemplified such a condition. As Thomas Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1561) put it:

For since ill is contrary to good, and good to ill, it is (in a manner) necessary by contrary and a certain counterpoise the one should ... strengthen the other, and where the one wants or increases, the other to want or increase also: because no contrary is without his other contrary. Who knows not that there should be no Justice in the world, were it not for wrongs? No stoutness of courage, were there not fainthearted? Nor continence, were there not incontinency? Nor health, were there not sickness? Nor truth, were there not lies? Nor happiness, were there not mischances?

Between the 1550s and the 1680s, however, the word accumulated a range of concepts and meanings that enabled Burnet to use it promiscuously – even paradigmatically – in his 'modern' translation of More's Latin text. First, happiness became the favoured way to render 'felicitas' in English, rendering the English word 'felicity' – the usual way to describe worldly contentment in the fifteenth century – all but obsolete. As a result, ideas and sensations previously understood as felicitous were now described as happiness. Second, while medieval writers talked in terms of 'bliss' and 'blessedness' to describe their relationship with God, their descendants increasingly spoke in terms of spiritual and everlasting happiness. Third, 'happiness' also became the preferred term to translate classical ideas of *eudaimonia* and *summum bonum*: on the one hand, the realization and fulfillment of perfect and 'natural' selfhood; on the other hand, the overarching ideal – or 'sovereign good' – upon which the good life, the good person, and the good afterlife is based.

It is possible to imagine the new word 'happiness', therefore, as a kind of linguistic glacier, slowly moving along the face of the earth accumulating concepts and connotations as it went. The landscape left behind amounted to the most significant transition of all: the transformation of happiness from the product of hap and fortune to the outcome of art and deliberation. This was a conceptual shift that the *Utopias* of the 1550s and 1680s beautifully capture. Important in this respect is that Utopians were a people who embodied reason and control: over themselves, over each other, and over their environment. For Robinson in the 1550s, More's imaginary society would have signified the antithesis of happiness, which was a term still rooted in ideas of luck and happenstance. Utopia represented the deliberate triumph of man over capricious fortune: Utopians would never

have heard of the term. Burnet, in contrast, inherited a different sense of happiness: a complex word that had transmuted from its stem hap into a term of ‘art’ or ‘science’. In the brave new world of modern English, that is, ‘happiness’ had become a state or condition to be deliberately pursued, calculated and measured rather than left to the outcome of chance.

This was, in fact, precisely what the most sustained and focussed discussion of happiness in the seventeenth century argued. In *The Art of Happiness* (1619) Francis Rous argued that happiness of whatever kind was too important to be left to hap: it should be achieved through ‘art’. Whereas Robinson used a variety of words to translate the achievements and priorities of the Utopians – felicity, the wealth of the peoples, commonwealth, perfect blessedness, joy and mirth, pleasure – Burnet could use what for him was now the master term: happiness.

We can see, then, that the lesson to be learnt from *Utopia* about health is relatively straightforward: while pre-moderns may not have possessed the medical knowledge and technologies we possess today, their holistic view of health and the preventative responsibilities of both individuals and societies are values to which we increasingly, and increasingly vainly, aspire. The lessons about happiness are less obvious. On the one hand, our modern obsession with happiness – described by William Davies as ‘a measurable, visible, improvable entity’ that ‘has now penetrated the citadel of global economic management’ – might well be dated from Burnet’s *Utopia* and the cultural changes that turned happiness from a term of hap into a work of art.³ Certainly ‘how to be happy’ books like Paul Dolan’s *Happiness by Design* are not too removed from Francis Rous’ study, nor the science of happiness promulgated by the likes of Richard Layard.⁴ On the other hand, taking the story back in time reveals that ‘happiness’ has not always been as conceptually stable as contemporary commentators, or indeed historians, assume – that, indeed, it was only in the sixteenth century that happiness began to acquire the meanings with which we associate it today.

The different translations of More’s *Utopia* point, finally, to the power and importance of words more generally: how they change in meaning and significance over time, and how words that for one generation are obvious and paradigmatic are, for another, unknown or mean something completely

³ William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being* (London, 2015), 3.

⁴ Paul Dolan, *Happiness by Design: Finding Pleasure and Purpose in Everyday Life* (London, 2014); Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, 2nd edition (London, 2011).

different. Although we are often unaware of them, these changes matter. After all, it is precisely words like health and happiness that define what we do today, and why and how we do it.

Health and Happiness. Phil Withington. The anniversaries keep on coming – the death of Shakespeare this year, Luther’s Theses next, the defeat of Napoleon last. Health is straightforward because More had a section dedicated explicitly to it. Like many passages of Utopia, this drew on attitudes and practices that were current in England at the time and gave them a sharp and idealized twist – so that Utopians demonstrated, as it were, the perfected version of contemporary reality. In the case of health, this meant that Utopians upheld all the virtues of the “humoural medicine” that was then practiced in England. Phil Withington. Published 2016. Art. Save to Library. Create Alert. Health and Happiness are intertwined one is not likely to be consistent without the other. Health and Happiness is a page I created in order to share news and information on becoming and stay See more. Community See all. 368,604 people like this. 359,144 people follow this. About See all. Contact Health and Happiness on Messenger.