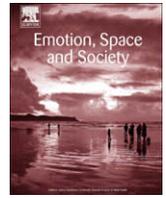




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Sociable happiness

Sara Ahmed*

Media and Communication, Goldsmiths College, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how happiness is directed towards objects and directs us towards objects. Reflecting on happiness as the restriction of sociability, the paper considers the family as a happy object not because it causes happiness, but because of the demand that we share an orientation toward the family as a good thing. Those who are not orientated in the right way become 'affect aliens' and kill-joys.

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Emotions are quite sociable. We are moved after all by the proximity of others. We feel with and for others. Sociability can even be a feeling: when you feel sociable you want to be with others. Sociability implies not only the existence of proximate others, but also the enjoyment of proximity. The sociable person likes the company of others. In this paper, I want to consider happiness as a form of sociability rather than the happiness of sociability. It is a truism that happiness is happiest when it is shared with others. And yet does happiness simply bring us together? A social bond might be created if the same things make us happy. In turn, those who are not made happy by the same things might threaten our happiness. If emotions are sociable, then sociability might need to be theorised in terms of the restriction as well as enjoyment of company. Happiness might generate the very company we like as a company of likes.

How can we think about the sociability of good feeling? My starting point is not to assume there is something called affect (or for that matter emotion) that stands apart or has autonomy, as if it corresponds to an object in the world. I begin with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into the world, and what I have called 'the drama of contingency', how we are touched by what is near (Ahmed, 2006: 124). It is useful to note that the etymology of 'happiness' relates precisely to the question of contingency: it is from the Middle English 'hap', suggesting chance. One of the early meanings of happiness in English relates to the idea of being lucky, or favoured by fortune, or being fortunate. Happiness would be about what happens, where 'the what' is

something good. This meaning may now seem archaic: we may be more used to thinking of happiness as an effect of what you do rather, as a reward for hard work, rather than as what happens to you. But I find this original meaning useful, as it focuses our attention on the 'worldly' question of happenings.

What is the relation between the 'what' in 'what happens' and the 'what' that makes us happy? Empiricism provides us with a useful way of addressing this question, given its concern with 'what's what'. Take the work of John Locke. *He argues that what is good is what is 'apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us' (Locke, 1997: 216)*. So we judge something to be good or bad according to how it affects us, whether it gives us pleasure or pain. Locke suggests that 'he loves grapes it is no more, but that the taste of the grapes delights him' (1997: 216). So we could say that an object becomes happy if it affects us in a good way. For Locke, we place our happiness in different things (246), which means different things become good for us. We turn towards those things that make us happy. When things make us happy, they become part of our lived horizon. The bodily horizon can thus be thought of as a horizon of likes.

Note the doubling of positive affect in Locke's example: we love what tastes delightful. To be affected by an object in a good way is to have an orientation towards an object as being good. Happiness can thus be described as *intentional* in the phenomenological sense (directed towards objects), as well as being *affective* (contact with objects). To bring these arguments together we might say that happiness is an orientation towards the objects we come into contact with. We move towards and away from objects through how we are affected by them. This does not mean there is always a correspondence between objects and feelings. We have all probably experienced what I call 'unattributed happiness'; you feel

* Tel.: +44 20 7717 2964; fax: +44 20 7919 7616.
E-mail address: s.ahmed@gold.ac.uk

happy, not quite knowing why, and the feeling can be catchy, as a kind of brimming over that exceeds what you encounter. The feeling can lift or elevate any proximate object, which is not to say that the feeling will survive an encounter with anything. It has always interested me that when we become conscious of feeling happy (when the feeling becomes an object of thought), happiness can often recede or become anxious. Happiness can arrive in a moment, and be lost by virtue of its recognition.

I would suggest that happiness involves a specific kind of intentionality, what I would call 'end orientated'. It is not just that we can be happy *about* something, but some things become happy *for us*, if we imagine they will bring happiness *to us*. Happiness is often described as 'what' we aim for, as an end-point, or even an end-in-itself. Classically, happiness has been considered as an end rather than as a means. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1998: 1) describes happiness as the Chief Good, as 'that which all things aim at'. Happiness is what we 'choose always for its own sake' (8).

We don't have to agree with the argument that happiness is an end-in-itself to understand the implications of what it means for happiness to be thought in these terms. If happiness is the end of all ends, then all other things become means to happiness. As Aristotle describes, we choose other things 'with a view to happiness, conceiving that through their instrumentality we shall be happy' (8). Things become good, or acquire their value as goods, insofar as they point towards happiness. If objects provide a means for making us happy, then in directing ourselves towards this or that object, we are aiming somewhere else: towards a happiness that is presumed to follow. The temporality of this following does matter. Happiness is what would come after. Given this, happiness is directed towards certain objects, which point towards that which is not yet present. Happiness does not reside in objects; *it is promised through proximity to certain objects*. So the promise of happiness – if you do this, then happiness is what follows – is what makes things seem 'promising', which means that the promise of happiness is not in the thing itself.

Happiness thus directs us to certain objects, as if they are the necessary ingredients for a good life. What makes this argument different to John Locke's account of loving grapes because they taste delightful, is that I am suggesting that the judgment that certain objects are 'happy' is already made, before they are even encountered. Certain objects are attributed as the conditions for happiness so that we arrive 'at' them with an expectation of how we will be affected by them, which affects how they affect us, even in the moment they fail to live up to our expectations. Happiness is an expectation of what follows. For instance, the child might be asked to imagine happiness by imagining 'happy events' in the future, such as a wedding day, the 'happiness day of your life'.

So when we find happy objects, we do not just find them anywhere. The promise of happiness directs life in some ways rather than others. To share in the happiness of others is how we come to share a certain direction. We could even say that groups cohere around a shared orientation towards some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of happiness. The fan club or hobby group make explicit what is implicit about social life: *that we tend to like those who like the things we like*. The social bond is thus rather sensational. If the same objects make us happy – which means investing in the same objects 'as if' they make us happy – then we would be directed or orientated in the same way. Happy objects accumulate positive affective value as social goods through being passed around.

Is happiness itself transmitted through such objects? If we were to answer this question with a 'yes', then we might suggest that happiness is contagious. David Hume's approach to moral emotions in the eighteenth century rested precisely on a contagious model of happiness. He suggests that 'others enter into the same humour and catch the sentiment, by a contagion or natural sympathy' and

that cheerfulness is the most communicative of emotions: 'the flame spreads through the whole circle; and the most sullenly and remorse are often caught by it' (Hume, 1975: 250–251, see also Blackman, 2008). A number of scholars have recently taken up the idea of affects as contagious, drawing primarily on the work of the psychologist of affect Silvan Tomkins (Brennan, 2004; Gibbs, 2001; Kosofsky, 2003; Probyn, 2005). As Anna Gibbs describes: 'Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another (2001: 1).

Thinking of affects as contagious helps challenge the idea that affect resides within an individual body, by showing how bodies are affected by what is around them. A question remains: how are we affected by what comes near? The model of affective contagion tends to treat affect as something that is transmitted smoothly from body to body, sustaining integrity in being passed around. I want to explore how we are affected differently by the things we come into contact with, which might include other bodies. To be affected by another does not mean being affected in the same way as another, or that an affect is simply transmitted, creating a shared feeling or atmosphere.

Consider the opening sentence of Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*: 'Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and "felt the atmosphere"' (2004: 1). Brennan writes very beautifully about the atmosphere 'getting into the individual', using what I have called an 'outside in' model, very much part of the intellectual history of crowd psychology and the sociology of emotion (Ahmed, 2004: 9). However, later in the introduction she makes an observation, which involves a quite different model. Brennan suggests that: 'if I feel anxiety when I enter the room, then that will influence what I perceive or receive by way of an "impression"'. I agree. Anxiety is sticky: rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up whatever comes near. Anxiety gives us a certain kind of angle on what comes near. Of course, anxiety is one feeling state amongst others. If bodies do not arrive in neutral, if we are always in some way or another moody, then what we will receive as an impression will always depend on our affective situation. This second argument suggests that how we arrive, how we enter this room or that room, will affect what impressions we receive. After all, to receive is to act. To receive an impression is to make an impression.

Think about experiences of alienation. I have suggested that happiness is attributed to certain objects that circulate as social goods. When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated – out of line with an affective community – when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good. The gap between the affective value of an object and how we experience an object can involve a range of affects, which are directed by the modes of explanation we offer to fill this gap. If we are disappointed by something, we generate explanations of why that thing is disappointing. Such explanations can involve an anxious narrative of self-doubt (why I am not made happy by this, what is wrong with me?) or a narrative of rage, where the object that is 'supposed' to make us happy is attributed as the cause of disappointment, which can lead to a rage directed towards those that promised us happiness through the elevation of such objects as good. We might even become strangers, or affect aliens, at such moments.

We can also feel alienated in rooms when the affective gestures of the room do not correspond to our feeling states. Take the example of laughter in the cinema. How many times have I sunk desperately into my chair when that laughter has been expressed at points I find far from amusing! We do not always notice when others sink. One can feel unjustly interpellated on such occasions: the gestures of discomfort and alienation do not register; they do not affect the collective impression made by the laughter. To an outsider, it may simply appear that the audience shared an

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