**INTRODUCTION**

**What is Wrong with Happiness?**

The question in the title would baffle many a reader. And it is meant to baffle – to prompt one to pause and think. To pause in what? In our pursuit of happiness, which – as most readers would probably agree – is on our minds most of the time, fills the greater part of our lives, cannot and will not slow down, let alone stop...at least no longer than for a (fleeting, always fleeting) moment.

Why is this question likely to baffle? Because to ask ‘what is wrong with happiness?’ is like asking what is hot about ice or malodorous in a rose. Ice being incompatible with heat, and rose with stench, such questions assume the feasibility of an inconceivable coexistence (where there is heat, there can’t be ice). How, indeed, could something be wrong with happiness? Is not ‘happiness’ a synonym of the absence of wrong? Of the very impossibility of its presence? Of the impossibility of all and any wrong?!

And yet this is a question asked by Michael Rustin, as it has been by quite a few worried people before and probably will be in the future – and Rustin explains why: societies like ours, moved by millions of men and women pursuing happiness, are getting richer, but it is far from clear whether they are getting happier. It looks as if the human pursuit of happiness may well prove to be self-defeating. All the available empirical data suggest that among the populations of affluent societies there may be no connection...
at all between rising affluence, believed to be the principal vehicle
of a happy life, and greater happiness!

The close correlation between economic growth and enhanced
happiness is widely believed to be one of the least questionable
truths, perhaps even the most self-evident. Or at least, this is what
the best-known and most respected political leaders, their advisers
and spokespeople, tell us — and what we, who tend to rely on their
opinions, repeat without pause for reflection or second thoughts.
They and we act on the assumption that the correlation is genuine.
We want them to act on that belief still more resolutely and ener­
getically — and we wish them luck, hoping that their success (that
is, adding to our incomes, to our disposable cash, to the volume
of our possessions, assets and wealth) will add quality to our lives
and make us feel happier than we are.

According to virtually all the research reports scrutinized and
summed up by Rustin, ‘improvements in living standards in
nations such as the United States and Britain are associated with
no improvement — indeed a slight decline — in subjective well­
being.’ Robert Lane has found that despite the massive, spectacu­
ar rise of American incomes in the postwar years, the self-reported
happiness of Americans has declined. And Richard Layard has
concluded from a cross-national comparison of data that although
the indices of reported satisfaction with life grow by and large in
parallel with the level of national product, they rise significantly
only up to the point where want and poverty give way to the
satisfaction of essential, ‘survival’ needs — and stop climbing or
tend to slow down drastically with further rises in affluence. On
the whole, only a few percentage points separate countries with
an average annual income per capita between 20,000 and 35,000
dollars from those below the barrier of 10,000 dollars. The strat­
 egy of making people happier through raising their income does
not seem to work. On the other hand, one social index that seems
to be growing most spectacularly in line with the level of affluence,
indeed as fast as subjective well-being was promised and
expected to rise, has so far been the incidence of criminality: of
burglary and car theft, drug trafficking, economic graft and busi­
ness corruption. And of an uncomfortable and uneasy sensation
of uncertainty, hard to bear, let alone to live with permanently.
Of a diffuse and ‘ambient’ uncertainty, ubiquitous yet seemingly
unanchored, unspecified and for that reason all the more vexing
and aggravating . . .

Such findings feel profoundly disappointing, considering that it
was precisely an increase in the overall volume of happiness ‘of
the greatest number’ — an increase led by economic growth and a
rise in disposable cash and credit — that was declared, through the
last several decades, to be the main purpose guiding the policies
set by our governments, as well as the ‘life politics’ strategies of
our, their subjects. It also served as the main yardstick for mea­
suring the success and failure of governmental policies, and of our
pursuit of happiness. We could even say that our modern era
started in earnest with the proclamation of the universal human
right to the pursuit of happiness, and from the promise to demon­
strate its superiority over the forms of life it replaced by rendering
that pursuit less cumbersome and arduous, while being more
effective. We may ask, then, whether the means suggested to
achieve such a demonstration (principally, continuous economic
growth as measured by the rise in ‘gross national product’) were
wrongly chosen? If so, what exactly was wrong with that choice?

The sole common denominator of the otherwise variegated
products of human bodily and mental labour being the market
price they command, the statistics of the ‘gross national product’
aimed at grasping the growth or decline of the products’ avail­
ability record the amount of money changing hands in the course
of buying and selling transactions. Whether or not the indices of
GNP acquit themselves well in their overt task, there is still a
question of whether they should be treated, as they tend to be, as
indicators of the growth or decline of happiness. It is assumed
that as the spending of money goes up, it must coincide with a
similar upward movement in the happiness of spenders, but this is
not immediately obvious. If, for instance, the pursuit of happiness
as such, known to be an absorbing, energy-consuming, risk­
fraught and nerve-taxing activity, leads to a greater incidence of
mental depression, more money is likely to be spent on anti­
depressants. If, thanks to an increase in car ownership, the fre­
cency of car accidents and the number of accident victims grow,
so too does expenditure on car repairs and medical treatment.
If the quality of tap-water goes on deteriorating all over the place,
more and more money will be spent on buying bottled water to be
carried in our rucksacks or travel bags on all trips, long or short
(we will be asked to swill the contents of the bottle on the spot
whenever we approach this side of the airport security check, and
need to buy another bottle on the other side of the checkpoint).
In all such cases, and a multitude of similar instances, more money changes hands, boosting the GNP figures. This is certain. But a parallel growth in the happiness of consumers of antidepressants, victims of car accidents, carriers of water bottles, and, indeed, of all those many people who worry about bad luck and fear their turn to suffer might come – that is far less obvious.

All that should not really be news. As Jean-Claude Michéa recalled recently in his timely rewriting of the convoluted history of the ‘modern project’,4 as long ago as 18 March 1968, in the heat of the presidential campaign, Robert Kennedy launched a scathing attack on the lie on which the GNP-bound measure of happiness rests:

Our GNP takes into account in its calculations the air pollution, tobacco advertising and ambulances riding to collect the wounded from our motorways. It registers the costs of the security systems which we install to protect our homes and the prisons in which we lock up those who manage to break into them. It entails the destruction of our sequoia forests and their replacement through sprawling and chaotic urbanization. It includes the production of napalm, nuclear arms and armed vehicles used by police to stifle urban unrest. It records...television programmes that glorify violence in order to sell toys to children. On the other hand, GNP does not note the health of our children, quality of our education or gaiety of our games. It does not measure the beauty of our poetry and the strength of our marriages. It says nothing about our compassion and dedication to our country. In a word, the GNP measures everything, except what makes life worth the pain of living it.

Robert Kennedy was murdered a few weeks after publishing this fiery indictment and declaring his intention to restore the importance of things that make life worth living; so we will never know whether he would have tried, let alone succeeded, in making his words flesh had he been elected President of the United States. What we do know, though, is that in the forty years that have passed since, there have been few if any signs of his message having been heard, understood, embraced and remembered – let alone any move on the part of our elected representatives to disown and repudiate the pretence of the commodity markets to the role of the royal road to a meaningful and happy life, or evidence of any inclination on our part to reshape our life strategies accordingly.

Observers suggest that about half the goods crucial for human happiness have no market price and can’t be purchased in shops. Whatever your cash and credit standing, you won’t find in a shopping mall love and friendship, the pleasures of domesticity, the satisfaction that comes from caring for loved ones or helping a neighbour in distress, the self-esteem to be drawn from work well done, gratifying the ‘workmanship instinct’ common to us all, the appreciation, sympathy and respect of workmates and other people with whom one associates; you won’t find there freedom from the threats of disregard, contempt, snubs and humiliation. Moreover, earning enough money to afford those goods that can only be had through the shops is a heavy tax on the time and energy available to obtain and enjoy non-commercial and non-marketable goods like the ones listed above. It may easily happen, and frequently does, that the losses exceed the gains and the capacity of increased income to generate happiness is overtaken by the unhappiness caused by a shrinking access to the goods which ‘money can’t buy’.

Consumption takes time (as does shopping), and the sellers of consumer goods are naturally interested in tapering to a bare minimum the time dedicated to the enjoyable act of consuming. Simultaneously, they are interested in cutting down as far as possible, or eliminating altogether, those necessary activities that occupy much time but bring few marketing profits. In view of their frequency in commercial catalogues, promises in the descriptions of the new products on offer – like ‘absolutely no effort required’, ‘no skills called for’, ‘you will enjoy [music, views, delights of the palate, the restored cleanliness of your blouse etc.] in minutes’ or ‘in just one touch’ – seem to assume a convergence in the interests of sellers and buyers. Promises like these are covert/oblique admissions that the sellers of goods would not wish their buyers to spend too much time enjoying them, so wasting time that could be used for more shopping escapades – but evidently they must also be a very reliable selling point.

It must have been found that prospective customers wish for quick results and only a momentary engagement of their mental and physical
faculties—probably to vacate time for more attractive alternatives. If cans can be opened with a less ‘bad for you’ kind of effort thanks to a new miraculously ingenious electronic can-opener, more time will be left to spend in a gym exercising with gadgets promising a ‘good for you’ variety of exertion. But whatever the gains in such an exchange, their impact on the sum total of happiness is anything but unambiguous.

Laura Potter embarked on her ingenious exploration of all sorts of waiting rooms expecting that she would find there ‘impatient, disgruntled, red-faced people cursing each lost millisecond’—fulminating at the need to wait for whatever ‘urgent business’ brought them there. With our ‘cult of instant gratification’, she mused, many of us would ‘have lost the ability to wait’:

We live in an era where ‘waiting’ has become a dirty word. We’ve gradually eradicated (as much as possible) the need to wait for anything, and our new, up-to-the-second adjective is ‘instant’. We can no longer spare a meagre 12 minutes for a pan of rice to boil, so a time-saving two-minute microwavable version has been created. We can’t be bothered to wait for Mr or Mrs Right to come along, so we speed date ... In our time-pressed lives, it seems that the 21st-century Briton no longer has time to wait for anything.

Much to her surprise (and perhaps that of most of us), however, Laura Potter found a very different picture. Wherever she went, she sensed the same feeling: ‘the wait was a pleasure ... Waiting seemed to have become a luxury, a window in our tightly scheduled lives. In our “now” culture of BlackBerrys, laptops and mobile phones, “waiters” viewed the waiting room as a place of refuge.’ Perhaps the waiting room, Potter concludes, reminds us of the intensely pleasurable, alas forgotten, art of relaxing ...

The pleasures of relaxation are not the only ones to have been laid at the altar of a life hurried for the sake of saving time to chase other things. When the effects that were once attained thanks to our own ingenuity, dedication and hard-learned skills are ‘outsourced’ to a gadget requiring only a swish of a credit card and a push of a button, something that used to make many people happy and was probably vital for everybody’s happiness is lost on the way: pride in ‘work well done’, in dexterity, smartness and skill, in a daunting task performed, an indomitable obstacle over-
plate in no time, and then looked wistfully at mine, still almost full. Each time it happened, I passed my strawberries to him. And you know', so Maslow concluded the story, 'I remember those strawberries tasting better in his mouth than in mine ...' Markets have flawlessly spotted the opportunity of capitalizing on the impulse to self-sacrifice, that faithful companion of love and friendship. The willingness to self-sacrifice has been commercialized, just like most other needs or desires whose gratification has been acknowledged as indispensable for human happiness (a Cassandra of our days would advise us to be wary of markets even when bringing gifts ...). Self-sacrifice now means mostly, and preferably exclusively, parting with a large or possibly yet larger sum of money: an act that can be duly recorded in the GNP statistics.

To conclude: pretending that the volume and depth of human happiness can be taken care of and properly served by fixing attention on just one index – GNP – is grossly misleading. When it is made into a principle of governance, such a pretense may become harmful as well, bringing consequences opposite to those intended and allegedly pursued.

Once life-enhancing goods start to move from the non-monetary realm to the commodity market, there is no stopping them; the movement tends to develop its own momentum and becomes self-propelling and self-accelerating, diminishing yet further the supply of goods that by their nature can only be produced personally and can only flourish in the setting of intense and intimate human relationships. The less possible it is to offer to others goods of the latter kind, goods 'that money can’t buy', or the less willingness there is to cooperate with others in their production (a willingness to cooperate is often greeted as the most satisfying good that can be offered), the deeper are the feelings of guilt and the unhappiness that result. A wish to atone and to redeem the guilt pushes the sinner to seek yet more expensive, buyable substitutes for what is no longer offered to the people with whom their life is lived, and so to spend yet more hours away from them in order to earn more money. The chance to produce and share the sorely missed goods which one is too busy and too exhausted to conjure up and to offer is thereby yet further impoverished.

It looks therefore as if the growth of 'national product' is a rather poor measure of the growth of happiness. It may be seen instead as a sensitive indicator of the strategies, wayward and misleading as they may be, which in our pursuit of happiness we have been forced, persuaded or cajoled to adopt – or manoeuvred into adopting. What we can learn from GNP statistics is how many of the routes followed by seekers of happiness have been already redesigned to lead through the shops, those prime sites for money to change hands – whether or not the strategies adopted by happiness-seekers differ in other ways (and they do differ), and whether or not the routes they suggest vary in other ways (and they do vary). We can deduce from those statistics how strong and how widespread is the belief that there is an intimate link between happiness and the volume and quality of consumption: an assumption that underlies all shop-mediated strategies. What we can also learn is how successfully markets manage to deploy that hidden assumption as a profit-churning engine – by identifying happiness-generating consumption with consumption of the objects and services offered for sale in the shops. At this point, marketing success rebounds as a sorry plight, and ultimately as an abominable failure of the self-same pursuit of happiness it had been presumed to serve.

One of the most seminal effects of equating happiness with shopping for commodities which are hoped to generate happiness is to stave off the chance that the pursuit of happiness will ever grind to a halt. The pursuit of happiness will never end – its end would be equal to the end of happiness as such. The secure state of happiness not being attainable, it is only the chase of that stub­

bornly elusive target that can keep the runners (however moder­ately) happy. On that track leading to happiness, there is no finishing line. The ostensible means turn into ends: the sole available consolation for the elusiveness of the dreamed-of and coveted ‘state of happiness’ is to stay on course; as long as one stays in the race, neither falling from exhaustion nor being shown a red card, the hope of eventual victory is kept alive.

By subtly shifting the dream of happiness from the vision of a full and fully gratifying life to the search for means believed to be needed for such a life to be reached, markets see to it that the pursuit can never end. The targets of the search replace each other with mind-boggling speed. It is fully understood by the pursuers (and, of course, by their zealous coaches and guides) that if the pursuit is to achieve its declared purpose, the pursued targets have
to quickly fall out of use, lose their lustre, attraction and power of seduction, be abandoned and replaced – and many times over – by other, ‘new and improved’ targets, doomed to suffer a similar lot. Imperceptibly, the vision of happiness shifts from an anticipated after-purchase bliss to the act of shopping that precedes it – an act overflowing with joyous anticipation; joyous for a hope as yet pristine, untarnished and undashed.

Thanks to the diligence and expertise of the advertising copywriters, such life-and-(high)street wisdom tends nowadays to be acquired at a tender age, well before there is a first chance to hear subtle philosophical meditations on the nature of happiness and the ways to a happy life, let alone a chance to study them and reflect on their message. We may learn, for instance, from the first page of the ‘Fashion’ section of a widely read and well-respected magazine, that Liberty, a twelve-year-old schoolgirl, ‘has already discovered how to make her wardrobe work well’. Topshop is her ‘favourite store’, and for a good reason: in her own words, ‘even though it’s really expensive, I know that I’ll come out with something fashionable.’ What the frequent visits to Topshop mean for her is first and foremost a comforting feeling of safety: Topshop’s buyers confront the risks of failure on her behalf and take the responsibility for the choice on themselves. Once she buys in that shop, the probability of making a mistake is reduced to nil, or almost. Liberty does not trust her own taste and discretion sufficiently to buy (let alone don in public) just what has caught her eye; but things she bought in that shop she can parade in public with confidence – confident of recognition, approval and, in the end, of the admiration and high status that closely follow it: all those feel-good things which parading clothes and accessories in public is intended to achieve. Says Liberty of the shorts she bought last January: ‘I hated them. I did love them but then I got them home and I thought they were too short. But then I read Vogue and I saw this lady in shorts – and they were my shorts from Topshop! Ever since then I’ve been inseparable from them.’ This is what the label, the logo, and the location can do for their customers: guide them on the confusingly twisted, booby-trapped road to happiness. The happiness of being issued with a publicly recognized and respected certificate confirming (authoritatively!) that one is on the right track, is still in the chase, and is allowed to keep one’s hopes alive.

The snag is: how long will the certificate stay valid? You can bet that the ‘ever since’ of ‘being inseparable’, true as they were in April 2007, won’t last long in Liberty’s long life. The lady wearing short shorts will not appear in Vogue a few issues later. The certificate of public approval will reveal its small print and abominably brief validity span. You can even bet that on her next visit to Topshop Liberty will not find similar shorts – even if she, improbably, were to seek them. But you would be a hundred per cent sure to win if you bet that Liberty’s visits to Topshop would continue. She will go there again and again. Why? First, she has learned to trust the wisdom of whoever in that shop decides what to put on the shelves and trolleys on the day of her visit; she trusts them to sell things complete with a guarantee of public approval and social recognition. Second, she knows already from her brief yet intense experience that what has been put on shelves and trolleys one day won’t be there a few days later, and that to update the fast-ageing knowledge of what ‘is (still) in’ and what ‘is (already) out’ and to find out what is very much ‘on’ today, though it was not at all on display yesterday, one must visit the shop frequently enough to make sure that the wardrobe goes on ‘working well’ without interruption.

Unless you find a label, a logo, a shop you can trust, you are confused and may be lost. Labels, logos, shops are the few remaining safe havens amidst the ominous rapids that threaten your safety; the few shelters of certainty in a vexingly uncertain world. On the other hand, however, if you’ve invested your trust in a label, a logo, or a shop, you have mortgaged your future. The short-term certificates of ‘being in’ or ‘up to date’ will continue to be issued only as long as you keep your investment invested. And the people behind the label, the logo, or the shop will see to it that the timespan of the validity of the newly issued certificates will be no longer than the validity of the old ones, if not still shorter.

Obviously, mortgaging one’s future is a serious business and a serious decision to take. Liberty is twelve years old and has a long future ahead, but however long or short one’s future might be, pursuing happiness in a consumer-market society of labels, logos and shops requires that it be mortgaged. The celebrated actor featuring in a full-page advertisement of the Samsonite company is much older than Liberty, but his future seems similarly
mortgaged; though, as is proper for his age, the mortgage contract was signed well in the past (or, at least, this is what the advertisement insinuates). The title of the advertising copy, ‘Life’s a journey’, sets the stage for the bold type, partly capital-letters message: ‘CHARACTER is all about retaining a strong IDENTITY’ (note the reference to ‘gravity’ in the name of a travelling accessory boasting of its lightness) – an image which the copywriters, lest it won’t be fully digested, hasten to explain: the celebrated actor, they say, ‘is making a statement as he travels with Samsonite Graviton’. They don’t say anything about the contents of the statement, though. They hope, certainly not without reason, that to a seasoned reader the contents will be unambiguous without further explanation. The meaning of the statement will be easily grasped: ‘I am returning from the John Lewis department store where Gravitons have just been put on sale. I’ve bought one in the company of other people with gravity, and so increased (retained?) a specific gravity of my own.’

For the celebrated actor, as for Liberty, having and displaying publicly things carrying the right label and/or logo and obtained in the right shop is primarily a matter of obtaining and retaining the social standing which they guard or to which they aspire. Social standing means nothing unless it has been socially recognized; that is, unless the person in question is approved by the right kind of ‘society’ (each category of social standing has its own proper codes of law and judges) as its rightful and deserving member – as ‘one of us’.

Labels, logos and brands are the terms of the language of recognition. What is hoped to be and as a rule is to be ‘recognized’ with the help of brands and logos is what has been discussed in recent years under the name of identity. The operation described above stands behind the preoccupation with ‘identity’ accorded such centrality in our society of consumers. Showing ‘character’ and having one’s ‘identity’ recognized, as well as finding and obtaining the means to assure the achievement of these interrelated purposes, become central preoccupations in the pursuit of a happy life.

Though it has remained an important issue and an absorbing task since the early modern passage from an ‘ascription’ to an ‘achievement’ society (that is, from a society in which people were ‘born into’ their identities, to a society in which construction of identity is their task and responsibility), ‘identity’ has now shared the fate of other life accoutrements: devoid of a direction determined once and for all, and no longer meant to leave behind solid and indestructible traces, identity is now expected and preferred to be easy to melt and suitable for recasting in moulds of different shapes. Once a ‘whole life’ project, identity has now turned into an attribute of the moment. Once designed, it is no longer ‘built to last forever’, but needs to be continuously assembled and disassembled. Each of those two apparently contradictory operations carries equal importance and tends to be equally absorbing.

Instead of demanding an advance payment and a lifelong subscription with no cancellation clause, the manipulation of identity is now an activity akin to the ‘pay as you watch’ (or ‘as you phone’) facility. It is still a constant preoccupation, but now split into a multitude of exceedingly short (and thanks to progress in marketing techniques, ever shorter) efforts, able to be absorbed by even the most fleeting attention; a succession of sudden and frenetic spurts of activity which is neither predesigned nor predictable, but has instead immediate effects that follow comfortably closely and do not threaten to outstay their welcome.

The skills required to meet the challenge of the liquid modern reprocessing and recycling manipulation of identity are akin to those of a juggler, or, more to the point, to the artfulness and dexterity of a prestidigitator. The practice of such skills has been brought within the reach of an ordinary, run-of-the-mill consumer by the expedient of simulacrum – a phenomenon (in the memorable description of Jean Baudrillard) similar to psychosomatic ailments, known to cancel the distinction between ‘things as they are’ and ‘things as they pretend to be’, between ‘reality’ and ‘illusion’, or between the ‘true state’ of affairs and its ‘simulation’. What once was viewed and suffered as an interminable drudgery calling for uninterrupted mobilization and an onerous straining of every ‘inner’ resource, can now be accomplished with the help of purchasable, ready-to-use contraptions and gadgets with the expenditure of a modicum of money and time – though, of course, the attractiveness of an identity composed of bought trappings rises in proportion to the amount of money spent. Most recently it has begun to rise as well with length of waiting, as the most prestigious and exclusive designer shops introduce waiting
lists – clearly for no other purpose than to enhance the distinction with which the waited-for tokens of identity endow their buyer. As Georg Simmel, one of the founding fathers of social science, pointed out a long time ago, values are measured by the other values which have to be sacrificed to obtain them, and delay in gratification is arguably the most excruciating of sacrifices for people cast in the fast-moving and fast-changing settings characteristic of our liquid modern society of consumers.

Annulling the past, ‘being born again’, acquiring a different and more attractive self while discarding the one that is old, worn out and no longer wanted, reincarnating as ‘someone completely different’ and starting from ‘a new beginning’... such enticing offers are difficult to reject out of hand. Indeed, why work on self-improvement with all the strenuous effort and painful self-sacrifice such toil inevitably requires? And in the event that all that effort, self-denial and noxious austerity fails to make up for the losses soon enough – why send good money after bad? Is it not obvious that it is cheaper, and quicker, and more thorough, and more convenient, and easier to achieve, to cut your losses and start again – to shed the old skin, spots, warts and all, and buy a new one, ready-made and ready-to-wear?

There is nothing new in seeking escape when things get really hot; people have tried that, with mixed success, at all times. What is really new is the twin dream of escaping from one's own self and acquiring a made-to-order self; and a conviction that making such a dream a reality is within reach. Not just an option within reach, but the easiest option, the one most likely to work in case of trouble; a short-cut option, less cumbersome, less time-and-energy consuming and so all in all cheaper if measured, according to Simmel's advice, by the volume of the other values which have to be given up or curtailed.

If happiness is permanently within reach, and if reaching it takes only the few minutes needed to browse through the yellow pages and pull a credit card out of a wallet, then obviously a self that stops short of reaching happiness can’t be ‘real’ or ‘genuine’, but a relic of sloth, ignorance or ineptitude – if not all of them together. Such a self must be counterfeit or fraudulent. The absence of happiness, or insufficient happiness, or happiness less intense than the kind proclaimed as attainable to all who tried hard enough and used the proper means with proper skills, is all the reason one needs to refuse to settle for the ‘self’ one has and to embark and continue on a voyage of self-discovery (or rather self-invention). Fraudulent or botched selves need to be discarded on the grounds of their ‘non-authenticity’, while the search for the real one should go on. And there is little reason to stop searching if one can be sure that in a short moment the moment being lived will become history and another moment will duly arrive, carrying new promises, bursting with new potential, auguring a new beginning...

In a society of shoppers and a life of shopping we are happy as long as we haven’t lost the hope of becoming happy; we are secure from unhappiness as long as some of that hope is still ticking. And so the key to happiness and the antidote to misery is to keep the hope of becoming happy alive. But it can stay alive only on condition of a rapid succession of ‘new chances’ and ‘new beginnings’, and of the prospect of an infinitely long chain of new starts ahead. That condition is brought about by slicing life into episodes: that is, into preferably self-enclosed and self-contained time stretches, each with its own plot, its own characters and its own ending. The latter requisite – the ending – is met if the characters acting or acted upon in the course of the episode are presumed to be engaged solely for its duration, with no commitment made as to their admission to the episode which follows. Each episode having its own plot, each needs a new casting. Any indefinite, interminable commitment would severely limit the range of plots available for the succeeding episodes. An indefinite commitment and the pursuit of happiness seem to be at cross-purposes. In a society of consumers all ties and bonds have to follow the pattern of the relationship between buyer and commodities bought: commodities are not expected to outstay their welcome and must leave the stage of life once they start to clutter it up instead of adorning it, whereas buyers are neither expected nor willing to swear eternal loyalty to the purchases they bring home or to grant them permanent rights of residence. Relationships of the consumerist type are, from the start, ‘until further notice’.

In a recent survey of the new types of relationships tending to replace the old ‘till death us do part’ kind, Stuart Jeffries notes the rising tide of ‘commitment-phobia’ and finds ‘commitment-light schemes that minimize risk exposure’ to be ‘increasingly common’. These schemes aim to squeeze the poison out of the
sting. Entering into a relationship is always a risky affair, since the thorns and traps of togetherness tend to reveal themselves gradually and their full inventory can hardly be composed in advance. Entering into relationships accompanied by a commitment to maintain them through thick and thin, whatever happens, is akin to signing a blank cheque. It portends the likelihood of confronting some as yet unknown and unimaginable discomforts and miseries with no escape clause to be invoked. The ‘new and improved’, ‘commitment-light’ relationships cut their anticipated duration down to the duration of the satisfaction they bring: commitment is valid until satisfaction fades or falls below an acceptable standard – and not a moment longer.

A few years ago, in the hope of stemming a rising tide still deemed to be only a transient fad, a battle was waged under the slogan ‘A dog is for life, not just for Christmas’ – it tried to prevent the abandonment of unwanted pets by January, when kids had become exhausted with the pleasure-giving potential of their Christmas gifts and had instead become weary of the daily chores demanded by the care of a pet. As we learn from Jeffries’ study, however, this October a London branch is to be opened by a highly successful American firm, Flexpetz, that ‘will enable customers to spend just a few hours or a few days’ with one of their ‘lovable and fully trained’ dogs groomed for hiring. Flexpetz is one of the fast-multiplying companies specializing in ‘services that offer traditional pleasures without the pain of ownership’. The trend to place transience where duration was once a rule is not confined to animal pets. At the far end of that trend there is a rapid rise in the number of households run by couples ‘living together’ but resentful of marriage vows. By 2001, only 45 per cent of British households were homes of married couples, whereas by 2005 the number of (presumably, not forever) cohabiting couples rose to well over 2 million.

There are at least two different ways to evaluate the impact of ‘commitment-phobia’ on the state and prospects of our contemporaries’ happiness. One way is to welcome and applaud the lowering of the costs of pleasurable time. The spectre of future constraints that always hovered over committed partnerships was, after all, the proverbial fly able to blight and ruin a barrelful of the sweetest-smelling ointment; killing off that fly before it began its pernicious mischief is obviously no mean improvement. And yet, as Stuart Jeffries discovered, one of the largest car-hiring companies advises its customers to give personal names to the car they book time and again, on and off. Jeffries comments: ‘the suggestion is poignant. It surely indicates that, even as we are less likely than ever before to commit to anything long term, the sentimental, perhaps even self-deluding pleasures of attachment remain with us – like ghosts of old ways of being.’

How true. Again and again, as so many times before, we find that one can’t have a cake and eat it. Or that there are no free lunches. That there is a price to be paid for every gain. You gain freedom from the awkward task of caring daily for whatever you occasionally use: a car needs frequent washing, checking of tyres, changing of antifreeze and oil, renewing of the licence and insurance, and hundreds of other things, large and small, to be remembered and done, and you may fret and grumble about the bother and the waste of precious time that could be used for more pleasurable pastimes. But (surprisingly for some, expected for some others), attending to your car’s needs is not an unambiguously unpleasant act. There is also a pleasure fully its own in the work having been done well and in you – precisely you, deploying your skills and proving your dedication – having done that work. And slowly, imperceptibly perhaps, that pleasure of pleasures is born: the ‘pleasure of attachment’, which owes its healthy growth in equal measure to the qualities of the object of your care and to the quality of your care. That elusive yet all-too-real and overwhelming pleasure of ‘I-Thou’, of ‘we live for each other’, ‘we are one’. The pleasure of ‘making a difference’ that matters not only to you. Of making an impact and leaving a trace. Of feeling needed – and irreplaceable: a deeply pleasurable feeling, though so difficult to come by – and utterly unattainable, nay inconceivable, in the loneliness of self-concern and where attention is focused narrowly on self-creation, self-assertion and self-enhancement. That feeling may come only from a sediment of time, of time filled with your care – care being the precious yarn from which resplendent canvases of attachment and togetherness are woven.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideal recipe for a fully human, happy life – an ideal gaining in popularity in our postmodern or ‘liquid modern’ times – is the image of ‘Superman’, the grandmaster of the art of self-assertion, able to evade or escape all and any of the
fetters that trammel most ordinary mortals. ‘Superman’ is a true aristocrat – ‘the powerful, the high-stationed, high-minded, who felt that they themselves were good, and that their actions were good’, until, that is, they surrendered to the backlash and blackmail of the vengeful resentment of ‘all the low, the low-minded, the vulgar, the plebeian’, retreated and lost their self-confidence and resolution. The ‘Superman’ (or, in another translation, the ‘Higher Man’) is, we can say, the aristocrat of the past (or, more precisely, the aristocrat as portrayed/imagined by Nietzsche to exist sometime in the past) resurrected or reincarnated in his pristine, unalloyed and uncut shape, shedding all the psychic leftovers of his interim misfortunes and humiliations, and recreating by his own will and action what to the original aristocrats of yore came naturally and matter-of-factly. (‘The “well-born”, Nietzsche insisted, “simply felt” themselves the “happy”; they did not have to manufacture their happiness artificially ... [or] to talk and lie themselves into happiness ... Complete men as they were, exuberant with strength, and consequently necessarily energetic, they were too wise to dissociate happiness from action – activity becomes in their minds necessarily counted as happiness.’)

For Nietzsche’s ‘Higher Man’, the power and resolve to disregard all rules and obligations is itself a supreme value which needs to be defended tooth and nail against compromise. A formidable obstacle on the road to Superman-style self-mastery, as he was soon to find out, was however the unyielding logic of time – in particular, according to the insightful commentary of Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz, the vexing yet indomitable ‘staying power of the moment’. Self-mastery calls for the capacity to annihilate or at least neutralize the impact of external forces inimical to the self-creation project, yet the most formidable and overwhelming among such forces are precisely the traces, sediments, or leftovers of the prospective Superman’s own drive to complete self-mastery; the consequences of the deeds he himself undertook and accomplished for its sake. The present moment (and every step on the way to complete self-mastery is one or another ‘present moment’) can’t be neatly cut off from all that has already happened. A ‘new beginning’ is a fantasy that can’t really be fulfilled, as the actor arrives at the current moment carrying indelible traces of all previous moments; and being a ‘Superman’, traces of past moments cannot but be the traces of his own past deeds. A fully self-sustained and self-contained ‘episode’ is a myth. Acts have consequences that outlive them. ‘Will that designs the future is deprived of its freedom by the past,’ comments Buczyńska-Garewicz. ‘The will to settle old accounts diverts to the past, and this is [as Zarathustra, the literary spokesman for Nietzsche, put it] the teeth-gnashing and lonely torment of the will.’ ‘The staying power of the moment’ is, we may say, the death knell of the trials of a ‘new beginning’; to a trained ear, its sounding would be audible well before that ‘new beginning’ was attempted. In the gestation of self-mastery, the life of most embryos ends in miscarriage, if not abortion.

Nietzsche wants the ‘Higher Man’ to treat the past (including his own past deeds and commitments) with derision and feel unbound by them. But let me repeat: the past that slows down or arrests the flight of imagination and ties the hands of the designers of the future is nothing other than a sediment of past moments; present weaknesses are direct or oblique effects of their past displays of strength. And, horror of horrors, the more resourceful and resolute the aspiring ‘Superhumans’ (that is, men and women treating Nietzsche’s call to arms seriously and resolving to follow it), the more deftly they master, manipulate and exploit each and any of the current moments to replenish and expand the happiness nesting in power and its displays, the deeper and yet more indelible the imprints of their ‘accomplishments’ are bound to be, and the narrower will be their future room for manoeuvre.

Nietzsche’s ‘Higher Man’ seems to be doomed to end up as most of us, ordinary humans, do. Like, for instance, the hero of Douglas Kennedy’s story of a ‘man who wished to live his life’. That man kept enclosing himself in the walls of obligations surrounding him, constantly thickened by ever more numerous traps and ambushes of family life, while all that time he dreamed of more freedom. He made resolutions to travel light, while adding to the burdens that kept him fixed to the ground, making the slightest movement a drudgery. Embroiled (or rather embroiling himself) in such irresolvable contradictions, Kennedy’s hero did not suffer more oppression than the next person. He was no one’s victim, not a target of anyone’s resentment or malice. His dreams of the freedom to assert himself were foiled by no one except himself, and by nothing except his own efforts of self-assertion; the burden under which he sagged and groaned was made of the
coveted and, indeed, cherished fruits of those efforts – of his career, his house, his kids, his ample credit – all those admirable and coveted ‘goods of life’ that offered a good reason, as Kennedy suggests, to get out of bed in the morning . . .

So whether this was or was not Nietzsche’s intention, we may interpret his message (most probably against his intention . . .) as a warning: though self-assertion is human destiny, and though in order to implement that destiny a genuinely superhuman power of self-mastery would be needed, and though one would need to seek, summon and deploy a truly superhuman strength in order to fulfil that destiny and thereby to give justice to his own human potential – the ‘Superman project’ carries seeds of its defeat from the start. Perhaps unavoidably.

Our lives, whether we know it or not and whether we relish the news or bewail it, are works of art. To live our lives as the art of life demands, we must, just like the artists of any art, set ourselves challenges which are (at the moment of their setting, at any rate) difficult to confront point-blank; we must choose targets that are (at the moment of their choosing, at any rate) well beyond our reach, and standards of excellence that vexingly seem to stay stubbornly far above our ability (as already achieved, at any rate) to match whatever we do or may be doing. We need to attempt the impossible. And we can only hope, with no support from a trustworthy favourable prognosis (let alone from certainty), that with a long and grinding effort we may sometime manage to match those standards and reach those targets and so rise to the challenge.

Uncertainty is the natural habitat of human life – though the hope of escaping uncertainty is the engine of human life pursuits. Escaping uncertainty is a paramount ingredient, even if only tacitly presumed, of all and any composite images of happiness. This is why ‘genuine, proper and complete’ happiness always seems to reside some distance ahead: like a horizon, known to retreat whenever you try to come nearer.