Making Space for our Melancholy
Clem Henricson

We live in an era when 'happiness' has become the litmus test for the good life. But is that a good thing or has it been achieved on the back of crimping major human emotions? Might not these feelings require cultural awareness and support - accommodation rather than denial? The contention in this article is that 'melancholy' is one such emotion.

Our preoccupation with the notion of happiness and upbeat living has numerous manifestations. There is a stock of self help literature across the spectrum from philosophical endeavours in the vein of Alain de Botton to publications with practical tips for daily living. There are, too, socio-policy enterprises advocating and gaging the components of happiness and the role of policy in enhancing its spread. Embracing this approach, happiness indicators are used by governments as a measure of success; Richard Layard has spoken recently to the RSA on the merits of such endeavour.

However, despite this mood music, the pursuit of happiness is by no means unchallenged. There are precedents for questioning the promotion of happiness as the rationale for living and consequent framing of lifestyles. Examples range from John Stuart Mill's querying of utilitarianism in the nineteenth century and a similar indictment by John Gray in the twenty first century - both indicating a preference for knowledge and truth as an objective. Then we have recent anxieties over the emergence of an anaesthetised culture unable to produce the heights of tragic art, and here we have Eric Wilson's plea in Against Happiness and Ronald Dworkin's Artificial Happiness.

There is a strong case to be made for extending these concerns to include the inability of happiness to meet the full needs of the human psyche. The contention is that there is a universal psychological link between melancholy and the lifelong human experience of 'detachment'. The word detachment is used here, not in the sense of being emotionally aloof, but to describe the many facets of separation. There is detachment from the womb at birth, detachment from the world at death and, along the line, in child and adult development a progressive detachment from people and places which offer security and affection, environmental and social loss and change, emigration of multiple sorts. This pervasive association needs to be embraced rather than denied.

Overviews of the use of the term melancholy, such as Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy in the in the seventeenth century and Laszelo Foldenyi's Melancholy in the twentieth century, show it to have been systematically pathologised and confused with depression and other mental health issues. There has been a misplaced emphasis on the avoidance of melancholy feelings and a refusal to accept them as an important feature of human conception and identity.

Psychological wellbeing may be improved by reducing the oppression of an unrealistic expectation of happiness and in lessening the onerous obligation to

engage with false optimism. Societies have dominant moods, for example in the past in relation to duty, religiosity, sexual abstinence. There were liberating benefits in introducing options for change and choice in the face of these constricting trends of acceptability. A similar case can be made in respect of the current engagement with happiness.

There is value to be had from offering social and cultural space for melancholy and the following proposals might make a contribution to that process.

· The expansion and publicising of artistic engagement with melancholy in multiple settings. This would involve the projection of the emotion through artistic discussion in a variety of media and the development of arts' programmes with a melancholic perspective.

· The creation and preservation of environmental spaces both natural and man made that are conducive to spirituality in a secular age. The conceptualisation of these spaces would require innovative thinking and participatory consultation alongside professional consideration of environmental aesthetics, architecture, opportunities for public sculpture and installations, landscaping and urban and rural planning.

· The stimulation of discourse around expectations of ways of living that accommodate melancholy. This would address matters such as the nature of melancholy including its comforts, its role in rituals and its significance in terms of collective and individual living habits.

· The promotion of a wide ranging public and specialist discussion of the role of melancholy with a view to influencing the development of understanding and appropriate wellbeing assessments. The intention would not be to assess the degree to which people feel melancholic; subjective indicators would be confined instead to gaging the extent to which people feel free and enabled to express and experience melancholy. The measures proposed in relation to the arts, the environment and discourse on ways of living could be measured as objective indicators. The core of the investigation would be the degree to which melancholy is institutionally supported and consequently liberated.

In making space for melancholy, what is not being suggested is a collective wallow in nostalgia or an excuse for inactivity or abandonment of other critical aspects of wellbeing. The notion of fulfillment within the limitations of what is realistic and which caters for a significant strand of sadness and reflection on loss is what is being sought. The intention is not to countermand happiness, but rather to open up for acceptance and development an aspect of consciousness that has the potential to offer balm away from the glare of optimism. The pleasure of melancholy, the kindness of melancholy is its closeness to where we are - realism bathed in the relief that there is nowhere left to fall. The feeling is of being in tune with life in a minor key. Cultivating melancholy involves a delicate combination of diminution and aggrandisement. Exclusion, solitude and littleness are elevated to nobility spread across the texture of living.