

When I was a child in communist Albania, happiness was called Aniushka. Aniushka was a large Czechoslovak doll that belonged to my neighbours. They were party members who had been allowed to travel to Prague at one point, and brought Aniushka back to decorate their bedroom. She was not on sale in any Albanian shop.

She had thick, black hair done up in a chignon, and wore an imperial-looking orange satin dress adorned with lace. Her lips were bright red, and she had deep blue eyes, and long, dark eyelashes that gave her a dreamy expression. She sat majestically on the bed with the sides of her dress unfolded over the mattress, giving the plain, communist furniture a solemn, Habsburg air.

I would stare for hours, longing to touch her. Sometimes, I sat on a chair by the bedroom doorstep - which was as close to her as I was allowed to get - and we talked about whether she might like, one day, to become a toy rather than an ornament.

After the fall of communism, many people started upgrading their houses and buying new, western-style beds and cupboards. Aniushka's time was up, too, and my neighbours asked if I might like to have the doll. "You loved it so much when you were little," they said. But I no longer wanted it. Perhaps I was too old for toys. Perhaps it was difficult to imagine imperial Aniushka placed anywhere other than on top of my neighbours' austere communist bed. But perhaps also because there is something unsettling about the memory of strong desires that, with time, fade as if they had never been as strong, or as if they had never been ours.

Did Aniushka truly represent happiness, or is it in the nature of happiness that our idea of it centres on those things that are by nature inaccessible?

The German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe thought so. Happiness, he said, is a ball after which we run wherever it rolls, and we push it with our feet when it stops. Ball or doll, I find his view plausible.

I am perplexed when the pursuit of happiness is presented as some kind of obvious insight we're all supposed to share. Take a popular saying that became a fixture on people's T-shirts in Albania just after

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the end of the cold war, accompanied by a smiley yellow face: "Don't worry, be happy." Why? It's hard to see what would be left of happiness once you remove the worry. Every action involves a mixture of self-doubt, inconsistent effort, temptation by evil, unreliability of satisfaction. If you abstract from all that in the pursuit of happiness, one can barely define what's left as happiness at all.

Things become even more perplexing (and somewhat disturbing) when the pursuit of happiness is elevated from an individual goal to become the foundation of political life.

Take the declaration of independence of the United States of America, in which it is presented as a "self-evident truth", an inalienable right with which all men have been endowed. A critic might argue that there is a fundamental problem with exclusion here. The historical accuracy of that judgment is philosophically mirrored in the flaws of a moral theory that promotes "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". That is one of the most famous sentences of Jeremy Bentham, the founding father of utilitarianism, and one of the greatest influences on liberal economic thought. What about the smallest number, one might ask? What about those who don't know what their happiness is? Can one measure happiness? Can one person's happiness really be pursued without causing misery to another? What if it were in the nature of happiness to encapsulate the satisfaction of desires that are always comparative and relational, and incidentally destructive?

There is only one view of happiness that I find persuasive - but only because it is not about happiness at all. The Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant argued happiness can never be a guiding principle of action, it is at most something we can hope to enjoy if we fulfil our duties. We do what is right only because it is the right thing to do, not in the expectation of rewards. Happiness may (or may not) come as a result of virtuous behaviour, but one should not make it a condition for knowing how to act.

Some find this view unbearably sad, unbearably Protestant, or unbearably both. Doesn't it drain the joy out of life, they ask, to turn our relationship to others into a list of moral obligations that relegates feelings and satisfaction to second place?

But I've always found the view both liberating and empowering. You focus on the world as a whole, and you engage with others, aware of your finitude, cognisant of the arbitrariness of inclinations and of the contingency of desires. It encourages one to accept worrying and appreciate striving, and to seek the meaning of life beyond individual pleasure. I also don't think it's sad at all. And anyway, what could be more terrifying than "Don't worry, be happy", the command to pursue something that is by definition out of reach? ● Observer