

“The Value of Frustration”: An Interview with Adam Phillips

Jane Elliott and John David Rhodes

John David Rhodes: In various places in your work there’s clearly a kind of skepticism about aiming to be happy or choosing that as a kind of goal, and so, as a place to start, I wonder if happiness is the wrong word for a lot of other things we talk about—like contentment, or pleasure, or joy, equanimity—and if we might be better off calling those things by what they are and disentangling them from this larger term.

Adam Phillips: Yes. I think the risk is that it’s a kind of dead word because it does too much work, and that, in a way, it only becomes talkable about if you do precisely what you’ve described: break it down into all the things that it might involve for individual people at any given moment, otherwise it becomes so vague in a way, it becomes the sort of thing that no one would encourage anybody not to be, and yet, you don’t know what you’re doing when you’re encouraging them to be happy, exactly, because it contains a multitude of sins. So I think it would be better, in a way...I mean, there are two things I think. One is, it would be better to break it down. The other would be, given it’s such a prevalent word, to be able to say something about the work it does do. Because although we can say, “Let’s just drop that,” like the word “love,” and come up with all sorts of other words, it may be very interesting to know exactly how we use the word, even in its vagueness and weirdness.

Jane Elliott: Sort of along the lines of the work you did with sanity, looking at the kind of practices it includes, or the kind of conceptions it links together, rather than just displacing it altogether.

AP: Yes. And in way, presumably the thing to do would be just to see all the ways, all the places it just turns up, all the places one finds oneself using that word, and seeing what one might be getting at, what other people might be getting at. Because certainly people come for psychoanalysis when they’re unhappy; that doesn’t mean necessarily they want to be happy.

JDR: Right. There’s a line in your recent book on kindness about how people turn to psychoanalysis because they’re more unhappy than they can bear. So, I was thinking about the word “unhappy” and the idea of bearability, or what one can bear, which is something Sara Ahmed has been talking about recently. Would it be better to think about the aim of psychoanalysis not being about happiness but about the bearable life, as opposed to the good life?

AP: Yeah. I mean, I would have thought really, that’s really what people must be talking about if they’re talking psychoanalytically. Of course, it’s about pleasure, but it’s also about literally how much of yourself—your thoughts, feelings, desires—you can bear to think about, to feel, and to enact. What psychoanalysis adds to the conversation that complicates it is the pleasure of unbearability, or the pleasure one gets from being unhappy. And so I suppose that’s the thing that has to be added in here, which is the quest for unhappiness.

JE: One of things I’ve been thinking about is that although there is so much of a drive for happiness, obviously, in popular discourse—that we should always be wanting the next thing—there does seem to be at the moment some kind of counter-discourse that’s

about somehow attenuating or getting away from one's desire. I'm thinking of the Oprah culture, things like meditation, and yoga. As if happiness is sort of inversely proportionate to desire. It's maybe a bastardized understanding of Buddhism, in a way. It's as if we can somehow stop looking for the object, then we can be happy. It's almost as if getting out of the time of desire, where you are constantly looking to the future, is going to solve things, because you can just "be in the moment." So I was wondering what you think of this counter-discourse. Does it seem to be doing any useful work, or is it just another way of saying the same thing?

AP: It seems to me a good thing that people want to have conversations about the problems attached to desiring. I think what can't work is being a sort of Buddhism tourist. I don't think one is going to be able to simply appropriate, in a sort of supermarket-y way, other world religions as a solution to these problems. But I do think—and presumably the credit crunch has something to do with this—that it's been very weird living as though there's no such thing as scarcity, when in fact, in a way you could think there's only scarcity. I think that people being able to have an ironic relationship to their own desire and also be aware of the fact (or what seems to me to be a fact anyway) that we don't want what we want, in one sense, and also that we're always going to want something else, and that satisfaction is not the answer to life, so to speak. Partly because there isn't an answer to life, but partly because satisfaction isn't always the point. So I think what people should be talking about is...people should be trying to produce more eloquent, persuasive accounts about the value of frustration, not the value of satisfaction. And I think that the equation of happiness with forms of satisfaction is the problem.

JDR: Is it that they are mistakenly used one for the other?

AP: Yeah.

JDR: Or does satisfaction still remain in play in some way? Or is it its coupling with happiness that's the problem, the coupling of satisfaction and happiness?

AP: I think it is that we're bewitched by the idea of gratification and we're bewitched by the idea that gratification is what we want and is the thing that will make us happy, as though there's simply a sliding set of equations here. And anybody who gives it a moment's thought knows it isn't as simple as that.

JE: We were discussing earlier how when you read some of these accounts of "being in the moment," it actually sounds like what is being described is depression. Because when I think of having no object of desire, that's like being dead.

AP: It is. Yes.

JE: It's a strange utopianism.

AP: Yes, I agree. There's also a strange logic to it, as well. The question is whether the problem in desiring is the object of desire. Now, logically, you think it must be. So what you've got to do is remove the object of desire from the picture and then we'll be okay. But in a way, you're left with more of the problem. Because you can't get around the fact that you're a desiring creature. You may have different ways of relating to an object of

desire, but you can't, it seems to me, evacuate objects of desire. It's all about the way in which one approaches them, or what one thinks one wants from them.

JE: In a way, the inverse of thinking that the next object will fix things is thinking that getting rid of the object will fix things.

AP: Yeah, exactly.

JDR: The object, even if it's a mistaken object, needs to be there. There needs to be an object, because it's what happens in the movement towards or away from it that's important.

AP: Yeah.

AP: There's a very interesting idea that has unsurprisingly fallen out of circulation that Ernest Jones had, which was the idea of aphanisis, which is loss of desire. His idea was—and it seems to me a good one, and it's one that psychoanalysis for some reason has dropped—is the idea that the individual's terror is the absence of desire, and that desire might be something like the thing that Miles Davis said—that he woke up for years and years with music in his head and then one day he didn't. Desire might be something that we wake up every day with, but one day we might not. The question would be then whether there are desireless states that aren't depression, or that don't need to be pathologized as a way of managing them. Because it would seem to me that it's as though the fundamental terror that capitalism exploits is that we might not want anything. That's the thing that we've all got to talk each other out of. That we really want things; in fact we want loads of things. I think, in that—the fervor of that—happiness gets recruited.

JDR: Since we're kind of talking around and about pleasure, it's often that pleasure and happiness—and I don't want to force us to return to the question of happiness because I think in some ways you've answered that question—appear proximately in some of your thinking. But it's very clear that you never mistake them for one another; they're never identified with one another. Should we be more concerned with pleasure, and then happiness or contentment is something that comes along in the wake of that?

AP: Yes, which may or may not occur.

JDR: I guess what I wonder is what is the relation among pleasure, happiness, and desire, what is in that triangulation?

AP: When you said that, what I thought was that, for me anyway, pleasure has to do with absorption, and it has to do with absorption in something that is at least nominally outside oneself. And absorption is the prior thing, I presume, that's pleasure-driven, so to speak, even though the pleasure to be derived from it may not be clear at all. And happiness may be a consequence of states of absorption, but it may not be. So it would seem to me that happiness is the thing that may or may not occur, but that as an object of desire, it's a radically misleading one. But it may be one of the good things that happens as a consequence of states of absorption.

JE: Is absorption so frequently pleasurable because it has to do with release from consciousness?

AP: Yes. Or release from consciousness as self-preoccupation. I think the project is—and actually, I think the project of psychoanalysis really is—to free people not to have to bother to be interested in themselves. What people—some people, anyway—are suffering from is self-absorption, and it's actually the most boring game in town. There's nothing in it, actually. The only interesting things, it seems to me, are outside oneself. Not because one is altruistic, but just because there's nothing to be interested in in oneself, actually. Obviously it's related to what's going on inside oneself, but it's to do with the external world. Happiness, if it's going to be useful, is related to the sort of free loss of interest in oneself.

JDR: That connects to what you talk about when you use the word “vulnerability”—a making oneself vulnerable. Vulnerability in that sense is the opposite of repetition. Self-absorption is another word for repetition; vulnerability is a word for something different.

AP: Yes, exactly. That's exactly right. I think vulnerability is a word for exchange and repetition is the word for the rendering impossible of exchange by stereotyping it.

JE: So repetition remains inside, in a sense.

AP: Yes, exactly. It would almost be like saying that what characterizes one's so-called internal world is repetition, and that's precisely the problem. That actually one is endlessly repetitious and monotonous, and the external world is infinitely variable. And the question is whether you can get from one to the other. It's extremely difficult.

JDR: Do you think that's also related to a question of futurity? It's clear there's narrative there, which is therefore temporal, which is then about...

AP: It's very hard to know which comes first, though, isn't it, because presumably repetition is the wish to preclude, to preempt the future. So this is something to do with being able to bear the idea of being in a state of exchange with the future, which is by definition unknowable. So that it really is about unpredictability. So one of the things we should be educating children in is not just the dangers of unpredictability—which are fairly obvious—but the pleasures of unpredictability, too. Because only there is the possibility of getting outside oneself.

JE: One of the recent articles on happiness in which you were quoted brought up the etymology that it has to do with “hap” as in happenstance and chance and luck. If real happiness requires some kind of openness to contingency, is luck some way of trying to change that into something that is always good, to get out of the contingent, to make it something more bearable?

AP: Or simply, it's a way of describing being able to take your chances. Something like that. Luck, presumably, if it isn't called luck—whatever else it could be called—the things that happen that one has not organized for oneself (which are most things, presumably), the question is what you can make of them, what you can transform them into. And good luck is presumably the chance occurrence that you transform to your own benefit in some way, and therefore you feel it is good luck. Because it isn't necessarily good luck to win the lottery. You may make it good luck. But in and of itself...

JE: It could be a disaster.

AP: Absolutely.

JDR: It's way of reading or interpreting.

JE: It's a way of negotiating the agency involved in happiness. Of owning it or not.

AP: Yes. I think the problem is having the illusion that one knows what one wants. And the reason that frustration is important is because frustration contains the possibility of discovering a new want. What usually happens is because we can't bear frustration, we fill it with a known want. This has to do with the repetition problem. It's very, very difficult, actually, to be surprised by one's desires. Surprisingly difficult. As though there is a set [of desires]. Now presumably there is a set—it can't be infinite—but it may not be anything like as limited as one thinks it is. I imagine that one is limiting it out of anxiety. The reason we have what we think of as obvious sexual preferences, foods we definitely like and definitely don't like, and so on, is because there is some anxiety about not narrowing the range. It's like agoraphobia. We could want anything. Not literally anything, but my guess is that we could probably want a lot of things. I think we could like a lot more people than we do, for example, but we can't. We just can't let ourselves.

JE: We just can't bear it.

AP: No, we can't take it.

JDR: But we can't think ourselves there. You can't will yourself into that discovery, right? You kind of suspend yourself in an ambiance in which something new can emerge. It seems like the new thing has to emerge, but you can't find it.

AP: Yes. Or you depend on something other than yourself to make it possible. You can't just dream it up and go and do it. That's the wrong picture. The right picture is that you dream up all sorts of things, and then things happen to you that are neither what you dreamt up nor what happened to you. If you see what I mean. But you can keep on generating something out of that exchange.

JE: Since you mentioned lots of other people... One of the reasons we decided to focus this issue on happiness was the election of Obama. Obviously there was a huge outpouring of catharsis and joy over his election, but there was sort of a counter-reaction from the academic left. Judith Butler, for instance, published an article online about this, saying that this was very dangerous, that we need to retain critique, we need to resist these emotions. I wonder if there is some kind of resistance to the idea of collective happiness, as if in any group larger than one, or possibly a family, it's very dangerous. Most people don't talk about happiness beyond the individual or the relationship. Is there a more interesting or more productive way of thinking about collective happiness, or is it always dangerous?

AP: There must be a link in this example, mustn't there, between happiness and hope and a deferred future. I would have thought the problem here is the terror of hope. It's as though what isn't acknowledged publicly is how ambivalent we are about hope, as though it's an unequivocal good. Hope is very, very dangerous and potentially poisonous, or poisonous for some people, because what can't be borne is the inevitable disappointment. Because hope would be a great thing if it sort of got you to

disappointment, then you got through disappointment and you got to the next bit. But often this process stalls, and at that point there's a great deal of rage or vengefulness or bitterness or cynicism or whatever, and that's the threshold, because ideally, if we could organize this, people should be encouraged to hope exorbitantly and enabled to bear the consequences of these hopes being thwarted. And that means, not exactly realized.

JE: Do you have to make the hope different the next time?

AP: I don't believe in learning from experience.

JE: How do you avoid it not being repetition?

AP: That's the problem. And maybe that's what Judith Butler's on about, although I think she's wrong. I haven't read the article, but her belief may be that critique will keep us sane and sober, so we'll hope better.

JE: There's a kind of intellect versus emotion binary in a lot of these pieces.

AP: Yes, I can believe that. I think, I really think we should just accept the intractability of this, that we are creatures who hope, that the more in despair we are, the more we will hope exorbitantly, and the more there is the potential for catastrophic disillusionment. The acid test in anything is always going to be, how people deal with catastrophic disillusionment, which we've all had an experience of, without taking refuge in cynicism or bitterness or vengefulness. If that's possible, then something can happen. And usually it isn't.

JE: I think one of the fears at work in a lot of this writing is the fear that disappointment would drive people away. There's an intuition that that could happen, that this disappointment is around the corner, and therefore we can't give in to the hope.

AP: Yes, exactly. And they'll give up on politics, or they'll give up on communality.

JE: Because this is the one chance.

AP: I mean, that's the problem, in a way, with happiness being offered as the object of desire. As a lure, the risk of it is that when people discover that they simply can't have access to the happiness that they were promised, what they will then turn into, what they will then do about it. And that must be the source of political and personal terror.

JE: Because we all seem to have an intuition that bad things will come out then, probably also from personal experience.

AP: Yeah, yes, exactly. I think we're right. There's both a superstition and there's a regulation of excitement going on, because we know—because we've had the experience ourselves—that disappointment doesn't bring out the best in us. And there's always going to be disappointment. It doesn't mean you have to think you're living in a veil of tears, but one of the things you're living in inevitably is a range of disappointments. They don't have to be cataclysmic, but they can be.

JE: To go back a little bit to the idea of collective happiness, do you think that the resistance to a feeling of joy in communality has something to do with twentieth-century

history? Is it a necessary worry? I almost feel that there's a sense that any kind of large group emotion is equivalent to Fascism.

AP: Yes, it's tainted by Fascism, isn't it? Or it's tainted by cults, or religious fundamentalism, or whatever. But it would seem to me that there is a tremendous longing. I mean, one of the things presumably that individualism has been the solution to is communal disappointment, but I think the primary longing is for that communal pleasure. That's the real thing. I think everybody feels that. Maybe not everybody feels that, but a lot of people feel that. But people are very frightened—and understandably frightened—of what happens when large groups of people get together, because large groups are mad. But so are individuals. It's not as though the large groups are madder than individuals; they're just madder in different ways. And I think that's part of the problem. But I think there's an increasing feeling that people don't have anything in common. Actually, they have everything in common, but the feeling is they have nothing in common. And in-commonness is the point. In other words, it isn't taken for granted. It's as though it's something we have to make, or find. And I think without that there is a lot of despair.

JE: It's almost as if there's a fear that we want that so badly that we will countenance terrible things to have it.

AP: Yes. Or we'll do everything we can to avoid it, so we won't have to face the dealing with it, so it will be held in place as a longing. But there must be a communal possibility somewhere, or a viable political ideal somewhere, but not for us, not now.

JE: Because for it actually to be instantiated would be...

AP: You'd have to do deal with it. It would be real.

JE: In that sense, you could see some of these articles as trying to insist that it's not happening.

AP: Yes. Or to regulate the possibility that it might be.

JE: To keep it controlled.

AP: Yes. Or at bay in some way.

JDR: It's a eugenic version of political success. Because it can't see the end of the story that it wants to be told, then it has to make sure that we're forever waiting for the right moment to commence the prologue.

JE: I've been reading this woman's blog called "The Happiness Project," which is really annoying, but one of the things I notice that she says that a lot of self-help discourse for women is also saying is that it's better not to achieve parity in your marriage in terms of childcare or housework because you'll just get angry. You won't ever get it, so it's better not to try to get it. You'll be happier if you just do all the dishes and don't worry about it. There's an interesting idea here about the relation between happiness and justice that, in some ways, to try to make things fair or to pay attention to inequality is to make yourself crazy. Is happiness, as it's conceived now, an obstacle to thinking about justice?

AP: Well, yes, it could be. Because that sounds terrible, and presumably part of the problem with it is the assumption that happiness comes from states of non-conflict, whereas actually it would be better to say that conflict is the point. People should be seeking out conflicts, not avoiding them, and bearing with that, because that's the only way that anything's going to happen. So that the wish to avoid conflict is actually the wish for quiescence; it's actually the most cynical position, I think, covertly.

JDR: Implicitly apolitical in that sense.

AP: Yes, exactly. So the idea that happiness equals harmony is absolutely misleading.

JE: It's strange, too, because it really suggests that you need to ignore a tremendous amount to be happy.

AP: So happiness equals denial of reality.

JE: Yes, basically.

AP: As long as you can deny enough reality, you'll be fine. Which is a way of saying that actually in reality there is no happiness. So as long as we can delude ourselves we can be happy. So it's actually not a viable project anyway.

JE: Absolutely not viable. It's another way of thinking about the insidiousness of happiness discourse: it can be used to say, "Don't worry about what you're not getting. Don't worry about what's not fair, because that will just make you miserable."

AP: Happiness discourse makes people retarded, it seems to me. When people get into promoting happiness, they become stupid, as though the very word is an attack on one's intelligence. It's a way of not thinking. It becomes like a secular religious language of the most debilitating sort. It's a way of simplifying one's mind.

JDR: You can see it happen with artists. Bernardo Bertolucci makes less interesting movies after he becomes a Buddhist, essentially. Actually, since I've brought up the aesthetic, Jane and I are both interested in the way that works of art—often literature—figure in your thinking at various key moments. I'm interested in the insistence with which you think about or ask us to think about psychoanalysis in aesthetic terms—as *a* story that we tell ourselves. I'm thinking about the function of the indefinite article there: the fact that it's *a* story, and the fact that it's *a story*. There's something really inviting, and hopeful, and pleasurable about that formulation, about the indefiniteness of the article and about the possibility of narrative, the way that narrative is so vitally at the foundation of whatever this project of psychoanalysis is. I want to ask you what you think the productivity of the indefiniteness of these narratives is?

AP: Well, the thing about this is that it comes out of having a psychoanalytic training. This is not the cause, but it's one of the sources. Because when I trained there was a prevalent view that psychoanalysis was *the* story; that really everything could be understood within its language, that it was *the* comprehensive language, it was the supreme fiction. Not a supreme fiction—it was the supreme truth. Now if you happen to have studied literature before you enter into psychoanalysis, this just seemed astounding really, in a way. I mean, I was astounded. I was very young, but I was astounded. And the way in which it is a puzzling issue is because, of course, in one sense, psychoanalysis isn't

a story; it's an incredibly powerful one, if you happen to find it powerful. People are not Freudians in the way they're Shakespearians. It's a different sort of thing. Well that really interests me. I haven't got anything to say about it particularly, but it really did engage me, that—that these stories could be so compelling and so explanatory and so satisfying, and yet knowing that they were competing with a lot of other stories. I mean, I'd much rather read Wallace Stevens than read Freud. There's no doubt about it, just in terms of my pleasure, my engagement, my looking forward to it, and so on. But—*but* Freud's got really useful—to me—compelling and interesting things to say about what we're like. It's a good language because it gives me more amusement, more pleasure than a lot of other languages. So I think it's difficult to be clear about this, but I think psychoanalysis is good for the people who find it useful and interesting. Just that. It couldn't be a universal thing that people are resisting and so on. Of course it's also an interesting idea that the reason you might not like somebody or something is because you're resisting them. I mean, I think that's a good idea. It's a bad idea if it's taken to be the absolute truth or the only way. So I'm completely puzzled by this and I'm puzzled by, I think, presumably by something that we're all puzzled by in some way, which is why some stories get a grip, what works about them. All of us have got ideas about why psychoanalysis has got a grip. But it's got a grip on me in that, I can't exactly say that it works, and for some reason I value it because it doesn't work, but it's a way of talking that makes it possible for people to feel and think and live differently. I believe that to be true. Some people. So the question is, if you don't believe in psychoanalysis, and your friend is unhappy, what do you recommend they do? That seems to me the question. It's not that it's the best thing, because it isn't. It's the best thing for some people sometime, but there is the issue of what you advise people to do when they're suffering in certain ways. And it seems to me one of the best things going now for some forms of suffering for some people. And in that sense, it's not *a* narrative; it's *the* narrative. It includes within itself the possibility of being critical of it, so that when you do it, I, as the analyst, might say something that the other person finds useful, interesting, and then you'd also want to know why they believe you. You're doing two things at once that are potentially quite illuminating. Which is, we're having this conversation, it's useful to you, presumably, which is why you keep coming. But the other thing we need to work out is why you might be predisposed to give my words this kind of seriousness or gravity, significance. Not as if to say they're not really important, but as if to say we don't really know what their importance is, and we could maybe say something about that between us. But it's about the possibility of it not being assumed that one person is more authoritative than another.

JDR: There's a kind of terror, though, in just thinking about the concept of being interesting, from my own experience of being in psychoanalysis. I was terrified before each meeting with my analyst that whatever I was going to say wasn't going to be interesting enough, and then I was also worried that whatever she might offer back I might not find interesting, as well. That performance anxiety, which is about being interesting, which is somehow about telling an interesting story—is that—and I'm also feeling my own anxiety about asking an interesting question—does that need to be there in some way? Is that a necessary fear?

AP: I think so.

JDR: I mean, obviously it's about transference and counter-transference, but then what happens if you fail to be interesting? Does that mean that there's nothing for anyone to work with?

AP: Well, no. I think the beauty of the situation is—because I regret bandying the word interesting around because it doesn't address this that you're talking about—this is not a comment about you, obviously.

JDR: It can be. [laughter]

AP: If somebody comes, as everybody does come, with an anxiety one way or the other about how interesting they are, I assume that they're talking about an experience of not being able to hold somebody's attention, an experience we've all had. That however much our mothers and our fathers loved us and were interested in us, there were times when they weren't, and that really was difficult to deal with. And so presumably we did at least two things. One is we tried to step up our performance to engage them, and we did other things like retreated, sulked, got enraged, tried to find other people and so on. So that that would be integral to the situation, that two people are going to wonder whether they can hold each other's attention, and that's what you analyze. You will try to understand both how that came about and what the self-cure has been for that. So in your example, I'd say, your self-cure has been to try and be interesting, let's say. Well that's part of a repertoire, most of which is repressed, of self-cures for this problem. Because, for example, when your mother wasn't interested in you, it could have freed you to go and do something else, or it could have made you think, "Well, fuck her." Or, "I'll find somebody else and make her jealous," or whatever, but there are a lot of possibilities. It's a fundamental anxiety. And the trouble is, if you bandy around the thing about people being interesting, you step up the anxiety about it. [laughter]. Which is a bad thing.

JE: Would the goal be to try to recover the other self-cures to make the repertoire bigger, or...

AP: Well, I think the goal would be partly simply to show what the other alternatives might be and why they might be resisted and why one has become fixed in one's self-cure. It would be something like that. But the fundamental predicament is intractable.

JDR: Coming in and wanting to be interesting, again the fixation is too much on the object, and it becomes another word for a kind of contentedness or happiness. It becomes another useless word or a dead word.

AP: Yes. But you can see how the wish to be interesting—which presumably we must all have—is such a mad idea, partly because it's an attempt to imagine what the other person wants from oneself, which, of course, one can't help but do that, but it's unfathomable because they don't know either. So it's a labyrinth, which is presumably why we're so obsessed by it.

JE: We think it's merely a triangle, or reflexive, but it's not.

AP: But it's infinite.

JE: I guess in relation to this you can't help but think about the infamously boring happy families that are the antithesis to narrative. There could be understood to be a kind of opposition between happiness and complexity, which would seem to make happiness a dead-end for art. Does happiness actually have anything to offer the aesthetic?

AP: I would have thought in this sense that happiness is the repressed. That, so far, people haven't been able to write interestingly enough about happiness, but I don't think that we should conclude from that that it isn't very interesting.

JE: Or that it's non-narrative.

AP: Yeah. It seems to me that, for all sorts of reasons, we have assumed that all the unacceptable things about ourselves, all the difficult things are the interesting things; that's what we're going to articulate. It's a bit like, children take for granted the good things about their parents and they remember the frustrations. It would be very interesting to undo that, to make an equally plausible case for saying that what's unarticulated is happiness. There's a tremendous resistance to finding vocabularies for happiness, whereas, weirdly enough, there's a tremendous eagerness to complain, so to speak, or to speak fearfully.

JE: To sort of survey our archive of suffering.

AP: Yeah.

JDR: We think of happiness as so connected to or—mistakenly—identical to joy or certain kinds of intensities that can't be sustained in a kind of narrative context. You can write a lyric poem about a truly joyful, ecstatic state, but that somehow can't be sustained, so, as long as we think of that as a model for happiness, then happiness remains unnarrated in some way.

AP: Yes. And by the same token, we could actually feel much more exposed talking about our pleasures and our happinesses than about our miseries.

JE: From that perspective, when we say that happiness is boring, we're rehearsing our resistance, because to find something boring...

AP: Is itself a resistance. There's something about it that you don't want to go into.

JE: That you prefer to find dull.

JDR: But also then happiness is the thing that makes it possible for us to like other people, so that might also be something that we're repressing.

AP: I think that's right.

JDR: Which comes back to the question of commonality as a site or object of repression.

AP: And also, happiness is an object of envy. One of the things that happiness does is it stimulates envy.

JE: Which is another reason to resist thinking about it too much.

AP: Yes, exactly.

JE: It seems to me there's a straightforward reading of the resistance to happiness which would say that, on some level, we can't bear the fact that we were happiest with our

parents and we can't be there, we had to leave. So therefore it's better not to think that we were ever happy there, or to not think that happiness is very interesting. Do you think that's too...

AP: I believe that, but the other bit might be—which is a more difficult thing to think about, which I think is a dilemma for children—when the moment—if it is a moment—when they discover that there are pleasures not provided by the family. That creates an interminable and insoluble problem, because I think the deal is, all good things must come from the family. So if you begin to find a pleasure outside the family or that is not within the family's realm, then this is radically confounding. So I think there might be two bits to it. One is, our original states of happiness were in that family and they're lost forever, and if we wanted to try and recreate those forms we would have to strive in the external world in ways that might feel difficult. And then there are the pleasures that were not in the family. So I think it's both sides of the line, and they're both difficult in different ways.

JE: Why do we feel it's forbidden to have pleasure outside of the family? Why do we feel that so intuitively when we first encounter the outside pleasure?

AP: I think because our mothers and fathers demand—they need us to need them. It's intrinsically narcissistic. It's disloyal and it's endangering, because insofar as it's disloyal, you lose their protection, so you're radically unmoored when you're going after that thing outside the family.

JDR: Rings true.

JE: You've extracted yourself in this terrifying way that you want to undo as soon as possible.

AP: You're too free. And that must be what the fear of freedom existentialist thing is about. It's about when you sacrifice your protection for your desire.

JE: So you think there could be an aesthetic of happiness, but we just don't have it?

AP: Yeah, I really do.

JE: It might require a different temporality than we're used to.

AP: I think it might. I agree. And it would involve us not giving up on all our versions of original sin, but being able to see that if there's an idea of original sin, then there's another idea of, not original virtue, but of original something else that original sin is invented to manage. And it could be something like original ecstasy, or original bliss, but that's as real, in it's way.

JDR: I remember hearing you give a talk on modernism awhile back in which you described that modernism wants to make it new, but that we are all doomed to repetition. I've been thinking about some recent work that's trying to find an ethics of modernism in and around its complexity. On the one hand, a lot of this work extends out of a professed desire, or rather a professed belief in the value of the aesthetic *as* the aesthetic, but actually what it ends up doing is converting the aesthetic—particularly

modernism—into an ethical medium. Because it's harder to understand or harder to read, it makes us better subjects. We make more careful political and erotic choices.

JE: It's supposed to make us self-reflexive.

JDR: So that reflexivity in the aesthetic becomes reflexivity in our ethical lives. It's an attractive argument, but it's predicated on an anxiety about the aesthetic. That it might not be good for you, actually. Or it might not be anything.

AP: Yes. It might just be morally equivocal.

JDR: I think the argument extends from a crisis in the humanities, like, what are we doing here talking about books?

AP: If it makes no difference.

JDR: If it might not make someone vote properly.

AP: Certainly I was educated to believe that if you were a good reader, you were a good reader of life, fundamentally, and you would be less prone to Fascist suggestion and you'd be less bully-able, less intimidate-able. But, of course, the moment you fall in love, this completely falls out of the window. The moment those basic experiences happen to you, you cease to be a good reader, or you become a hyper-good reader, but not the reader you've been educated to believe you should be. Because you're then precipitated into that world of proto-Fascism, proto-servility, all that stuff. So, in a way, there is some idealization of language here, it seems to me, or idealization of reading. Although I think reading's a good thing.

JDR: We can't be the better subjects that we want to be without it, at least for those of us already in it, if we feel like we're leading the lives that are close to, or near, or directed towards the lives we think we ought to lead, then reading figures very importantly in that, but it's hard to imagine that it figures in the same way for everyone. It's certainly not the magic bullet.

AP: What I find baffling is that, for me, it's the experience of reading that I like. Just doing it, just that. One of the reasons that I couldn't be an academic is because I find it incredibly difficult to talk about the things that I read. I can do it, and in some ways it's really interesting. But the Leavis thing, which I was more or less educated in, said that the reading was a means to the end of making you a morally better subject and certainly makes you aware of morality as an issue, gives you a language for that, but what it never talked about at all simply was the pleasure of reading, about which there might not be very much to be said, except I know—like a lot of people who read—I read, for example, to insulate myself from my own family.

JE: I always felt that I was very lucky that reading was coded as moral because I used it like heroin. I was just lucky that it wasn't considered masturbation.

AP: Quite. I mean, without it, where would we have gone in our families? Or where would we have gone in adolescence to escape from real bodies?

JE: I still feel that I manage my two relationships to literature by having a division in the two different bodies of work that I write about. Sometimes they creep into one another, but I try to keep an eddy of fiction that is merely comforting.

JDR: I almost feel sorry for people who grow up in literary families or academic families, because then that experience is already assumed to be what will happen.

AP: It's very hard not to be literary and to have a sense of inner superiority. The people I was educated with, that was, broadly speaking, the result.

JE: I guess that's what we're trying to get away from.

JDR: I do think that until we find a really convincing way of talking about what we do in studying literature or the aesthetic that is not entirely beholden to an ethical discourse, then our eclipse will only draw nearer.

JE: I'm confused, though, because I feel like what we're saying is that we need to resist a kind of instrumentalization, but we've had that discourse as well. In a sense, it's the Trilling argument, which holds that the instrumentality of literature is that it refuses to be instrumentalized, that it can't be put in the service of ideology. I feel like we've already gone down that road, as well.

JDR: That's true.

JE: I'm not sure that there's a third way.

AP: There may be a third way, but I think dreamwork is a good idea. As today is the dream day, various things may be significant to us or not, but things are being picked up that we might dream and then, were we to talk about them, things will be revealed. Well, reading could be part of the dream day, so that it has an impact, but of an indiscernible kind, that it's fundamentally untrackable. All we know is that we love reading and we do quite a lot of that, but the way that it comes out in the wash is extremely unpredictable. So it's not instrumental in a calculated way—although we can calculate it, we can teach it and do all sorts of things—but it has its way with us in some way, and we usually don't know what it is. It's a real problem in psychoanalysis because without the moral line, there's no reason to do it. Either there's a story about why it makes you better in some way or other or why would anybody do it?

Adam Phillips is a psychoanalyst and writer.

Jane Elliott is on the Advisory Board of World Picture and is the author of Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory: Representing National Time (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). She teaches at the University of York (UK).

John David Rhodes is an editor of World Picture.