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Are We Mere Chemicals? Happiness as a Prescription

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Ronald W. Dworkin warns that doctors are now routinely prescribing psychotropic drugs for general unhappiness. The use of mind-altering drugs as a cure for anything short of emotional satisfaction may strike most Americans as, well . . . depressing. Nevertheless, it is becoming a widespread phenomenon of our times.

Dworkin is an anesthesiologist and a scholar at the [Hudson Institute](#). (He is [Ronald W. Dworkin](#), not the philosopher [Ronald Dworkin](#).) Writing in *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, he argues that “doctors are changing the psychological dynamic in millions of Americans.”

How? “Instead of finding happiness through a better life, many people now handle the due stress of life with medication. To the extent that they do, they are simply following the doctors’ lead.”

Here’s more:

Doctors now view everyday unhappiness and clinical depression as lying on a continuum, with biochemistry accounting for the whole range of human moods, from pathological to normal variants. Whether a patient suffers from clinical depression or just everyday unhappiness is immaterial because neurotransmitter imbalance is thought to be the cause of both. In both conditions, antidepressants are the treatment of choice.

But Dr. Dworkin argues that unhappiness, like physical pain, is a necessary part of life. At times, unhappiness can serve to awaken persons to other needs and necessary changes. Eliminating unhappiness through the routine use of drugs represents a fundamental change in human living.

Dworkin understands the magnitude of this shift:

Antidepressants solve an age-old problem. In the past, happiness was scarce, vulnerable to life’s trials, and sometimes gained only at the expense of others. Antidepressants, on the other hand, make happiness available to everyone, even when life is hard, and for as long as people want it.

In one sense, this revolution in the way human life is conceived is tracable directly to the notion that human beings are driven by chemicals. As Dr. Dworkin understands, when unhappiness is turned into a biochemical problem, the obvious answer to that problem is the intervention of other chemicals.

Interestingly, Dr. Dworkin also indicates that the rapid rise in the number of prescriptions for psychotropic drugs is attributable to primary care physicians, not psychiatrists. As he explains, “the movement to treat unhappiness with drugs originated in primary care, which remains the force behind the movement to this day. It was primary-care doctors who overprescribed Valium in the late 1960s; it is primary-care doctors who overprescribe drugs like Prozac and Zoloft today.”

Christians cannot buy into the elimination of unhappiness by the use of drugs. As the Bible makes clear, human existence involves an entire range of emotional states and experiences. The mature Christian is attentive to these states as a matter of obedience to Christ. We may be unhappy because we are being unfaithful or disobedient to God’s Word. If so, the last thing we need is to hide that fact from ourselves by popping a pill.

We may be sad because we have good reason to be so. The Christian may be called to endure sadness, but never to lose hope. The Psalms were not written by a man on Prozac.

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