

Can optimism ensure happiness?

Business



Can optimism ensure happiness? That is the question asked by many philosophers, and pondered over by many normal people. The answer to that question is no, optimism cannot ensure happiness.

Examples of this can be found in famous works such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger, or *Candide*, by Voltaire. In the real world there are also studies conducted about optimism like the study by Tali Sharot, demonstrated in the TED video, *The Optimism Bias*. The most useful and direct example of optimism found in literature lies within the pages of *Candide* by Voltaire.

The novella tells the story of the young Candide and his unbelievable quest to find his love, Lady Cunegonde. His professor, Pangloss, teaches Candide that this world is the best of all possible worlds. “ He proved admirably that in this best of all possible worlds, His Lordship’s castle was the most beautiful of all castles, and Her Ladyship the best of all possible baronesses” (Voltaire 15). Throughout his journey, Candide faces death and peril in many different forms, but tends to stay optimistic during the novella. But every time Candide gets closer to Lady Cunegonde, she is taken away right in front of him. With his optimism, he keeps thinking everything is for the best, and keeps searching for his lady.

He is dragged to opposite corners of the world, varying from Argentina to Venice. Instead of facing reality, and being a realistic person, Candide wasted years of his life chasing a girl that by the end of the book, he did not even like that much anymore. Yes, at the end of the story, he does get Lady Cunegonde, but he isn’t happy. The story ends with Candide, the Lady

Cunegonde, and their friends working a farm. But the catch is that they are not actually happy, they are just too busy working the land to see their own unhappiness. So, after all that optimistic searching, Candide ends up unhappy.

Voltaire used this book to show his dislike towards optimistic philosophy. The second literary example of optimism can be found in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. *The Catcher in the Rye* tells the story of a rebellious and troubled teenager named Holden Caulfield.

The Catcher in the Rye seems like an unlikely example to use when proving that optimism does not ensure happiness, because simply, Holden is almost always unhappy. Like previously stated, Holden seems mostly depressed for the entire book, but there are sections where Holden becomes optimistic. He pictures life in the mountains with a girl named Sally: "Look," I said. "Here's my idea. How would you like to get the hell out of here? Here's my idea, I know this guy down in Greenwich Village that we can borrow his car for a couple weeks.

He used to go to the same school I did and he still owes me ten bucks. What we could do is, tomorrow morning we could drive up to Massachusetts and Vermont, and all around there, see". (Salinger 132) After chapters and chapters of pessimism, Holden turns optimistic. Of course this thought made Holden happy, but ended up ruining his date with Sally and his night. After that event he once again fell back into alcoholism. Although Holden is never really quite happy in the book, the second he turned optimistic everything just got even worse.

The *Catcher in the Rye* and *Candide* are both just stories about imaginary characters, although both of them have real connotations to actual human emotions. But in order to fully understand the human optimistic complex, some science is required. This can be witnessed in the TED video *The Optimism Bias*. In the video, a scientist named Tali Sharot goes over a human mental complex known as the optimism bias. She talks about how humans have a natural tendency to see the “bright side” rather than reality. She describes the bias as so: It’s our tendency to overestimate our likelihood of experiencing good events in our lives and underestimate our likelihood of experiencing bad events.

So we underestimate our likelihood of suffering from cancer, being in a car accident. We overestimate our longevity, our career prospects. In short, we’re more optimistic than realistic, but we are oblivious to the fact. (Tali Sharot) She includes how optimism can lead to misinformed decisions. She received an email from a fire fighter that can show the negative side of the optimism bias in real life.

“Fatality investigations for firefighters often include ‘We didn’t think the fire was going to do that,’ even when all of the available information was there to make safe decisions” (Tali Sharot). Another example described was that the optimism bias could lead to underestimation of time or difficulty when completing a project. Optimism leads to unrealistic expectations, which in some cases, led to death. So the answer to the pivotal question is no, optimism cannot ensure happiness. As shown in *Candide*, it led to a chase around the world, only to live an unhappy life.

In *Catcher in the Rye*, it just made Holden more depressed and flung him deeper into alcoholism. A real world study conducted by Tali Sharot shown in The Optimism Bias TED video, showed that excessive optimism can lead to misinformed and unsafe decisions. Works Cited Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*.

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