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Happiness by Prescription?

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The current cover article for the *Harvard Magazine* raises basic questions about the psychiatric profession. Nevertheless, the article should be of interest to anyone concerned about the human condition — and especially to those concerned about the biblical concept of human personhood and the purpose of life.

In “[Psychiatry by Prescription](#),” writer Ashley Pettus begins by describing the case of “James,” a promising young scientist whose career prospects were clouded by his fear of public speaking. A psychiatrist diagnosed his problem as a “social phobia” and prescribed psychotropic drugs. Now, James is prospering in his career.

From [her essay](#):

In recent years, James’s story has become increasingly common. Using an ever-expanding arsenal of neurochemical drugs, physicians now treat variants of mood and temperament that previous generations viewed as an inescapable part of life. In an earlier era, James’s fears might have forced him to change professions. Today, the exceptionally shy and the overly anxious, the hyperactive and the chronically unhappy can seek relief from their suffering through medical intervention. And the parameters of what constitutes a “mental disorder” have swelled. An estimated 22 million Americans currently take psychotropic medications—most for relatively mild conditions.

This widespread embrace of biological remedies to life’s problems raises troubling questions for psychiatry. Paradoxically, even though psychopharmaceutical sales have soared in the United States during the past 20 years, only half of those with severe disorders receive adequate treatment. Clinicians and researchers disagree over what the priorities of the field should be and whom they should count as mentally ill. Are we over-treating the normal at the expense of the truly disturbed? Can we adequately distinguish illness from idiosyncrasy, disease from discontent? And are we allowing pharmaceutical companies and insurers to define the boundary between illness and health?

The widespread embrace of biological remedies to life’s problems raises troubling questions, not just for psychiatry, but for theology and ministry as well. How do we define “normal” human experience? Do we just take a pill to mask basic spiritual problems? Do we reject all emotional states but sheer happiness?

These are no longer hypothetical questions. The article deserves a close look.

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