

# The Age of Absurdity: Why Modern Life Makes It Hard to Be Happy by Michael Foley

Everything about modern life conditions you for a life of unhappiness, broken dreams and thwarted ambition. Michael Foley's entertaining, intelligent book may just help you get over yourself, writes Phil Hogan



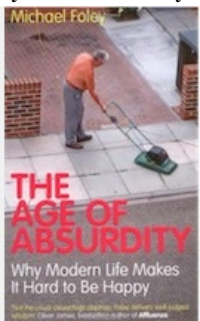
**Phil Hogan**  
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Michael Foley won't give a hoot for what I or anyone else thinks about his book. It will have been reward enough to have toiled over its bright wisdoms, its pleasing metaphors, its range of reference (from *Gilgamesh* to *The Wizard of Oz*), its laugh-out-loud funny bits. As he sees it, happiness – or at least the avoidance of misery, envy, resentment and humiliation – is to put one's shoulder to the boulder, Sisyphus-style, and get what fun you can out of the push.

## The Age of Absurdity: Why Modern Life Makes it Hard to be Happy

by Michael Foley



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There is some pushing to be done here. Foley is not one for the "fatuous breeziness" of bullet-pointed self-help manuals or the nostrums of the new science of wellbeing ("watch less TV, smile more at strangers") – or indeed any other sort of easy way out. Here are Christ and Buddha, Marx and Freud, Spinoza and Nietzsche, Joyce and Proust, mixing it with brain experts Pinker and Rose. It's not so much a trawl of great minds as proof that they think alike when it comes to human frailty – notably the way our base desires hoodwink our higher-reasoning selves and drive us mad with one unmet expectation after the other.

Modern life, Foley argues, has made things worse, deepening our cravings and at the same time heightening our delusions of importance as individuals. Not only are we rabid in our unsustainable demands for gourmet living, eternal youth, fame and a hundred varieties of sex, but we have been encouraged – by a post-1970s "rights" culture that has created a zero-tolerance sensitivity to any

perceived inequality, slight or grievance – into believing that to want something is to deserve it. As Foley puts it: "Is it possible that a starving African farmer has less sense of injustice than a middle-aged western male who has never been fellated?"

It's not even as if we want what we have once we've got it. Foley calls this "the glamour of potential", a relentless churning of desire by which the things we have are devalued by the things we want next. The only way out of the churn is "detachment", an idea as compelling to the Greek and Roman stoics as to Sartre and Camus: if you can't change the world, don't let it change you. The problem is that detachment – solitude, quietly taking responsibility for your own actions – is inimical to modern life, which is characterised by "communities", the herd instinct, team-building (Foley's take on corporate cheerfulness is worth the £10.99 on its own) and "the new religion of commotionism". The difficulty of change is aggravated in a society in which difficulty itself is avoided. Hence the study of science dwindles in universities ("Why submit to mathematical rigour when you can do a degree in surfing and beach management?") and sales of oranges plummet because people will no longer take the trouble to peel them.

Detachment and difficulty – key stages in notions of quest and ritual and understanding – are disappearing. Foley points out that whereas in primitive cultures an adolescent would be separated from the tribe and taken to the desert for a spot of bodily mutilation, spiritual enlightenment and transformation, today's hero "remains at home with his parents and ventures out into danger by playing EverQuest online in the basement".

Absurdly readable.