

In Defense of Surprise

(Alt: Healthy & Unhealthy Skepticism)

By

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Most affective neuroscientists agree that there are six primary emotions—joy, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise, just like in the Pixar movie, *Inside Out*. These emotions are our first responses to whatever is happening to us. There are also secondary emotions that we experience in response to these initial, primary feelings. Having an angry outburst, for example, might cause feelings of remorse, embarrassment, or guilt. Grief, which is extreme sadness, is often followed by a particular pattern of secondary emotions—shock, anger, regret, depression, and, finally, acceptance (a kind of emotional equilibrium).

What I find most interesting about the primary emotions is that only one of them is positive; joy. This isn't to say our responses to joy are always positive. The things that make us feel good aren't always good for us, others, or the environment. Too much joy in the evening could lead to big headaches in the morning. According to news reports, the 37-year-old man accused of starting the fires that have recently set Spokane ablaze told investigators that he “feels fire is powerful, beautiful, and that things that go through fire experience a kind of rebirth.” Whether he is proven to be insane or not, that which brings him joy isn't positive for anyone or anything.

Negative feelings, by which I mean those that cause us discomfort, can likewise lead to destructive and unwanted behavior, but they can also be very positive. Fear prevents us from engaging in dangerous behaviors or situations. Anger motivates us to do something positive to make circumstances and situations more just. And disgust can save us from eating poisons or rotten foods. This, I believe, is the point of all our emotions; they exist to facilitate our survival, and, in this sense, they have all evolved to serve positive purposes; even if they sometimes lead us in the wrong direction.

Although we are emotionally driven to pursue joy (positive states), I find it interesting that most of our feelings represent negative responses to what we experience—fear, anger, disgust. But what about the sixth primary emotion, the one I want to reflect on here, surprise? It is the only primary emotion that, according to circumstances, can be experienced as either positive or negative. Or maybe it is always initially negative but can quickly become positive once we recognize that its cause is harmless. Walking into a dark room and suddenly finding yourself surrounded by an unexpected mob can be terribly shocking, until you realize your friends have gathered to throw you a surprise party. We don't like surprises, but if they turn out to be good, we quickly get over the shock, fear, freezing, and may even consider it a cause for merriment and joy. On the other hand, despite the red flag warnings we received well in advance, the devastating fires our community has experienced were so bad that the surprise has led to secondary feelings of anxiety, shock, grief, anger, despair, uncertainty, and other negative states.

This is why I believe surprise is ultimately a negative emotion, which, again, isn't the same as saying it's a bad emotion. Like most primary emotions, this negative state can serve and protect us. What makes surprise unique, however, is that it is an emotion we do our best to avoid. It is an unwanted state that influences our behavior in advance of ever feeling it. This is why so many organizations have contingency plans and contingency funds, as an oxymoronic attempt to prepare for any "unexpected" surprises. The very definition of *contingency* is a "future event or circumstance which is possible but cannot be predicted with certainty." This reluctance to be surprised is why we say things like, "Always expect the unexpected." "Be prepared for anything." "We don't want any surprises." Or "I hate surprise parties!"

Joy is a feeling that actively guides us toward certain experiences, just as fear and anger and disgust guide us away from them. This is to say, they move us to respond as we are experiencing them. But surprise, because we like to avoid it, influences our behavior without needing to feel it first, in the same way we don't have to feel physical pain before trying to avoid it. We don't like to experience fear or anger or sadness either, but, when we do, there is usually time to respond. Surprises, by their very nature, catch us off guard and, often, when it's too late, especially if the surprise is a predator and we are its prey. So, many of us attempt to organize our lives in ways that minimize our chances of being surprised. We buy insurance, save for the future, plan for retirement, and live each day through a series of familiar routines so that we can feel surer of what comes next. Just this week a sentence from a book I was finishing caught my attention: "The brain is a prediction engine. It builds models of the world to avoid surprise."¹

This notion that the brain is essentially a prediction machine reaches back to 19th-century physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz, who described perception as a kind of unconscious guesswork—the mind constantly forecasting what's out there and correcting course when it gets things wrong. In recent decades neuroscientists have built this hunch into one of today's most influential theories of how the brain works, which has important implications for what we've been exploring here: what the brain is working hardest to minimize, in its ceaseless modeling of the world, is the feeling of *surprise*. Every routine we keep, every plan we make, every expectation we carry is the brain trying to meet the world already knowing what comes next.

In his 2023 book, *The Experience Machine: How Our Minds Predict and Shape Reality*, neuroscientist Andy Clark, one of today's leading proponents of this theory, says, "Predictions and prediction errors are increasingly recognized as the core currency of the human brain, and it is in their shifting balances that all human experience takes shape ... the brain is constantly trying to guess how things in the world (and our own body) are most likely to be..."² This suggests that surprise influences our lives far more than any other emotion; that avoiding it is what our brains are for and are always at work doing—predicting the future so we aren't ever caught off guard. Despite

our brains being really good at this, however, life, as we often say, remains full of surprises—some good, some bad.

From all of this, I have been wondering lately if states of hopelessness, pessimism, cynicism, and skepticism are secondary responses to our distaste for being surprised. Such states, it seems obvious, can work as preventative measures. They prevent us from being fooled, tricked, misled, or proven wrong. They prevent us from feeling uncertain and from, as Erich Fromm called it, the feeling of “unbearable doubt.”³ They prevent us, that is, from getting our hopes up and being disappointed.

Disappointment is a secondary response to surprise, the kind of surprise we don’t want to feel. Not only because the future doesn’t meet our expectations, but because it causes us to question the reliability of our predictions about what comes next—and we don’t like surprises. Nor do we want to live with the discomfort of uncertainty, the feeling that we might be wrong, especially about whatever unseen experiences might lie ahead. We want the comfort of believing we can know what’s around the next corner.

None of these states—hopelessness, pessimism, cynicism, or skepticism—are innately harmful. But if it is the nature of the human mind to chronically attempt to predict what’s going to happen next, and if we use these states as unconscious coping mechanisms for avoiding reality, then they are harmful. It is better to face reality than not, including the reality of not knowing. Our brains are probably very good and accurate at predicting what will happen in the next moment, maybe even in the next few moments, but our ability to do so becomes strained the farther out in time and location we must project our predictions. It’s easy to predict that the room and circumstances we’re in right now will remain relatively the same during the next few seconds, but not what will happen in the next hour, nor next week, nor what is happening elsewhere right now, outside, across the street, or down the road. Yet, our predictive brains don’t like such uncertainty, although uncertainty is our truer reality, so we defend ourselves against it by adopting coping strategies that prevent us from ever being surprised by anything.

Nowadays, hopelessness, pessimism, cynicism, and skepticism are often used synonymously, but they are different. So, let’s consider each of them in turn:

Hopelessness: You may recall my recent sermon during which I held a discussion with an AI personification of 20th century social psychologist Erich Fromm. When I asked him about hope, he told us, “To hope is to hold that door open with your own shoulder when every reasonable calculation says to let it swing shut.” For Fromm, hope is never passively believing things will magically get better on their own, nor is it forced optimism that denies the harsh realities we are facing. Hope is believing that the world can get better if we work hard to make it better. It’s about believing in our own agency. It’s about believing what we do is important, that it might make a

difference, and that it is, thus, our ethical responsibility to try. But we can't believe in our agency if we don't have hope. Hoping we can make a real difference is what drives our agentic behaviors and passions. Hopelessness, on the other hand, reflects a feeling of powerlessness; that there's nothing that can be done to change things (there's that predictive mind at work), so why bother trying. And if we don't try, then our prediction is more likely to come true, and we won't have to experience any surprises. Oh, how the predictive brain loves to say, "I told you so."

Pessimism: Pessimism differs somewhat from hope in that it points to a generally negative personality. Pessimism prevents one from ever getting their hopes up and, thus, from being surprised or disappointed. All of us are pessimistic at times, which is fine and good. But to adopt a pessimistic disposition or to develop a pessimistic personality that impacts how we experience the world in general causes us to do so in a way that is often wrong about the future, and that prevents us from being surprised by the many good things happening, the good in others, the real differences we're making, and, again, our potency in the world, by which I mean our own potential to make a positive difference. It comes from the Latin word *pessimus*, meaning "the worst" or "bottom most." It shares the same root, *ped*, for foot, and means at its core, "to stumble," "to impair," or "downward, to the ground." Pessimism brings us down—chronically down—not in a way that grounds us, but in a way that prevents us from moving forward. Pessimists, stuck in their ways, stuck in the present, which soon becomes the past, don't have to face the uncertainty of the future because they never get there.

Cynicism: Cynicism refers to a particular brand of ancient Greek philosophy. It emerged, as Stoicism and Epicureanism did, after the fall of Athens around 400 BCE, as attempts to help the people then to cope with the ruin of what was once among the greatest of civilizations. Since the people felt powerless to change their external reality, or to restore their society to its former glory, philosophy helped them develop mindsets to find happiness within. The stoics devoted themselves to developing their own character through their values and virtues. The Epicureans concentrated on the greater pleasures of life; like purpose, friendship, reason, and beauty. But the cynics, from the Greek word meaning "dog-like," attempted to find happiness by living like dogs. They did so by attempting to avoid all the trappings of society by existing as the animals do; naked, foraging for food, homeless, sleeping outdoors on the hard, cold ground, and so on. This makes sense considering the ruin of Athens must have come as a shocking surprise to many; who then responded by vowing to never be fooled again. Better to live like dogs than to live with the fear of being surprised by such disastrous loss ever again.

As an optimist who still believes we can make a difference, including successfully combating climate change by holding *that door open with my own shoulder when every reasonable calculation says to let it swing shut*, I have encountered many who have been almost angry in their disposition toward me, and others who feel compelled to regularly try convincing me I am wrong. Confusingly, they seem to want to return, like the cynics, to the natural world (as they imagine it was), absent of any machines or technology, as if that was some glorious, harmonious, beautiful condition for

human life; yet they also say its “game over.” *There’s nothing left to be done.* But even if this prediction is true, I’d rather go out with my shoulder against the door than by doing nothing while criticizing those trying to do something.

Skepticism: If we lump skepticism in with hopelessness, pessimism, and cynicism, as if they are all synonyms, then it becomes another path to avoid. But if we consider it separately, it offers us a positive path forward. For, rather than attempting to predict the future, skepticism at its core is not only about living with doubt, but meaningfully applying it to everything we encounter, including our own beliefs. Skepticism is related to the word for “spec,” as in spectacle, meaning “to see,” “to reflect,” “to observe.” It comes from the Greek word, *skeptomai*, meaning to search, think about, or look for. According to philosopher Massimo Pigliucci, “Its original meaning means ‘Inquirer.’” In his book, *How to be a (Happy) Skeptic*—not a hopeless skeptic, not a pessimistic skeptic, not a cynical skeptic, but a happy skeptic—he says, “Skepticism embodies an attitude of open-mindedness, a willingness to be proven wrong, and a spirit of inquiry. We all ought to be skeptics!”⁴

It was used during the latter part of the Renaissance in reference to those who doubted and disbelieved in the Christian faith, but it goes back to an ancient Greek philosophy that doubted it was possible to know anything with certainty, which is different than saying skeptics didn’t believe in truth, or that something they doubted might not be true. So, contrary to its modern association with pessimism and negativity, doubt is the mechanism that opens us up to being surprised. For, if we realize we don’t know anything for certain, we need not ever fear being disappointed if our ideas about the world are proven wrong. More important, the skeptics shouldn’t be defined as those who doubt everything but as those who are always seeking and searching for greater understanding.

Just think about all the craziness in today’s world, by which I mean people thinking they have a right to believe what they prefer to believe rather than what’s true; and hating on anyone who dares say “the emperor has no clothes.” But pretending that the lies repeated in our echo chambers and the “alternative facts” we concoct for ourselves are all true hasn’t made us happier or our world better. As today’s psychologists and therapists would concur, true happiness comes only when we develop the tools necessary for coping with reality. As the great Roman skeptic Cicero of the first Century BCE said, “To hasten to give assent to something erroneous is shameful in all things.”⁵ We cannot be happy in a world we haven’t accepted on its own terms, as it truly is.

Psychologist Theodor Reik once said, “Only when doubt arises do the premises of dogma formation emerge.”⁶ That’s the negative reaction to doubt, to become dogmatic and to approach life with a false sense of rigid certainty, perceiving having any doubts as dangerous. It’s why “The capacity to doubt, and in particular the ability to endure doubt for a long time,” Reik also said, “is one of the rarest things on this planet.”⁷ Unlike most people, however, Skeptics don’t respond negatively to doubt—they embrace it as a positive approach to life. That means skepticism, not the

hopeless, pessimistic, cynical kind, but the kind in which one embraces uncertainty as the truer condition of the world and to thus embrace doubt as the reality through which we must navigate our lives, is also “one of the rarest things on this planet.”

But when we do adopt skepticism as a healthier approach to doubt, we open ourselves up to the benefits of being surprised. We experience states of awe and wonder because we allow our minds to exceed the limits of our own imaginations. We discover new truths because we can more easily let go of our errors and move on from our mistakes. We can grow and evolve and more fully unfold as individuals because we are not trapped within the endless cycling of our false or limited habits and paradigms. We become more honest with ourselves and can more truly relate and engage with others. We escape isolation and the false comfort of our echo-chambers and become citizens and friends of the whole wide world.

If all of this sounds good, then I suggest you try letting go of the hopelessness, pessimism, and cynicism that are rampant in our society, and give healthy, happy skepticism a try. Who knows, you might just surprise yourself.

¹ Diamandis, Peter H.; Kotler, Steven. *We Are as Gods: A Survival Guide for the Age of Abundance* (Exponential Technology Series), Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition, 2026

² Clark, Andy, *The Experience Machine: How Our Minds Predict and Shape Reality*, Pantheon Books, Kindle Edition, 2023

³ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965., p. 96

⁴ Pigliucci, Massimo, *How to be a (Happy) Skeptic*, (Kindle Edition), Penguin Random House, New York, NY, 2026.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Reik, Theodor, *Dogma as Compulsion*, Greenwood Press Publishers, Westport, CT, 1951, 1975., p. 73.

⁷ Ibid., p. 61.