

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Daniel Gilbert is a professor of psychology at Harvard. The following passage is adapted from his 2006 book Stumbling on Happiness.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

I recently had an argument with my wife, who insisted that I like the movie *Schindler's List*. Now, let me be clear: She was not insisting that I *would* like the film or that I *should* like the film. She was insisting that I *do* like the film, which we saw together in 1993. This struck me as supremely unfair. I don't get to be right about too many things, but the one thing I reserve the right to be right about is what I like. And as I have been telling everyone who would listen for more than a decade, I do not like *Schindler's List*. But my wife said I was wrong.

So we rented *Schindler's List*, watched it again, and the results of my experiment unequivocally proved who was right. We were. She was right because I was indeed riveted by the movie for all of the first two hundred minutes. But I was right because at the end something awful happened. Rather than leaving me at the story's conclusion, the director, Steven Spielberg, added a final scene in which the real people on whom the characters were based came on-screen and honored the movie's hero. I found that scene so intrusive, so mawkish, so thoroughly superfluous, that I actually said to my wife, "Oh, give me a break," which is apparently what I'd said in a rather loud voice to the entire theater in 1993. The first 98 percent of the movie was brilliant, the final 2 percent was stupid, and I remembered not liking the movie because (for me) it had ended badly.

The only strange thing about this memory is that I've sat through an awful lot of films whose proportion of brilliance was significantly less than 98 percent, and I remember liking some of them quite a bit. The difference is that in those films the stupid parts were at the beginning, or in the middle, or somewhere other than the very end. So why do I like average films that end superbly more than nearly perfect films that end badly? After all, don't I get more minutes of intense and satisfying emotional involvement with the nearly perfect film than with the average film?

Yes, but apparently that's not what matters. Memory does not store a feature-length film of our experience but instead stores an idiosyncratic synopsis, and among memory's idiosyncrasies is its obsession with final scenes. Whether we hear a series of sounds, read a series of letters, see a series of pictures, smell a series of odors, or meet a series of people, we show a pronounced tendency to recall the items at the end of the series far better than the items at the beginning or in the middle. When we look back on the entire series, our impression is strongly influenced by its final items. This tendency is particularly acute when we look back on experiences of pleasure and pain.

For instance, volunteers in one study were asked to submerge their hands in icy water (a common laboratory task that is quite painful but that causes no harm) while using an electronic rating scale to report their moment-to-moment discomfort. Every volunteer performed both a short trial and a long trial. On the short trial, the volunteers submerged their hand for sixty seconds in a water bath that was kept at a chilly fifty-seven degrees Fahrenheit. On the long trial, volunteers submerged their hand for ninety seconds in a water bath that was kept at a chilly fifty-seven degrees Fahrenheit for the first sixty seconds, then surreptitiously warmed to a not-quite-as-chilly fifty-nine degrees over the remaining thirty seconds. So the short trial consisted of sixty cold seconds, and the long trial consisted of the *same sixty cold seconds* with an *additional thirty cool seconds*. Which trial was more painful?

Well, it depends on what we mean by *painful*. The long trial clearly comprised a greater number of painful moments, and indeed, the volunteers' moment-to-moment reports revealed that they experienced equal discomfort for the first sixty seconds on both trials, but much more discomfort in the next thirty seconds if they kept their hand in the water (as they did on the long trial) than if they removed it (as they did on the short trial). But when volunteers were later asked to *remember* their experience and say which trial had *been* more painful, they tended to say that the short trial had been more painful than the long one. Although the long trial required the volunteers to endure 50 percent more seconds of immersion in ice water, it had a slightly warmer finish and hence was remembered as the less painful of the two experiences. Memory's fetish for endings explains why women often remember childbirth as less painful than it actually was, and why couples whose relationships have gone sour remember that they were never really happy in the first place. As Shakespeare wrote, "The setting sun, and music at the close / As the last taste of sweets, is the sweetest last / Writ in remembrance more than things long past."

The fact that we often judge the pleasure of an experience by its ending can cause us to make some curious choices. For example, when the researchers who performed the coldwater study asked the volunteers which of the two trials they would prefer to repeat, 69 percent of the volunteers chose to repeat the long one--that is, *the one that entailed an extra thirty seconds of pain*. Because the volunteers remembered the long trial as less painful than the short one, that was the one they chose to repeat.

ESSAY TOPIC

According to Gilbert, how do endings influence human memory and human choices? To what extent do Gilbert's ideas help you understand the way people think and behave? Write an essay responding to these two questions. To develop your own position, be sure to discuss specific examples; those examples can be drawn from anything you've read, as well as from your observation and experience.