CHAPTER 10
THE SUBJECTIVITY OF HAPPINESS

The application of scientific research to happiness as a common phenomenon leads us only to incomplete success. The observation, experimentation, collection, description, comparison, and categorization of occurrences of happiness in others have only limited use in guiding us to the realization of our happiness. Besides differences in available resources and in external restrictions and opportunities, personal differences do not seem to permit us to identify a coherent, full set of principles by which we can produce happiness. These differences frustrate our ambition to find an objective, scientific way to achieve happiness. The utility of scientific exploration of happiness is based on the notion that we, our environment, and our correlations are comprised by certain substances and follow certain laws. We might have hoped to use such predictability to construct higher, human laws of recommended behavior. Such laws appear to prevail at the general level of existential needs and general requirements to fulfill them that can be reflected in fundamental human laws. However, fundamental laws only inform us of some general requirements and parameters regarding our pursuits. Such laws seem to be rather helpful in guiding us to improved and optimized interaction with other humans. They also can assist us to understand our existential needs better. But they do not help us to order our pursuits within the parameters they provide where we are free of external fundamental impositions to organize our pursuits. The ascertainment of generally applicable laws appears incomplete in directing us toward happiness because it leaves our idiosyncrasies unexplored.

Before we become overly upset about this lack of guidance, we might want to consider what such a guidance would entail. If our individual pursuit of happiness were directed by general laws, we would be locked into following them. They would curtail our movement and force certain activities on us. Such a prescribed path does not appear to be in the interest of our happiness. We could only do as we are told or sustain the punishment of unhappiness. We appear to be happier if our pursuits are not imposed, if we have options, if we can shape our happiness according to our individual judgment. We may ask why we feel this way. If the fulfillment of our existential needs is our ultimate emotional objective, we should be glad about a manual that prescribes how to achieve it. Still, we have a need to determine and to follow our own path. If fundamental and other general laws were sufficient to direct us to the best possible position of fulfillment success, our need for self-determination would be a developmental error. It would counsel

us to move away from practices that maximize our chances of individual and collective survival. The existence of this need proposes that it may be essential or at least helpful in securing our survival. It suggests that an individualized approach toward the fulfillment of needs might be more successful than a generic approach. Enabled by the flexibility and progressive features of our mind, this need for self-determination contains an opportunity to react to particular conditions. Its variability permits humans to occupy specialized positions and functions that can improve individual and collective survival and thriving.

Then again, the existence of a need for self-determination also seems to indicate that we are on our own regarding the fulfillment of our needs beyond the instructions provided by fundamental laws and their derivatives. This conclusion is tempered by our realization that we can refer to empiric knowledge and the substances and laws of nature for technical support. They establish our practical parameters and equip us with tools and substances for our pursuits once we set objectives. But they do not tell us which objects and events we should seek, create, use, or avoid except for instrumental, factual insights of effectiveness and efficiency. They do not give us an answer to our question what will make us happy. Some guidance to answer this question can be provided by our common needs in correlation with the application of natural substances and laws. Typically, there are multiple technical ways to fulfill an underlying existential need or to fulfill a combination of them. The different levels of satisfaction these strategies attain for our needs inform us which of them will make us happier or happiest. What we regard as freedom would be our ability to choose among the group of endeavors that qualify for satisfying our underlying needs according to our individual preferences. To find out what suits us best, we would still have to try the available alternatives. However, research by trial to maximize the fulfillment of our needs can be inefficient and ineffective and might endanger our principal needs. This appears to be the reason the development of humanity has favored the individualization of needs through a combination of genetics and acquired dispositions. It seems to be an attempt by nature to help us adjust to environmental particularities. That attempt may date back to periods before we were able to summon higher rational capacities that engender choice. The programming of specialized instinctive features automates activities and responses and relieves us from or reduces requirements of autonomous, specified assessments as well as the risks and costs of trials. The generation of these individualized mechanisms has allowed humanity to adjust to its circumstances and streamline the pursuit of common needs into approaches with a greater chance of fulfillment.

To understand whether and how idiosyncrasies can fulfill that promise, we have to examine them in some more detail. Each pursuit of a common need seems to be subject to several factors of individualization. It is influenced by our particular environmental circumstances and our ability to operate in correlation with that environment. Many of these particularities may be momentary, remediable, or superficial. Environmental settings may be changeable, and individuals might improve their comprehension of their needs or the means and strategies that might satisfy them. However, they might also abstain from or fail in such developments or they might encounter limits that they cannot transcend. Additionally, the particularities of our pursuits depend on our fulfillment status. Our motivations may change with changing absolute and relative satisfaction levels for each of our needs. Further, needs may undergo fundamental changes during our life that modify our attitudes toward their deprivation and fulfillment and our pursuit of them. All these factors may combine to result in a unique positioning for individuals with regard to their needs and the means by which they pursue satisfaction. Differences in our pursuits might then be at least partly explained by differences in our historical and current positioning regarding our environment and the phasing of our needs.

If these were the only factors contributing to the individuality of our needs, they might be relatively easily avoided in relevant parts. If we experienced needs with the same intensity, faced the same environmental circumstances, and possessed the same resources as others, we might engage in similar pursuits. Yet we observe that not all individuals approach their endeavors in an identical manner even if these factors are similar. While there is considerable overlap in how similarly situated individuals perceive, think, feel, and behave, we can detect extensive remaining idiosyncrasies. This segment of idiosyncrasies appears to have been with us since we can remember or for a long time. They may stem from particular genetic conditions and the physiology these are encoded to create. They may also originate in environmental factors, which encompass all other factors beyond our original genetic constitution. Such factors may interact with the development, composition, or integrity of our body in addition to or in deviation from our genetic blueprint. They include physical, chemical, or biological forces that might generate obvious changes in our body as well as influences acquired through our senses that might be harder to trace. These sensory influences constitute and trigger less palpable physiological reactions in our body and particularly our mind. Because these effects are less accessible to a scientific exploration, we may discount their presence. We may only recognize formative influences that are caused by

momentous events. Nevertheless, we seem to be susceptible to subtle influences as well. Our upbringing, education, and social environment mostly form or affect our thoughts, emotions, and behavior gradually with an apparent concentration in our earliest years. Environmental factors then wield important influences on the formation of our idiosyncrasies. Although the development of idiosyncrasies beyond the effects of direct physiological interference is initially conditioned upon genetically shaped mental structures and processes, there seems to be extensive room for experiential individualization of our mind. We may in significant part become who we are through these experiences.

Genetic rational dispositions may already diverge substantially among individuals to delineate our rational capacity and to direct our thoughts. Even if they do not implant us with substantive impressions, they may determine particularities in the processing of information. Environmental influences may further variegate rational aptitudes and thought processes within genetically set limits. Beyond that, variations in genetic and environmental sources seem to particularize our needs. They also may vary the facilities with which we receive, translate, and transport information for processing by our rational and emotional facilities. As gatekeepers, our perceptive facilities possess important influence over the formation and operation of rational functions and the emotional registration and response mechanisms that constitute our needs. Conversely, rational functions and needs may affect the perception and transport of information or at least their receipt of it. Additionally, the joint focus by rational attributes and needs on our pursuits generates a developmental and a functional correlation between them. The interaction among our perceptive, emotional, and rational mind is conducted by general subdivisions and idiosyncratic particularizations of traits that may span across these partitions. We may refer to general subdivisions as common perceptive, rational, and emotional traits and to their particularizations as idiosyncratic, particularized, or specific traits. Perceptive traits comprise features that receive and deliver raw information. Rational traits are involved in the abstraction of knowledge about the workings of the world from that information. Emotional traits use raw and processed information to register pain, pleasure, and their anticipations and produce motivations that we detect as needs and wishes. These mechanisms form our mental traits that we may abbreviatedly call traits. Since their interaction creates our personality, we may also call them personality traits. Dispositions defined by more obviously physical properties may affect our mind as well. But they stay distinguishable because they do not manage sensory signals, formulate rational reflections, or issue emotions.

The lasting effects of mental traits may cause individuals to differ fundamentally in their needs and how they regard these best pursued. Motivations, processes, and extensive parts of our results may be fundamentally shared. Still, the fulfillment of our common needs that are amended by specific emotional traits may appear incomplete, deficient, or even miscarried unless this fulfillment abides by the demands of these specific traits. If we attempt to cut through the particularities of individual happiness to common needs, we can bring a sense of objectivity to the inquiry. Yet we deprive the subject matter of much of the articulation that gives it relevance in our pursuits. The importance of particularized aspects of emotional traits for our happiness often rivals the insistence of existential needs. The intensity of their demands makes clear that the satisfaction of the compound needs they constitute with underlying existential needs is not a generic process aiming at a generic result. These ingrained idiosyncrasies in combination with perceptive, rational, and situational idiosyncrasies may force the pursuit of significant segments of human needs to become individual undertakings. In spite of the solidness of their underlying foundations in shared attributes, they may not allow us to establish a comprehensive general model of happiness in terms of objectives or strategies.

The problem with establishing a substantive general model of happiness appears to be that it has to either ignore or reject and overcome personality differences. The governance of mental traits by personal variances despite fundamental commonalities may cause confusion. To the extent our perceptions, thoughts, and needs are overlaid by idiosyncrasies, we might be incapable of relating to other individuals although the commonality of underlying traits suggests this should be possible. We might presume that, as members of the same species, others perceive, think, feel, and act as we do. If others are restrained within particularized reference points of their mind, and even more if we are caught in dissimilar reference points of our own, we might not be able to understand their perceptions, thoughts, needs, or behavior. We may presume without question that our ways of perception, thinking, and feeling epitomize the common standards for human mental traits. We may be tempted to judge the mental processes and behavior of others as erroneous or ineffective. We may posit that they would be better off if they followed our perceptions, rational approaches, emotions, and behavior. Failing to discriminate differences or discounting their importance may also lead us to err in assuming that we can uncritically adopt other individuals' approaches to satisfy our needs. We can only avoid falling prey to these conclusions if we understand the discrepancies between our and other individuals' mental dispositions.

We may question where our idiosyncratic traits leave us in our struggle to improve our happiness. Particularized needs may not suffice to securely guide us toward happiness. To illustrate this issue, we may use the analogy with a game setting. The technical structures and procedures ordained by substances and laws of nature, our existential requirements, and the fundamental rules resulting from them govern. They set the playing field, general objectives, limitations, and ground rules and provide the resources and some of the implements by which we can operate. However, they leave it to us to meet game objectives by using our individual capabilities and preferred strategies within the sanctioned maneuvering space and means. Our options or choices of strategies might not work to our satisfaction. We might have to develop strategies that better interrelate our capacities with these settings. Further, our strategies might have to be flexible. We might encounter aligned, competing, or opposing players whose involvement, capacity, or strategy might change. The playing field and conditions as well as our conditioning and attitudes might change. This requires us to work with a number of variables. Some of them might be unpredictable. We might not fully understand them even after we encounter them. Upon such a background, we target fulfilling our objectives and we tune our strategies as game constellations present themselves and progress.

The pursuits of our needs are additionally complicated because we have separate objectives for each need and multiple playing fields that may be connected in some aspects. More important, our idiosyncrasies appear to pose irresistible internal requirements with which we must comply while we have to also abide by the rules in a game. Their sourcing and rigidity may make adjustments to the opportunities and the requirements of our setting difficult and maybe impossible. Still, it may be difficult to convince us that we should abandon or modify our mental idiosyncrasies, even if we could identify them. To us, following our mental traits is not merely a strategy. They represent objectives in themselves without which reaching the main objectives is diminished or meaningless. They represent requirements that we have to obey regardless of whether we recognize that they cause us pain. This applies more obviously to our emotional traits. Yet even our rational and perceptive idiosyncrasies appear to insist that we maintain them. Beyond the mere impositions of their own factuality, emotional traits may actively perpetuate perceptive and rational idiosyncrasies because these often participate in the formation or maintenance of emotional idiosyncrasies. The immediate motivational leadership of emotional traits may cause our mental traits to appear entirely under the leadership of our emotional traits even though that may only be partly warranted.

Arguably, much of the trend to emotional idiosyncrasies is the result of successful economic activity, social arrangements, and technology. These factors are regularly intertwined in their development. They have given us better command to change our circumstances and implement our needs with an increased quality and quantity of means. We have eminently increased the effectiveness, efficiency, and availability of means for satisfying common needs. It might therefore appear that our focus on economic activity, social arrangements, and technology has been fueled by common needs and by technical proficiency in their service alone. It might seem that idiosyncrasies have merely proliferated as a byproduct of the resulting increased offerings of means, that our pursuits have dispersed opportunistically within the range of possibilities as these became unlocked by economic activity, social arrangements, and technology. Then again, if quantitative and qualitative augmentation of means to satisfy common needs were the exclusive incentive for idiosyncrasies, they would have little variety. Efforts to meet challenges would yield provisional variety until means proved their superiority and varying conditions were brought up to standard. Variety would only be a function of different tasks, different situational challenges, or a lack of knowledge or development. There appear to be independent origins for a diversification of idiosyncrasies that predate economic activity, social arrangements, and technology although they may interact with them. This interaction may have had and still have a mutual effect on the development of both. The intensity of this interaction may make it hard to separate the two types of sources.

Considering the intensity and variety of idiosyncratic pursuits, idiosyncrasies may seem to extensively contribute to human development. But even if we recognize that emotional idiosyncrasies are more than side effects of existential development, we may doubt that their development carries a significant, let alone an indispensable function. We may still view them as deviations that mostly detract from existential pursuits and only collaterally lead to some progress. They seem to lack ulterior purpose and appear to become their own purpose. Even if they stimulate human development, they also occupy a large, possibly overproportional share of results. That domination seems to be growing. The increasing availability of differentiated means appears to exert formative effects on us that motivate us to set ourselves apart even more. There does not seem to be a limit for individual differentiation. This threatens to lead humanity into an existence of superficial eccentricities. But humans may develop existentially advantageous differentiations as well that might become prevalent generally or in particular settings to which individuals become adapted. Idiosyncrasies seem to

constitute reactive or proactive trials by which our species develops and fills its potential for survival and thriving. Considering this assistance, misguided differentiations may seem like a necessary expense.

We may also approve differentiations with regard to our needs for individual survival and thriving. The variety of ways in which humans define and pursue existential needs might suggest to us that we can review the range of that variety and have the liberty to select from it. We seemingly advance in our powers of self-determination to shape a satisfying course that is closely customized to our desires. Yet such an optimism may be short-lived if we consider that our idiosyncrasies, including our idiosyncratic desires, might represent inadequate trials to cope with our environment. Genetic variations or traits imposed on us by our environment might increase our dissatisfaction because they may negatively impact the satisfaction of other needs or we might not succeed satisfying them. Our pursuits of and attributions of resources to particularities may cause deficiencies in existential pursuits, even in the existential pursuits to which they are attached, as well as in other idiosyncratic pursuits. External circumstances or the superseding urgency of existential needs may not permit us to make the choices idiosyncratic needs demand. Either way, the disharmony among our traits may result in lifelong suffering and may affect our chances of individual survival. Beyond that, our impressions of self-determination and of freedom to select from a wide variety of means turn out to be an illusion. Our idiosyncrasies do not appear to be a product of our free determination and do not seem to be amenable to adjustment. Further, the accumulation of restrictions they impose reduces the area of strategies we find useful. Our freedom of choice appears to be additionally constricted because our particularized needs motivate us to ascertain the best solution for their requirements. Finally, idiosyncratic pursuits may lock us into factual settings and narrow our selections that we are positioned to actualize subsequently. For these reasons, idiosyncratic emotional traits do not represent freedom. Arguably, we are subject to similar curtailments by the demands of our common needs. But our fund of possible pathways to achieve fulfillment is less restricted. This enhances our opportunities to meet underlying existential needs with the greatest effect. Additionally, the developmental history of existential needs and their common purpose appear to have shaped them to allow us the pursuit of all of them in mutually beneficial harmony.

Our potential for pain from the frustration of idiosyncratic pursuits intensifies in a social context because our idiosyncrasies may interfere with or may be affected by pursuits of other individuals. That potential may already be high in connection with existential pursuits

by multiple individuals. But the fact that these individuals have their own idiosyncrasies provides additional incendiary potential and unpredictability. Idiosyncratic pursuits carry a high risk of incompatibility among individuals because they may not partake in conventional structures and processes of mutuality but may pose obstacles to them. Moreover, the restricted or missing sharing of idiosyncratic emotional traits among individuals detracts from their social legitimacy, particularly if they encroach on recognized pursuits. The resulting social conformance pressure encroaches on the apparent individual importance and the immovability of idiosyncratic emotional traits. It threatens to engender a continuing struggle among individuals and between individuals and the systems of interaction and governance they establish. The unconventional diversity of idiosyncratic needs and their disturbance potential appear to render it necessary to regulate their practice with particular care. If idiosyncratic pursuits cause interference with the common needs of other individuals, their supplemental character suggests that they must yield unless they can be shown to have superior existential importance. However, the collective and general individual importance of idiosyncratic pursuits also suggests that they be given some space. This might mean that existential rights might have to suffer some curtailment in matters that are considered nonessential for their pursuit or maintenance. The balancing between interests this may necessitate may be difficult, but it may be accomplished in a general fashion. A determination may be significantly more problematic where individuals contend with one another concerning their idiosyncratic needs. The variety, subjective complexity, and lack of broad acknowledgment of many idiosyncrasies may prompt a legal order to refrain from regulating particular interferences. It may instead confine itself on the protection of fundamental rights, including the right to practice idiosyncrasies within limited, equal zones of liberty.

If societal pressures demand an excessive sacrifice of pursuits, it becomes less advantageous for individuals to partake in a society. Excessive sacrifice may be spring from the uneven recognition of existential rights or the imposition of idiosyncratic opinions over individuals who do not share them. But even if societal arrangements can be instituted to resolve such conflicts and they endeavor to optimize societal interaction on the basis of equality for all, they may exact detractions from ideals that individuals may deem too costly. Societal cooperation or coordination may prove to be a problem if our objectives and paths of pursuit have drifted too far apart. Cooperation may become illusory where we do not share the desirability of what could be accomplished by cooperation or if we and other individuals do not provide sufficient

means that would be useful for one another. As internal and external differences in how we pursue happiness increase, we may be unable or less able to provide or acquire coordinated behavior. These correlative limitations may combine with the autonomous limitations that our idiosyncratic mental traits leverage on our pursuits to create or exacerbate difficulties in meeting our common needs. Our insistence on particular manners of pursuit and our exclusion of other capable strategies that do not comport with our personality may then have significant consequences. They may create circumstances that threaten our individual and collective survival and thriving or at least reduce fulfillment by narrowing our selections. If sufficiently pressured, we may cope by resigning to fundamental objectives and pursuits. However, even if this saves or benefits our existence, the curtailment of idiosyncratic emotional traits is bound to negatively affect our happiness.

Behind a pretense of freedom of choice, idiosyncratic emotional traits appear to impose unnecessary complications in meeting our existential needs. They raise our potential for incurring pain if we do not possess the luxury of satisfying our existential needs in our preferred way. The subjective character of our happiness and of its requirements seems to make it more difficult to obtain and maintain happiness. Diversified traits may have some benefits because they can provide and fill opportunities or requirements for diversification. But their inflexible cogency may be more a hindrance than an asset for the fulfillment of our needs. As much as we may be accustomed to and value our personality, we may also feel the pain it causes us. Other individuals may be happy with particulars that are easier to achieve and still be able to meet their existential needs. We may realize that, because our happiness is staked to particular conditions that are harder to achieve, we may be less probable to achieve a level of happiness others may enjoy. The larger the spread in the ensuing capacity to produce happiness is, the more we may consider our more demanding particularities or our inability to fulfill them as a curse. We may be discontented with who we are. We may wish we could modify our idiosyncrasies to a format that would be more successful in drawing happiness from our circumstances. In addition, we may be discontented with the knowledge, the skills, or the physical means we can generate or locate for the satisfaction of our needs. This discontent may motivate us to look beyond the limits we find in us or in our environment and possible incremental improvements. Our empiric inquiries may appear to give dissatisfactory answers to our question what will make us happy and how we can reach it. We may try to avoid these problems by construing ideal conditions for happiness. The following section examines that approach.