

## Why Happiness is of Marginal Value in Ethical Decision-Making

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In the last few decades psychologists have gained a clearer picture of the notion of happiness and a more sophisticated account of its explanation. Their research has serious consequences for any ethic based on the maximization of happiness, especially John Stuart Mill's classical eudaimonistic utilitarianism. In the most general terms, the research indicates that a congenital basis for homeostatic levels of happiness in populations, the hedonic treadmill effect, and other personality factors, contribute to maintain a satisfactory level of happiness over the long run for a large percentage of any population, and relatively independently of the circumstances of the population. Consequently, although there are certainly ethical reasons to address the conditions of persons and populations, it is of marginal value to base such decisions on improvements in their levels of happiness. The happiness of others is not a sensible criterion for ethical decision-making.

### 1. A Review of the Psychological Literature on Well-Being

In a remarkable review of thirty years of psychological research, Edward Diener, Eunkook Suh, Richard Lucas, and Heidi Smith, provide important insights into the nature of happiness. In the psychological literature, happiness is understood primarily as subjective well-being, characterized as an inner, affective, subjective state, constituted by two major components: Global positive affect or sanguine mood, and, a certain level of contentment with life generally, but also in specific domains, such as work, family, health, and good feeling for a group or community.<sup>1</sup> As Diener Suh, Lucas, and Smith emphasize, these are distinct components that may be assessed separately.<sup>2</sup> Sanguine mood or temperament is constituted by a generalized and relatively indurate pleasant affect. It should be distinguished from the emotion of joy which is occasional. Still a disposition toward feeling joy, elation, and even ecstasy in joyful things would be part of sanguine mood. Sanguine mood is a mood that is usually associated with a feeling of comfort, pleasantness, enthusiasm,

vigor, and placidity.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, if we experience a predominance of unpleasant affect, such as anxiety, sadness, boredom, anger, depression, and tiredness, well-being is absent from our lives. Contentment is a feeling of satisfaction with our current state-of-affairs, as measured by the lack of desire for more than what we have; contentment may also result from the satisfaction of the progress toward goals or plans. When we are not content, we experience frustration, envy, and resentment, sometimes in a dark mix.

In a set of studies, psychologists David Myers and Ed Diener conclude that most Americans describe themselves as “pretty happy.”<sup>4</sup> Ninety-three percent feel very happy, pretty happy, or moderately happy, as opposed to sad or neutral. David Lykken and Auke Tellegen found similar results. Nearly eighty-seven percent of some two thousand three hundred middle-aged twins in their sample rated themselves to be in the upper third in overall, long-term contentment. As they dryly say: “We interpret these ratings to mean that most people are in fact reasonably happy most of the time.”<sup>5</sup> They further speculate that there might be some evolutionary advantage to being happy, in the sense that most people want to live and reproduce with happy rather than unhappy people, if they have a choice, and subjective well-being allows us to cope with both the fierce anxieties and little annoyances of life. Assuming some genetic disposition toward happiness, it would be expected that happiness traits would become predominant in populations.

The interesting question, however, is what explains the occurrence of happiness in individuals. There are two competing theories that fall along the usual fault line between environmental versus genetic explanations of behavior. The more popular view suggests that well-being or happiness is the result of happy things happening to a person, and result from the quality of a person’s environment. According to this environmental explanation, certain positive events are both the necessary and sufficient conditions for happiness. A rival theory suggests that happiness is congenitally produced through personality or other genetically based mechanisms. Under this view, such congenital factors are primarily responsible for coloring relatively indeterminate events as positive, neutral, or negative, and there is a surprisingly great range of such events that will sustain a level of happiness, though their effects on happiness are typically short term. For example, as most research shows, average subjective well-being is about the same for people in various income levels, except above and below extreme thresholds. Excluding Job-like situations, then, over the long-term, people with sanguine personalities will be happy under a wide range of circumstances.

Diener and his colleagues suggest a somewhat attenuated congenital view. Although personality is the most significant explanation of happiness, still there are interesting interactions between personality and environment that must be taken into consideration. Congenital factors make a fit between person and environment possible, so that certain events are objectively fitted to make

happy people who are subjectively fitted to be happy; conversely, even events objectively fitted to make people happy will not make people with certain personalities all that much happier. Thus, certain events are required for someone to be actually happy, although there is a surprising range of such events that will do the job, and the effect of the events is not long lasting. But the interplay between the congenital factors and the environment also create a kind of stigmery that reinforces and sustains levels of happiness that are relatively congenitally set for individuals. People with sanguine personality can create or select an environment which forms a positive feedback loop, creating a sustainable positive affect for that person. The inverse is the case with the choleric personality.

## **2. The Environmental Account of Happiness and its Variants**

One of the earliest researchers on well-being, Warner Wilson, was also a proponent of the environmental view. He suggested that there are basic human needs, and if circumstances allow people to fulfill the needs, they will be happy. He proposed that the typical happy person is “young, healthy, well-educated, well-paid, extroverted, optimistic, worry-free, religious, married person with high self-esteem, job morale, modest aspirations, of either sex and of a wide range of intelligence.”<sup>6</sup> However, recent research gives mixed support for this view. Happiness does not correlate significantly well with the typical demographic factors of age, gender, income, race, education, and marital status.<sup>7</sup> Among specific demographic variables, age seems to have small effects on happiness.<sup>8</sup> Most studies lead to the conclusion that education has little effect on subjective well-being.<sup>9</sup> Wealth does not seem to correlate with happiness as significantly as popular belief would suggest. In a report on long-term trends by Edward Diener and Eunkook Suh, levels of subjective well-being remained relatively constant from 1946–1989, despite significant increases in income. Several other studies confirm these findings with some caveats.<sup>10</sup> Together the studies suggest that in a society with relatively high wealth on average, wealth will not correlate well with happiness, except at the extreme ends, among the very poor or the very wealthy. In a society with strongly disparate classes of wealth, the correlation might be stronger. This might be explained in part by Alex Michalos’s discrepancy theory.<sup>11</sup> Individuals compare themselves to a number of standards, including other people, past conditions, ideal levels of satisfaction and needs or goals. The judgment of satisfaction is based on discrepancies between current conditions and standards. Since the discrepancies between poor people and wealthy people in societies where the average level of wealth is very low is more striking, jumps in happiness might be stronger for people who gain wealth.

According to several studies, married people are happier on the whole than unmarried people. Women were found to be somewhat happier than men, divorced people the least happy, and people who had never married the next happiest. Conversely, depression rates are highest for people who have been divorced twice or more, and the least for people who are married.<sup>12</sup> But there are many qualifications to this claim. A recent study suggests that the transition from being single to being married is less a cause of happiness than the transition from being married to being single, either through divorce or death of the spouse. Moreover, partners are likely to report greater levels of happiness depending on their stage of marriage. The honeymoon and empty nest stages appear much more satisfying than the stages with toddlers or teenagers. Indeed, children seem to have a somewhat negative effect overall on the levels of happiness for married couples. Thus the difference between being single, and never married, and being married with children, may not be that great.<sup>13</sup>

In an analysis of about thirty American studies, Robert Witter and his colleagues found that religion has a positive, modestly strong effect on the happiness of people, and strongest on those who are regular church goers. When this is disaggregated, however, some interesting qualifications emerge. Ruut Veenhoven found the effect stronger for Americans than Europeans, which suggests some cultural differences. He also found that the effect is stronger for the elderly, African Americans, women, and Protestants as opposed to Catholics. When age, class, and education are controlled, the effect of religion seems to diminish. When controls for social contacts are also applied, the effect drops significantly. This suggests that social support is most likely the principal way in which religion affects happiness, and seems to be of most benefit for those who are single, old, retired, or in poor health.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the popular view that wealth brings greater happiness, it is also widely believed that health brings greater happiness. Although this holds when health is self-rated, the correlation is weakened when objective measures of health as determined by physicians are used. Morris Okun and L. George found that only one variable between physician-rated health and subjective well-being correlated with any significance. Randy Larsen found that people who are not objectively healthy will still rate themselves as happy, or, people who are objectively healthy may rate themselves as unhappy. He also discovered that neurotics recall more gastrointestinal problems than actually reported and, in general, self-related health conditions reflect the person's level of emotional adjustment as well as the actual physical condition.<sup>15</sup> Overall, the global life satisfaction of seriously ill people, such as cancer victims, and people in relatively good health seems to differ only slightly according to studies by Iris Breetvelt and F. Van Dam.<sup>16</sup> There are also the famous studies by Phillip Brickman and Donald Campbell which suggest that spinal-cord-injured accident victims did not appear nearly as unhappy as might be

expected. However, as Edward Diener points out, their subjective well-being is still substantially lower than the control group. Although a study by Lois Verbrugge and her colleagues showed that patients with one chronic health problem, for example, congestive heart failure, showed improvement in subjective well-being over a year-long period since discharge from the hospital, people with five or more chronic problems were found to have a decline in happiness. Edward Diener and his colleagues conclude that when a disabling condition is severe or entails multiple or chronic problems, it usually negatively affects a person's sense of well-being, but otherwise negative effects on health to do not significantly correlate with decline in well-being.<sup>17</sup>

Another environmental account of happiness is provided by Robert Lane in *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*. Lane recognizes that there is little correlation between income, education, or health, and subjective well-being. Yet, because these factors are the basis of economic indicators of welfare, he argues that economics takes the wrong measures of happiness. Instead, he argues that the true source of happiness is family and close relations, factors which market economies have contributed to weakening. In some ways, this coincides with Michael Argyle's argument that having families and close relations are some of the stronger causal correlates of happiness.<sup>18</sup> However, there are some serious flaws in Lane's data analysis which would suggest a strong attenuation of this hypothesis.<sup>19</sup> In general, the naïve environmental theory is suspect since it seems that people's external circumstances, such as how much money they make, whether they are married, how old they are, their level of education, whether they are male or female, their health status, do not seem to significantly affect their sense of well-being as much as we might think.

There are also modified forms of the environmental view. One such version is what Edward Diener calls the telic view of well-being. What people are trying to do in life, and how well they are succeeding at it might be more correlative with a sense of well-being than their current socio-economic status. The type of goals, the success at attaining the goals, and the rate of progress toward the goals may affect their well-being more strongly than a particular socio-economic status.<sup>20</sup> Thus, a wealthy person may be relatively unhappy since the preponderance of her goals are not achieved, despite the fact that she is wealthy. Similarly a less wealthy person may be happy since a preponderance of his goals have been achieved. Consequently, wealth may not correlate well with happiness, if that is not the most important goal or in the mix of preponderance of goals a person wishes to achieve. The general idea is that people react in positive ways when making progress toward goals and react negatively when they fail to achieve them, but that their circumstances, no matter what they are, may contribute or interfere with those goals. Wealth could interfere with some goals but aid in others. Thus, "because people have diverse goals and motives, different resources predict subjective well-being

for different people.”<sup>21</sup> For example, in a study of the well-being of prisoners, Tim Kasser showed that if inmates had a satisfying spousal or other intimate relationship with people outside of prison, they also had a lower sense of well-being, because imprisonment interfered with the realization of that relationship. Instead, if the goal was physical fitness, which could be attained in prison, such prisoners had higher senses of well-being in the sample.<sup>22</sup> This also showed, as Diener points out, that the same goal could be a source of higher or lower well-being depending on whether people’s circumstances frustrate or facilitate it.

However, it is not just the success at goals which seems to enhance well-being. It is the fact that there is congruence among the goals set and the fact that the attainment of the goals would lead to what the person has in mind. Thus, someone might set a goal, make good progress toward it, attain it, and yet the goal does not yield what she hoped for. People may be wrong about what might result in well-being, or the preference ranking of such goals; or they may set goals that interfere with one another. A study by Tim Kasser and Richard Ryan suggests that people who rank wealth, fame, and beauty over self-acceptance, community feeling, or affiliation, report lower senses of well-being overall.<sup>23</sup> Well-being is not solely linked to satisfaction of what is desired or preferred, but to the attainment of what, in fact, is most fitted to make people happy.

However intriguing the telic theory might be, it still has fundamental flaws, as Diener and his colleagues point out. Most fundamentally is uncertainty about the direction of the causal arrow here. Happy people may select goals for which they have the appropriate resources and be more successful, consequently reinforcing any well-being that derives from goal satisfaction. Unhappy people, as shown in the study of the elderly by Sylvie Lapierre and her colleagues, may select goals that, even if successful, do not enhance well-being by much.<sup>24</sup>

### **3. The Congenital Account of Happiness**

The inadequacies of the environmental account of happiness, as Diener and his colleagues argue, seem to point to congenital rather than external factors as primarily responsible for people’s sense of well-being. Among congenital factors personality appears to be the most influential: “Personality is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of subjective well-being.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, under this view, the sense of well-being that people have is primarily the result of the way they represent the world and the events in it, and this is due primarily to the significant features of their personality.

If personality is a central variable in the presence of well-being, genetic explanations are one of the predominant accounts of personality in this respect.

Among them, David Lykken's and Auke Tellegen's theory is telling. Their 1996 study involved over two thousand twins born between 1936 and 1955. Their conclusion was that happiness is governed by a congenitally determined neurochemical "set point" or "thermostat," which is based on Diener's own hypothesis.<sup>26</sup> Lykken compares it to other genetically-based physiological set points such as blood pressure. As he points out, every physician knows that blood pressure changes from time to time depending upon a number of factors. Therefore, if the genes determine anything about blood pressure, it is the basal set-point of blood pressure. Indeed, Lykken claims, based on studies by Diener and others, that the effects on current subjective well-being of both positive and negative life events are largely gone after just three months and undetectable after six months, although recent studies by Diener add some qualification to this. There may be something, then, to Lykken's claim that happiness is evolutionarily adaptive. As Diener and his colleagues suggest, an inherent sense of well-being may help us adjust to both good and bad events, "so that we do not remain in a state of either elation or despair."<sup>27</sup> We react most strongly to new events, but the reactions soften over time, and people generally adapt to many events, both positive and negative, over a short time.<sup>28</sup> Phillip Brickman and his colleagues found that lottery winners were not significantly happier than a control group, and that a group of individuals with spinal cord injuries were not as unhappy as might be expected. Ruth Silver also found that quadriplegics and paraplegics adapted to their spinal cord injury during the two months after the injury. Still, there seem to be certain events that are less adaptable, for example, the death or long-term care of someone we love, or extreme poverty. Recent studies by Andrew Clark, Ed Diener, and Yannis Georgellis have shown that men may not return to previous levels of subjective well-being after being fired from a job, and women may have more difficulty in the case of divorce. Richard Lucas and his colleagues explored marital status and life satisfaction in a longitudinal sample. According to the results, widows drop significantly in life satisfaction when their husbands die, and it may be after several years before they come back to near their former level.<sup>29</sup>

In their study, Lykken and Tellegen conclude that "the reported well-being of one's identical twin, either now or ten years earlier, is a far better predictor of one's self rated happiness than is one's own educational achievement, income, or status," and "it may be that trying to be happier is as futile as trying to be taller and therefore is counterproductive."<sup>30</sup> Dean Hamer of the National Cancer Institute argues for something similar: "How you feel right now is about equally genetic and circumstantial, but how you will feel on average over the next 10 years is fully 80% because of your genes."<sup>31</sup>

The hedonic treadmill hypothesis dovetails with the notion of homeostatic returns to a certain basal level of happiness after positive or negative events. According to Shane Frederick and George Lowenstein, the hedonic treadmill

“refers to any action, process, or mechanism that reduces the perceptual, physiological, attentional, motivation, hedonic, effects of a constant or repeated stimulus.”<sup>32</sup> This is explained by models such as Amos Tversky and D. Griffin’s endowment or contrast theory, according to which pleasant stimulus reduces the pleasure associated with subsequent stimuli of the same kind. In earlier work, Otis Duncan and Richard Easterlin argued for a lack of effect of increasing real income on satisfaction with income as well as other domains of life. Phillip Brickman and his colleagues found that levels of happiness in lottery winners were not particularly affected after a certain period of time. Brickman and Campbell argue that, assuming a certain threshold of adequate per-capita income, increases in standards of living do little to improve the level of human happiness. In an international study on age and happiness, Diener and Suh argue that despite the losses in objective resources, elderly people seem to experience more satisfaction with their overall life than younger adults. Diener and Suh suggest that the most probable explanation for the result is that elderly people adjust their expectations and goals according to the constraints of their situation.<sup>33</sup>

The view that happiness is adaptive, in the sense that it enables us to adjust to negative events, combined with the claim that most people rate themselves as happy beyond a neutral range, creates what Tiffany Ito and John Cacioppo call a positivity offset. The idea is that we adapt back to a positive point rather than to complete neutrality.<sup>34</sup>

Discrepancy theory also complements these various congenital theories. It is offered in attempts to show how subjective well-being may become normed for a certain population. Pick up any historical account of living conditions among the working class two hundred or a one hundred years ago, and it is hard for contemporary Americans to imagine being happy under such conditions. Yet there seem to have been significant numbers of happy people despite these conditions. Similarly, this can be said to be true of comparisons with conditions in many of the developing countries, and many people appear to be relatively happy in circumstances that most contemporary Americans would find miserable. Part of the explanation of such a paradox is the comparative framework. Generally, if everyone is in the same boat, the boat seems fine relative to the condition of others. It is only when we must transfer from a superior or inferior boat that dissatisfaction and discontentment arises.<sup>35</sup>

#### **4. Diener’s Estimation of the Environmental and Congenital Theories of Happiness**

Although congenital accounts of happiness appear to have stronger explanatory power than environmental accounts, purely congenital accounts of well-being do not appear to explain the whole picture. Although personality is the



most significant factor in accounts of happiness, Diener and his colleagues do not see it as the complete explanation of any person's sense of well-being. In criticizing Lykken and Tellegen's work, Diener and his colleagues note that if we consider a person's average well-being over a longer period in life, then the eighty percent of variation in well-being claimed for genetic influence does hold up. If we focus on a specific period in a person's life, then a more modest forty to fifty percent of variation in well-being can be accounted for genetically. This was also Hamer's estimation of the situation.

Diener's solution is to argue for a qualified personality explanation by hypothesizing that influences of personality traits on emotions are somewhat moderated by the individual's environment.<sup>36</sup> Personality may interact with situations and the environment to influence our sense of well-being. Certain individuals may have a predisposition to react strongly or neutrally to positive events, depending on personality factors such as extraversion and introversion and, conversely, more or less strongly to negative events, depending on the same factors. But such a predisposition is set up by a fit between personality and environment. Certain events are objectively fitted to make happy people who are subjectively fitted to be happy. Thus, people with sanguine personalities will feel happy about positive events and less unhappy about negative events, while choleric people will feel neutral about positive and strongly unhappy about negative ones. If a sense of well-being were purely in the subject, then a person with a strong sense of well-being should retain it constantly despite misfortune. But there are some events in life that are such that no amount of optimism overcomes. Young widows are much less happy than others regardless of personality traits. As Diener illustrates, an impoverished young widow without confidants and with multiple physical disabilities who lives near a noisy airport is much less likely to be happy than the average person. In contrast, a woman with a substantial income and a satisfying marriage who is healthy and conforms to the religious beliefs of her culture is very likely to be happy and satisfied with her life. At the same time, if well-being were simply generated by events, the same events should draw the same pleasant effects uniformly. However, the same events may draw more pleasant affects for some people but not for others. Some people are more fitted to be affected by events that are fitted as positive than others. In fact, if Diener is correct, nearly ninety percent are. Presumably, certain kinds of events and happenings deemed as typically positive are needed for happiness. Differential levels of well-being between extraverts and introverts will occur only if positive events exist in the extraverts' environments.<sup>37</sup> However, a surprisingly wide range of possibilities will do. Our personalities may create positive environments which, in turn, results in a kind of stigmergy, in which the self-constructed positive nature of the environment contributes to sustainability of our subjective well-being. People with extraverted, optimistic, and worry-free personalities will have more of a tendency to create events and

engender attitudes that reinforce such characteristics, while neurotic, introverted ones will have a tendency to create events that reinforce global feelings associated with that.

Marriage could prove to be a good test case for this hypothesis. Good marriages have many features that make them objectively fit to be experienced positively. It is thought that marriage satisfies a number of needs: intimacy, attachment, wanting to belong, social acceptance, and emotional support.<sup>38</sup> If Diener and his colleagues are correct, people who are happily married are more likely to be happy people. Lucas and his colleagues found that “people who get married and stay married are more satisfied than average long before the marriage has occurred.”<sup>39</sup> Also, happier people are more likely to create more positive marriages. Happier people, then, are more likely to remain married. As Diener and his colleagues explain, “happy people may have a better chance of getting married, and, once they commit themselves to the marital relationship, the psychological benefits of companionship can further boost subjective well being.”<sup>40</sup> Although unhappy people are happier in marriage than being single, they are not as happy in marriage as happy people are. Unhappy people are also more likely to be in less positive marriages. This should result in a natural sorting, especially as social constraints are loosened, such that more happy people are married than unhappy ones. Consequently, any sample of married people will show a bias towards happy people made somewhat happier by the stigmergy of a positive marriage. This would also cause more unhappy people to settle into the single category, thus biasing the pool towards less happiness.

With an overall view in mind, we can say that the research summarized above supports the following claims about happiness. Most people are on the whole happy, above neutral in their general affect and satisfaction with their lives. Estimates place this figure around eighty percent. Over the course of a life time and on average, about eighty percent of the subjective well-being of people is determined by congenital factors, such as personality; such congenital factors determine a basal set point for happiness, from which certain positive or negative events can cause some deviation. As positive or negative events occur in people’s lives, about forty to fifty percent of the subjective well-being that results from them is due to congenital factors, although both positive boosts and negative declines in the subjective well-being of people may only be short-term. On average, such events have an effect over a period of three to six months because of some form of adaptation, hedonic treadmill, or a positivity offset. Some especially negative events, however, will cause longer declines in the subjective well-being of people, or cause some average reduction in people’s overall base-line. In a kind of stigmergy effect, the congenital bases of subjective well-being will dispose people to create and select corresponding environments that reinforce existing dispositions in subjective well-being.

## 5. Consequences of the Psychological Research for Happiness-Based Ethical Theories

The results of this psychological research would appear to have significant consequences for happiness-based ethical theories, yet there must be careful attention to how happiness is defined in each theory. Although Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* is nominally translated as happiness, sophisticated interpretations would have us identify it as a way of being instead of a psychological state of well-being.<sup>41</sup> The translation of the term by John Cooper as flourishing may be more felicitous, since it has more to do with living well by living virtuously than with subjective feeling or temperament, as Aristotle's classic definition makes clear.<sup>42</sup> Flourishing is the virtuous exercise of the best of human capacities in the engagement of the best of human practices, and is not similar to the sense of happiness as a subjective state of well-being. Although flourishing certainly has psychological correlates and may include subjective states of well-being, it is not thought to be co-extensive with it.<sup>43</sup> This however, raise the interesting question by Julie Annas, whether people can be said to be flourishing yet not happy.<sup>44</sup> If the answer is that it does then flourishing is not dependent on happiness in the modern, psychological sense, but could result in the strange outcome that a flourishing person may not feel sanguine or very satisfied with life. If, instead, we believe that part of what it means to flourish is to be happy in the subjective sense, then chronic unhappiness would prevent counting even the most virtuous person as flourishing. However, since the empirical research on happiness indicates that subjective well-being is on the whole more a factor of congenital personality than virtuous practice, we end up with the view that flourishing is dependent on the luck of personality. This endorses the unsettling claim by Bernard Williams that it is possible for vicious people to be happy and virtuous people unhappy, but for somewhat different reasons.<sup>45</sup> It is not because virtue can sometimes be a cause of unhappiness, as Williams suggests, but because subjective well-being appears to be independent of virtuous or vicious behavior. Thus, the reasons to be virtuous must be more stoical than epicurean in the sense that the desire for happiness should not drive the reasons for being virtuous, and virtue must be its own reward. Nonetheless, it may still be the case that a flourishing life may have desirable subjective correlates other than subjective well-being, such as a sense of fulfillment.

There may also be questions about the applicability of the psychological research to the hedonic form of utilitarianism advanced by Jeremy Bentham, since Bentham defines "happiness" primarily as pleasure rather than subjective well-being. It is clear that Bentham views happiness as the ultimate value: "By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is

in question.”<sup>46</sup> Received interpretations of Bentham make it clear that he defines happiness primarily in terms of pleasure, specifically, the “enjoyment of pleasures, security from pains.”<sup>47</sup> For Bentham, pleasures are examples of sensations, which are fundamental and irreducible psychological entities characterized by their intrinsically positive feeling. This enables Bentham’s attempt to quantify them in terms of six metrics of intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity and purity.<sup>48</sup>

There are two matters to consider in this case. Even if the ultimate value on Bentham’s view is pleasure as a positive sensation, the phenomenon of the hedonic treadmill and the findings of discrepancy theory may still have a bearing on utilitarian calculations of total pleasure.<sup>49</sup> As well, the reduction of happiness to pleasure may simply be an inadequate account, and we must forego the idea that when we are maximizing pleasure we are also maximizing happiness. Knowing that pleasures are attenuated by their very intensity and duration has to figure into the utilitarian calculation. If a pleasure is long in duration its pleasure will diminish over time according to the treadmill theory. Thus, in calculating the total amount of pleasure over a period of time, future pleasures may have to be discounted in a manner similar to discounting in cost-benefit methodologies. If the pleasure is intense, then it will have less duration, and that must also be taken into consideration. The hedonic treadmill phenomena would also appear to generate a kind of pleasure inflation. In order to maintain the same level of pleasure in a population which has experienced the pleasure over a period of time, there may have to be an increase in one or more of the dimensions Bentham considers to obtain the same quantity of pleasure in the next calculation. This is consistent with the paradox presented by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi of rising expectations. As each level of pleasure is obtained, desires for more pleasures emerge.<sup>50</sup>

Discrepancy theory suggests another caution about hedonic utilitarianism, especially in the calculation of total pleasures in a population. Where there are discrepancies in amounts of pleasure experienced in a population, there will be less happiness in the total population because of comparison, than if there is a relative equitable distribution of pleasures. Within a certain range of pleasure, there may be more overall happiness in a population that has a lower quantity of pleasure equally distributed than another population which has the same amount of pleasure more inequitably distributed.

Bentham makes a critical assumption that pleasure and happiness are correlated. However, defining “happiness” simply as pleasure may be inadequate. Increases in pleasure may not, in fact, generate genuine feelings of happiness. Although sanguine mood and the feeling of contentment are certainly pleasurable, they are more than the sensation of pleasure. Hedonic utilitarians must consider the genuine possibility that in maximizing pleasure in a population, they may not always be maximizing happiness.

The results of the psychological research may also have less impact on desire-satisfaction and preference versions of utilitarianism, primarily because happiness may not be considered the highest value in such theories. There could be people who do not prefer happiness to other goals or states, and may, in fact, prefer virtue, adventure, or liberty to happiness. However, to the extent that people do in fact prefer happiness as an end state, then the general outcome of the psychological research would provide many cautions in that pursuit. In particular, the criticisms of the so-called telic view of happiness may be particularly pertinent. For people who prefer happiness, the mere satisfaction of goals thought to result in happiness may not be sufficient to produce happiness unless, in fact, the goals do achieve happiness. Yet, given the weakness of the environmental theory of happiness and the credibility of the congenital account, happiness may not be readily achievable by success in such ordinary goals as wealth, health, and marriage. This is analogous to standard criticisms of preference utilitarianism. The achievement of preferred goals may not be what people would really prefer under ideal states of information.

This leaves Mill's form of utilitarianism as the principal target of concern. There is no doubt that Mill argues that the promotion of happiness is the measure of the rightness of an act, or the "the standard of morality."<sup>51</sup> As he says additionally in the *Autobiography*, it is "the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life."<sup>52</sup> For him, "the greatest happiness principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."<sup>53</sup> For Mill this standard is justified by the fact that happiness "is . . . the only thing desirable . . . as an end."<sup>54</sup>

Although Mill sometimes defines happiness "as an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality," most interpreters have argued that this narrow account of happiness in terms of pleasures and pains is not reflective of Mill's more sophisticated understanding.<sup>55</sup> Mill distinguishes himself from Bentham by arguing for a quality of pleasure distinct from mere quantity of pleasure. Mill does not think that happiness is the mere satisfaction of pleasures, since it is the sort of pleasures realized that matter on his view. People with low standards are more easily satisfied but less happy than people who have higher standards of what counts as pleasurable. For Mill it is folly to think of happiness as a state of continuous, highly pleasurable excitement.<sup>56</sup> Happiness, as he says, is "not a life of rapture, but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing."<sup>57</sup> Life's pleasures should be enjoyed as they come along, and accepted without scrutiny. However, of pleasures, Mill praises the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures. Happiness is also characterized as inclusive of virtue, and

a sense of dignity. Elsewhere he says it is composed of the complement of tranquility and excitement, the existence of one calling forth the desire for the other. A happy person is also not selfish, but expresses care, fellow-feeling, and interest in others.<sup>58</sup> Indeed Mill's prudential advice that he expresses in his *Autobiography* is that a person should not make his or her own happiness an immediate aim. The aim ought to be the general improvement of humankind, from which might flow our own happiness.<sup>59</sup> Other characteristics include mental cultivation, the pursuit of knowledge, and artistic expression. The principal sources of an unhappy life are poverty, disease, and the withdrawal of affection and worth.<sup>60</sup> Thus, we find in Mill a mixed account of happiness, some definitions focusing on pleasure, others on the achievement of external circumstances, such as freedom from disease and poverty, some in a life of virtue and care for others, while others close to the notion of subjective well-being, in terms of sanguine mood understood as a complement of tranquility and excitement, and, involving a certain level of satisfaction with life. If we accept the point that Mill defines "happiness" as pleasure, then the concerns expressed about Bentham's hedonic form of utilitarianism apply. If we take Mill's account of happiness as virtue and concern for others, then we must worry about the issue of whether virtue truly generates happiness. If we accept his account of happiness as the attainment of certain conditions or goals, then the criticisms of the environmental theory of happiness must apply here.

The utilitarian principle, the so-called greatest happiness principle, is justified by Mill on the arguably flawed grounds that on the assumption that happiness is good for an individual, then the greater good is comprised of the happiness of an aggregate of individuals. To the extent that anyone in a position of a power of choice would choose the greater good, then, the person would choose the greatest happiness. Thus, "happiness is a good, . . . each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons."<sup>61</sup> Consequently, when there is the option of alternative actions, actions that promote the greater happiness are to be preferred: "for that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether."<sup>62</sup> Assuming that we are working with an account of happiness as subjective well-being, the trouble with the maximization principles is that acting to increase the happiness of a population is of marginal value in ethical decision-making.

To encapsulate the credible findings in psychological research, we can say that most people are happy. Most of the happiness of a person over a lifetime is determined congenitally, and every happy or sad event is subject to a hedonic treadmill effect that in most cases returns people to their congenital level of happiness after a relatively short period of time. Consequently, the present condition over an entire population is satisfactory from the standpoint of the criterion of their happiness, although it may certainly not be satisfactory from other ethical standpoints. Thus, improving their socio-economic conditions

within certain thresholds will not improve the quantity of happiness significantly in the population, in the long run. Improvements in wealth, health, education, and other social goods may be morally justified but not on the basis of a maximization of happiness. Conversely, lowering the quantity and quality of such socio-economic conditions could be justified by utilitarian principle as long as the quantity of happiness in the population does not noticeably decline. Indeed, with these assumptions, the standard methodologies of total and average utilitarian calculation would show that there is marginal value in acting for the purposes of increasing a population's overall happiness.

Let us consider the average principle. Following Thomas Hurka, we may say that variations of the principle either average across persons or average across time. Moreover there are variations in the order of averaging, where either the principles average across persons and use summative principles across times, or, conversely, average both across persons and times.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, some philosophers argue that we should first apply the calculation to persons before times, and others the converse. For example, one version of the average principle would have us sum the happiness felt by each person at all the times in his life, and then averages the measures across lives, or, would have us calculate the average amount of happiness felt by each person alive at a single moment, and then have us sum these measures across moments.<sup>64</sup> As James Hudson has pointed out, to limit the time frame of average utilitarianisms is problematic, since a certain action at a given time would be evaluated differently depending on the temporal location of the evaluator.<sup>65</sup>

Where we sum up the effects of an action on the average happiness for each individual over a life-time, for any action taken to improve the average happiness of a population, if Lykken, Tellegen, and Hamer are right, the average happiness for each individual over a life-time will be determined by their congenitally-set basal happiness eighty percent of the time. Consequently, changing events for that person will not, overall, have much effect on their level of happiness over the course of a lifetime. If eighty to ninety percent of people are happy above neutral, then the average principle would calculate very little marginal value to changing events of that population in order to affect its average level of happiness. If we vary the average principle, and first calculate the average level of happiness for the population at a particular moment, then sum over the moments of the population, we end up with roughly the same result. In this case, although the event may have variable effect on each person in the population at a moment, given the roughly three to six month window of the hedonic treadmill effect, the average effect over moments in a person's lifetime will peak then fall to the person's basal setting, and this will be true for a large majority of members in the population.

Under the total principle, we would sum up the happiness across persons in a population, then sum up the results across time.<sup>66</sup> We look for greater gross quantities of happiness when comparing outcomes. Since the three empirical

findings would suggest some constancy of happiness in any population over time and, given that most people will be happy with conditions above a minimal threshold, we could reasonably be justified in reducing the standard of living for a current population, if we could at the same time increase the population. This is consistent with Derek Parfit's repugnant conclusion, which would have us prefer larger numbers of people with lower quality of life to smaller numbers with higher quality.<sup>67</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, Robert Lane argues that the "economic and political institutions of our time are products of the utilitarian philosophy of happiness," and is delighted to point out the irony that this utilitarian philosophy has "guided us to a period of greater unhappiness."<sup>68</sup> Lane faults the utilitarian ethic for its supposedly Benthamite reduction of the measure of happiness to money. Lane appears to have missed the mark here. For Lane, happiness will be increased when family, community, and solidarity are enhanced, not market prosperity. Although we can easily agree that good families, flourishing communities, and solidarity bound by noble purposes are good things, and that market prosperity has a number of ill consequences, the flaw in Lane's thinking is one that, in a doubly ironic way, he shares with utilitarians that happiness ought to be the measure of moral decision-making. This is, in part, due to Lane's exaggerated account of the decline in happiness over the last decades and, thereby, the belief that it can be improved over time under the right changes in institutions in practices, under an environmental theory of happiness.

The summary of research findings on subjective well-being suggest something different, and have the most serious consequences for classic eudaimonistic utilitarianism and its concomitant maximization principles. If we base the moral goodness of actions on the maximization of happiness, but realize that increases in happiness for a population have only marginal value, then we do little good in the world by trying to maximize happiness. Moreover, this thinking can be counter productive. If the maximization of happiness is the best or only criterion for moral decision-making then, given the best evidence about the nature of happiness, we have no moral incentive to change much of the human condition, except in certain narrowly defined areas of interest, and for very low thresholds. In fact, depending on the principle of calculation we use, we could justify substantially lowering the quality of life for large populations. Thus, we do better to increase good in the world by looking for criteria other than the overall happiness of a population.

It might be objected that even if the overall happiness of a population can only be improved marginally, then to the extent that it is highly desirable



or counted as the ultimate value, improving it even slightly is worthwhile. This is true up to a point. From a utilitarian point of view, it would be worth pursuing medications or treatments that addressed the sense of well-being for the chronically unhappy, as long as overall happiness in a population does not decline. But this is only a marginal concern of ethical theorists. Ethics has to do with decisions in all aspects of life, from birth to death, and if most decisions will have little effect on the happiness of most people in the long run, it is the wrong criterion to use in making these moral decisions.

Happiness is an adaptive, coping strategy. It helps us to tolerate the human condition. Modern psychological studies suggest that a remarkable number of people are simply happy with a variety of circumstances and difficulties, beyond basic thresholds of subsistence and security. Subjective happiness is of marginal value, then, in calculating the right or the best thing to do within the play of these thresholds. On an average and over a significant period of time, people will remain about as happy as they are now. Making decisions on the basis of supposed increments or decrements of happiness is bad policy criteria and bad ethics. This suggests that the reason to bring about certain things, ethically speaking, should not be for the purpose of happiness, but for some other consequence, or simply for the goodness or rightness of the practices themselves.<sup>69</sup>

## Notes

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4. David Myers and Edward Diener, "Who Is Happy?" *Psychological Science* 6(1) (1995); Edward Diener and Carol Diener, "Most People are Happy," *Psychological Bulletin* 7(3) (1996).
5. David Lykken and Auke Tellegen, "Happiness is A Stochastic Phenomenon," *Psychological Science* 7(3) (1996).
6. See Warner Wilson, "Correlates of Avowed Happiness," *Psychological Bulletin* 67 (1967): 294; see Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, op cit., p. 276.
7. See Michael Argyle, "Causes and Correlates of Happiness," in Daniel Kahneman, Edward Diener, Norbert Schwarz, eds., *Well-being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999). Angus Campbell, Phillip Converse, and Willard

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  9. See Lykken and Tellegen, op cit., pp. 186–194. See Richard Witter, M. Okun, W. Stock, and N.M. Haring, "Education and Subjective Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis," *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 6 (1984). See also Norval Glenn and C. Weaver, "Education's Effect on Psychological Well-being," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45 (1981).
  10. See Edward Diener and Euksook Suh, "Measuring Quality of Life: Economic, Social, and Subjective Indicators," *Social Indicators Research* 40 (1997). See also Lykken and Tellegen, op cit.; Andrew Clark and Andrew Oswald, "Unhappiness and Unemployment," *Economic Journal* 104 (1994); Edward Diener, J. Horwitz and Robert A. Emmons, "Happiness of the Very Wealthy," *Social Indicators Research* 16 (1985). See Argyle, op cit., p. 357.
  11. See Edward Diener and Frank Fujita, "Resources, Personal Strivings, and Subjective Well-Being: Nomothetic and Idiographic Approach," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68 (1995); see Alex Michalos, "Multiple Discrepancies Theory (MDT)," *Social Indicators Research* 16 (1985).
  12. See Myers and Diener, op cit., p. 15; Norval Glenn and C. Weaver, "A Multivariate, Multi-survey Study of Marital Happiness," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 40 (1979); Marilyn Haring-Hidore, W.A. Stock, M.A. Okun, and Robert Witter, "Marital Status and Subjective Wellbeing: A Research Synthesis," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47 (1985). See David Myers, "Close Relationships and Quality of Life," in Daniel Kahneman, Edward Diener, Norbert Schwarz, eds., *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), p. 378.
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  17. See Phillip Brickman and Donald Campbell, "Hedonic Relativism and Planning the Good Society," in Morris Apley, ed., *Adaptation-Level Theory: A Symposium* (New York: Academic Press, 1971). See Lois Verbrugge, J. Reoma, and A. Gruber-Baldini, "Short-term Dynamics of Disability and Well-being," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 35 (1994). See Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, op cit. p. 287.
  18. See Robert Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 7–8. See Argyle, op cit.

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23. See Timothy Kasser and Richard Ryan, "A Dark Side of the American Dream Correlates of Financial Success as a Central Life Aspiration," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 (1993).
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25. Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, op cit., p. 278.
26. Lykken and Tellegen, op cit.; Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, op cit.
27. Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, op cit., p. 285.
28. See Euksook Suh, Edward Diener, and Frank Fujita, "Events and Subjective Well-being: Only Recent Events Matter," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70 (1996).
29. See Phillip Brickman, D. Coates, and R. Janoff-Bulmann, "Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36 (1978). See Ruth Silver, *Coping with an Undesirable Life Event: A Study of Early Reactions to Physical Disability* (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL., 1982). See Andrew Clark, Yannis Georgellis, Richard Lucas, and Edward Diener, "Unemployment Alters the Set-point for Life Satisfaction," *Psychological Science* 15(1) (2004). See Richard Lucas, Andrew Clark, Yannis Georgellis, and Edward Diener, "Re-examining Adaptation and the Setpoint Model of Happiness: Reactions to Changes in Marital Status," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84 (2003).
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34. See Tiffany Ito and John Cacioppo, "The Psychophysiology of Utility Appraisals," in Daniel Kahneman, Edward Diener, and Norbert Schwarz, eds., *Well-being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003); see Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, op cit., p. 286.
35. See Michalos, op.cit.; See also Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, op cit.
36. See Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, op cit., p. 281.
37. Ibid.
38. See Argyle, op cit.
39. Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, and Diener, op cit., p. 536.

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42. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, H. Rackham, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925), I. vii. 15–16.
43. See Annas, *op cit.*, pp. 330, 365.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 330.
45. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 45–46.
46. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. I.2.
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50. See Mihali Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow* (New York: Harper, 1990), p. 10.
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54. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 16; see John Lachs, “Two Views of Happiness in Mill,” *Mill News Letter* 9 (1973); Fred Berger, “Mill’s Concept of Happiness,” *Interpretation* 7 (1978); Edward Walter, “Mill on Happiness,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 16 (1982); Robert Hoag, “Mill’s Conception of Happiness as an Inclusive End,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987); Marcus Singer, “Mill’s Stoic Conception of Happiness and Pragmatic Conception of Utility,” *Philosophy* 75(291) (2000).
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58. *Ibid.* pp. 12, 13, 18, 45.
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60. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, *op cit.*, p.18.
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63. See Thomas Hurka, “Average Utilitarianisms,” *Analysis* 42(2) (1982); Thomas Hurka, “More Average Utilitarianisms,” *Analysis* 42(3) (1982); Thomas Hurka, “Value and Population Size,” *Ethics* 93 (1983); Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
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68. Lane, *op cit.*, p. 13.
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