

HAPPINESS

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Utilitarian moral philosophy holds that public policy should aim at advancing happiness. For long this principle seemed unrealistic but contemporary research shows it can work.

Jeremy Bentham (1789) wrote that the moral worth of all action should be judged by the degree to which it contributes to the 'greater happiness of a greater number'. This philosophy is still object of much controversy (Smart & Williams 1973). The following objections have been raised. 1) Happiness is undefined, hence the philosophy is meaningless. 2) Happiness is immeasurable, hence the philosophy lacks consequence, 3) Happiness is fleeting, enduring happiness is hence impossible. 4) Happiness is for a happy few, happiness for the 'great number' is hence illusionary. 5) Happiness is relative, 'greater' happiness is hence impracticable. 6) Happiness spoils, great happiness for a great number is hence undesirable. 7) Given this, we better aim at more tangible worth, like social justice and psychological autonomy.

Happiness became the subject of empirical research in the 1960's. To date 3300 studies have considered the matter, listed in the World Database of Happiness (website below) and recently reviewed by Diener (1999) and Argyle (2002). From the perspective of this research the objections appear to be erroneous.

Happiness can be defined

Bentham defined happiness as 'the sum of pleasures and pains'. Similarly happiness is currently conceived as 'the overall appreciation of ones life as-a-whole'. In this conceptualisation, happiness is an outcome of life and distinct from preconditions for a good life, such as a livable environment and good life-abilities. This conception differs from current notions of 'quality of life', which combine anything good (Veenhoven 2000).

Happiness can be measured

Happiness is a conscious state of mind; hence it can be measured by interrogation. It is an overall judgement; so it can be measured by single questions. Thus happiness can be assessed in large-scale surveys. Several standard questions have shown to be quite valid and reasonably reliable (Diener 1995). Degree and duration of happiness are combined in assessment of 'happy life-years' (Veenhoven 1996).

Enduring happiness is possible

Though some things called happiness are fleeting, e.g. luck and ecstasy, happiness in this sense is not. Follow-ups after one year show stability rates in the range of +. 65.

Happiness of a great number is possible

Unhappiness prevails in some parts of the present day world, but the majority is happy in most nations. In 2000 only 4% of the British ticked 'not at all satisfied' on a

question about global satisfaction with the life one leads (Eurobarometer Survey). Time-sampling studies on daily affect show also a preponderance of good mood. These results cannot be disposed as measurement bias or cognitive accommodation.

Greater happiness is possible

At the macro level happiness depends heavily on societal qualities such as wealth, justice and freedom. Social policy can improve these conditions. At the meso level happiness depends on institutional qualities, like autonomy at work or in care-institutions. Organisational reform can improve such situations. At the micro level happiness depends on personal capabilities like efficacy, independence and social skills. Education and therapy can improve these proficiencies. Improvement is not always nullified by habituation or by a shift in standards of reference. Happiness is not relative. Contrary to common belief happiness is not calculated cognitively from the gap between want and reality, but rather inferred from unreasoned mood (Veenhoven 1991). Improvements are neither neutralised by a fixed view on life. Happiness is not a trait (Veenhoven 1994).

Happiness does not deprave

Follow-up studies on consequences of happiness have shown positive effects on moral behaviour, happiness fosters altruism and sociability. There is also evidence that happiness promotes activity and initiative, but no indication for negative effects on creativity. Last but not least, happiness is positive for health; happy people live longer (Veenhoven 1988).

Happiness is a good outcome criterion

Quality of life is typically measured by presence of conditions deemed good for people; happiness indicates how well people actually flourish. Current QOL-indexes typically add apples and oranges; happiness provides an overall appraisal of life. Current indexes treat external conditions and inner capabilities separately; happiness reflects the apparent 'fit' of conditions and capabilities. Given this, happiness is the best outcome criterion available (Veenhoven 2000, 2002).

All in all, the criterion of happiness has value and should be used more in assessing outcomes of policy and therapy.

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Web links:

- World Database of Happiness, ongoing register of scientific research on subjective appreciation of life: www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/happiness
- Journal of Happiness Studies, an interdisciplinary forum on subjective wellbeing: www.wkap.nl/journals/johs