

DOES HAPPINESS MATTER?

ON THE VALUE OF GREAT HAPPINESS FOR A GREAT NUMBER

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1 WHY THIS QUESTION?

The previous chapters have shown that the Japanese are currently less happy than the Dutch, caused largely by societal differences between them, namely, that Japanese society is more collectivistic and less democratic. These differences can also be attributed to cultural lag. Although Japan is economically advanced, many of her institutions are still marked by the late agrarian phase of societal development, in particular her power structure and the family. If these data are correct, what should the Japanese do? Should they change their society in order to become happier, potentially by accelerating the processes of individualization and democratization that are currently ongoing in Japanese society? There is a price to such cultural modernisation as it would undermine cherished traditions, obliterate Japan's current identity, and cause unrest and alienation. Are these changes worth the additional happiness? Is an average happiness score of 6.2 not good enough?

The answer to that question depends on the valuation of happiness. If one sees happiness as the highest good, then the answer is clear: Japan should further modernize. But if one feels that happiness is not everything, The answer is not so obvious and may even be negative. A well-informed choice requires an insight into the value of happiness. To that end, current views on the value of happiness are reviewed, starting with the 'greatest happiness principle' in moral philosophy and then by summarizing the criticism to that position. These moral positions are evaluated by considering the assumptions that underlie them, and then by examining the reality-value of these assumptions. For this latter purpose, I will draw on findings from empirical research on happiness.

2 THE GREATEST HAPPINESS PRINCIPLE

For a long time, happiness was not a prominent issue in moral philosophy. In the wake of modernity, however, happiness has come to the forefront as a major value.

2.1 The Principle

Two centuries ago Jeremy Bentham (1789) wrote that the goodness of an action

should not be judged by the decency of its intentions, but by the utility of its consequences. Bentham conceived final 'utility' as human 'happiness'. Hence, he concluded that we should aim at the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number'. Bentham defined happiness in terms of psychological experience, as 'the sum of pleasures and pains'. This philosophy is known as 'Utilitarianism', because of its emphasis on the utility of behavioral consequences. 'Happyism' would have been a better name, since this utility is seen to contribute to happiness.

When applied at the level of individual choice, this theory runs into some difficulties. One problem is that often one cannot foresee the balance of effects of specific actions on happiness. Another problem is that the theory deems well-intended behavior to be amoral if it happens to pan out adversely. Imagine the case of a loving mother who saves the life of her sick child, who becomes a criminal in adulthood; mothers can seldom foresee a child's future and thus should not be reproached for their unconditional motherly love.

The theory is better suited for judging general rules, such as the rule that mothers should care for their sick children; adherence to this rule will add to the happiness of a great number. Following such rules is then morally correct, even if consequences may be negative in a particular case. This variant is known as 'Rule-Utilitarianism'. Rule-Utilitarianism has been seen as a moral guide for legislation and has played a role in discussions ranging from property laws to the death penalty. The principle can also be applied to wider issues in public policy; such as to what degree income-inequality is acceptable. In that case, Rule-Utilitarianism would argue that inequality is not bad in and of itself, but it is unacceptable if it reduces the happiness of the average citizen. Following Rule-Utilitarianism, the Japanese should adopt policies that create greater happiness even if these policies might interfere with their cultural identity.

2.2 Objections against the principle

This moral principle met much resistance. Churches rejected it for the reason that it placed the basis of morality in earthly life rather than in divine revelation. In the 20th century, the greatest happiness principle was also rejected by the major ideologies of that time. Collectivist ideologies such as communism and fascism rejected it because of its focus on the individual rather than on the collective, and liberal thinkers had reservations because they feared that the principle could legitimize a cutback on civil liberties. In intellectual discourse, this resistance has materialized in the following objections:

2.2.1 *Little value in happiness*

One of the arguments is that happiness is a trivial matter. Happiness is denounced as mere pleasure and rosy contentment. Subsequently it is argued that happiness may be 'false because it draws upon a distorted view on reality. A related argument holds that happiness depends on the comparison of what one *thinks* one could have with what one *actually* has. Happiness is thus no more than the satisfaction of greed, and that greater happiness is neither possible nor desirable since we always want more than we have.

A second class of objections concerns adverse consequences of happiness. One of the arguments is that happiness spoils; for instance, that it fosters irresponsible consumerism and petty pleasure seeking. It is also argued that happiness drains the motivation to improve oneself and the world, the so-called 'contented cow' argument. Similarly, it is argued that happiness reduces critical thinking and therefore makes us an easy prey for dictatorial technocrats. At the societal level this could lead to political passivity, economic stagnation and cultural degeneration, which in the end leads to societal disintegration or occupation by less happy but more powerful competitors.

A third set of misgivings maintains that the goal of advancing happiness justifies amoral means, especially when the state meddles in the happiness of its citizens. It is argued that greater happiness for the greatest number could be achieved by the exploitation of minorities and the eliminations of annoying deviants. Likewise it is also maintained that the goal of greater happiness may require that we relinquish some of our freedom of press and democracy because citizens feel better without disturbing news and political controversies. Another horror-scenario concerns the creation of greater happiness by selective breeding or genetic manipulation.

Much of these objections feature in Aldous Huxley's (1935) *Brave New World*. This science fiction novel describes a society where most of these fears have come true: the society is governed by a class of technocrats that aims at the happiness of citizens but allows them no say in it. The media bring only good news and distraction but do not feed critical thinking. People are genetically manipulated to fit given social positions and are allowed to indulge in sex and soma (a happiness drug). The hero of the book is the only real human in this world because genetic manipulations had failed in his case. He cannot live in this utilitarian paradise and hangs himself in the end.

2.2.2 *More value in other things*

Denunciations of happiness, such as those stated above, are typically followed by claims that there are higher values, though critics differ in opinion on what these higher values are. Typically, church leaders emphasize the merits of religious devotion, socialists call for equality, and liberalise hold autonomy highest. From this perspective the Japanese could say that there is more value in preserving their unique culture and identity, and consequently, are willing to sacrifice 1.5 point on the happiness scale.

3 IS HAPPINESS TRIVIAL?

Is happiness really important, or is it merely trivial and frivolous? A better understanding of happiness, and a closer look at current research findings will help answer that question.

3.1 **Mere pleasure**

As mentioned above, happiness is often denounced as petty pleasure. In *Brave New*

World this is exemplified in a consumerist lifestyle, free sex and the use of soma. Huxley portrayed superficial enjoyment, but is this enjoyment happiness? I propose that it is not. **Scheme 1** reiterates the distinction between different kinds of satisfaction made in Chapter 1.

In that scheme, passing pleasure appears in the top-left quadrant, and is distinguished from lasting happiness at the bottom-right. Therefore, this objection does not apply to happiness properly. This is not to say that pleasurable living does not add to happiness, because it can (Veenhoven 2003), but happiness cannot be reduced to petty pleasure because it also depends on meaningful activity and self-development.

It is commonly assumed that happiness depends on social comparison, in which one's happiness is determined by being better off than one's neighbors. Similarly it is assumed that happiness depends on the meeting of culturally determined standards of success, and that the happiness of present day Americans is based on their ability to live up to the standards presented in the media. In both cases happiness is seen as cognitive contentment that can be achieved by settling for low standards. This theory appears to be wrong, however, since most of its implied predictions fail empirical testing (Veenhoven 1991, 1995). Rather, the available data suggest that happiness is essentially an affective phenomenon that signals how well we thrive. Thus, all organisms that are free to choose make their choices primarily on the basis of affective experience, with positive affect working as a go-signal and negative affect as a stop-signal. This affective orientation exists also in humans; evolution did not replace effect with cognition, but added cognition to the existing system. Cognition allows us to reflect on our affective experience, and as a result we can recall how well we feel over longer periods of time and hence assess happiness.

This theory is connected to the idea that happiness signals the gratification of basic human needs. Nature has safeguarded the meeting of essential requirements for functioning with negative and positive affect. When food supply falls short in the body, we are pushed to eating by the negative feeling of hunger, and we are pulled by interest and curiosity in order to keep informed about the possibilities of the environment. Different needs are safeguarded with affective signals, and together these signals reflect in mood. Unlike affects, mood is not linked to specific needs but signals the overall situation. Good mood indicates that we are doing well; bad mood warns that something may be wrong, and we are alerted to find the source. Mood can be compared to the green and red lights on machines: green marks smooth functioning while red is a warning signal. This theory is summarized in **Scheme 2**. In this view, happiness is not just an idea but rather a biological signal of good adaptation.

3.2 Superfluous?

The above objections imply that we could live equally well without awareness of being happy or not. Some critics, however, claim that this concept exists only in the minds of Western intellectuals and that normal people seldom bother about it. In Chapter 1, however, we saw that the concept is known all over the world, and that the percentage of 'don't know' responses to survey questions about happiness tends to be lower than 1%. This means that happiness is readily present in the minds of almost everybody. These findings support the above theory that happiness serves as an affective compass in life. In this view, happiness embodies vital information and is not trivial.

4 IS HAPPINESS HARMFUL?

Even if happiness has intrinsic value, maximization of happiness could have negative effects on other valued matters. Critics of utilitarianism claim that this will happen. They foresee that greater happiness will make people less caring and responsible, and they fear that the premise for happiness will legitimize amoral means in public policy. This scenario is also described in *Brave New World*, where citizens are too absorbed in their petty pleasures to care about their fellow man and to acknowledge their political oppression, while the ruling technocracy uses genetic manipulation and selective information to control the people. How realistic is this viewpoint?

4.1 Does happiness spoil?

The growing literature on consequences of happiness, recently in the context of 'positive psychology' suggests that happiness is an activating force and facilitates involvement in tasks and people. Happiness is seen to 'open us' to the world, while unhappiness invites us to retreat (Frederickson 2000). This view fits the above theory that happiness functions as a 'go-signal'.

Research findings support this positive view. Happiness is strongly correlated with activity and predicts sociable behaviors, such as helping. Happiness has also a positive effect on intimate relations; happy people make more friends and are more likely to marry. Happy people are also better parents. There is also good evidence that happiness lengthens life (Danner et. al. 2001). Clearly, happiness is good for us. There are also indications that the happiness of citizens has a positive effect on society. Happy people are better citizens, they are more likely to vote and participate in civil society, as well as add to a climate of tolerance and support for democracy.

A recent review of this literature can be found in Lyubomirsky (2005). These findings do not exclude the possibility that happiness may entail some negative effects, but does show that positive effects dominate.

4.2 Does a premise for happiness excuse amoral means?

The main philosophical objection against the greatest happiness principle is that it justifies all ways to improve happiness and hence permits morally objectable means, such as slavery and political repression. The possibility of such undesirable consequences is indeed implied in the logic of radical utilitarianism, but is it likely to materialize?

The available data suggest that this is not the case. In Chapter 1, we saw that the average happiness is highest in nations that are free, democratic and respect human rights. In addition, people live happiest in nations with free access to information and a high degree of education. Similarly, the average happiness appears to be higher in nations where democracy and equality are highly valued and where autocracy is rejected (Veenhoven 2000). Apparently, the disgusting politics of *Brave New World* do not create happiness in the Real World.

Likewise, various studies at the individual level have shown that happy people

are typically independent and active, rather than sullen consumer slaves as portrayed in *Brave New World*. Happy people are also more concerned about society and are more apt to be involved in political action than unhappy people. Again, research findings do not support armchair speculation about adverse effects of happiness. The consequences of happiness are typically positive.

5 CONCLUSION

Happiness is a vital and important concept, not only because it is better to feel good than to feel bad, but also because it signals good adaptation and facilitates human functioning. Thus, there are good reasons for pursuing great happiness for a great number. Objections against the greatest happiness principles fall short.

Taken together, recent findings indicate that the Japanese people should not ignore the relative low level of happiness in their country, and even if they choose not to instigate the changes required for greater happiness, they should acknowledge the price to be paid for that choice. The Dutch should not relax either. Although they are happier than the Japanese, they are less happy than the Swiss, the Danes, the Icelanders and the Irish. If average happiness can be around 8 in these countries, why could it not be in The Netherlands as well?

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SCHEME 1: FOUR KINDS OF SATISFACTION

	<i>Passing</i>	<i>Enduring</i>
<i>Part of life</i>	Pleas ure	Part-satisfaction
<i>Life -as -a-whole</i>	Top -exper ien ce	<u>Life -satisfaction</u>

SCHEME 2: NEED-THEORY OF HAPPINESS

