

HAPPINESS: HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

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ABSTRACT

Notions of the good life have not changed much over time. All the concepts known today can be found in early writings. What has changed is the prominence attached to aspects of the good life. Another long-term change is that conceptualizations became more specific and that empirical research has revealed their reality links, which made increasingly clear that there is no such thing as 'true happiness'.

1 PHILOSOPHY OF THE GOOD LIFE

As humans are conscious beings, they have always given thought about the quality of their lives. This thought became more systematic after the invention of scripture and the development of professional scholarship. Different notions of quality of life crystallized, often called by the same name of 'happiness'. A long-standing discussion emerged on the relative importance of these and on what constitutes 'true happiness'.

These views on the good life have been described at length in several books on the 'philosophy of happiness', such as recently in the monumental review by Darrin McMahon (2006) entitled 'Happiness: A history'. An overview of this literature is available in the 'Bibliography of Happiness' (Veenhoven 2013a, subject sections Tb and Tc).

These historical accounts compare schools of thought over time, typically beginning with ancient Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle and the Stoics, and ending with 20th century post-materialists. The focus is on the ideas as such rather than on the social forces that shaped these. Information is drawn from writings that have stand the centuries, which involves some selection. These historiographies describe views on the good life in scholarly circles and do not inform us about views held in the general public.

Approach of this chapter

In this chapter I will follow a different approach. I start from a classification of notions of the good life and indicate which of these appeal most to particular parties in the debate. On that base I make some informed guesses about prominence among scholars in the past. Next I discuss the effect of recent empirical research on the conception of quality of life.

2 NOTIONS OF THE GOOD LIFE

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The word 'happiness' is used in various ways. In the widest sense it is an umbrella term for all that is good. In this meaning it is often used interchangeably with terms like 'well-being' or 'quality of life' and denotes both individual and social welfare. This use of words suggests that there is one ultimate good and there is no conflict between individuals and society. It further suggests that the quality of life could be measured uni-dimensionally.

Quality-of-life concepts can be sorted using two distinctions, which together provide a fourfold matrix. I have proposed that classification in an earlier attempt to bring order in the many measures used in contemporary quality-of-life research (Veenhoven 2000). Here I use it for ordering historical views on the good life. The first distinction is between chances and outcomes, that is, the difference between opportunities for a good life and the good life itself. A second difference is between outer and inner qualities of life, in other words between 'external' and 'internal' features. In the first case the quality is in the environment, in the latter it is in the individual. Robert Lane (1994) made this distinction clear by distinguishing 'quality of society' from 'quality of persons'. The combination of these two dichotomies yields a fourfold matrix. This classification is presented in [figure 1](#).

Livability of the environment

The left top quadrant denotes the meaning of good living conditions, shortly called 'livability'.

Ecologists see livability in the natural environment and describe it in terms of pollution, global warming and degradation of nature. Currently, they associate livability typically with preservation of the environment. City planners see livability in the built environment and associate it with such things as sewer systems, traffic jams and ghetto formation. Here the good life is seen as a fruit of human intervention. In the sociological view, society is central. Livability is associated with the quality of society as a whole and also with the position one has in society.

Life-ability of the person

The right top quadrant denotes inner life-chances. That is: how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life. Amartya Sen (1992) calls this quality of life variant 'capability'. I prefer the simple term 'life-ability', which contrasts elegantly with 'livability'.

The most common depiction of this quality of life is absence of functional defects. This is 'health' in the limited sense, sometimes referred to as 'negative health'. Next to absence of disease, one can consider excellence of function. This is referred to as 'positive health' and associated with energy and resilience. A further step is to evaluate capability in a developmental perspective and to include acquisition of new skills for living. This is commonly denoted by the term 'self-actualization'. From this point of view a middle-aged man is not 'well' if he behaves like an adolescent, even if he functions without problems at this level. Since abilities do not develop alongside idleness, this quality of life is close to the 'activity' in Aristotle's concept of 'eudemonia'. Lastly, the term 'art of living' denotes special life-abilities; in most contexts this quality is distinguished from mental health and sometimes even attributed to slightly disturbed persons. Art of living is associated with refined tastes, an ability to enjoy life and an original style of life.

Utility of life

The left bottom quadrant represents the notion that a good life must be good for something more than itself. This assumes some higher values. There is no current generic for these external outcomes of life. E.M. Gerson (1976: 795) refers to these effects as 'transcendental' conceptions of quality of life. Another appellation is 'meaning of life', which then denotes

'true' significance instead of mere subjective sense of meaning. I prefer the simpler 'utility of life', while admitting that this label may also give rise to misunderstanding.

When evaluating the external effects of a life, one can consider its functionality for the environment. In this context, doctors stress how essential a patient's life is to its intimates. At a higher level, quality of life is seen in contributions to society. Historians see quality in the addition an individual can make to human culture, and rate for example the lives of great inventors higher than those of anonymous peasants. Moralists see quality in the preservation of the moral order, and would deem the life of a saint to be better than that of a sinner. As an individual's life can have many environmental effects, the number of such utilities is almost infinite.

Apart from its functional utility, life is also judged on its moral or esthetic value. For instance, most of us would attribute more quality to the life of Florence Nightingale than to that of a drunk, even if it appeared in the end that her good works had a negative result in the end.

Subjective enjoyment of life

Finally, the bottom right quadrant represents the inner outcomes of life. That is the quality in the eye of the beholder. As we deal with conscious humans, this quality boils down to subjective appreciation of life. This is commonly referred to by terms such as 'subjective wellbeing', 'life-satisfaction' and 'happiness' in a limited sense of the word.

Humans are capable of evaluating their life in different ways. We have in common with all higher animals that we can appraise our situation affectively. We feel good or bad about particular things and our mood level signals overall adaptation. As in animals these affective appraisals are automatic, but unlike other animals it is known that humans can reflect on this experience. We have an idea of how we have felt over the last year, while a cat does not. Humans can also judge life cognitively by comparing life as it is with notions of how it should be.

Most human evaluations are based on both sources of information, that is: intuitive affective appraisal and cognitively guided evaluation. The mix depends mainly on the object. Tangible things such as our income are typically evaluated by comparison; intangible matters such as sexual attractiveness are evaluated by how it feels. This dual evaluation system probably makes the human experiential repertoire richer than that of our fellow-creatures.

In evaluating our life we typically summarize this rich experience in overall appraisals. For instance we appreciate several domains of life. When asked how we feel about our work or our marriage we will mostly have an opinion. Likewise, most people form ideas about separate qualities of their life, for instance how challenging their life is and whether there is any meaning in it. Such judgments are made in different time-perspectives, in the past, the present and in the future. Mostly such judgments are not very salient in our consciousness. Now and then, they pop to mind spontaneously. Though not in the forefront of consciousness all the time estimates of subjective enjoyment of life can be recalled and refreshed when needed. This makes these appraisals measurable in principle.

Such a subjective evaluation can also concern one's life as a whole. Jeremy Bentham (1789) referred to such appraisal as 'the sum of pleasures and pains' and called it 'happiness'.

3 UNIVERSAL TOPICS

All above mentioned notions of the good life figure in classic thought, clearly because they all are of relevance in the human condition. A few examples suffice to illustrate their timeliness.

Livability

Since our life depends very much on external conditions, livability issues will always pop-up in reflections on the good life. We see this for instance in imageries of Paradise, such as described by Alois Hahn (1976) and also in Utopist blue prints of an ideal society on earth, such as by Thomas Moore (1869). These designs of a livable environment typically reflect the problems of the times in which they emerged. Contemporary notions of the good society focus very much on the degree to which they have solved problems of the past, such as poverty, inequality and oppression.

Life ability

Quality of life depends evidently on what we make of the given living conditions, so capability issues have always figured in notions of the good life. In this context different interest groups have emphasized different competences. 'Bravery' and 'fighting skill' were praised in the warrior classes, spokesmen for which have long dominated in the discourse. The spokesmen themselves, typically moral philosophers, rather emphasized 'wisdom'. Intellectual development was cherished by bureaucrats such as the Chinese Mandarins among which the teachings of Confucius were well received. 'Perseverance' and 'rationality' were emphasized in the business classes, such as in the 16th century Protestant Ethic (Weber 1905). Personal 'autonomy' is more central among contemporary psychologists and pedagogues, who see the good life more in terms of 'mental health' than of 'morality'.

Utility of life

Since we are thinking animals, hard wired to pick-up causal relations, we cannot evade wondering what our life is good for. Consequently issues of meaning figure typically in discussions on the quality of life. All religions provide answers to that question, which often involve a promise of paradise, entrance to which is typically not free.

In the above mentioned case of the Protestant Ethic the meaning of life is seen in being a good steward in Gods garden during one's life time. In some radical religions meaning is found in the eradication of heretics. Meaning is also central in secular notions of the good life and is typically seen in furthering social justice and saving mother earth. Post-modern agnostic philosophers also emphasize meaning, but cannot decide what for.

Subjective enjoyment of life

Human thinking capacity has not replaced the evolutionary older affect system. Like other animals, we can feel good or bad and tend to approach situations where we feel good and avoid conditions that feel bad. Facial reflections of feeling happy or unhappy are recognized all over the world (Ekman & Friesen 1975). As a result hedonic appraisals are always on the scene.

In Christian mythology, Adam and Eva are assumed to have felt good before being expelled from Paradise and to have suffered much after in the harsh conditions of real life. Pictorial representations of earthly paradises typically show smiling faces, such as in Chinese communist propaganda (e.g. Laing 2004: ch. 10).

Subjective enjoyment of life is also a recurrent topic in philosophy. Among the early Greeks 'hedonists' such as Democritus thought of the good life as a life one likes. This view is also found in 18th century utilitarianism, such as professed by Bentham (1789).

Subjective enjoyment of life is also prominent in real life experience. Most modern people think of it every day (Freeman 1978). The salience of this notion appears also in the promptness of responses to survey questions about life satisfaction and the low percentage 'don't know' answers; typically less than 1% (Veenhoven 2013b).

4 HISTORICAL VARIATIONS

Still these topics have not always been equally prominent in conceptualization of the good life.

Classic focus on morality

Virtue is central in much classic philosophy, probably because most philosophers made their living as moral advisors. In that context personal capabilities such as honesty and faith are emphasized (right-top quadrant in [figure 1](#)) and also manifestations of utility, such as martyrdom (left bottom quadrant). This emphasis on moral behavior seems to have been more pronounced in historical conditions where morality was at its weakest.

Some classic philosophers have also given thought about what makes for a good society, such as Plato (380 BC) in his ‘Politeia’ and in the writings of Confucius (Veenhoven & Guoqing 2008). This emphasis is typical for developed states and is therefore more prominent in contemporary nation states than it has ever been in the past. Today, all modern states monitor the quality of the living conditions they provide, using sophisticated systems of ‘social indicators’, which become increasingly internationalized.

Moral philosophers were typically mixed about the worth of subjective enjoyment of life. Most accept it as a byproduct of living a good life, rather than an a manifestation of the good life as such. One reason for this reservation is in their professional involvement with moral disciplining. Another reason is probably in the poor quality of life in agrarian societies, which appears in historically high rates of homicide, poor health and consequently a short life-time. This historical deep-point in quality of life is depicted in [figure 2](#). This misery is likely to have called for the glorifying of suffering and in the projection of happiness in after life, a demand to which the churches of these days have responded.

Modern emphasis on subjective wellbeing.

During the Middle Ages it was widely believed that happiness is not possible in earthly life and that the basis of morality is in the word of God. These views were contested in the 18th century ‘Enlightenment’; happiness came to be seen as attainable and morality was regarded as man-made. A lively discussion on the relation between happiness and morality emerged (Mauzi 1960, Buijs 2007) and in that climate an instrumental view on morality appeared, in which ethical codes are seen as ways of securing a happy life.

Much of that enlightened thought is reflected in Bentham’s (1789) ‘Introduction to morals and legislation’. Bentham argues that the moral quality of action should be judged by its consequences on human happiness and in that line he claims 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’, that is, in the right bottom quadrant of [figure 1](#). His philosophy is known as ‘utilitarianism’, because of its emphasis on the utility of behavioral consequences.

Though welcomed in enlightened circles in the 18th century, this view was rejected by the dominating ideologies of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The strongest opposition came from the churches, which saw little value in earthly happiness and professed a principalistic morality based on the ten commandments. The liberals of that time also had reservations about the greatest happiness principle; in their power struggle with the aristocracy they rather emphasized freedom. Likewise the socialists who entered the scene in the late 19th century prioritized social equality. Nationalism dominated in first half of the 20th century when the two world wars took place, and nationalists were more interested in national glory than in individual happiness.

As a result, interest in happiness declined and one of the indications is a sharp drop in

the use of the word in book titles after 1800 (Buijs 2007). When I took a course in social philosophy in the 1960s I encountered Bentham's greatest happiness principle as a historical topic. Yet a revival took off at that time. Ever more books on 'How to be happy' appeared in the bookshops and happiness became also a topic on the political agenda.

This renewed interest in greater happiness was driven by several factors. One of these is that many pressing ills had been overcome, at least in the Western world. The second half of the 20th century was characterized by peace, democracy and an unprecedented rise in the standard of living. This gave way to more positive goals, such as health and happiness. Another factor was the development of a multiple-choice-society in which individuals can choose how to live their life and therefore get interested in what way of life will be most satisfying. The rise of happiness on the political agenda was also facilitated by the weakening of the earlier ideological opposition mentioned above. The churches had declined, the liberals and the socialists got their deal and nationalism had lost much of its appeal.

The effect of these long-term ideological shifts was much amplified by the emergence of empirical research on quality of life.

5 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON QUALITY OF LIFE

Quality of life became a subject of empirical research in the second half of the 20th century, when modern welfare states developed and social engineering came to require systematic information about the well-being of the general population in order to identify needs and track progress in meeting these. Specialized research institutes were established in all developed nations and periodical welfare surveys were started. This 'social indicator revolution' (Bauer 1967) has affected thought about the good life in several ways.

Empirical research gave rise to greater conceptual differentiation than armchair theorizing had done in the past, both because measurement pressed to greater precision and because findings revealed unexpected differences between aspects of the good life. For instance, the classic notion of 'wisdom' has crumbled in a set of rather loosely related traits (Bergsma & Ardel 2012).

The new quality of life research has also augmented the growing interest in subjective appreciation of life, that is in the quality of life denoted in the right bottom quadrant of [figure 1](#). Life satisfaction appeared to be easily measurable in survey research, and in fact better measurable than most of the other qualities of life mentioned in scheme 1 (Veenhoven 2000). As a result, subjective happiness became more tangible a topic; research showed how happy we are in this sense and also indicated how happy we can realistically be. Findings of this kind are well covered by the media, which has also augmented the rising prominence of subjective well-being. Moreover, social scientists have surpassed philosophers as quality of life specialists and also for that reason the above mentioned philosophical reservations have lost appeal.

Rise of research on life satisfaction

Empirical research on life satisfaction took off as a topic in 'social indicators research' that emerged in the 1970s. The number of papers on this subject in the journal 'Social Indicators Research' grew so much that the specialized 'Journal of Happiness Studies' was split off in 2000. Subjective enjoyment of life became a side topic in medical 'quality of life research' that developed in the 1980s and in both 'positive psychology' and 'happiness economics', which appeared around the year 2000. The number of scientific publications on happiness has grown steeply since the 1960s, as can be seen in [figure 3](#). In all this research the leading question is what makes people subjectively happy with the major motivation being to

advance this kind of happiness. Results of this strand of research are gathered in the World Database of Happiness (2013), which currently involves some 20.000 findings, some 5000 ‘distributional’ findings on how much people like the life they live and about 15.000 ‘correlational’ findings on things that go together with subjective enjoyment of life.

Observed links with other qualities of life

Many of the correlational findings on life-satisfaction concern aspects of the good life denoted in **figure 1**, in particular with the environmental conditions of the top-left quadrant and the personal capabilities in the top-right quadrant.

The data confirm many of the educated guesses philosophers have made in the past, such as that average life satisfaction is typically higher in democratic nations and that happy individuals tend to abide more to moral principles. Yet the data also show much variation, not all citizens flourish equally well under democracy and morality is no sure ticket to happiness.

Some of the presumed links between qualities of life appear not to exist. For instance, average happiness in nations is unrelated to equality of incomes and negatively related to religiousness (Berg & 2009, 2010). Likewise studies at the individual level found no relation between happiness and IQ (Choi & Veenhoven 2012).

This means that the different varieties of the good life do not always go together. There is no such thing as ‘true’ happiness that covers all qualities, but rather quality configurations, in which some qualities strengthen each other, while others conflict. A challenge of future research is to chart configurations that are optimal in given historical conditions.

6 CONCLUSION

Notions of the good life are largely given by the human condition and pop up at all times in the great civilizations, though typically in the context of current intellectual discourses. Relative prominence varies across times and cultures. Subjective life satisfaction has gained prominence in contemporary western society. This is partly due to the development of multiple choice society and another reason is that empirical research is well possible on aspect of the good life

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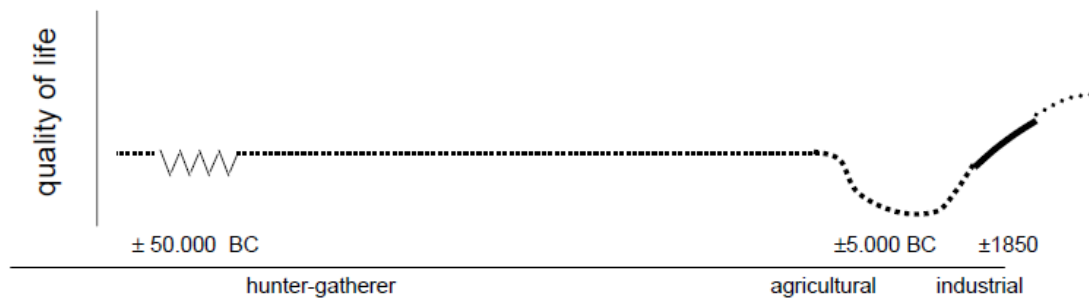
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Figure 1
Four qualities of life

	<i>Outer qualities</i>	<i>Inner qualities</i>
<i>Life chances</i>	Livability of environment	Life-ability of the person
<i>Life results</i>	Usefulness of life	Satisfaction with life

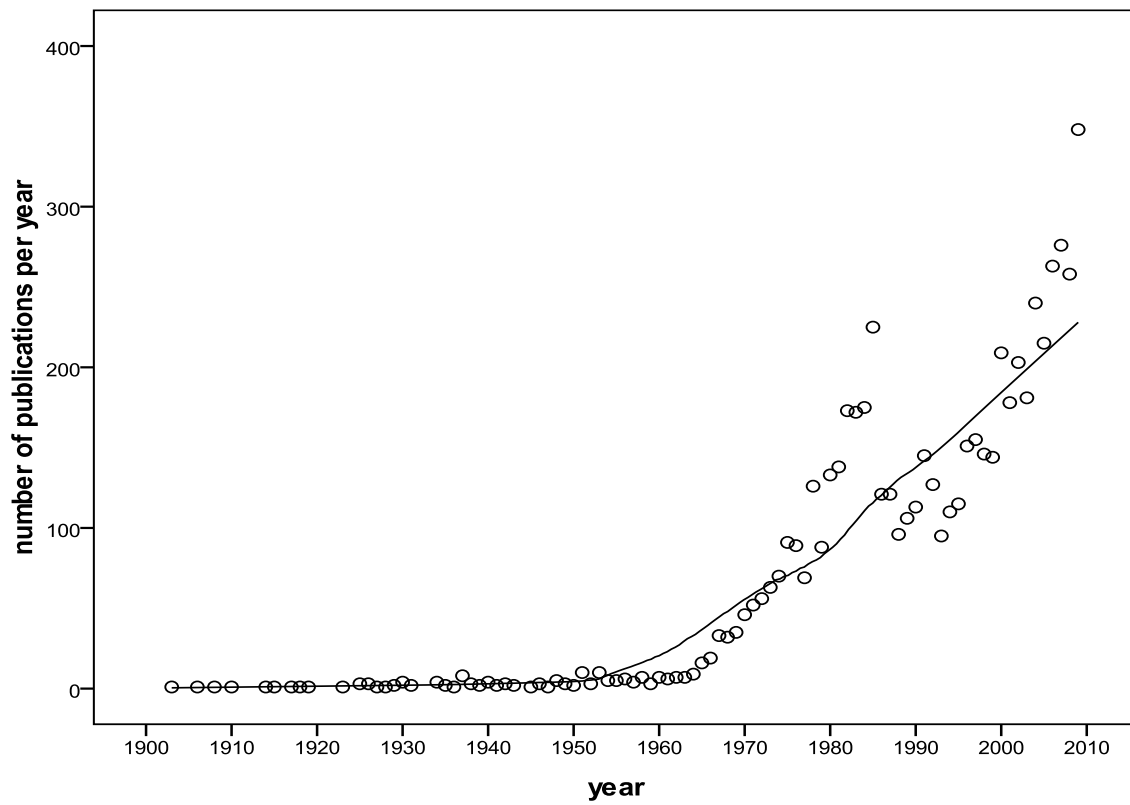
Source: Veenhoven 2000

Figure 2
Years lived in good health over human history



Source: Veenhoven 2010

Figure 3
Scientific publications on life satisfaction since 1900



Source: Bibliography of Happiness (Veenhoven 2013a)