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Happiness as a Force for Promoting International Equality

Lawrence Karn* and Takahiko Hattori*

Abstract

This paper examines a number of approaches to the question of human happiness in terms of the benefits and challenges each may hold for increasing social justice by seeking to diminish inequalities that enslave, objectify and disadvantage people in positions of diminished resources, power and opportunities. Writings by Bertrand Russell, Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi as well as a presentation by Dan Gilbert introduce modern approaches to personal happiness. Attempts to quantify happiness are discussed with reference to works by Richard Easterlin and Gregg Easterbrook. Finally, Martha Nussbaum and Sara Ahmed’s arguments for a broadened approach to happiness—one that necessarily includes the role of happiness in advancing international equality—are explored.

Key Words: feminism, happiness, human rights, international equality, social justice

1. Introduction

This paper will be divided into three parts. First, there will be a discursive analysis of the 20th century current state of thinking on personal happiness as represented in Bertrand Russell’s Conquest of Happiness, Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s remarks in “Positive Psychology: An Introduction” and Dan Gilbert’s TED Talk on “The Surprising Science of Happiness.”

Second, quantitative approaches to happiness will be considered. Richard Easterlin’s “The Economics of Happiness” and Gregg Easterbrook’s “The Great Story of our Era: Average People Better Off” will be used in a discussion of the statistical approach to defining happiness. The discussion also moves from what we term personal happiness to the realm of individual measures of happiness.

In creating a distinction between personal happiness and individual happiness, we will as-

*School of Social Information Studies, Otsuma Women’s University
associate particular words with each term. Personal happiness will be linked to personality, character and the ways in which personality traits allow for adaptation, synthesis of happiness and for one person to find worthwhile something another person might find uninteresting.

We suggest that the notion of individual happiness has the nuance of a more numerical and mathematical definition. Individual happiness may be regarded as a measure of the attainment of what every member of the group necessarily wants. Models that strive for “aggregate happiness” are in this category. In Easterlin’s work, for example, individuals, who may not be the same individuals surveyed in earlier samples, are questioned to generate statistical data on subjective levels of happiness.

In this paper, we suggest that the phrase “personal happiness” has more of a qualitative feel than the phrase “individual happiness” and that the following examples convey a flavor of this distinction. The concept of character-building enlightenment whereby one develops oneself as a human being, both striving to reach one’s potential and nurturing one’s sense of social justice may be seen as a goal in personal happiness, as a way each one of us can adjust his or her personal standards. Money and material wellbeing are often associated with individual happiness.

Third, Martha Nussbaum’s “Who Is the Happy Warrior? Philosophy Poses Questions to Psychology” and Sara Ahmed’s “Feminist Killjoys” The Promise of Happiness will be used in critiquing earlier approaches to happiness that were presented in the first two sections of this paper. We will suggest that these go beyond the narrow focus of both positive psychology as well as the statistical critiques of positive psychology and economic measures of wellbeing and, in so doing, that Nussbaum and Ahmed’s inquiries provide insights into the role of happiness in redressing international inequalities.

2. The 20th Century Current State of Thinking on Personal Happiness

2.1 Bertrand Russell’s Conquest of Happiness

Written in 1930, in The Conquest of Happiness, Bertrand Russell, in setting out the scope of his examination in “What Makes People Unhappy?” seeks to limit his focus to personal happiness in particular. Russell comments, “I have written before about the changes in the social system required to promote happiness. Concerning the abolition of war, of economic exploitation, of education in cruelty and fear, it is not my intention to speak in this volume” 1). Linking the concept of personal happiness as a force for the eventual promotion of international equality, he poses the rhetorical question, “To prevent the perpetuation of poverty is necessary if the benefits of machine production are to accrue in any degree to those most in need of them; but what is the use of making everybody rich if the rich themselves are miserable?” 2). In advocating the necessity of a shift in attitudes for there to be the possibility of greater justice and equality, Russell quite reasonably and laudably links this improvement to personal happiness in the consideration that, “Education in cruelty and fear is bad, but no other kind can be given by those who are themselves the slaves of these passions.
These considerations lead us to the problem of personal happiness (while Russell had here used the phrase “the individual” we have substituted it for “personal” happiness in favor of consistency in this paper): what can a man or woman, here and now, in the midst of our nostalgic society, do to achieve happiness for himself or herself?\(^5\)

In limiting his discussion to personal happiness, Russell declares, “My purpose is to suggest a cure for the ordinary day-to-day unhappiness from which most people in civilized countries suffer, and which is all the more unbearable because, having no obvious external cause, it appears inescapable”\(^5\). The attitude shifts that are necessary—described as one’s ‘views of the world’—are presented in Russell’s assertion, “I believe this unhappiness to be very largely due to mistaken views of the world, mistaken ethics, mistaken habits of life, leading to destruction of that natural zest and appetite for possible things upon which all happiness, whether of men or animals, ultimately depends. These are matters which lie within the power of the [person (we are substituting this for the word individual)], and I propose to suggest the changes by which his happiness, given average good fortune, may be achieved”\(^6\).

Using personal happiness as a character trait or subjective state that may be likened to spiritual enlightenment, or, at least, to a sense of selflessness, Russell reflects, “I enjoy life; I might almost say that with every year that passes I enjoy it more. This is due partly to having discovered what were the things that I most desired and having gradually acquired many of these things. Partly it is due to having successfully dismissed certain objects of desire - such as the acquisition of indubitable knowledge about something or other - as essentially unattainable. But very largely it is due to a diminishing preoccupation with myself”\(^7\).

While the wish to do good in the world and the intention that happiness has a role to play in promoting international equality frames Russell’s remarks on personal happiness, based on his suggestion that personal happiness is a prerequisite for undertaking “changes in the social system,” much of The Conquest of Happiness is devoted to helpful advice on achieving personal happiness. While the concern may be raised that an emphasis on personal satisfaction might also sanction selfishness, Russell declares such “self-absorption is of various kinds. We may take the sinner, the narcissist, and the megalomaniac as three very common types”\(^8\) and then provides detailed examples to demonstrate personal happiness does not justify selfish behavior.

Russell’s counsel may be regarded as either quaint or somewhat historically dated in reflecting the attitude toward women in 1930, but he writes with good intention and in an engaging manner. Russell’s Conquest is noteworthy due to its influence on the humanistic psychology movement of the 1960 and 70s and the current positive psychology movement.

The good nature and humanism that infuses Russell’s professions of faith on the topic of personal happiness may be characterized in the following three recommendations. “Fundamental happiness depends more than anything else upon what may be called a friendly interest in persons and things.”\(^9\) “To like many people spontaneously and without effort is perhaps the greatest of all sources of personal happiness.”\(^10\) “The secret of happiness is this: let your interests be as wide as possible, and let your reactions to the things and persons that interest you be as far as possible friendly rather than hostile.”\(^11\)

Overall, we endorse Russell’s approach to
happiness. Its potential benefits and shortcomings will be noted in the conclusion of this paper and Russell’s formulation will be compared to others through the course of this essay.

2.2 Positive Psychology Emerges

Seventy years after Russell’s observations on the transformative effect personal happiness may lead to in the world—the conviction that kindness and joy rather than cruelty and fear must be the guiding principles and goals of civilization—Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, in “Positive Psychology: An Introduction”, take up the challenge of advancing happiness in a personal way within an empirical framework. The key points of the positive psychology approach to happiness can be summarized as follows.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi advance the field of Positive Psychology in a special edition of the prestigious and influential American Psychologist with the following pronouncement: “Left alone on the pinnacle of economic and political leadership, the United States can continue to increase its material wealth while ignoring the human needs of its people and those of the rest of the planet. Such a course is likely to lead to increasing selfishness, to alienation between the more and the less fortunate, and eventually to chaos and despair.” The notion of happiness as a force for promoting international equality is manifest in this statement.

Further declaring the emergence of their field to be a call to action, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi declare “The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities.”

In a manner that allows for both quantification and seeks to encompass arts, politics, social justice issues and philosophy in addition to psychology, the following scope of operations is presented: “The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic.” Certainly, this broad definition is useful in the economic approaches to happiness that seek to measure subjective assessments of well-being.

Seeking to distinguish itself from humanistic psychology with an appeal to a scientific and scholarly rigor positive psychology implies the humanistic school lacked, the charge is laid that, “one legacy of the humanism of the 1960s is prominently displayed in any large bookstore: The ‘psychology’ section contains at least 10 shelves on crystal healing, aromatherapy, and reaching the inner child for every shelf of books that tries to uphold some scholarly standard.” Further positioning itself as a bastion of scholarly rigor, the assertion is made that “positive psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, faith, self-deception, fads, or hand waving; it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents to those who wish to understand it in all its complexity.” In what has become a cliché among New Age devotees—the declaration “I’m not religious but I am spiritual”—it is noteworthy to find positive psychology praising spir-
matter what happens, may be exemplified in the findings Dan Gilbert offers in his presentation on "The Surprising Science of Happiness." Gilbert credits the enlargement of the human brain, in evolutionary terms, with having endowed people with the capacity to imagine events before they occur and also to synthesize happiness. He comments on how people imagine one flavor is tastier than another without having to engage in the unpleasant experience of trying the bad-tasting option, yet also cautions against the tendency for the simulation to make you believe different outcomes are more different than they really are or than we expect them to be. Gilbert terms this error "impact bias" and makes the remarkable assertion that, "From field studies to laboratory studies, we see that winning or losing an election, gaining or losing a romantic partner, getting or not getting a promotion, passing or not passing a college test, and on and on, have far less impact, less intensity and much less duration than people expect them to have. In fact, a recent study -- this almost floors me -- a recent study showing how major life traumas affect people suggests that if it happened over three months ago, with only a few exceptions, it has no impact whatsoever on your happiness." 19)

It is significant that Gilbert cites experiences like major traumas, romantic affiliations and receiving promotions because these events—health, relationships, income—are later considered in Easterlin’s study. For the time being, we may return to Gilbert’s central points on the topic of the human aptitude for recovering from misfortune and for synthesizing happiness.

Gilbert explains that, “Human beings have something that we might think of as a ‘psychological immune system.’ A system of cognitive processes, largely non-conscious cognitive processes, that help them change their views of the

2.3 The Synthesis of Happiness

The most recent personal happiness approaches, that one may be equally happy no
world, so that they can feel better about the worlds in which they find themselves". The capacity to accept, adapt and adjust is cited by Gilbert in presenting the statistical data that reveals one's life satisfaction is no different a year after becoming a paraplegic than it is a year after becoming a multi-millionaire. He further adds anecdotal data of people who've experienced various types of misfortune and have felt happier in the long term.

Introducing his experiments to provide scientific explanation on the process of synthesizing happiness, Gilbert comments, “We smirk because we believe that synthetic happiness is not of the same quality as what we might call ‘natural happiness.’ What are these terms? Natural happiness is what we get when we get what we wanted, and synthetic happiness is what we make when we don’t get what we wanted.”

Predictably, and in casual terms, Gilbert describes the results of an experiment in which subjects were unable to receive their first choice of an art print and were only allowed to make their selections from items the experimenter allowed them to have. “Happiness! ‘The one I got is really better than I thought! That other one I didn’t get sucks!’ That’s the synthesis of happiness.”

To provide deeper confirmation that happiness actually can be synthesized, Gilbert replicated the experiment with patients suffering from amnesia. He concludes, “What these people did when they synthesized happiness is they really, truly changed their affective, hedonic, aesthetic reactions to that poster. They’re not just saying it because they own it, because they don’t know they own it.” Gilbert provides further evidence to support his thesis that happiness can be synthesized by describing another forced-choice experiment in which Harvard students were required to surrender one of their two favorite photographic works. Gilbert uses his findings to provide proof that, “The psychological immune system works best when we are totally stuck, when we are trapped.”

This is a third element—after having a choice and having it denied, having no option to reverse one’s second choice—that allows for the synthesis of happiness. Gilbert explains, “...here’s what’s really happening. Both right before the swap and five days later, people who are stuck with that picture, who have no choice, who can never change their mind, like it a lot! And people who are deliberating – ‘Should I return it? Have I gotten the right one? Maybe this isn’t the good one? Maybe I left the good one?’ – have killed themselves. They don’t like their picture, and in fact even after the opportunity to swap has expired, they still don’t like their picture. Why? Because the reversible condition is not conducive to the synthesis of happiness.”

Gilbert concludes his talk with a remarkably normative and status-quo-supporting series of assertions. These include the directive to proceed in a conservative manner, to limit our ambitions and to perform duties happily. He says, “We should have preferences that lead us into one future over another. But when those preferences drive us too hard and too fast because we have overrated the difference between these futures, we are at risk. When our ambition is bounded, it leads us to work joyfully. When our ambition is unbounded, it leads us to lie, to cheat, to steal, to hurt others, to sacrifice things of real value. When our fears are bounded, we’re prudent; we’re cautious; we’re thoughtful. When our fears are unbounded and overblown, we’re reckless, and we’re cowardly.” Easy and slow, confined to work we must find joyful, mindful of others and able to contain our fears are ways we adapt to the dominant system. This is a subtext...
of the claim that humans are naturally adaptive to the even the worst of situations.

Cementing the notion that people, rather than the creation of more just institutions, bear the greatest responsibility for creation of happy life situations, Gilbert offers the final invocation that, “The lesson I want to leave you with from these data is that our longings and our worries are both to some degree overblown, because we have within us the capacity to manufacture the very commodity we are constantly chasing.”

The words manufacture and commodity are significant because they connote a mechanical rather than organic structure in Gilbert’s explanation of the synthesis of happiness. Alistair Miller, in his critique of positive psychology, cites such concepts as behavior management, personality categorization, goal orientation and life mission as constructs positive psychology has appropriated from a range of other disciplines and branches of psychology. Miller questions the assertions implicit in these concepts and concludes disparagingly that, “The model of mental health depicted by positive psychology turns out to be little more than a caricature of an extravert—a bland, shallow, goal-driven careerist whose positive attitudes, certainties and ‘high self-esteem’ mask the fact that he lacks the very qualities that would enable him to attain a degree of true self-knowledge or wisdom, and to really grow as a human being.”

3. Quantitative Approaches to Happiness

3.1 The Economics of Happiness

Richard Easterlin’s “The Economics of Happiness,” provides a critique of what Gilbert referred to as the ‘psychological immune system’ and undertakes to generally challenge positive psychology and happiness psychologists’ notion of natural human adaptability.

Easterlin sets out to examine well-being in terms of inquiries into subjective feelings. Before embarking on Easterlin’s inquiry, recent efforts to find concrete ways by which humans, either individually or in groups, can be made happy and happier may be examined. Attempts to quantify happiness for the purpose of enhancing happiness have, with the rise of social media since the early 2000s, become a popular concern. We feel there are two principal reasons for this concern. One is connected with the social implications of a feedback mechanism that craves simplified data. Information delivered in “sound bites” appeals to consumers who desire instant expertise through oversimplification. The effort to regard each situation anew and judge each case on its own merits can be replaced with the efforts of economists and psychologists to quantify [even if such quantification relies on subjective self-assessments] happiness under such monikers as overall satisfaction with life, general well-being and various measures of prosperity or material enjoyment.

We feel the second reason for the examination of well-being through inquiries into subjective feelings is connected with the political implications of data that seems to prove people are happier with one law, policy, candidate or party than another. If happiness is defined as “getting what one wants” evidence that people are happier with one law, policy, candidate or party than another. If happiness is defined as “getting what one wants” evidence that people are happy, through measures such as a presidential approval rating, are politically useful. Governments are ever vigilant in their search for ways to appeal to voters and justify their policies. Psychologists and economists are pleased to generate such data.

Richard Easterlin, in challenging both economists and positive psychologists’ approaches to happiness, begins by reframing happiness. He notes, “Although there are subtle differences be-
Cantril’s survey is strikingly similar. In every country, material circumstances, especially material living conditions, are mentioned most often.\(^{33}\) This seems to suggest that conditions of greater economic equality, which would have the greatest impact on the material conditions of existence, would lead to greater happiness.

Reframed, this suggests a strong, if not reciprocally true relationship between happiness and international equality. Challenging this contention is the further statement that Cantril’s survey also found, “Concerns about broad international or domestic issues, such as war, political or civil liberty, and social equality, are rarely mentioned.”\(^{34}\)

This apparent contradiction—that material circumstances are most often mentioned and yet the concern for social equality is rarely mentioned—may stand as an anomaly or may be a place where this paper’s earlier distinction between personal happiness and individual happiness is useful. In seeking measurements of individual happiness as an aggregate\(\text{[or “aggregable” result]}\) the elements of personal happiness related to virtues like political or civil liberty and social equality are rarely mentioned.\(^{34}\)

One key reason for this conflation of happiness with subjective well-being is that it allows Easterlin to examine both psychology and economics under the same rubric.

Easterlin examines the “set point” notion used in the psychology of happiness to assess the veracity of the claim that people always return to their natural equipoise, based on their particular genetic or personality characteristics in an “adjustment process [called] ‘hedonic adaptation.’ One setpoint theory writer states flatly that life circumstances have a negligible role to play in a theory of happiness.”\(^{30}\)

Turning to economics, Easterlin notes, “In contrast, economics places particular stress on the importance of life circumstances—particularly on one’s income and employment situation—to well-being. The view that money makes you happier finds ringing endorsement in economic theory. The implication is that one can improve one’s happiness by getting more money, and that public policy measures aimed at increasing the income of society as a whole will increase well-being.”\(^{31}\)

In light of this paper’s interest in exploring happiness as a force for promoting international equality, Easterlin’s discussion of Hadley Cantril’s research is relevant. Easterlin describes that, “In the early 1960s, social psychologist Hadley Cantril carried out an intensive worldwide survey in fourteen countries, rich and poor, capitalist and communist, asking open-ended questions about what people want out of life—what they would need for their lives to be completely happy.”\(^{32}\) Easterlin reports, “Despite the enormous socioeconomic and cultural disparities among the countries, what people say in Cantril’s survey is strikingly similar. In every country, material circumstances, especially material living conditions, are mentioned most often.”\(^{33}\) This seems to suggest that conditions of greater economic equality, which would have the greatest impact on the material conditions of existence, would lead to greater happiness.

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Tracing the three main areas after material circumstances—health, family and money—people most often cite as important for their happiness, Easterlin uses what we may consider to be aggregated longitudinal studies\(\text{[over time, but surveying demographically similar individuals]}\) in order to determine\(\text{[from a subjective assessment perspective]}\) if people maintain their set point through hedonic adaptation. In reaching the conclusions of no, no and yes, Easterlin notes, “the evidence does suggest that even with adaptation, there is, on average, a lasting negative effect of poor health on happiness”\(^{35}\); “on average, marriage brings greater happiness, marital dissolution, less”; and that “in the ma-
tional goods domain there does appear to be complete hedonic adaptation."^{37}

Easterlin concludes, "The survey evidence indicates that over the life cycle, family and health circumstances typically have lasting effects on happiness, but that more money does not."^{38} This brings us to the final question of to whom Easterlin’s measurements, convincing as they are, are actually a revelation. His research does provide evidence that most people would agree with the following three statements: Yes, I was happier when I was healthier and younger. Yes, I was happier when I was in a stable long-term relationship. No, I wasn’t happier with the lesser amount of money I was earning in the past compared to now.

Easterlin, foremost, is seeking a metric of subjective well-being and his final conclusion amounts to a one-sentence recommendation. "Most people could increase their happiness by devoting less time to making money, and more time to nonpecuniary goals such as family life and health."^{39} While this advice is not exactly surprising, Easterlin’s examination of the theories both the psychology of happiness and economic measures of happiness present regarding subjective well-being is illuminating. It must also be noted that he created an aggregate scenario to assess individual happiness. What if Easterlin had compared, for example, people who do yoga with his random sample? What if Easterlin had only surveyed yogis?

Matthieu Ricard, in his TED talk on The habits of happiness, discussed his ‘sample group’ who were focusing on happiness as a quieting of the mind and openness to universal love. His ‘findings’ were informed by the experiences of monks meditating on mountaintops in the Himalayas. Recalling my months in an ashram in the Bahamas, where the requirement of “practicing contentment” was a condition of one’s stay, I can share my findings of the subjective assessments of personal happiness residents there reported. I was there as staff intermittently over a three-year period and spoke with all the practicants, many of whom visited many times. In that group, reported happiness increased especially in those who were of advancing age, had health problems or had suffered relationship dissolution. Reported happiness increased from year to year and during each visit even when all three conditions were the impetus for an individual’s lifestyle choice.

Easterlin’s query addressed whether happiness naturally increased or stayed at a set point and how circumstances largely beyond one’s control impacted on the set point theory. If Easterlin had looked at how happiness might be increased through actions and events within our control, as suggested in the above example, it seems his findings would have yielded a different result.

3.2 Easterbrook and the Paradox of Progress

Gregg Easterbrook’s work is interesting from a 2003 perspective and in terms of a discussion of the material aspects of being better off and the interpretation of the statistics of income and wellbeing.

In the context of challenging the belief that increases in income inequality are indicative of a socially unjust economic arrangement, Easterbrook opines “if you torture numbers long enough they will confess to anything”^{40} and focuses on the low wages of immigrant workers as the culprits. “Factor out immigration, and the rise in American inequality disappears; median income trends become quite healthy.”^{41} Easterbrook makes two statements. “...take into account that it is in the interests of immigrants that they be allowed to enter the United States—strongly in their interests—and in-
equality-gap statistics, though always a concern, cease to be an indictment of the American economy. In the next sentence, he makes a statement that is not necessarily a given. "Stated in the opposite way, if the existence of an inequality gap is an indictment of the American economy, then the solution is to forbid immigration." In this case it is just as plausible to say, 'If the existence of an inequality gap is an indictment of the American economy, then the solution is to remove these inequalities.'

More stridently, Easterbrook challenges, "Unless you favor the closing of borders, don't complain that the top is pulling away from the middle in income terms." Reflecting on the earlier comments of Russell, there is every reason to complain that denying others the good chance at a better life diminishes one's personal happiness. Again, Easterbrook's notion that the presence of underpaid immigrants rather than the underpayment of immigrants is the real problem, is an elitist we/they framing of the problem of income inequalities.

Easterbrook comments on health care spending in noting that older Americans complain about prescription medication costs but ought to be thankful for the benefits of those medications in the form of increased longevity and better health. Easterlin says, "One reason so many American senior citizens are at this writing upset about the costs of prescription drugs is that those drugs have kept them alive long enough that they need more drugs." An earlier point Richard Easterlin made about decline in health leading to a reduction in happiness would suggest that the prosperity that "buys for America's citizens ever longer lives with more vigor and less pain," would enhance feelings of wellbeing and happiness.

Easterbrook discusses rising housing standards as an indicator of an increase in material wellbeing and presents statistics to support the assertion that the "equalizing of education between rich and average is just as striking." Easterbrook's final "examples of average-rich convergence" cite statistics on leisure and work time. Increases in the percentage of average Americans using air travel, staying in hotels and eating in restaurants are used to demonstrate equalization in leisure activities. Easterbrook claims the fact that over 50 percent of Americans are employed in office settings where "the typical person's occupational injury concerns are now carpal tunnel syndrome from typing rather than lost limbs from stamping presses or lost eyesight from sewing in low light—numbers among the most impressive social accomplishments in human history." It is noteworthy that the statistical data is interpreted to suggest changes in technology, commerce and production amount to social accomplishments. If Easterbrook had presented this particular one of "the most impressive social accomplishments in human history" as also being incidental rather than planned the nuance of this being some type of supreme humanitarian effort would be further dispelled.

Easterbrook presents two suggestions as to why happiness does not increase even though prosperity has. He terms one "the 'revolution of satisfied expectations,' meaning that now we have so much it's hard to look forward to more" and the other as 'collapse anxiety,' by which he means people fear their present level of comfort is unsustainable.

In an earlier aside, Easterbrook had commented on how "there is nothing wrong, and much right, with seeking utmost comfort; the only real objection is that billions around the world have far more basic needs that go unmet." Content to continue presenting further evidence of American prosperity, he advises,
“We should simply recognize, and feel grateful for, what this reflects about ever higher [national] living standards”53).

While Easterbrook does not question the implications of ignoring the unmet basic needs of billions of others, he does suggest that collapse anxiety is irrational. Ending on a hollow-sounding happy note, Easterbrook considers “if a collapse were coming, its signs ought to be somewhere. That is not what trends show. Practically everything is getting better”54). Though Easterbrook has equated happiness with material wellbeing, the conflation is problematic since it both ignores the sufferings of those whose basic needs are unmet and relies on the explanation that those who fail to be happy amidst abundance do so for primarily irrational reasons.

4. Happiness in Advancing International Equality

4.1 Nussbaum’s Critique

Martha Nussbaum, in setting out to examine conceptual issues a psychology of happiness must take into account, begins with the consideration of pleasure and poses the question, “is it a sensation, or is it something more like a way of attending to the world, or even a way of being active”55)? In exploring the first possibility, Nussbaum cites Mill in critiquing Bentham and informs us, “Mill writes in his great essay “On Bentham,” [that] ‘Bentham failed in deriving light from other minds.’ [and that] For him [Bentham], pleasure simply must be a single homogeneous sensation, containing no qualitative differences”56).

Nussbaum says the “reason for this problem is that Bentham’s deepest concern is with pain and suffering”57) and Nussbaum argues for a physical versus psychological distinction in types of pain, noting that the “pain of a headache is very different from the pain of losing a loved one to death”58). Nussbaum criticizes, “Nor was Bentham worried about interpersonal comparisons, a problem on which economists in the Utilitarian tradition have spent great labor, and one that any program to use subjective satisfaction for public policy must face”59).

Noting Bentham’s willingness to engage in cross-species comparisons, Nussbaum comments, “One of the most attractive aspects of his thought is its great compassion for the suffering of animals, which he took to be unproblematically comparable to human suffering”60). Nussbaum objects that, “Bentham sees no problem in extending the comparison class to the entire world of sentient animals”61). Nussbaum further comments, “Bentham cannot be said to have developed anything like a convincing account of pleasure and pain, far less of happiness”62).

Nussbaum uses the phrase “strident simplicity” to characterize Bentham’s thinking when perhaps unapologetic simplicity would be more accurate. In Bentham’s time ‘greatest good for the greatest number’ may have been a sensible approach to happiness and, as Nussbaum acknowledges, he was more concerned with the alleviation of suffering than the creation of happiness, perhaps being willing to let people create happiness for themselves while doing the work of trying to remove the obstacles to happiness. It seems, if one reflects back to the happiness psychologists’ concern with “making normal people stronger and more productive and making high human potential actual”, there is still merit in Bentham’s approach.

Nussbaum writes Aristotle seeks qualitative distinctions of pleasure but problematically “offers two very different conceptions of pleasure”: the “first identifies pleasure with unimpeded activity”63) and the “second, and probably better, account holds that pleasure is something that
comes along with, supervenes on [that unexpectedly changes the quality of], activity”^{64}. Nussbaum refers to “Mill thinking of pleasures as very like activities (with Aristotle in Book VII) or, with Aristotle in Book X, as experiences so closely linked to activities that they cannot be pursued apart from them” and that “the unity of the Benthamite calculus has been thrown out, to be replaced by a variegated conception, involving both sensation and activity, and prominently including qualitative distinctions”^{65}. Nussbaum concludes this consideration saying, “Moreover, any experiment that simply assumes pleasure to be a hedonic state, something like a sensation, would also be inadequate, say Mill and Aristotle, to the complexity of human experience, since people agree that activity matters”^{66}. We may respond that, yes, the complexity of human experience is real. However, it would be hopelessly subjective and highly anecdotal to feel each experience was unique and incomparable. Isn’t it more desirable to be able to spot patterns of similarities from which to say that these factors seem to go together? Isn’t it useful to be able to identify factors that individuals associate with happiness when asked simple questions like “what makes you feel happy or are you generally happy with your life?”

Nussbaum responds, “The fact that people answer such questions hardly shows that this is the way that they experience their lives”^{67}. Nussbaum speaks about how it seems inappropriate to speak of the satisfaction or pleasure one might feel on one’s deathbed to criticize the phrase “satisfied with one’s life overall”^{68}. Is it a valid criticism for Nussbaum to say that on one’s deathbed one may not be speaking of life satisfaction? It is more likely, we contend, that one would focus on how one feels about the impending event of death. Instead of talking about satisfaction or pleasure, the focus might more likely be turned toward comfort and relief—that nearby are others with whom we share loving care and that the Universe has decided we are ready to return to it. If we’re in pain or unable to quiet our fears of the unknown, comfort and relief may be provided by pain-killers or psychotropic medications and these may reasonably been regarded as a form of happiness.

Nussbaum focuses on the discussion of the incommensurable nature of satisfaction, but also notes a common theme—that if one is feeling satisfied that’s really a “herd-like feeling of satisfaction”^{69} and should alert us that that’s the very time one ought to think ‘oh no, I’m just resting on my laurels and better get busy to meet another challenge.’ “When we notice that happiness is complex, we are prepared to face yet a further question in connection with its proper analysis: does happiness require self-examination?”^{70} Nussbaum here seems to suggest the answer is yes and that we should, in an Aristotelian manner, aspire to be “More skilful in self-knowledge.”^{71} In this case, self-knowledge may be regarded as an aspiration toward a “higher and nobler or finer” form of happiness. It may also be the case that there is a deeper happiness that accompanies pleasure and satisfaction which continues even when we don’t declare, “this is pleasurable and satisfying” at the time we’re involved in a deeper happiness.

On the question ‘what is happiness?’ Nussbaum writes, “Aristotle thought: that activity is far and away the main thing, and that pleasure will normally crop up in connection with doing good activities without struggle, the way a virtuous person does them.”^{72} Nussbaum also suggests that Aristotle “implies, too, that it would be totally mistaken to pry the pleasure apart from the activity and seek it on its own.”^{73} While the first thought may be true, the implication may not be true unreservedly. We contend that
some pleasures on their own might simply be other kinds of happiness. The mere act of referring to some pleasures as “higher pleasures” connotes others as “lower pleasures” from which we may also derive some form of happiness. For example, people may sometimes just want to be entertained with light comedy instead of deeply thoughtful drama. Knowing one has chosen a lower pleasure as an indulgence may also be a way of acknowledging the need to choose better and higher pleasures more often. It may be a way of acknowledging that humans are highly inconsistent and that higher and lower pleasures heighten one’s appreciation of a wider range of happiness experiences.

Examining normative questions of a psychology of happiness under the heading of bad pleasures and good pains, Nussbaum comments that, “bad people have pleasure in their bad behavior”74 and we must appreciate this is too simple a statement. Racists and other bad people do not often acknowledge the label and most often feel their behavior is good behavior. Nussbaum reiterates Rousseau’s point that, “To the extent that privileged groups live a charmed life and insulate themselves from the sufferings of the poor, everyone is missing out on happiness, since they are all living in a bad unjust world”75 and asks, “Does Seligman’s positive psychology risk pushing already hubristic Americans in the direction of even greater hubris”?76 We feel that it does. In tentative answer to this question, Nussbaum notes that, “deferring to the subjective experience of pleasure or satisfaction will often bias the social inquiry in the direction of an unjust status quo”77. While the goals of positive psychology are outlined as being “about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic”, the hubris that appears more in Easterbrook’s comments above than in Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi’s introduction to positive psychology, does bolster a system of structural inequalities.

Nussbaum concludes that, “Public policy should also focus on the mitigation of the sort of pain that is not an enrichment of the soul or a deepening of self-knowledge, and there is a lot of pain that is not conducive to anything good”78 and that “the appeal to subjective well-being, as currently used in the psychological literature, is not utterly useless, but at present it is so riddled with conception confusion and normative naivete’ that we had better pause and sort things out before going any further”79.


Nussbaum’s reflections on happiness do promote internationalism and her Central Human Capabilities may be appreciated as a real-world plan that would allow people to determine their own happiness rather than imposing a vision of happiness on them. Nussbaum’s scheme is predicated on a belief that people really do have the capacity to choose.

4.2 Ahmed’s Critique

The principal theme in Sara Ahmed’s “Feminist Killjoys” The Promise of Happiness, is in
not allowing others to define one’s happiness. Ahmed explores this theme with complex insight and incisiveness. It is also characterized by and may be regarded as an expansion of the perception Ahmed shares that “The political plea of [Mary Wollstonecraft] in Vindication [of the Rights of Women] is against the right of men to decide what happiness means for women” 82).

Ahmed states that, “happiness is used as a technology or instrument, which allows the re-orientation of individual desire toward a common good” 83) and that definitions based on gender are basically “happiness scripts” 84) that prescribe the required actions and reactions in particular situations. The necessity of going along with these scripts is defined as how one must get along with others. The obligation to be happy may take the form of “simply approximating the signs of being happy—passing as happy—in order to keep things in the right place” 85).

Ahmed contends that, “the history of feminism is thus a history of making trouble, a history of women … refusing to make others happy” 86). In an analysis of George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss, Ahmed discusses how when the female character, Maggie, is viewed as a troublemaker for speaking out in concern for her parents, this reveals “the relationship between consciousness of injustice and being attributed as the cause of unhappiness” 87).

Ahmed speaks of how a questioning or rejection of conventions, though they may impose conditions of unjust inequality, is characterized as a source of unhappiness. “Feminists by declaring themselves as feminists are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness. The feminist killjoy ‘spoils’ the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness” 88).

Citing Marilyn Frye, Ahmed observes how “happiness becomes the expected ‘default’ position for those who are oppressed, such that it comes to define the sphere of neutrality. You are either happy: or you are not” 89).

Ahmed makes the point “that feminists are read as being unhappy, such that situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as about the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what feminists are unhappy about” 90).

The discussion Ahmed engages in, which is a version of the tautology “to speak out is to be labeled as outspoken”, is truthful and compelling. It is also, though unstated by Ahmed, a revelation of the technique used to shut down discussion on a topic by focusing on the speaker rather than the content.

The following example is typical of a “shutting down discussion” exchange. I am upset with this condition versus this condition is upsetting. Both constructions are problematic. The former focuses on the upset of the speaker. The respondent may then ignore the upsetting condition in favor of counseling the speaker out of his or her upset. The latter statement, that “this condition is upsetting”, may be met with the request for the speaker to ‘take ownership’ of his or her feelings and again defocus on the condition.

Ahmed feels that, “for a life to count as a good life, it must take on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. If happiness is what allows us to reach certain points, it is not necessarily how you feel when you get there” 91).

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Echoing Gilbert’s notion that happiness involves a process of adjustment, Ahmed speaks of feminism that holds up “the concept of aliveness … as an alternative social value to happi-
These points about happiness are connected with an approach to happiness that examines the need for people to define their own happiness rather than to have happiness defined for them. Implied in the quest for equality and redress of social injustice is the upset of conventional standards that require happy housewives, grateful and smiling servants and a variety of other attributes imposed on oppressed peoples.

5. Conclusions

In relating the approaches to happiness briefly surveyed in this paper to the concept of happiness as a force for promoting international equality, the following points of convergence and divergence may be appreciated.

From Bertrand Russell’s assertion that personal happiness is necessary before one feels inclined to take action toward world peace, through to the hopes of positive psychology in improving the capacity for high human potential and in preventing the world from devolving into chaos and despair, to Dan Gilbert’s attempts to demonstrate humanity’s natural psychological immune system, the flow from personal happiness to an individually measurable synthesis of happiness was explored in the first section of this paper.

Ahmed concludes with a pronouncement on how happiness can be used. She says, “We learn to see what is concealed by signs of happiness. You can cause unhappiness merely by noticing something. And if it can cause unhappiness merely to notice something, you realize that the world you are in is not the world you thought you were in. Feminism becomes a kind of estrangement from the world and thus involves moments of self-estrangement. Our feminist archive is an archive of unhappiness even though the threads of unhappiness do not weave our stories together.”

Ahmed ends with the invocation that “we can recognize not only that we are not the cause of the unhappiness that has been attributed to us but also the effects of being attributed as the cause.”

These points about happiness are connected with an approach to happiness that examines the need for people to define their own happiness rather than to have happiness defined for them. Implied in the quest for equality and redress of social injustice is the upset of conventional standards that require happy housewives, grateful and smiling servants and a variety of other attributes imposed on oppressed peoples.
beneficent attitude toward humanity and the amelioration of international inequalities, this is not accompanied by a systematic or programmatic approach that might be employed to create specific public policy to redress inequalities.

The merit of the positive psychology approach presented by Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi is in its stated goal to change public policy in a way that does seek to prevent the world from lapsing into chaos and despair and clearly enunciates that the privileged position of the United States and, by implication, other industrially developed nations does carry with it a responsibility to help less fortunate places develop their human joy and potential. The potential benefit of this shift in focus and duty is immense. By expanding the field of psychology beyond the treatment of psychological problems and into the realm of expanding human potential and social responsibility positive psychology has to improve the world, the promotion of international equality must figure into the equation. The challenges in positive psychology are twofold: The first is that the need for operational terms, where measures used are clearly defined, must also lead to a situation where positive psychology researchers are imposing their definition of happiness on others. The second challenge in an empirical approach to happiness is that in seeking methods of individual measurement of “hedonic adjustment”, the “natural psychological immune system” or the contention that people invariably return to a set point of contentment in various experimental proofs which generate statistical evidence of its veracity—the role of the individual is the focus and issues of structural inequality are ignored.

One example of this practice is shown in Dan Gilbert’s presentation on the science of happiness. The benefit of Gilbert’s approach to happiness is that the notion of a psychological immune system has enormous appeal. The set point theory is like a restating of the commonplace wish to have the courage to change what can be changed, strength to endure what can’t be changed and wisdom to know the difference between the two. In terms of Gilbert’s presentation, the wisdom is in knowing that within three months of even the worst event there is no difference between the two. This “knowing” constitutes a belief that must be of great comfort to individuals who have suffered terrible losses or life challenges. In encouraging people to believe “I will be happy no matter what happens” we feel there is a benefit. To persevere one must have the energy to overcome obstacles and to whatever degree Gilbert’s approach to happiness helps others keep up their positive energy there is a real benefit. Insofar as Gilbert’s approach contributing to an internationalist world view and equalizing inequalities, the exact opposite may be the effect. That is to say, Gilbert’s examples and experiments seem best suited to individuals who are prosperous enough to undertake the actions—whether that means starting over after having lost one’s fortune or engaging in treatment after having been rendered paraplegic—more open to individuals in the developed world. The subtext is that one ought to use the resources that one has in order to adjust as completely as one is able to adjust and express the good wishes that others are able to do the same. By locating the responsibility for happiness in the individual, Gilbert’s approach sidesteps the question of whether giving all others in the world a chance for happiness is in any way connected with one’s own happiness. Instead, the only balm given to sooth inequalities is that all humans should learn to develop their psychological immune system to synthesize happiness in whatever condition they may be.
The second section of this paper, through the consideration of Richard Easterlin’s work, provided a critique of the “set point reversion” concept in positive psychology and of the approach to happiness that seeks to quantify the experience of happiness as a measure of subjective wellbeing. Further discussion of the challenge in equating material wellbeing with happiness was provided in Gregg Easterbrook’s work. Easterbrook’s notions of the difficulty in imagining ever-greater prosperity and the fear that present prosperity may implode under the weight of its own success—which he respectively terms the revolution of satisfied expectations and collapse anxiety—may also be framed as the problem of equating economic wellbeing with personal happiness. Reflecting on Russell’s observations and anticipating Martha Nussbaum and especially Sara Ahmed’s objections, Easterbrook’s “paradox of prosperity” may be interpreted as indicative of the rift between the statistical measurement of individual happiness and the world-consciousness necessary for meaningful personal happiness.

Richard Easterlin, in critiquing the psychological-happiness-is-“hard-wired” claim, updates Hadley Cantril’s study that took place more than 40 years ago and presents evidence that happiness does require more than developing the ability to return to one’s set point of hedonic adaptation. The benefit of this challenge is that material living conditions—which, in Easterlin’s research, also include health and relationships—are demonstrated to be relevant to happiness and inequalities in these conditions are shown to diminish happiness. Speculative analysis of these findings suggests the extrapolation that expanding one’s relationships to include “doing good in the world” would increase one’s happiness. The shortcoming of Easterlin’s approach, in terms of this paper, is that it doesn’t categorically state that diminishing inequalities internationally increases one’s happiness.

One of the shortcomings in Easterbrook’s argument is that he does not question the implications of ignoring the unmet basic needs of billions of others. It is, however, useful that he raises this issue even to ignore it. Anyone reading Easterbrook, noting what short shrift he gives this concern, may then consider how the unmet basic needs of billions of others do serve to diminish happiness.

This paper’s third section begins with a discursive exploration of Martha Nussbaum’s critique of personal happiness and individual happiness notions. Nussbaum examines Bentham’s attempts to quantify happiness and Aristotle’s approach in examining the quality of happiness as virtue. Nussbaum’s 10 human conditions extends this discussion to indicate that qualitative standards for all—which include rights not to be deprived of the minimum freedoms necessary for self-determination of happiness from a personal happiness definition and the minimum material necessities for the pursuit of economic wellbeing on a global scale—offer the best hope for promoting equality in the world. This is the internationalist perspective that is implicitly echoed in Sara Ahmed’s critique of the how a dominant group’s imposition of their notion of happiness on those who are subjugated calls for a reevaluation of the consciousness of happiness. Whenever the right to self-determination in both senses [in determining what the self is and in constructing one’s own personal happiness] is denied to any group or class—women or immigrants or poorer people—the happiness in the world is diminished. Happiness denied to others in the world truly does question the authenticity of individual happiness. Ahmed concludes that the “Feminist Killjoy” is simply
pointing out the illusion to destroy the false-reality of female emancipation under the heading of the happy housewife or colonialism implicit in the notion of the happy immigrant.

Both Nussbaum’s formulation of a template for universal personal happiness—as embodied in the Central Human Capabilities—and Ahmed’s repudiation of the ways subjugating notions of happiness has been historically applied and must be reformulated demonstrate the potential of happiness as a force for promoting international equality.

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Notes

1) Russell (1939) p. 17.
2) Ibid, p. 17.
3) Ibid, p. 17.
4) Ibid, p. 17.
20) Ibid, 4:30.
21) Ibid, 8:30.
22) Ibid, 10:23.
35) Ibid, p. 3.
36) Ibid, p. 4.
37) Ibid, p. 5.
38) Ibid, p. 5.
41) Ibid, p. 11.
42) Ibid, p. 11.
43) Ibid, p. 11.
47) Ibid, p. 27.
48) Ibid, p. 27.
49) Ibid, p. 27.
50) Ibid, p. 32.
51) Ibid, p. 32.
52) Ibid, p. 20.
54) Ibid, p. 32.
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- http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy/transcript#t-1017000
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Logical_atomism
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- 14.
86) Ibid, p. 60.
87) Ibid, p. 61.
89) Ibid, p. 66.
92) Ibid, p. 79.
93) Ibid, p. 79.
95) Ibid, p. 83.
96) Ibid, p. 83.
97) Ibid, p. 86.
98) Ibid, p. 87.