

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13867-3 - The Psychology of Happiness: A Good Human Life

Samuel S. Franklin

Excerpt

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What Is Happiness?

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Thomas Jefferson, The Declaration of Independence, 1776

I find it astonishing that Thomas Jefferson placed happiness alongside liberty and life itself in the Declaration of Independence. While we don't know for sure why Jefferson included happiness in the document, Darrin McMahon¹ discovered "that formulations linking happiness, life, liberty and property" appeared in a number of colonial constitutions. Thus, interest in happiness seems to have been "in the wind" at the time of America's birth. McMahon also noted that while the delegates to the Continental Congress "scrutinized" every line of Jefferson's draft, "cutting and slashing," not a single one recorded reservations about the "pursuit of happiness." Everyone agrees that happiness is good, but should it be up there with life and liberty, and made so prominent in the founding document of the United States?

Psychologist Jonathan Freedman² wrote that when one of his interviewers tried to talk about happiness to people in groups,

¹ McMahon, D. M. (2006). *Happiness: A history*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

² Freedman, J. (1978). *Happy people: What happiness is, who has it, and why*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

they joked and gave it no real importance. However, “when she interviewed them alone, the topic became too serious and emotional and people stopped talking.” Perhaps Jefferson’s idea of happiness is the serious kind, the kind that people have difficulty talking about. In this chapter, we will try to understand Jefferson’s view by looking at some of the alternative meanings of happiness.

HAPPINESS AS FEELINGS OF PLEASURE

Most people today think of happiness as a feeling, specifically, a feeling of pleasure. We often link pleasurable events and happiness: “I am happy to meet you.” “I’m happy to be home again.” “I’m happy with my job.” Almost any kind of pleasure seems to make us happy.

Bodily pleasures like food, wine, and sex can certainly be enjoyable, and some scholars still think of them as the keys to happiness.³ However, it is hard to imagine that Jefferson was thinking of such pleasures when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. If pleasure was really as important as life and liberty, we would probably all be addicted to drugs, sex, and rock and roll. Clearly, we are not. Everybody likes pleasure but most of us wouldn’t settle for a life filled with just good feelings. Philosopher Robert Nozick⁴ asks us to imagine being hooked to a machine that can stimulate the pleasure centers of the brain on demand so that we could feel good all the time. Most of us would be repulsed by such an arrangement.

It is true, however, that not all pleasures are simple sensory pleasures. Philosopher John Stuart Mill⁵ spoke of the “higher pleasures,”

³ Tannsjo, T. (2007). Narrow hedonism. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 8, 79–98. Also see Nettle, D. (2005). *Happiness: The science behind your smile*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state and utopia*. New York: Basic Books.

⁵ Mill, J. S. (1952/1861). Utilitarianism. In the *Great books of the Western world*. R. M. Hutchins & Adler, M. J. (Eds.), (Chapter 2, pp. 447–457).

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the joys that come from art, music, philosophy, religion, and so on. According to Mill, bodily pleasures are appropriate for animals, but humans also seek more noble satisfactions.

Who would argue that pleasure is unimportant? We recognize the value of both the bodily and the higher pleasures, and we agree that they contribute greatly to the quality of life. I have just returned from a large-chain electronics store filled with music videos, CDs, video games, and plasma TVs. The store was jammed with customers in pursuit of pleasure. There is nothing wrong with that, but will they find happiness there? If we are honest with ourselves, I think we will admit that pleasure alone is not enough. A life of drugs, sex, fine wine, and good books is not the ideal for everyone, and probably not the ideal for anyone. It is unlikely that this is what Jefferson had in mind.

HAPPINESS AS WEALTH

A lot of people believe that money brings happiness, and it is not just individuals that hold this view. Many of our most important social institutions have also taken to the pursuit of money. Not long ago I chaired a university committee that included several faculty members and a few prominent citizens from the community. Before one of the meetings, a highly respected judge remarked, “Law used to be a profession, now it is a business.” A physician at the table added, “The same is true of medicine.”⁶ Through the window of our meeting room we could see the future site of a giant campus entertainment complex that now hosts not only university athletic events, but also Madonna, The Wiggles, and *American Idol* – money makers all! Where “giving” used to be the goal of institutions like law, medicine,

⁶ I was very surprised to find that Tom Morris, in his book *If Aristotle Ran General Motors* (1997, New York: Owl Book, Henry Holt and Co., p. 52) reports almost exactly the same experience.

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politics, and education, “getting” now reigns supreme. Money brings happiness, or so we think.

There can be no doubt that money is important to individual well-being and to the survival of our institutions. It is necessary for essentials such as food and shelter. It gives us security, status, and the option to travel; to hire others to labor for us; and to buy the things we like. At the institutional level, it pays salaries, buys equipment, and enables us to do our jobs.

Money is good! Aristotle thought of it as a “real good” just like food, sleep, and friends. But most of us know, deep down, that wealth doesn’t really bring happiness.⁷ Money can solve some problems, but how can it relieve the pain of a lost loved one or a failed marriage or an incurable illness? There is ample evidence that the link between money and happiness is really rather weak.

In David Myers’ book *The Pursuit of Happiness*,⁸ money is discussed in some detail. The research shows that those of us in the developed world are slightly happier than those in poorer nations, and that the very wealthy of the United States experience slightly more happiness than the rest of us. However, these differences are really quite small. Ed Diener, a leading happiness researcher, together with his colleagues⁹ studied the well-being of some of America’s richest citizens and found them to be only slightly happier than the average citizen. Furthermore, several wealthy people in Diener’s sample admitted to being unhappy. Studies of lottery winners lead us to the same conclusion. Those lucky enough to win major jackpots

⁷ King, L., & Napa, C. K. (1998). What makes a life good. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 156–165. King and Napa found that “meaning in life and happiness are essential to the folk concept of the good life, where as money is relatively unimportant.”

⁸ Myers, D. G. (1992). *The pursuit of happiness: Discovering the pathways to well-being and enduring personal joy*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

⁹ Diener, E., Horwitz, J., & Emmons, R. (1985). Happiness of the very wealthy. *Social Indicators*, 16, 263–274.

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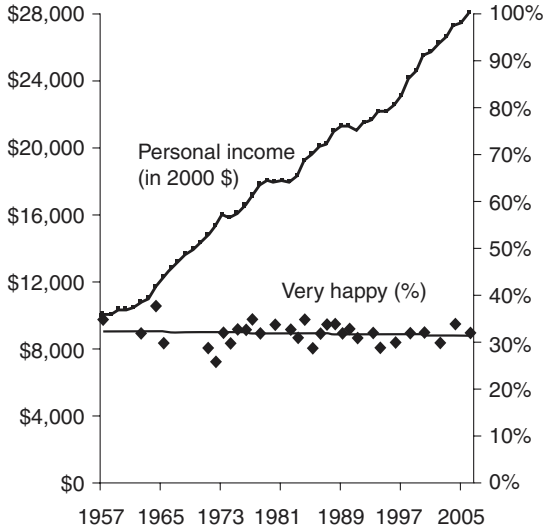


FIGURE 1.1. Personal income and happiness.

Source: Courtesy of David G. Myers. National Opinion Research Center General Social Surveys. Reproduced with permission.

experience very high levels of well-being for about a year but after that, happiness drops back to the previous level.¹⁰

The graph in Figure 1.1 summarizes fairly well the relationship between wealth and happiness. We see that money makes an important difference to happiness up to a point. After the essentials of food, clothing, shelter, and so on, money doesn't add much to the store. Having too little money can contribute to unhappiness, but if we have enough to cover the necessities of life (BMW's and sailboats are not necessities), it makes relatively little difference. As Myers notes, "well-off is not the same as well-being." Political scientist Robert E.

¹⁰ Brickman, P., Coats, D., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1978). Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 917–927, and Luter, M. (2007). Book review: Winning a lottery brings no happiness! *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 8, 155–160.

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Lane¹¹ suggests that the pursuit of money can actually diminish well-being by misdirecting us from the things that really matter, such as family, friends, and community.

RELIGION AS HAPPINESS

God seems to be more important to happiness than money. Myers observes that God provides several important ingredients to our lives. First, we are social animals, and as we congregate and worship together, we find ourselves part of a large, friendly, and protective community. Second, religion offers a sense of purpose and gives meaning to our existence. Myers suggests that we all need something beyond the self to believe in, something to live and die for. Religion grants us a place in the larger scheme of things and gives purpose to our lives. Finally, in God we may find unconditional acceptance and security. Religion tells us that we are not alone and that we can trust in something supremely divine, powerful and caring to watch over us.

For some, the happiness attainable in this life pales in comparison to the eternal joy awaiting us in the next. From the outset, our species has embraced a transcendent world. Traditional societies everywhere accept a spiritual or divine realm beyond the observable. At one time the actions of the skies, the oceans, the fields, and all of nature were inexplicable except in spiritual terms. The powers that moved the world became the early gods and over countless generations these spiritual forces and humans became linked. The roots of monotheism reach back to a sky god, a god higher than all the other spiritual powers, who became formalized in the God of Abraham. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share the recognition of a single supreme power.¹²

¹¹ Lane, R. E. (2000). *The loss of happiness in market democracies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

¹² Armstrong, K. (1993). *A history of God. The 4000 year quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York: Ballantine Books.

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It was not long after Christianity took hold that it focused on spiritual matters to the exclusion of just about everything else. Saint Augustine, in about 400 A.D., gathered the ideas of earlier thinkers into a formal doctrine that has shaped Christianity for hundreds of years. Augustine contrasted the perfect world of God with the imperfect representations we find in the sensible, everyday world, and urged us to disregard the latter as much as possible.

A good life for Augustine and for the countless generations that followed him during the Middle Ages meant forsaking the world of matter as much as possible. The sensory world, the objective, physical world we know so well was for Augustine something to abhor, while the City of God, the transcendent world, led to salvation and eternal bliss. Happiness was not to be found in earthly possessions or physical pleasures but rather in knowing God. Only religion could bring true happiness.

Since, then, the supreme good of the city of God is perfect and eternal peace, not such as mortals pass in and out of by birth and death, but the peace of freedom from all evil, in which the immortals ever abide, who can deny that the future life is most blessed, or that, in comparison with it, this life which now we live is most wretched, be it filled with all blessings of body and soul and external things?¹³

Almost a thousand years of devotion to religious and spiritual matters carried Western civilization through what most think of as a very painful time. Most of Europe stagnated as worldly knowledge was forsaken. Cities decayed and poverty enveloped all but the nobility; darkness covered all of Europe.

Enlightenment emerged gradually. A thousand years after the birth of Jesus, the Church initiated the first of a series of Crusades to free the Holy Land from infidels. One of the many unexpected

¹³ Augustine, S. (1952). *The City of God*. In Hutchens, R. M. & Adler, M. J. (Eds.), *Great Books of the Western World*. Book 19, Chapter 20, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

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consequences of those Crusades was the rediscovery of Classical Greek writings that had been preserved by Islamic scholars. As the Crusaders returned home to Europe, the ideas of Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, traveled with them.

Moses Ben Maimon (1135–1204), or Maimonides as he is more commonly known, brought together the teachings of Judaism and Aristotelian philosophy, showing how *reason* and faith together were superior to faith alone. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) followed Maimonides and laid the foundation of modern Catholicism by recognizing that God gave us senses to know the physical world as well as the spiritual one, furthering the integration of the two. Aquinas brought *faith and reason together* pretty much as they exist in contemporary Christianity.

There were other sources of illumination penetrating the darkness of the Middle Ages. The re-emergence of interest in the natural world encouraged exploration. Columbus sailed to America in 1492; Copernicus (1473–1543) proclaimed the sun, not the earth, as the center of the solar system; Galileo (1564–1642) and Isaac Newton (1642–1727) began the serious investigation of the natural world and laid the foundations of modern science. Newton, while still a believer, found God relatively unimportant for understanding the natural world. God created it but no longer interfered in worldly matters.

With the rebirth of interest in the natural world, the place of man also changed. Early Humanism challenged the early Church's view by claiming that this life *is* important. Eternal bliss may eventually come but in the meantime our earthly lives matter as well. We are both spirit and nature.

HAPPINESS AS FULFILLMENT

The humanists bring us to our final meaning of happiness and the one to which this book is devoted: *Happiness is the fulfillment of human potential*. Happiness is not only about feeling good or being wealthy or

being holy. Rather, happiness is fulfilling our inherent possibilities, or, as the U.S. Army commercial says, “be[ing] all that [we] can be.”

To live well we humans must, like other creatures, be what we are meant to be. Birds are meant to fly, and to live well they must exercise that potential. Lions are meant to hunt, and if restrained in a zoo they cannot live well. It is not enough to survive and procreate, as some biologists would have it. And the Behaviorists of the mid-twentieth century were wrong too; we are not just pieces of clay to be molded by our environment. John Watson, the founder of the Behavioristic movement in psychology, claimed that if we gave him

a dozen healthy infants, well formed and my own specified world to bring them up in, ... I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – a doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even into beggarman and thief.¹⁴

Watson misled psychology for decades. Humans are endowed with potentials; we are all latent or actual artists, athletes, teachers, performers, mothers, scientists, and the like. Some of us lack these particular qualities but have been blessed with others. We are not meant to be just one thing or another; each of us has many possibilities. Mother, scientist, friend, artist, and athlete can and should and do co-exist. To the degree that we fulfill our inherent potentials we live well. Two of my children are fairly talented artists, and I have noticed over the years that when they take the time to draw or to paint, they are joyful. But other demands often take precedence. All of us have gifts that we tend to neglect while we devote our lives to other, “more important” tasks. Yes, we must stay attuned to reality, but those who have the discipline to exercise their talents live better. Unexpressed propensities can be damaging. Psychologist Abraham Maslow warns that choosing to ignore your potentials

¹⁴ Watson, J. B. (1924/1970). *Behaviorism*. New York: W.W. Norton; p. 104.

can have dangerous consequences. Carl Rogers suggests we have a genetic blueprint, an array of possibilities that must be fulfilled if we are to have a good life. We will explore their ideas in some detail in Chapter 4.

The fulfillment model makes pleasure only incidental to happiness. Happiness is better viewed as a way of living, not a temporary state that comes and goes. None of us will ever fully realize our potentials but it is a matter of degree; it is about going as far as possible. The more we grow into ourselves the better our lives become. It feels good to exercise or paint or write, or to follow whatever the inclination of our potentials. But the feeling is not the important part; it is only a *by-product of growth*. Good feelings can be used as a guidance device¹⁵ to direct our actions, but good feelings are secondary to the growth upon which happiness depends. It feels good when we do the right thing, when we exercise or master a tennis swing, or act kindly to someone in need. But the correlate of right action should not be the goal. Pleasure is not the cause of happiness but often the by-product of fulfillment. And we must be careful because not all pleasures derive from fulfillment. The good feelings produced by drugs, alcohol, or an extravagant shopping spree can trick and misdirect us. It is actualization, not pleasure, that is the key to a good life.

Happiness has several meanings. It is often thought of as a temporary state, a passing feeling that comes from eating ice cream or seeing a good movie. For some, having money is happiness, and for others it is faith in God. Clearly pleasure, wealth, and spirituality are important elements of every life, but are these what Jefferson intended in the Declaration of Independence? I think not.

Jefferson's life could not be described as fun filled or pleasure seeking. Money was important to him and he abhorred debt, but people

¹⁵ Klinger, E. (1977). *Meaning and void: Inner experience and the incentives in people's lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.