Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Spring 2004

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From the happiness of virtue to the virtue of happiness: 400 B.C.–A.D. 1780

It is only right that *Dædalus* should devote an issue to happiness, seeing that its publisher was chartered with the "end and design" of cultivating "every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honour, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people."

Its publisher, of course, is the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, founded in 1780 at a time when Americans – newly independent and free – were demanding that their institutions, like their government, serve a purpose, that they be *useful*. And to many eighteenth-century minds, there was simply no better test of usefulness than 'utility' – the property of promoting happiness. The English philosopher Jeremy Bentham is often credited with first articulating the creed. But when he observed in 1776 in his lawyerly prose that "By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question," he was merely giving voice to what was already an eighteenth-century commonplace. To many enlightened souls on both sides of the Atlantic, the need to promote happiness had assumed the status of a self-evident truth.

That this truth, for all its self-evidence, was a relatively recent discovery – the product, give or take a decade, of the preceding one hundred years – is important. For though happiness itself already possessed a long history by the eighteenth century, the idea that institutions should be expected to promote it – and that people should expect to receive it, *in this life* – was a tremendous novelty.

It involved nothing less than a revolution in human expectations, while raising, in turn, a delicate question. Just who, precisely, was worthy of happiness? Was it fit for all? Was happiness a right or a reward? And what, for that matter, did the curious word really mean?

The answers to such questions take us to the heart of an eighteenth-century

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contradiction that remains with us to the present day.

It may already have been noted that implicit in the few lines from the Academy's charter is another central assumption regarding happiness, though in this case the assumption is far older than the eighteenth century. If we leave aside for now the meaning of "interest, honour, and dignity," we can see most clearly that the Academy is asked not simply to cultivate every art and science that advances happiness, but every art and science that advances the happiness of a "free, independent, and virtuous people." The people in question are the citizens of the United States. And the implicit assumption is that those living in bondage or sin are not worthy of happiness. In light of the fact that slavery was long considered but a species of sin, and freedom but a product of living well, I want to focus solely on the remaining term – virtue – sketching in what follows a genealogy of its close links to happiness.

The belief in the intimate association of happiness and virtue was widely shared in the eighteenth century. The same man who coupled liberty and the pursuit of happiness so closely in the Declaration of Independence could later state without equivocation that "Happiness is the aim of life, but virtue is the foundation of happiness." Jefferson's collaborator on the draft of the Declaration and an early member of the American Academy, Benjamin Franklin, similarly observed in 1776 that "virtue and happiness are mother and daughter." This assumption had for many the status of a received truth. But the evidence for it was not at all recent.

On the contrary, it had accumulated so steadily, so imperceptibly over the course of centuries as to become less a self-evident truth than a truth unexamined, one that seemingly required no evidence at all.

It was Aristotle, in the fourth century B.C.E., who first put the matter most forcefully. Happiness, he expounded at length in the *Nichomachean Ethics,* is an "activity of the soul that expresses virtue." For Aristotle, all things in the universe have a purpose, a function, an end (*telos*). And that end, he says, is what gives expression to the highest nature and calling of the thing. In the famous example, the noble end of the acorn is to become a thriving oak, and in the same way the function of the harpist is to play the harp (and of the excellent harpist to play it well).

But can we say that there is a function specific to human beings in general? Aristotle believes that we can, and he identifies it as reason. Reason is what distinguishes us from plants, nonhuman animals, and nonliving things, and so our purpose must involve its fruitful cultivation. Living a life according to reason is for Aristotle the human function, and living an excellent life – reasoning well throughout its course and acting accordingly – is for him a virtuous life. Achieving such a life will bring us happiness, which thus represents our highest calling, our ultimate purpose, the final end to which all others are necessarily subordinate.

Happiness for Aristotle is not a fleeting feeling or an ephemeral passion. It is, rather, the product of a life well lived, the summation of a full, flourishing existence, sustained to the end of one's days, "a complete life."

It follows naturally enough that Aristotle affords at least some place to the role of fortune – chance – in influencing our happiness. For no one would count a man happy, he acknowledges, "who suffered the worst evils and misfortunes."

To do so would be to defend a "philosopher's paradox."

In conceding this role to chance as a determinant of happiness, Aristotle, on the one hand, is simply admitting with his characteristic level-headedness the limits on our ability to determine our fate. In a world of uncertainty, anything might happen before the end – a truth, Aristotle affirms, that is well captured in the celebrated phrase of the legislator Solon, "Call no man happy until he is dead." Yet on the other hand, by seeking to circumscribe the role of chance in the first place – to cow it into submission by virtue's superior force – Aristotle was also participating in a much broader philosophical shift, one that directly challenged Solon's ancient wisdom.

In order to fully appreciate this challenge, it is helpful to look for a moment at the principal word in ancient Greek for happiness, *eudaimonia*, one of a constellation of closely related terms that includes *eutychia* (lucky), *olbios* (blessed; favored), and *makarios* (blessed; happy; blissful).[1] In some ways encompassing the meaning of all of these terms, *eudaimon* (happy) literally signifies 'good spirit' or 'good god,' from *eu*=good and *daimon*=demon/spirit. In colloquial terms, to be *eudaimon* was to be lucky, for in a world fraught with constant upheaval, uncertainty, and privation, to have a good spirit working on one's behalf was the ultimate mark of good fortune. Even more it was a mark of divine favor, for the gods, it was believed, worked through the *daimones*, emissaries and conductors of their will. And this, in the pre-Socratic world, was the key to happiness. To fall from divine favor – or to fall under the influence of an evil spirit – was to be *dysdaimon* or *kakodaimon* – 'unhappy' (*dys/kako*=bad), or more colorfully, 'in the shit,' a not altogether inappropriate play on the Greek *kakka* (shit/turds).[2] In a world governed by supernatural forces, human happiness was a plaything of the gods, a spiritual force beyond our control. When viewed through mortal eyes, the world's happenings – and so our happiness – could only appear random, a function of chance.

Central to the outlook of Hesiod and Homer, with strong echoes in many of the lamentations of Greek tragedy, this conception of happiness would prove remarkably stubborn. We need only think of the word itself: in every Indo-European language, the modern words for happiness, as they took shape in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, are all cognate with luck. And so we get 'happiness' from the early Middle English (and Old Norse) *happ* – chance, fortune, what *happens* in the world – and the *Mittelhochdeutsch Glück*, still the modern German word for happiness and luck. There is the Old French *heur* (luck; chance), root of *bonheur* (happiness), and *heureux* (happy); and the Portuguese *felicidade*, the Spanish *felicidad*, and the Italian *felicità* – all derived ultimately from the Latin *felix* for luck (sometimes

1 On this subject, see Cornelius de Heer, *Makar, Eudaimon, Olbios, Eutychia: A Study of the Semantic Field Denoting Happiness in Ancient Greek to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1969).

2 The *kak*- root (bad) in Greek bears no direct linguistic relationship to the *kakk*- root (caca; turds). Yet the classical Greeks used *kak*- words as generic forms of cursing to signify 'damn,' or perhaps even more strongly, 'oh shit,' thus rendering the pun plausible if not immediately apparent in formal terms. I am grateful to Jeffrey Henderson of Boston University for sharing his expertise on this matter. On the Greek penchant for such punning in general, see Henderson's wonderful *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

fate). Happiness, in a word, is what *happens* to us. If we no longer say that we are *kakodaimon* when things don't go our way, we still sometimes acknowledge, rather more prosaically, that "shit happens."

Despite this linguistic tenacity, most people today are probably uncomfortable with the idea that happiness might lie in the roll of the dice. And at least part of the reason for that uneasiness can be traced to Aristotle and his central contention that our behavior is the largest single factor in determining our happiness. Taking his cue from both Socrates and Plato before him, Aristotle avowed faith in human agency, in our ability to control our fortune by controlling our actions and responses to the happenings of the world.

Aristotle's efforts, in this regard, were part of a much broader movement to ensure the inviolability of a flourishing life in the face of external contingency and chance. As Martha Nussbaum has shown, Greek culture of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.E., in fact, was obsessed with precisely this dilemma: how to ensure happiness despite what may *happen* to us, despite the unpredictability of luck.[3]

The same question continued to preoccupy the Romans, and indeed it is the response of the Stoic philosophers Cicero and Epictetus that best illustrates the extent of that new faith in human agency. Whereas Aristotle and others had left at least some room for the play of chance in determining happiness, Cicero and Epictetus attempted to rule out its influence altogether. If the man of virtue is the happy man, they argued, then the man of perfect virtue should be happy come what may. Happiness is a function of the will, *not* of external forces. And so, extending this logic to its end point, Cicero is able to conclude that even the most extreme physical suffering should not thwart the happiness of the true Stoic sage. "Happiness . . . will not tremble, however much it is tortured." The good man can be happy even on the rack.

Like Aristotle, the great majority of the founding fathers of both the American Republic and the American Academy would likely have dismissed such talk as the defense of a philosopher's paradox. Yet in its very exaggeration the example illustrates perfectly the wider – and widely shared – classical view that happiness and pain were by no means mutually exclusive.[4] Happiness itself was not a function of feeling, but a function of virtue. And as such it frequently required denial, sacrifice, even suffering. To anyone in the eighteenth century who had received a classical education – which is to say, the vast majority of educated men and women – this was a powerful set of received assumptions.

And of course Cicero and Epictetus were not the only sources of the assumption that happiness sometimes required suffering, since a very different sort of man had also equated happiness with pain. That man was Jesus Christ, and his instrument of torture, his rack, was the cross.

Admittedly, the image of a mutilated corpse, suspended by nails from planks of wood, and surrounded by weeping women, does not call happiness immediately to mind. One will certainly be for-

3 See Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

4 This, I would argue, is true even of Epicureanism, although the case is certainly complicated. For more on Epicurus, see below.

given for harboring similar reservations about the religious tradition that grew up around this lugubrious symbol. With reason, it might seem, has Christianity been called the worship of sorrow.

And yet, we need only recall Christ's frequent injunction to "rejoice and be glad" to appreciate that the appeal of this new faith lay in more than simply its invitation to take part in the suffering and sacrifice of its central founder. The promise of redemption *through* suffering – and the promise of a happiness greater than could ever be imagined on Earth – animated the tradition from the outset.

Consider, for example, the nature of Christ's promise in the Gospels, and particularly the ringing good news of the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain as recorded, respectively, by Matthew and Luke in the second half of the first century A.D.

Each begins with a series of 'beatitudes,' so named because of the Vulgate translation of the Greek term with which they open. *Beati* in Latin, *makarios* in Greek – the terms are often rendered in English as 'blessed,' although 'happy' would serve equally well, as indeed it does in some English and various other translations, such as in French, where *heureux* from the Old French *heur* is used in the cannon. What is critical, though, is the original Greek term itself – critical, on the one hand, in that the term is not *eudaimon*, a word that any educated speaker of Greek in the first century would have immediately associated with the tradition of classical philosophy; but critical, on the other, in that *makarios* was itself a term employed frequently by classical authors, including Aristotle and Plato, to signify 'happy' or 'blessed.' More exalted than *eudaimon*, without the same emphasis on chance, *makarios* signified an even loftier state, implying a direct connection to the gods. More importantly, it was the word that had already been chosen by the authors of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Jewish Bible (the Christian Old Testament), in their rendering of the classical Hebrew beatitudes, the so-called Ashrel. As Thomas Carlyle was later moved to observe, "There is something higher than happiness, and that is blessedness."

The authors of the New Testament beatitudes would certainly have agreed. Here is Matthew:

> Blessed [beati/*makarios*] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
> Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. . . .
> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
> Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
> Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
> (Matthew 5:3 – 11)

And here is Luke:

> Blessed [beati/*makarios*] are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
> Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
> Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
> Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for
surely your reward is great in heaven.
(Luke 6:20 – 22)

Much, of course, could be said about these curious passages, now nearly two thousand years old. But let it suffice here to emphasize the promise of imminent reward for those living virtuously in the here and now. The merciful, the pure in heart, the meek – all who pursue justice and the way of the Lord – will be given their due, granted mercy, a direct audience with God, intimacy in his family, and the rich legacy of his kingdom. The hungry shall be filled, the mournful shall laugh, their gifts will be great in heaven. And though all are enjoined to rejoice *now* in this expectation – to "leap for joy" – this is essentially a proleptic happiness, a happiness of the future, what Augustine would later call the "happiness of hope."

This Christian conception was tremendously powerful. For the happiness promised in the beatitudes, and subsequently elaborated in Christian tradition, was at once specific in its suggestions of rich reward and extremely, luxuriantly vague. Here the imagination could be set free to revel in the delights of the kingdom of God, to fantasize the total fulfillment that would justify one's earthly pains. All the milk and honey of Jewish deliverance was joined to a new prospect of ecstatic, erotic communion with God, of gazing lovingly into his eyes, "face to face," as the Apostle Paul had promised. The words themselves – release, rapture, passion, bliss – are revealing. Whether in heaven or the New Jerusalem, the happiness of paradise would be entire and eternal, endless and complete.

Even better, the beatific vision offered a seductive rejoinder to Solon's saying "Call no man happy until he is dead." In the Christian account, happiness *was* death – a proposition that dealt a powerful blow to the vagaries of earthly fortune, while at the same time transforming the end of human life from a boundary into a gateway. Whereas in the classical account, happiness encompassed the span of a lifetime, Christian beatitude was infinite. And whereas classical happiness remained a comparatively cerebral affair – cool, deliberative, rational, balanced – Christian happiness was unabashedly sensual in its imagined ecstasies. Feeling, intense feeling, was what flowed forth with Christ's blood, transformed in the miracle of the Eucharist from the fruit of intense pain to the sweet nectar of rapture.

And yet, for all their essential differences, there were important similarities between the classical and Christian conceptions. In each tradition, happiness remained an exalted state, a precious reward for great sacrifice, commitment, and pain. The consummation, the crowning glory of a well-lived life, happiness would be granted only to the worthy, the virtuous, the god-like happy few.

As Christianity was fused ever closer with the intellectual inheritance of the classical pagan authors, these similarities were only strengthened. It is no coincidence that when Augustine put pen to paper shortly after his conversion to Christianity in 386, he entitled his first work *De Beata Vita*, The blessed or happy life. True, he treats there the theme that he would develop with such eloquence in the *Confessions* and *The City of God* – that perfect happiness, in this life, is simply not possible, because of original sin. Nonetheless, the work is a classical dialogue, with a message bearing the deep imprint of Plato and Cicero: that the "search for higher happiness, not merely its actual attainment, is a prize beyond all human wealth or honor or physical pleasure."[5] Augustine's continual assurance that although "we do not enjoy a present happiness" we can "look forward to happiness in the future with steadfast endurance," kept this once classical, now Christian, end directly in the sights of all who wandered as pilgrims on the deserts of life.

One could make similar observations with respect to various other pillars of church doctrine, citing Boethius, say, from his influential sixth-century *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, in which he repeatedly insists that the "entire thrust of the human will as directed to various pursuits is to hasten towards happiness." And of course there is Aquinas, who in stitching the rediscovered classics of Aristotle – and particularly the *Nichomachean Ethics* – into the tapestry of the medieval church ensured that Aristotle's highest end would endure, with only minor alterations, as the Christian *telos* for centuries to come. By the end of the Renaissance, in fact, Christianity and classicism had grown so closely intertwined on the subject of happiness that works of Christian Stoicism, Christian Platonism, Christian Aristotelianism, and even Christian Epicureanism tackled the subject in depth.[6]

The existence particularly of Christian Epicurean tracts on happiness may seem odd, even a contradiction in terms. Yet it is too often forgotten that Epicurus himself was an unimpeachable ascetic who taught that "genuine pleasure" was not "the pleasure of profligates," but rather the simple satisfaction of a mind and body at peace. This was a message that less severe Christians could find amenable. And with the changing attitudes toward pleasure that bubbled up from the twelfth-century 'renaissance' through the *Rinascimento* itself, increasing numbers of them did.

The fact is important, for it highlights a tension that had existed in the Christian conception of happiness from the start. On the one hand an earthly existence that demanded denial and renunciation, the embrace of suffering as *imitatio Christi* and the just deserts for original sin. And on the other, the promise of a reward that was often pleasurable – sensual – in the extreme. Heaven may always have seemed a paradise, but beginning in the thirteenth century, its luxuries achieved new levels in the Christian imagination. "In that final happiness *every* human desire will be fulfilled," Aquinas observes in the *Summa against the Gentiles*, and men and women will know "perfect pleasure," the "perfect delight of the senses," to say nothing of those of the mind. No pleasure, no pleasure at all, would be lacking – even, Aquinas specified (to the later delight of Nietzsche) the pleasure of enjoying others' pain. *Beati in regno coelesti videbunt poenas damnatorum, ut beatitude illis magis compleaceat*. The saved would feast on the sight of the sufferings of the damned.

Creative speculation on the Christian meaning of happiness multiplied during the High Renaissance. In works like Lorenzo Valla's *On Pleasure* (1431) and the monk Celso Maffei's *Pleasing Explanation of the Sensuous Pleasures of Paradise* (1504), to name only two, little was left to the imagination, with accounts brimming over with the delights that awaited

5 This is a phrase from Cicero's lost manuscript, *Hortensius*, which Augustine knew well. See Henry Chadwick, *Augustine,* Past Masters series (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 24.

6 See Charles Trinkhaus, *Adversity's Noblemen: The Italian Humanists on Happiness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940).

the faithful in the world to come.[7] Classical descriptions of Elysium, the Blessed Isles, and the pagan Golden Age were freely adapted to give spice to the afterlife, as were Christians' own accounts of the Paradise before the Fall, where, as Augustine had stressed, "true joy [had] flowed perpetually from God." The Renaissance imagination thus ranged freely forward to the joys that would come, and backward to those that had been. But the impulse to do so in such graphic detail clearly came from the present. The imagined pleasures beyond, that is, were a reflection of the greater acceptance of pleasure in the here and now.

The reasons for such a broad shift are of course complex. But in terms of ideas, an important place must be given to Aquinas and his fellow Christian Aristotelians. For by de-emphasizing the total, vitiating effects of original sin, and emphasizing the place of virtue as man's *telos*, they carved out a space for cultivating and improving earthly life. To be sure, perfect happiness (*beatitudo perfecto*) would still come only with death by grace. But in the meantime, one could prepare for it by cultivating imperfect happiness (*felicitas* or *beatitudo imperfecto*) along the ladder that led to human perfection. It was by climbing – pulling oneself upward – on the heights of just such a liberal theology that Christian humanists like Erasmus and Thomas More were able to conceive of an earthly existence that was rather more than a vale of tears.

In some respects, it is true, the Protestant Reformation – with its recovery of a dour, Augustinian theology of sin – tended to put a damper on this open indulgence of pleasure. And certainly the terrible violence of the ensuing Religious Wars did little to minimize pain. Yet it should also be stressed that for all their emphasis on human depravity, Calvin and Luther were by no means ill disposed to pleasure. The damned might well be "vessels of wrath," in Calvin's words, but for those in whom the workings of grace could be detected, the joys of the new Adam were at hand. As Luther felt moved to observe in his preface to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans:

> This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith.

Calvin, for his part, observed in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that God's grace was the alchemy that could transform human misery – including poverty, wretchedness, exile, ignominy, imprisonment, and contempt – into gold. "When the favor of God breathes upon us, there is none of these things which may not turn out to our happiness."[8] The trick of course was to be certain of God's grace and forgiveness, a certainty that in theory at least could never be had. But as Max Weber famously observed, one could always be on the lookout for signs. Did it not make sense to see earthly happiness as an indication that one might be headed in the direction of everlasting content? Not only fortune was evidence of good fortune. The ability to take pleasure in the won-

7 See the concise account in Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), esp. chap. 5, "The Pleasures of Renaissance Paradise."

8 On the subject of happiness in Calvin's thought, see Heiko A. Oberman, "The Pursuit of Happiness: Calvin between Humanism and Reformation," in *Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation: Essays in Honor of Charles Trinkaus*, ed. John W. O'Malley, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1993).

ders of God's creation was also an encouraging sign.

In this respect, it is fair to say that just as Epicurus was hardly epicurean, Protestants and Puritans were much less puritanical than is often supposed. The sanctioning of sexual pleasure within marriage, the "affirmation of ordinary life" entailed in the enjoinder to seek God in all things, and the constant reminder that the Creator's perfect creation appeared ugly only to those who saw it through sinful eyes – all this went some way toward establishing the proposition that pleasure might be taken as a sign of grace, that happiness might be a direct reflection of the virtuous Christian soul.[9]

Thus, the Reverend Thomas Coleman, preaching before the English Parliament on August 30, 1643, likened his countrymen's struggle against Charles I to the ancient Israelites' "long pursuit of happinesse," arguing that they might be confident in attaining their end.[10] It was a felicitous phrase, and in the coming years Englishmen of a variety of persuasions employed it regularly, echoing the conviction of the author of the 1641 tract *The Way to Happiness on Earth* that this was where our journey began.[11] "The being in a state of Grace will yield… both a Heaven here, and Heaven hereafter," rendering "a man's condition happy, safe, and sure," emphasized the Puritan millenarian Thomas Brooks.[12] By the time of the Restoration, even High Church authors were penning popular tracts on the art of contentment, as if to give credence to an earlier author's claim that "happinesse is the language of all." "We must look through all things upon happinesse," this author observed, "and through happinesse upon all things."[13]

The claims of these seventeenth-century British divines bring us very close to the truly momentous proposition that pleasure and happiness might be considered good in and of themselves. And it should not surprise us that one of the first authors to entertain this bold suggestion – John Locke – evolved directly out of this same religious milieu.

The son of a Puritan who had fought for Cromwell in the English Civil War, Locke himself, to be sure, was no orthodox Calvinist. And whatever insight he may have gleaned from Christian sources regarding happiness was no doubt amply supplemented by his immersion in Newtonian science and his understanding of Epicurus (as inter-

9 The phrase "affirmation of ordinary life" is that of Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

10 Thomas Coleman, *The Christian's Course and Complaint, Both in the Pursuit of Happinesse Desired, and for Advantages Slipped in that Pursuit: A Sermon Preached to the Honorable House of Commons on the Monthly Fast Day, August 30, 1643* (London: Christopher Meredith, 1643).

11 Robert Crofts, *The Way to Happinesse on Earth Concerning Riches, Honour, Conjugall Love, Eating, Drinking* (London: Printed for G. H., 1641).

12 Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth, or, A Serious Discourse Touching a Well-Grounded Assurance of Men's Everlasting Happiness and Blessedness* (London: Printed for John Hancock, Senior and Junior, 1657), preface.

13 Richard Holdsworth, *The Peoples Happinesse. A Sermon Preached in St. Maries in Cambridge, Upon Sunday the 27 of March, Being the Day of His Majesties Happy Inauguration* (Cambridge: Roger Daniel, 1642), 2, 5–6. Holdsworth was master of Emanuel College and vice chancellor of the university. Richard Allestree's *The Art of Contentment* (Oxford: At the Theater, 1675) went through over twenty editions and was still in print in the nineteenth century. Allestree, a leading royalist divine, was the provost of Eaton.

preted by the French priest Pierre Gassendi, whose writings Locke studied closely). Quite rightly, as a consequence, historians have long emphasized the latter influences in shaping Locke's work, particularly the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), in which he presents his celebrated conception of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, born without innate ideas or the corruptions of original sin, animated by sensations of pleasure and pain.

In the famous chapter "Power" in book 2 of that work, Locke uses the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" no fewer than four times. And he indeed employs a variety of Newtonian metaphors – stones that fall, tennis balls hit by racquets, and billiard balls struck by cues – to describe the ways in which human beings are propelled, and propel themselves, through the space of their lives. The force that moves them, we learn, the power that draws them near, is the desire for happiness, which acts through the gravitational push and pull of pleasure and pain. We are drawn by the one and repulsed by the other, and it is right that this is so. For in Locke's divinely orchestrated universe, pleasure is providential; it is a foretaste of the goodness of a God who desires the happiness of his creatures. "Pleasure in us," it follows, "is that we call good, and what is apt to produce pain in us, we call evil." And happiness in its full extent is simply "the utmost pleasure we are capable of."

Here, then, was the monumental formulation. Redeeming pleasure, it unabashedly coupled good feeling with the good.

Its influence on the eighteenth century was profound. There was virtue in pleasure, Locke's readers came to believe, and pleasure in virtue. Being good meant feeling good. Arguably, there was no more widespread Enlightenment assumption. Moral sense theorists like Frances Hutcheson and Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui shared it, as did the Unitarian Joseph Priestly and the psychologist David Hartley. David Hume maintained as much, right alongside the French philosophers Helvétius and Condillac and the Italian legal theorist Cesare Beccaria. And of course there was Bentham with his felicific calculus of pleasure and pain, to say nothing of Jefferson and Franklin.

All of these men, as it happens, were deeply indebted to Locke's *Essay*. But by the second half of the eighteenth century, even many who were not tended to share its key assumptions.[14] The anonymous author of *True Pleasure, Chearfulness, and Happiness, The Immediate Consequence of Religion*, published in Philadelphia in 1767, gave no evidence of having read the wise Mr. Locke. But he undoubtedly believed with him that God delighted to see his creatures happy, and that pleasure itself was a very good thing. Christ, he argued, was a 'Happy Christ,' who had revealingly performed his first miracle at a wedding, where not coincidentally there was feasting, dancing, and ample wine. The heavenly Father, surely, did not frown on mirth; he smiled fondly upon it.

This author was probably more upbeat than most. But he was not alone in proclaiming earthly happiness to be a direct consequence of religion. By the latter part of the late eighteenth century, in fact, Christian writers on both sides of the Atlantic – Protestant and Catholic alike – were churning out works that made precisely this claim, arguing that

14 On the importance of Locke and the primacy of pleasure in the eighteenth century, see Roy Porter, "Enlightenment Pleasure," in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

Christianity was an excellent *means* to a much coveted earthly end. In this way, religion itself took part in the great Utilitarian current that swept the century, sweeping up all things in its midst. And if happiness and pleasure – good feeling and amusement – were now expected even of religion in this life, they could be required of most anything. Increasingly they were, making unprecedented demands on places, professions, laws, relationships, governments, scientific academies – even essays on happiness, of which there were more written in the eighteenth century than in any previous age.

It bears repeating how radical this transformation was. For henceforth religion would be asked not only to serve salvation, but to serve what in a secularizing culture was treated ever more like an end in itself: earthly happiness. Already in the early nineteenth century Tocqueville could point out that when listening to American preachers it was difficult to be sure "whether the main object of religion is to procure eternal felicity in the next world or prosperity in this." He would have much more difficulty today.

It has long been a truism of modern historiography that this shift from the happiness of heaven to the happiness of Earth was a product of the Enlightenment, the consequence of its assault on revealed religion and its own validation of secular pleasure. I would not dispute the main lines of this interpretation, but as I have tried to suggest here, it is also the case that the shift toward happiness on Earth occurred *within* the Christian tradition as well as without.

And this fact is important, for it helps to account for the ways in which eighteenth-century men and women were able to shield themselves for so long from an uncomfortable truth. Namely, as Immanuel Kant would point out with such force at the end of the century, that "making a man happy [was] quite different from making him good." Kant, writing in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), used the term 'happy' in its eighteenth-century sense, as pleasure or good feeling – and clearly he was right. For if the proposition that doing good (living virtuously) meant feeling good (being happy) was always debatable, it was far more dubious still that feeling good meant being good. Virtue, Kant reaffirmed, with an air of common sense, was sometimes painful. And those who were happy, who felt good, were sometimes bad.

He might easily have added that by the logic of the pleasure/pain calculus, not only was it good to feel good, but it was bad to feel bad. Sadness, by this measure, would be a sin, and those who experienced it would justly feel guilty for doing so. It may be that in our own day we are close to this point. But in the eighteenth century, the proposition would still have shocked. The question is why – why did not more people think through the implications and the logic of one of the century's most dominant ethical impulses?

One answer is that they did not want to – all ages, after all, have their willful blind spots, our own day no less than the 1760s – and certainly it was nice to believe that feeling good and being good were mostly one and the same. But most men and women in the eighteenth century were simply *not able* to think through the implications of their increasingly contradictory assumptions about happiness – not able, that is, to see with the piercing vision of a Kant the contradictions that lay at the heart of the century's newly self-evident truths.

Admittedly, there were radicals who pushed the logic of the pleasure/pain calculus to its ultimate extreme. Julien Offray de La Mettrie, for one, or the Marquis de Sade, for another, argued that if pleasure was good, and pain was bad, then the most intense forms of pleasure – sexual or even criminal – should be embraced with virtuous gusto. "Renounce the idea of another world; there is none," Sade observes in his "Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man" (1782). "But do not renounce the pleasure of being happy and of making for happiness in this." If the world, in short, could offer nothing better than pleasure, then should not pleasure be pursued to the hilt? And what was more pleasurable, Sade wanted to know, than a good fuck?

Such exceptions, however, prove the rule. For Sade and La Mettrie were written off as pariahs, decried as scandalous, condemned as immoral, accused of lacking virtue. Their pleasure was not happiness, contemporaries charged, but egotism, immorality, indulgence, and vice. But the assumption that many fell back on to level this charge was not the century's newly self-evident conception of happiness as utilitarian pleasure. They fell back instead on the teachings about happiness that had accumulated slowly over the centuries, amassed by Hebrews and Hellenes, classicists and Christians: that happiness and virtue, happiness and right action, happiness and godliness did indeed walk in step, but that the journey was often difficult, demanding sacrifice, commitment, even pain. That happiness, if it came at all, was not a right of being human, but a reward, the product of a life well lived.

In the eighteenth century there were still enough Stoics and close readers of the Bible – men and women steeped in classical teachings on happiness and rich in the legacy of Christian virtue – so as not to efface completely the line that separated being good from feeling good. The eighteenth century still lived on this inheritance – but we might say that it lived on borrowed time.

To his immense credit, John Locke understood this dilemma, saw with a perspicacity and foresight that rivaled Kant's own the problems raised by the novel pursuits he set in motion. In the very chapter "Power" of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* Locke acknowledged, with more than a nod to his Calvinist past, that what prevented his system from devolving into a simple relativism of feeling was the prospect that one would judge the virtue of present pleasures and present pains – abstaining and acting accordingly – on the basis of future pleasures to come. This was "the reasonableness of Christianity." As he emphasized again, with reasonableness, in a later work of that name:

> Open [men's] eyes upon the endless unspeakable joys of another life and their hearts will find something solid and powerful to move them. The view of heaven and hell will cast a slight upon the short pleasures and pains of this present state, and give attractions and encouragements to virtue, which reason and interest, and the care of ourselves, cannot but allow and prefer. Upon this foundation, and upon this only, morality stands firm.[15]

By contrast, Locke conceded in the chapter "Power" of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* "Were all the Concerns of Man terminated in this Life, then why one followed Study and

15 John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. I. T. Ramsey (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958), 70.

Knowledge, and another Hawking and Hunting; why one chose Luxury and Debauchery, and another Sobriety and Riches," would simply be "because their *Happiness* was placed in different things." "For if there be no Prospect beyond the Grave, the inference is certainly right, *Let us eat and drink*, let us enjoy what we delight in, *for tomorrow we shall die*."

In such a world, why men and women should read the publications of the American Academy if it did not feel good to do so – or perform any number of other virtuous tasks – was not immediately apparent.

Julia Annas

Happiness as achievement

Ten years ago, shortly after publishing a book called *The Morality of Happiness* about the structure of ancient ethical theory, I received an email informing me that I had been added to a bibliography of "happiness researchers" on a website called the World Database of Happiness. I explored this site with interest, only to find that this was not a research program that I felt myself to be part of.

The website assumes, without discussion, that happiness is "subjective," that it is enjoyment or pleasure, and that it should be studied "empirically." Philosophy is then derided for failing to "operationalize" happiness and to produce "measures" of it. (Philosophy has a meager 88 entries in the bibliography, compared to 2,927 for the social sciences.) Empirical studies are lauded for their measures of happiness, while the website claims that "preliminary questions about conceptualization and measurement are now fairly well solved."

The website, however, gives off a definite air of disappointment. No sound body of knowledge on happiness, it admits, has yet been achieved. In the present state of research, we can claim only that "there are obviously several universal requirements for a happy life (such as food and possibly meaning)."

Philosophers (and some psychologists, too) will find it unsurprising that if you rush to look for empirical measures of an unanalyzed 'subjective' phenomenon, the result will be confusion and banality.[1] After all, what is it that the social scientists on the World Database of Happiness are actually measuring? Here is the heart of the problem. Is happiness really something subjective? Is it simply a matter of pleasure, a positive feeling? We can at least hope that it is not, and that we can come to conclusions better than the claim that what anyone needs to be happy is food and possibly meaning.

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1 For an amusing example, see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/2630869.stm>, where "scientists" claim to have solved "one of the greatest mysteries plaguing mankind" by actually giving us a mathematical formula: P + (5 x E) + (3 x H) = happiness, where P = personal characteristics, E = existence, and H = higher-order needs. You compute your formula by answering four questions.

For many years I have taught, discussed, and written on ancient ethical theories, whose basic concepts are those of happiness and virtue. During this time, philosophical interest in these theories has grown rapidly and has in turn produced a crop of modern 'virtue ethics' theories, a fair number of which are eudaimonist – that is, theories which take happiness and virtue to be basic concepts. Philosophers are now taking virtue and happiness more seriously than they had for some time, and realizing the importance of clarifying and deepening our understanding of these before rushing into empirical studies. (Judging by recent publications, this concern is shared in some areas of psychology.)

As a result, one of the best places to seek understanding of happiness is the study of ancient ethical theories and of those modern theories which share their eudaimonist concerns. For these recognize, and build on, some of our thoughts about happiness that have become overwhelmed by the kind of consideration that emerges in the claim that happiness is obviously subjective. Given the systematically disappointing results of the database approach, it is time to look seriously at our alternatives.

When it is asked what happiness is, a first answer may well be that it is some kind of feeling. Being happy is easily taken to be feeling happy – as when I wake up in the morning – a kind of smiley-face feeling. This line of thought takes us rapidly to the idea that I can be happy doing any old thing. Some people feel happy when helping old ladies across streets; others feel happy when torturing puppies: happiness comes down to whatever you happen to like.

But this line of thought cannot stay up for long. It is immediately obvious that when we talk about feelings we are talking about *episodes*; I wake up feeling happy but am depressed by the time I get to work, never mind lunchtime. Getting a smiley-face feeling from good deeds or bad deeds lasts only as long as the deeds do. And this kind of happiness does not matter to us all that much once we start to think in a serious way about our lives. As we bring up our children, what we aim for is not that they have episodes of smiley-face feeling, but that their lives go well as wholes: we come to think of happiness as the way a life as a whole goes well, and see that episodes of happiness are not what we build our lives around.

This point can produce a variety of responses. One is to say that when we are thinking of our lives as wholes, we should think in terms of flourishing or welfare or well-being rather than happiness. These terms may be useful in some circumstances to avoid misunderstanding, but we should not yield talk of happiness without further discussion to its most trivial contexts of use. In my experience, discussion rapidly reveals that we do talk about happiness over our lives as wholes, or at least over long stretches of them. We should not, then, restrict talk of happiness at the start to contexts of short-term feeling.

The point that these are the contexts which first occur to many people when they are asked about happiness indicates that our notion of happiness has indeed been affected by the notion of smiley faces, feeling good, and pleasant episodes. Doubtless this is the source of some of the empirical researcher's problems in trying to measure it. For if we try to measure the happiness of lives in terms of smiley-face feelings, the results will be grotesque. I have seen a survey that asks people to measure the happiness of their lives by assigning it a face from a spectrum with a very smiley face at one end and a very frowny face at the other. Suppose that you have just won the Nobel Prize; this surely merits the smiliest face. But suppose also that you have just lost your family in a car crash; this surely warrants the frowniest face. So, how happy are you? There is no coherent answer – unless you are supposed to combine these points by picking the indifferent face in the middle!

So, even if episodes first come to mind, we do think, centrally, of *living* happy lives. And this is because we think of our lives as wholes when we are thinking of how to live, what kind of people we are to aspire to be.

At this point, another characteristically modern, and more reasonable sounding, idea tends to come in. Surely having a happy life has something to do with getting what you want, rather than being frustrated and deprived of what you want? We all have desires; the happy person will be the person whose desires are fulfilled. The philosopher's term for this is the 'desire-satisfaction' account, which appeals to more thoughtful ideas about happiness than our initial ones.

Why wouldn't a happy life be one of getting what you want? People, after all, can live happy lives in many different ways. We feel that there is something wrong in trying to build any particular content into our notion of happiness such that only people living certain kinds of life could be happy. The idea that happiness is desire-satisfaction seems suitably neutral on the content of happy lives, allowing happiness to the intellectual and the incurious alike as long as they are getting what they desire.

It is possible to think of happiness as desire-satisfaction if we are prepared to think of happiness – in the spirit of the suggestion that it is subjective – as something on which each of us is the authority. I am happy if I think I am, since I am getting what I want. For who could be a better authority than I am on the issue of whether I am getting what I want? Perhaps the idea that happiness is desire-satisfaction does justice to the initial thought that it is something subjective – without the obvious problems of the smiley-face-feeling interpretation.

Why might we be dissatisfied with this result? We would have to hold that anyone getting what he or she wants is happy, whatever the nature of the desire. Happiness would thus lose any purchase as an idea that could serve to rank or judge lives; Nelson Mandela, Bill Gates, and Madonna, if they are all getting what they want, are all happy, so any comparative judgments about their lives cannot involve the idea of happiness. We might accept this, thinking that there must be something else about lives which can be compared – perhaps well-being or some other kind of value on which the agent is not necessarily the best authority.

One thing the desire-satisfaction account disables us from doing is making judgments about the happiness of people whose desires are in obvious ways defective. Notoriously, some desires are based on radically faulty information or reasoning. Some desires are unresponsive to the agent's reasoning powers because of the force of addiction or obsession. At a deeper level, some desires are themselves deformed by social pressures. Girls who desire less for themselves than for their brothers, poor people who see desire for self-betterment as unimaginable – these are just two of many kinds of desires that are open to criticism, despite being honestly expressed and open to modification in the light of reason and information, because they spring from the internalization of ideas that deny the agents themselves proper respect.

Once again, the idea that happiness is desire-satisfaction can absorb these points and even deny their faults, at the cost of shrinking happiness to something where only I am authoritative. Suppose, however, that I am happy if I think I am, because I am happy if I am getting what I want, and I am the authority on whether I am getting what I want. If we take this point seriously, we can see that we have not really moved forward from the smiley-face-feeling conception of happiness. Happiness is still just a state I am in that I report on: getting what I want, rather than feeling good, but still a state, namely a state of having my desires fulfilled.

Both the smiley-face and desire-satisfaction accounts of happiness, despite their current popularity, especially among social scientists, turn out to conflict with two other surprisingly deep and far-reaching convictions about the meaning of happiness, convictions which emerge readily in simple discussion. These are the thought that happiness has an essential connection with my life as a whole and the thought that happiness is an *achievement* on my part.

Why should I even bother thinking about my life as a whole? It can seem, from a modern point of view, like an excessively cautious thing to do – prudential in the way that people are prudential who save and buy life insurance. But it is actually rather different, and it is something we all do all the time, since there are two perspectives which we take on our lives.

One is the linear perspective, from which we think of our lives as proceeding through time, one action being followed by another as we slowly get older. The other perspective opens up as soon as we ask of any action, *Why* I am doing it. Why am I getting up? A number of different kinds of answers suggest themselves, but we readily recognize one kind that is *purposive*: I get up *in order to* get to my classes. Why am I going to my classes? In order to major in Spanish. Why am I majoring in Spanish? In order to get a job as a translator. The answers collected by this question will not all be on the same level of generality. Taking a course is a particular goal that gets its salience from some more general goal, such as having a satisfying career. Our goals are in this way *nested*.

One feature of this way of thinking that soon becomes clear is its capacity to *unify*. I cannot have as concurrent aims the ambition to be a great ballet dancer *and* the ambition to be a lieutenant in the Marines; I have to find a way to sequence these aims coherently. As this way of thinking reveals to me what my aims are, I realize that they are constrained by considerations of consistency, available time, resources, and energy. These constraints come from the fact that *my* aims are the aims I have in the only life I have to live. Confused or self-undermining aims force me to get clearer about my priorities and to sort out competing claims on my time and energy.

So thinking about the way one action is done for the sake of another leads seamlessly into thinking about my life in a nonlinear way, one we can call *global*. I may not leap right away into thinking of my life as a whole; I might start by considering smaller units circumscribing various phases of my life, such as my twenties or my life at university. But when large aims, typically associated with careers or self-fulfillment, come in, I have to move to thinking of my life as a whole – a whole given in terms of my goals and the way they fit together overall – rather than as mere duration through time.

This way of thinking, we should notice, strikingly refutes the initial supposition of a timid, over-prudent way of thinking about my life. Such a perspective would come from assuming that I already know, at least in outline, what will happen in my life, and respond to this cautiously. What we are concerned with here, by contrast, is an exploratory way of thinking about my life in which my plans are *shaping* and actively *organizing* what is going to happen in it.

Suppose I recognize this perspective and realize that what faces me is not just a series of actions trailing into the future, but a task, namely the task of forming my life as a whole in and by the way I act. I then have, even if in a vague and muddled way, a conception of my life as a whole and of the overall way my endeavors are shaping it – my *telos* as the ancients put it.

Does this get us to happiness? Aristotle famously said that everybody agrees that our *telos* is happiness. We, however, do not so readily come to this conclusion. Some respond at this point by denying that happiness is our overarching aim in life. Others accept Aristotle's point verbally, but trivialize it by taking happiness just to be whatever you want, thereby expelling from discussions of happiness serious concern with the formation of our lives.

It is important, however, to note that Aristotle at once goes on to add that agreement that our final or overarching end is happiness does not settle anything, since people disagree as to what happiness is. Some think it is pleasure, others virtue; unreflective people think it is money or status.

We can now see that we have made progress after all; for once we recognize, even if at an indeterminate level, that we have a final end, questions and problems about happiness now occupy exactly the right place. Coming up with the proper specification of our overall goal in living will make us happy. But before this is helpful for us, we need to know what happiness is.

Is it pleasure? We now know that the right answer to this question must recognize that happiness specifies not a transient feeling, but our final end in a way that makes sense for us of the aims we pursue. Am I studying Spanish, ultimately, to get pleasure? We can see right away that if the answer is to be yes, then pleasure has to be explicated in a way that makes sense of its role as an aim I could have in studying Spanish as one way to shape my life. If this can be done, it will turn out to have little to do with smiley-face feeling; it will turn out to be a blander, Epicurean kind of pleasure.

We are on the right track, then, in looking for happiness in the search for the best way to live, the best way to understand our *telos*. Once we follow through this train of thought, we can see why the smiley-face-feeling and desire-satisfaction accounts were so hopeless. The issues that matter are issues about the living of our lives, not about feelings or desires. Once this is clear, we can avoid verbal disputes about whether happiness properly applies to feelings or to lives as a whole. We talk in terms of both; but the issues about happiness that concern us most are those that are formulated once we think about our lives in a global as well as a linear way.

Do we actually think about happiness in this way? Certainly a lot of our discourse implies it. When I wonder whether winning the lottery will make me really happy, this is the point in mind; I am not wondering whether it will produce smiley-face feeling or give me what I want.

Discussion and debate about others' lives also makes clear to us that we are disputing about what happiness really is, and that this is a point about our lives and the ways these have been shaped. Two people may dispute whether their colleague ruined her life or not when she lost her job as a result of acting in accordance with her values. (She blew the whistle on corrupt practices, say.) One onlooker may say that she has ruined her prospects for happiness; now she is unemployable, and all her training and ambition will go to waste. The other may say that she would never have been happy had she not acted as she did; had she failed to live up to her values, her life would have been infected by hypocrisy. This is a dispute about happiness that could not be settled by reports about her feelings or desire-satisfaction. It is a substantive dispute about what we are seeking overall in life, and resolving it requires substantive discussion of our values and priorities.

Why does this sort of discourse not spring more prominently to the minds of social scientists when they embark on happiness research? It seems to be at least as prominent in the way people think and talk about happiness as are thoughts about feelings. It does not, of course, fit into the framework that conceives of happiness as subjective – and perhaps this should lead us to doubt the assumption that we have a well-grounded idea of 'subjective' happiness and that that assumption is the proper place to start our investigation of happiness. For, as we have seen, we do think of happiness as something to be achieved, or not, by living a life of one kind or another; and we do think of this issue as one to be discussed in terms of values and ideals. And this does not look 'subjective' in any of the many ways in which that term is understood.

Is happiness really an achievement, though, in the way suggested? Suppose we agree that I aim at happiness by specifying my aims in life overall, and agree, further, that this is something for which competing accounts are available, so requiring choice and direction on my part. Still, is happiness itself aptly to be thought of as a matter of the direction I give my life?

We are used to theories that take happiness to be a *state* – a positive one, of course. On this view, shared by consequentialists of all kinds, aiming to be happy just is aiming to get myself into this positive state. In principle, somebody else could do the work for me, and if the work is laborious it is hard to see why I would insist on doing it myself.

But could happiness be a state of myself that I (or if I am lucky, others) bring about in myself? Here it is relevant to mention a discussion with students that I have had many times, but which I first borrowed from a former student, Kurt Meyers.

Kurt asked the students in his business ethics class, mostly business school students, what they thought a happy life consisted of. All mentioned material things like a large salary, a nice house, an SUV, and so on. Well, he said, suppose you find in the mail tomorrow that an unknown benefactor has left you lots of money, so that these material things are now yours for the having. Would this make you happy? Overwhelmingly they said no (and this is uniformly what I have found also).

What this little thought experiment shows is that it was not really the material things, the stuff, that they imagined would make their lives happy. Rather, they thought of a happy life as one in which they *earned* the money, *made* something of their lives so that these things were an appropriate reward for their effort, ambition, and achievement. Just having the stuff was not all they wanted.

This is a mundane enough example, yet it is surprisingly powerful when we take it seriously. How many people really think that stuff alone will make them happy, regardless of how they obtain it? That you could be made happy by money or an SUV, regardless of how you got them? The thought extends readily to other things that have been taken to be objective measures of happiness in numerous studies. Am I made happy by being strong, healthy, intelligent, beautiful? By having an income at or above the average in my society? By having a reasonably high status in my society? Once we bear in mind the importance to us not just of having these things but of having them in one kind of life rather than another, we can see that these questions cannot sensibly be thought of as having yes or no answers. They open the discussion rather than tell us what we need to know to close it.

So we are not so far as we might think from the ancient thought that happiness is an achievement, even given the fact that our thoughts have got confused by the association of happiness with feelings. We do have the thought that happiness comes from living in some ways and not others, that it is not something that others can give you, either by giving you stuff or by getting you into a particular state. Too often these reflections have been ignored by the social sciences, and this has been something to regret, and the source of much of the disappointing state of happiness studies in that area.

One final objection is worth mentioning: it is that the idea of happiness as achievement is unrealistically high-minded.

We see all around us, it is claimed, people who do think of happiness as some kind of positive state, and who seem not to care greatly whether it is their own efforts which produce this state for them, or those of others. If this is a common way of thinking, is it not too idealistic to think of happiness as achievement?

To this the right response is, I think, that low expectations should not automatically lead us to lower our ideals. People have low expectations for a number of reasons – prominently, social conditions that have discouraged them from having higher ones. If someone does not think of himself as having much control over the shape his life can take, it is natural that he should not readily think of happiness as something *he* can achieve, and he may rest content with the notion that happiness is a state that others can just as well bestow. But this example does not show that happiness as achievement is a hopelessly ideal notion. As I have indicated, it does not take a lot of reflection to find it.

To show that eudaimonism is the right form for ethical theory to take would require more argument than I can provide here, but I hope to have shown at least that the notion of happiness as achievement which forms the center of such theories is already a part of our reflective lives.

In the meantime, it is worth redirecting our attention to what we actually think about happiness. We are faced with the point that we do think of happiness as an achievement in the way we live our lives: one subject to dispute and disagreement that we will need theories to clarify, never mind settle. And even this much shows us that philosophy has more to contribute than social science has allowed, both in refocusing the study on the proper data and in giving it fruitful direction.

Smiley faces are fun as reward stickers in children's books, but they are no help in serious thought about happy lives. It is a pity that we need philosophers to point this out.

Robert H. Frank

How not to buy happiness

An enduring paradox in the literature on human happiness is that although the rich are significantly happier than the poor within any country at any moment, average happiness levels change very little as people's incomes rise in tandem over time.[1] Richard Easterlin and others have interpreted these observations to mean that happiness depends on relative rather than absolute income.[2]

In this essay I offer a slightly different interpretation of the evidence – namely, that gains in happiness that might have been expected to result from growth in absolute income have not materialized because of the ways in which people in affluent societies have generally spent their incomes.

In effect, I wish to propose two different answers to the question "Does money buy happiness?" Considerable evidence suggests that if we use an increase in our incomes, as many of us do, simply to buy bigger houses and more expensive cars, then we do not end up any happier than before. But if we use an increase in our incomes to buy more of certain *inconspicuous* goods – such as freedom from a long commute or a stressful job – then the evidence paints a very different picture. The less we spend on conspicuous consumption goods, the better we can afford to alleviate congestion; and the more time we can devote to family and friends, to exercise, sleep, travel, and other restorative activities. On the best available evidence, reallocating our time and money in these and similar ways would result in healthier, longer – and happier – lives.

The main method that psychologists have used to measure human well-being has been to conduct surveys in which they ask people whether they are: a) very

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1 This paper draws heavily on chapters 5 and 6 of my book *Luxury Fever* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

2 Richard Easterlin, "Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot?" in *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz*, ed. Paul David and Melvin Reder (New York: Academic Press, 1974), and Richard Easterlin, "Will Raising the Incomes of All Increase the Happiness of All?" *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 27 (1995): 35 – 47.

happy; b) fairly happy; or c) not happy.[3] Most respondents are willing to answer the question, and not all of them respond "very happy," even in the United States, where one might think it advantageous to portray oneself as being very happy. Many people describe themselves as fairly happy, and others confess to being not happy. A given person's response tends to be consistent from one survey to the next.

Happiness surveys and a variety of other measures employed by psychologists are strongly correlated with observable behaviors that we associate with well-being.[4] If you're happy, for example, you're more likely to initiate social contact with friends. You're more likely to respond positively when others ask you for help. You're less likely to suffer from psychosomatic illnesses – digestive disorders, other stress disorders, headaches, vascular stress. You're less likely to be absent from work or to get involved in disputes at work. And you're less likely to attempt suicide – the ultimate behavioral measure of unhappiness. In sum, it appears that human happiness is a real phenomenon that we can measure.[5]

How does happiness vary with income? As noted earlier, studies show that when incomes rise for everybody, well-being doesn't change much. Consider the example of Japan, which was a very poor country in 1960. Between then and the late 1980s, its per capita income rose almost four-fold, placing it among the highest in the industrialized world. Yet the average happiness level reported by the Japanese was no higher in 1987 than in 1960.[6] They had many more washing machines, cars, cameras, and other things than they used to, but they did not register significant gains on the happiness scale.

The same pattern consistently shows up in other countries as well, and that's a puzzle for economists. If getting more income doesn't make people happier, why do they go to such lengths to get more income? Why, for example, do tobacco company CEOs endure the public humiliation of testifying before Congress that there's no evidence that smoking causes serious illnesses?

It turns out that if we measure the income-happiness relationship in another way, we get just what the economists suspected all along. When we plot average happiness versus average income for clusters of people in a given country at a given time, we see that rich people are in fact much happier than poor people. In one study based on U.S. data, for example, people in the top decile of the income distribution averaged more than five points higher on a ten-point happiness scale than people in the bottom decile.[7]

The evidence thus suggests that if income affects happiness, it is relative, not

3 See Easterlin, "Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot?"

4 For surveys of this evidence, see chapter 2 of Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and Andrew Clark and Andrew Oswald, "Satisfaction and Comparison Income," *Journal of Public Economics* 61 (1996): 359 – 381.

5 Ed Diener and Richard E. Lucas, "Personality and Subjective Well-Being," in *Understanding Well-Being: Scientific Perspectives on Enjoyment and Suffering*, ed. Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Norbert Schwartz (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1998).

6 Ruut Veenhoven, *Happiness in Nations* (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 1993).

7 Ed Diener, Ed Sandvik, Larry Seidlitz, and Marissa Diener, "The Relationship Between Income and Subjective Well-Being: Relative or Absolute?" *Social Indicators Research* 28 (1993): 195 – 223.

absolute, income that matters. Some social scientists who have pondered the significance of these patterns have concluded that, at least for people in the world's richest countries, no useful purpose is served by further accumulations of wealth.[8]

On its face, this should be a surprising conclusion, since there are so many seemingly useful things that having additional wealth would enable us to do. Would we really not be any happier if, say, the environment were a little cleaner, or if we could take a little more time off, or even just eliminate a few of the hassles of everyday life? In principle at least, people in wealthier countries have these additional options, and it should surprise us that this seems to have no measurable effect on their overall well-being.

There is indeed independent evidence that having more wealth *would* be a good thing, provided it were spent in certain ways. The key insight supported by this evidence is that even though we appear to adapt quickly to across-the-board increases in our stocks of most material goods, there are specific categories in which our capacity to adapt is more limited. Additional spending in these categories appears to have the greatest capacity to produce significant improvements in well-being.

The human capacity to adapt to dramatic changes in life circumstances is impressive. Asked to choose, most people state confidently that they would rather be killed in an automobile accident than to survive as a quadriplegic. And so we are not surprised to learn that severely disabled people experience a period of devastating depression and disorientation in the wake of their accidents. What we do not expect, however, are the speed and extent to which many of these victims accommodate to their new circumstances. Within a year's time, many quadriplegics report roughly the same mix of moods and emotions as able-bodied people do.[9] There is also evidence that the blind, the retarded, and the malformed are far better adapted to the limitations imposed by their conditions than most of us might imagine.[10]

We adapt swiftly not just to losses but also to gains. Ads for the New York State Lottery show participants fantasizing about how their lives would change if they won. ("I'd buy the company and fire my boss.") People who actually win the lottery typically report the anticipated rush of euphoria in the weeks after their good fortune. Follow-up studies done after several years, however, indicate that these people are often no happier – and indeed, are in some ways less happy – than before.[11]

In short, our extraordinary powers of adaptation appear to help explain why absolute living standards simply may not matter much once we escape the physical deprivations of abject poverty. This interpretation is consistent with the impressions of people who have lived or

8 See, for example, Peter Townsend, "The Development of Research on Poverty," in *Social Security Research: The Definition and Measurement of Poverty* (London: HMSO, 1979).

9 R. J. Bulman and C. B. Wortman, "Attributes of Blame and 'Coping' in the 'Real World': Severe Accident Victims React to Their Lot," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35 (May 1977): 351 – 363.

10 P. Cameron, "Stereotypes About Generational Fun and Happiness vs. Self-Appraised Fun and Happiness," *The Gerontologist* 12 (Summer 1972): 120 – 123.

11 P. Brickman, D. Coates, and R. Janoff-Bulman, "Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36 (August 1978): 917 – 927.

traveled extensively abroad, who report that the struggle to get ahead seems to play out with much the same psychological effects in rich societies as in those with more modest levels of wealth.[12]

These observations provide grist for the mills of social critics who are offended by the apparent wastefulness of the recent luxury-consumption boom in the United States. What many of these critics typically overlook, however, is that the power to adapt is a two-edged sword. It may indeed explain why having bigger houses and faster cars doesn't make us any happier; but if we can also adapt fully to the seemingly unpleasant things we often have to endure to get more money, then what's the problem? Perhaps social critics are simply barking up the wrong tree.

I believe, however, that to conclude that absolute living standards do not matter is a serious misreading of the evidence. What the data seem to say is that as national income grows, people do not spend their extra money in ways that yield significant and lasting increases in measured satisfaction. But this still leaves two possible ways that absolute income might matter. One is that people might have been able to spend their money in other ways that would have made them happier, yet for various reasons they did not, or could not, do so. I will describe presently some evidence that strongly supports this possibility.

The second possibility is that although measures of subjective well-being may do a reasonably good job of tracking our experiences as we are consciously aware of them, that may not be all that matters to us. For example, imagine two parallel universes, one just like the one we live in now and another in which everyone's income is twice what it is now. Suppose that in both cases you would be the median earner, with an annual income of $100,000 in one case and $200,000 in the other. Suppose further that you would feel equally happy in the two universes – an assumption that is consistent with the evidence discussed thus far. And suppose, finally, that you know that people in the richer universe would spend more to protect the environment from toxic waste, and that this would result in healthier and longer, even if not happier, lives for all. Can there be any question that it would be better to live in the richer universe?

My point is that although the emerging science of subjective well-being has much to tell us about the factors that contribute to human satisfaction, not even its most ardent practitioners would insist that it offers the final word. Whether growth in national income is, or could be, a generally good thing is a question that will have to be settled by the evidence.

And there is in fact a rich body of evidence that bears on this question. One clear message of this evidence is that, beyond some point, across-the-board increases in spending on many types of material goods do not produce any lasting increment in subjective well-being. Sticking with the parallel-universes metaphor, let us imagine people from two societies, identical in every respect save one: in society A everyone lives in a house with 4,000 square feet of floor space, whereas in society B each house has only 3,000 square feet. If the two societies were completely isolated from one another, there is no evidence to suggest that psychologists and neuroscientists would be able to discern any significant difference in their respective average levels of subjective well-being. Rath-

12 David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Who is Happy and Why?* (New York: Avon, 1993).

er, we would expect each society to have developed its own local norm for what constitutes adequate housing, and that people in each society would therefore be equally satisfied with their houses and other aspects of their lives.

Moreover, we have no reason to suppose that there would be other important respects in which it might be preferable to be a member of society A rather than society B. Thus the larger houses in society A would not contribute to longer lives, more freedom from illness, or indeed any other significant advantage over the members of society B. Once house size achieves a given threshold, the human capacity to adapt to further across-the-board changes in house size would appear to be virtually complete.

Of course, it takes real resources to build larger houses. A society that built 4,000-square-foot houses for everyone could have built 3,000-square-foot houses instead, freeing up considerable resources that could have been used to produce something else. Hence this central question: Are there alternative ways of spending these resources that could have produced lasting gains in human welfare?

An affirmative answer would be logically impossible if our capacity to adapt to every other possible change were as great as our capacity to adapt to larger houses. As it turns out, however, our capacity to adapt varies considerably across domains. There are some stimuli, such as environmental noise, to which we may adapt relatively quickly at a conscious level, yet to which our bodies continue to respond in measurable ways even after many years of exposure. And there are stimuli to which we never adapt over time but rather become sensitized; various biochemical allergens are examples, but we also see instances on a more macro scale. Thus, after several months' exposure, the office boor who initially took two weeks to annoy you can accomplish the same feat in only seconds.

The observation that we adapt more fully to some stimuli than to others opens the possibility that moving resources from one category to another might yield lasting changes in well-being. Considerable evidence bears on this possibility.

A convenient way to examine this evidence is to consider a sequence of thought experiments in which you must choose between two hypothetical societies. The two societies have equal wealth levels but different spending patterns. In each case, let us again suppose that residents of society A live in 4,000-square-foot houses while those of society B live in 3,000-square-foot houses.

In each case, the residents of society B use the resources saved by building smaller houses to bring about some other specific change in their living conditions. In the first thought experiment, I will review in detail what the evidence says about how that change would affect the quality of their lives. In the succeeding examples, I will simply state the relevant conclusions and refer to supporting evidence published elsewhere.

Which would you choose: society A, whose residents have 4,000-square-foot houses and a one-hour automobile commute to work through heavy traffic; or society B, whose residents have 3,000-square-foot houses and a fifteen-minute commute by rapid transit?

Let us suppose that the cost savings from building smaller houses are sufficient to fund not only the construction of high-speed public transit, but also to make the added flexibility of the automobile available on an as-needed basis. Thus, as a resident of society B, you need not give up your car. You can drive it to work on those days when you need extra flexibility, or you can come and go when needed by taxi. The *only* thing you and others must sacrifice to achieve the shorter daily commute of society B is additional floor space in your houses.

A rational person faced with this choice will want to consider the available evidence on the costs and benefits of each alternative. As concerns the psychological cost of living in smaller houses, the evidence provides no reason to believe that if you and all others live in 3,000-square-foot houses, your subjective well-being will be any lower than if you and all others live in 4,000-square-foot houses. Of course, if you moved from society B to society A, you might be pleased, even excited, at first to experience the additional living space. But we can predict that in time you would adapt and simply consider the larger house the norm.

Someone who moved from society B to society A would also initially experience stress from the extended commute through heavy traffic. Over time, his consciousness of this stress might diminish. But there is an important distinction: unlike his essentially complete adaptation to the larger house, his adaptation to his new commuting pattern will be only partial. Available evidence clearly shows that, even after long periods of adjustment, most people experience the task of navigating through heavy commuter traffic as stressful.[13]

In this respect, the effect of exposure to heavy traffic is similar to the effect of exposure to noise and other irritants. Thus, even though a large increase in background noise at a constant, steady level is experienced as less intrusive as time passes, prolonged exposure nonetheless produces lasting elevations in blood pressure.[14] If the noise is not only loud but intermittent, people remain conscious of their heightened irritability even after extended periods of adaptation, and their symptoms of central nervous system distress become more pronounced.[15] This pattern was seen, for example, in a study of people living next to a newly opened noisy highway. Four months after the highway opened, 21 percent of residents interviewed said they were not annoyed by the noise, but that figure dropped to 16 percent when the same residents were interviewed a year later.[16]

Among the various types of noise exposure, worst of all is exposure to sounds that are not only loud and intermittent, but also unpredictably so. Subjects exposed to such noise in the laboratory experience not only physiological symptoms of stress, but also behavioral symptoms. They become less persistent in their attempts to cope with frustrating tasks, and suffer measurable impairments in performing tasks requiring care and attention.[17]

Unpredictable noise may be particularly stressful because it confronts the subject with a loss of control. David Glass and his collaborators confirmed this hypothesis in an ingenious experi-

13 Meni Koslowsky, Avraham N. Kluger, and Mordechai Reich, *Commuting Stress* (New York: Plenum, 1995).

14 David C. Glass, Jerome Singer, and James Pennegaker, "Behavioral and Physiological Effects of Uncontrollable Environmental Events," in *Perspectives on Environment and Behavior*, ed. Daniel Stokols (New York: Plenum, 1977).

15 Ibid.

16 N. D. Weinstein, "Community Noise Problems: Evidence Against Adaptation," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 2 (1982): 82 – 97.

17 Glass et al., "Behavioral and Physiological Effects of Uncontrollable Environmental Events."

ment that exposed two groups of subjects to a recording of loud unpredictable noises. Whereas subjects in one group had no control over the recording, subjects in the other group could stop the tape at any time by flipping a switch. These subjects were told, however, that the experimenters would prefer that they not stop the tape, and most subjects honored this preference. Following exposure to the noise, subjects with access to the control switch made almost 60 percent fewer errors than the other subjects on a proofreading task and made more than four times as many attempts to solve a difficult puzzle.[18]

Commuting through heavy traffic is in many ways more like exposure to loud unpredictable noise than to constant background noise. Delays are difficult to predict, much less control, and one never quite gets used to being cut off by drivers who think their time is more valuable than anyone else's. A large scientific literature documents a multitude of stress symptoms that result from protracted driving through heavy traffic.

One strand in this literature focuses on the experience of urban bus drivers, whose exposure to the stresses of heavy traffic is higher than that of most commuters, but who have also had greater opportunity to adapt to those stresses. A disproportionate share of the absenteeism of urban bus drivers stems from stress-related illnesses such as gastrointestinal problems, headaches, and anxiety.[19] Many studies have found sharply elevated rates of hypertension among bus drivers relative to those of a variety of control groups, including a control group of bus drivers pre-employment.[20] Additional studies have found elevations of stress hormones such as adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol in urban bus drivers.[21] And one study found elevations of adrenaline and noradrenaline to be strongly positively correlated with the density of the traffic with which the bus drivers had to contend.[22] More than half of all urban bus drivers retire prematurely with some form of medical disability.[23]

A one-hour daily commute through heavy traffic is presumably less stressful than operating a bus all day in an urban area. Yet this difference is one of degree rather than of kind. Studies have shown that the demands of commuting through heavy traffic often result in emotional and behavioral deficits upon arrival at home or work.[24] Compared to drivers

18 Ibid., figures 5 and 6.

19 L. Long and J. Perry, "Economic and Occupational Causes of Transit Operator Absenteeism: A Review of Research," *Transport Reviews* 5 (1985): 247 – 267.

20 D. Ragland, M. Winkleby, J. Schwalbe, B. Holman, L. Morse, L. Syme, and J. Fisher, "Prevalence of Hypertension in Bus Drivers," *International Journal of Epidemiology* 16 (1987): 208 – 214; W. Pikus and W. Tarranikova, "The Frequency of Hypertensive Diseases in Public Transportation," *Terapevischeskii Archives* 47 (1975): 135 – 137; and G. Evans, M. Palsane, and S. Carrere, "Type A Behavior and Occupational Stress: A Cross-Cultural Study of Blue-Collar Workers," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52 (1987): 1002 – 1007.

21 Ibid.

22 G. Evans and S. Carrere, "Traffic Congestion, Perceived Control, and Psychophysiological Stress Among Urban Bus Drivers," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 76 (1991): 658 – 663.

23 Gary W. Evans, "Working on the Hot Seat: Urban Bus Drivers," *Accident Analysis and Prevention* 26 (1994): 181 – 193.

24 David C. Glass and Jerome Singer, *Urban Stressors: Experiments on Noise and Social Stressors* (New York: Academic Press, 1972); D. R. Sherrod, "Crowding, Perceived Control, and Behavioral Aftereffects," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 4 (1974): 171 – 186.

who commute through low-density traffic, those who commute through heavy traffic are more likely to report feelings of annoyance.[25] And higher levels of commuting distance, time, and speed are significantly positively correlated with increased systolic and diastolic blood pressure.[26]

The prolonged experience of commuting stress is also known to suppress immune function and shorten longevity.[27] Even daily spells in traffic as brief as fifteen minutes have been linked to significant elevations of blood glucose and cholesterol, and to declines in blood coagulation time – all factors that are positively associated with cardiovascular disease. Commuting by automobile is also positively linked with the incidence of various cancers, especially cancer of the lung, possibly because of heavier exposure to exhaust fumes.[28] The incidence of these and other illnesses rises with the length of commute,[29] and is significantly lower among those who commute by bus or rail,[30] and lower still among noncommuters.[31] Finally, the risk of death and injury from accidents varies positively with the length of commute and is higher for those who commute by car than for those who commute by public transport.

In sum, there appear to be persistent and significant costs associated with a long commute through heavy traffic. We can be confident that neurophysiologists would find higher levels of cortisol, norepinephrine, adrenaline, noradrenaline, and other stress hormones in the residents of society A. No one has done the experiment to discover whether people from society A would report lower levels of life satisfaction than people from society B, but since we know that drivers often report being consciously aware of the frustration and stress they experience during commuting, it is a plausible conjecture that subjective well-being, as conventionally measured, would be lower in society A. Even if the negative effects of commuting stress never broke through into conscious awareness, however, we would still have powerful reasons for wishing to escape them.

On the strength of the available evidence, then, it appears that a rational person would have powerful reasons to choose society B, and no reasons to avoid it. And yet, despite this evidence, the United States is moving steadily in the direction of society A. Even as our houses continue to grow in size, the average length of our commute to work

25 Daniel Stokols, Raymond W. Novaco, Jeannette Stokols, and Joan Campbell, "Traffic Congestion, Type A Behavior, and Stress," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 63 (1978): 467 – 480.

26 Ibid., table 3.

27 Anita DeLongis, Susan Folkman, and Richard S. Lazarus, "The Impact of Daily Stress on Health and Mood: Psychological and Social Resources as Mediators," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54 (1988): 486 – 495.

28 Koslowsky et al., *Commuting Stress*, chap. 4.

29 Koslowsky et al., *Commuting Stress*.

30 P. Taylor and C. Pocock, "Commuter Travel and Sickness: Absence of London Office Workers," *British Journal of Preventive and Social Medicine* 26 (1972): 165 – 172; Meni Koslowsky and Moshe Krausz, "On the Relationship Between Commuting, Stress Symptoms, and Attitudinal Measures," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences* (December 1993): 485 – 492.

31 European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, "The Journey from Home to the Workplace: The Impact on the Safety and Health of the Community/Workers" (Dublin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 1984).

Table 1
Four thought experiments: the conspicuous consumption of society A versus the inconspicuous consumption of society B

	Society A		Society B
1	Everyone lives in 4,000-square-foot houses and has no free time for exercise each day.	1	Everyone lives in 3,000-square-foot houses and has 45 minutes available for exercise each day.
2	Everyone lives in 4,000-square-foot houses and has time to get together with friends one evening each month.	2	Everyone lives in 3,000-square-foot houses and has time to get together with friends four evenings each month.
3	Everyone lives in 4,000-square-foot houses and has one week of vacation each year.	3	Everyone lives in 3,000-square-foot houses and has four weeks of vacation each year.
4	Everyone lives in 4,000-square-foot houses and has a relatively low level of personal autonomy in the workplace.	4	Everyone lives in 3,000-square-foot houses and has a relatively high level of personal autonomy in the workplace.

continues to grow longer. Between 1982 and 2000, for example, the time penalty for peak-period travelers increased from 16 to 62 hours per year; the daily window of time during which travelers might experience congestion increased from 4.5 to 7 hours; and the volume of roadways where travel is congested grew from 34 to 58 percent.[32] The Federal Highway Administration predicts that the extra time spent driving because of delays will rise from 2.7 billion vehicle hours in 1985 to 11.9 billion in 2005.[33]

Table 1 lists four similar thought experiments that ask you to choose between societies that offer different combinations of material goods and free time to pursue other activities. Each case assumes a specific use of the free time and asks that you imagine it to be one that appeals to you (if not, feel free to substitute some other activity that does).

The choice in each of these thought experiments is one between conspicuous consumption (in the form of larger houses) and what, for want of a better term, I shall call inconspicuous consumption – freedom from traffic congestion, time with family and friends, vacation time, and a variety of favorable job characteristics. In each case the evidence suggests that subjective well-being will be higher in the society with a greater balance of inconspicuous consumption.[34] And yet in each case the actual trend in U.S. consumption patterns has been in the reverse direction.

The list of inconspicuous consumption items could be extended considerably. Thus we could ask whether living in slightly smaller houses would be a reasonable price to pay for higher air quality, for more urban parkland, for cleaner drinking water, for a reduction in violent crime, or for medical research that would reduce premature death. And in each case the answer would be the same as in the cases we have considered thus far.

32 David Schrank and Tim Lomax, *The 2002 Urban Mobility Report*, Texas Transportation Institute, <http://mobility.tamu. edu/>.

33 Charles S. Clark, "Traffic Congestion," *The CQ Researcher*, 6 May 1994, 387 – 404.

34 For a detailed survey of the supporting studies, see Frank, *Luxury Fever*, chap. 6.

My point in the thought experiments is not that inconspicuous consumption is always preferable to conspicuous consumption. Indeed, in each case we might envision a minority of rational individuals who might choose society A over society B. Some people may simply dislike autonomy on the job, or dislike exercise, or dislike spending time with family and friends. But if we accept that there is little sacrifice in subjective well-being when all have slightly smaller houses, the real question is whether a rational person could find *some* more productive use for the resources thus saved. Given the absolute sizes of the houses involved in the thought experiments, the answer to this question would seem to be yes.

It might seem natural to suppose that when per capita income rises sharply, as it has in most countries since at least the end of World War II, most people would spend more on both conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption. In many instances, this is in fact what seems to have happened. Thus the cars we buy today are not only faster and more luxuriously equipped, but also safer and more reliable. If both forms of consumption have been rising, however, and if inconspicuous consumption boosts subjective well-being, then why has subjective well-being not increased during the last several decades?

A plausible answer is that whereas some forms of inconspicuous consumption have been rising, others have been declining, often sharply. There have been increases in the annual number of hours spent at work in the United States during the last two decades; traffic has grown considerably more congested; savings rates have fallen precipitously; personal bankruptcy filings are at an all-time high; and there is at least a widespread perception that employment security and autonomy have fallen sharply. Declines in these and other forms of inconspicuous consumption may well have offset the effects of increases in others.

The more troubling question is *why* we have not used our resources more wisely. If we could all live healthier, longer, and more satisfying lives by simply changing our spending patterns, why haven't we done that?

As even the most ardent free-market economists have long recognized, the invisible hand cannot be expected to deliver the greatest good for all in cases in which each individual's well-being depends on the actions taken by others with whom he does not interact directly. This qualification was once thought important in only a limited number of arenas – most importantly, activities that generate environmental pollution. We now recognize, however, that the interdependencies among us are considerably more pervasive. For present purposes, chief among them are the ways in which the spending decisions of some individuals affect the frames of reference within which others make important choices.

Many important rewards in life – access to the best schools, to the most desirable mates, and even, in times of famine, to the food needed for survival – depend critically on how the choices we make compare to the choices made by others. In most cases, the person who stays at the office two hours longer each day to be able to afford a house in a better school district has no conscious intention to make it more difficult for others to achieve the same goal. Yet that is an inescapable consequence of his action. The best response available to others may be to work longer hours as well, thereby to preserve their current positions. Yet the ineluctable mathematical logic of musical chairs assures that only 10 percent of all children can occupy top-decile school seats, no matter how many hours their parents work.

That many purchases become more attractive to us when others make them means that consumption spending has much in common with a military arms race. A family can choose how much of its own money to spend, but it cannot choose how much others spend. Buying a smaller-than-average vehicle means greater risk of dying in an accident. Spending less on an interview suit means a greater risk of not landing the best job. Yet when all spend more on heavier cars and more finely tailored suits, the results tend to be mutually offsetting, just as when all nations spend more on armaments. Spending less – on bombs or on personal consumption – frees up money for other pressing uses, but only if everyone does it.

What, exactly, is the incentive problem that leads nations to spend too much on armaments? It is not sufficient merely that each nation's payoff from spending on arms depends on how its spending compares with that of rival nations. Suppose, for example, that each nation's payoff from spending on nonmilitary goods also depended, to the same extent as for military goods, on the amounts spent on nonmilitary goods by other nations. The tendency of military spending to siphon off resources from other spending categories would then be offset by an equal tendency in the opposite direction. That is, if each nation had a fixed amount of national income to allocate between military and nonmilitary goods, and if the payoffs in each category were equally context sensitive, then we would expect no imbalance across the categories.

For an imbalance to occur in favor of armaments, the reward from armaments spending must be *more* context sensitive than the reward from nonmilitary spending. And since this is precisely the case, the generally assumed imbalance occurs. After all, to be second best in a military arms race often means a loss of political autonomy – clearly a much higher cost than the discomfort of having toasters with fewer slots.

In brief, we expect an imbalance in the choice between two activities if the individual rewards from one are more context sensitive than the individual rewards from the other. The evidence described earlier suggests that the satisfaction provided by many conspicuous forms of consumption is more context sensitive than the satisfaction provided by many less conspicuous forms of consumption. If so, this would help explain why the absolute income and consumption increases of recent decades have failed to translate into corresponding increases in measured well-being.