

The John Curtin Institute of Public
Policy:
Curtin Corner - *Possessions and
happiness: economic materialism and
bad psychology*



Acknowledgment of Country (**Boodja**)

I would like to acknowledge the Whadjuk Noongar people whose land we are standing on and recognise the strength, resilience and capacity of the Noongar people where Curtin University is situated.

I pay my respect to their vibrant and endless culture and the leadership of the Elders past, present and future. This country (boodja) where Curtin University is situated has belonged to the Whadjuk Noongar people for thousands of years and is a place of learning for all people now and Curtin University is very proud to continue on this very long tradition.



Abstract

- ▶ This Curtin Corner will be exploring the question of what happiness is conceptually, and the relationship between material acquisition and happiness. Often social science races to empirically measure happiness – looking for the how and why of happiness, without having enough clarity about the more fundamental question – what is happiness? This leads to a fundamental question of whether psychology, economics and other disciplines are measuring the types of happiness that really matter.



Image: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/happiness-meter> <http://clipart-library.com/clipart/kcMbGXq6i.htm>

An Overly-Ambitious Project

1. What is happiness? – conceptually mapping happiness
2. What is subjective well-being? Psychology
3. What is an Economic Materialist?
4. What does subjective well-being say about the Economic Materialists happiness?
5. How adopting the beliefs and attitudes of the Economic Materialist will make you happier

What we are going to do today in 40 minutes!

1. What is happiness? – conceptually mapping happiness – (WELL SOME OF IT 😞)
- ~~2. What is subjective well-being? Psychology~~
- ~~3. What is an Economic Materialist?~~
- ~~4. What does subjective well-being say about the Economic Materialists happiness?~~
- ~~5. How adopting the beliefs and attitudes of the Economic Materialist will make you happier~~

Today's talk

- ▶ Social science is rightly getting busy measuring happiness and discussing its causes and correlates. What social science measures does not tell us nothing. **However, we first need to have clarity about the more fundamental, analytical question, what *is* happiness?**
- ▶ Importantly, we are separating out the question of **how to get happiness (which is an empirical question)** and instead focusing on the **conceptual question of what happiness actually *is*.**



Image: <https://kk.org/cooltools/tool-tales-story-tape/>

Why would this be a problem?

- ▶ Lack of clarity
- ▶ The problem with not having clarity surrounding the concept of happiness is that people can be talking past each other, thinking they are agreeing when they are not, or even thinking they are disagreeing when they are not.

Here's some we sometimes see:

- ▶ “Employees of organisation **REDACTED** report 80% happiness!!!”
- ▶ “Study: New Yorkers Unhappiest People in America (Because We Work Hard and Read Books, Unlike Lazy, Stupid Hicks) A recent headline in the Village Voice”

Haybron, Daniel M.. Happiness: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) (p. 88). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.



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Why would this be a problem?

- ▶ Public Policy implications
- ▶ If the ambition of positive psychology is to effect policy change, they really want to be clear acquisitiveness really does make you sadder. Once you start pulling policy levers this has consequences, sometimes unintended.
- “History is fraught with cases where knowledge was used for immoral purposes, and this is especially true in the domain of happiness. There will be much ethical work for philosophers to do to make sure, for example, that knowledge about happiness is not used to oppress others.”

Oxford Handbook of Happiness (Oxford Library of Psychology) by Susan David, Ilona Boniwell, et al. <https://amzn.asia/0134fOK>

Public Policy implications



- ▶ An indicative claim: *“Our thesis is that [subjective] well-being should become a primary focus of policymakers, and that its rigorous measurement is a primary policy imperative...and propose that well-being ought to be the ultimate goal around which economic, health, and social policies are built”* (Diener & Seligman, 2004, pp. 1-2).
- ▶ For example, so pernicious is materialism thought to be for happiness, that the country of Bhutan has actively pursued public policy to stunt its development in society; *“Recognizing that materialistic values and cultures are associated with declines in happiness, GNH [Gross National Happiness] mandates the promotion and teaching of traditional values in schools”* (Besser, 2021, p. 202).

What we are focusing on today

Mental State accounts of happiness (like subjective well-being) which privilege our introspective experience of life do not capture the inherently complex nature of happiness. They only partially explain the holistic concept of happiness, as our psychological experiences are only one (albeit important) dimension of happiness.

We will outline a pluralism about the concept of happiness. There are many different types of happiness (just as there are types of prejudice or forgiveness), which may be partially or completely compatible, or incommensurable, with each other.

Why is this important?

There are many happiness claims made in social science, the media and anecdotally in our lives. Getting a clearer understanding of what happiness is conceptually means we can be more discerning when considering happiness claims for ourselves or others

Ultimately, many of us claim that happiness is our end (teleology) in life.

1. What is Happiness?



Crib Test



What is Happiness?

- ▶ Conceptually mapping happiness
- ▶ Dimensions of happiness:
 - ▶ Is happiness a mental state or not?
 - ▶ How is happiness related to morality?



What is Happiness?



- ▶ Is happiness a mental state or not?
- ▶ The first question to consider is whether happiness is just our first-hand positive experience of mental states? Many people think that happiness is purely psychological, being a property of an individual's states of mind (Haybron, 2010, p. 30; Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, pp. 14-5) – for example, experiencing prolonged feelings of pleasure and almost no pain.
- ▶ SWB happiness broadly involves two kinds of mental states, affective – involving “any mental state that is essentially a feeling” (Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, pp. 7-8), and cognitive – involving judgements and assessments, which together constitute our happiness (Diener, 1984, p. 542).

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What is Happiness?

- ▶ **Is happiness a mental state or not?**
 - ▶ “Truman was happy? He seemed to experience many positive emotions, with an apparently loving spouse and respect from his friends and acquaintances. Moreover, Truman seemed psychologically healthy. He did not suffer from clinical depression or intense bouts of anxiety. Though his desire to go to Fiji was, as of yet, unfulfilled, many of his other desires appeared to be satisfied. (Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, p. 14).
 - ▶ Is Truman Burbank happy? (Mulnix & Mulnix, pp13-16)



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What is Happiness?



- ▶ **Is happiness a mental state or not?**
 - ▶ For others, happiness also involves non-mental states or states of the world (Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, pp. 19-20) – for example, that you have genuine, real relationships, autonomy and freedom. On this view, it is not enough to just have the experience of ongoing positive mental states – happiness as a mental state, the facts of the world must accord with this experience – happiness involves non-mental states.

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What is Happiness?



- ▶ **Deceived lives**
- ▶ “Imagine you’re contented with some aspects of your life. You believe your wife is faithful to you and take pleasure in that belief; you also think your colleagues at work admire you, and you’re pleased by that. But both beliefs are false: your wife has multiple lovers, and your colleagues ridicule you behind your back. If pleasure alone were good, your condition here would be ideal, since you have only pleasant feelings. But surely your delusions make your life worse—it’s bad to be deceived in these matters.”
- ▶ Hurka, Thomas. *The Best Things in Life: A Guide to What Really Matters (Philosophy in Action)* (p. 87). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition. - Hurka

Pleasures and satisfactions may not be the only part of happiness

- ▶ "reflect on the following scenario: say you are given a choice to live one of four kinds of lives: living as an unhappy slave, living as a happy slave, living as an unhappy free man, or living as a happy free man. Do you know which life you would choose? In fact, could you rank your choices among all four lives?"
Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, p46
- ▶ Importantly, which would you prefer?
 - ▶ ~~living as an unhappy slave~~
 - ▶ living as a happy slave
 - ▶ living as an unhappy free man
 - ▶ ~~living as a happy free man~~

6 main problems with mental state accounts of happiness

- ▶ 6 main problems with mental state accounts of happiness
 - ▶ Deception
 - ▶ Impoverishment
 - ▶ Deprivation
 - ▶ Degradation
 - ▶ Inauthenticity
 - ▶ The shape of a life

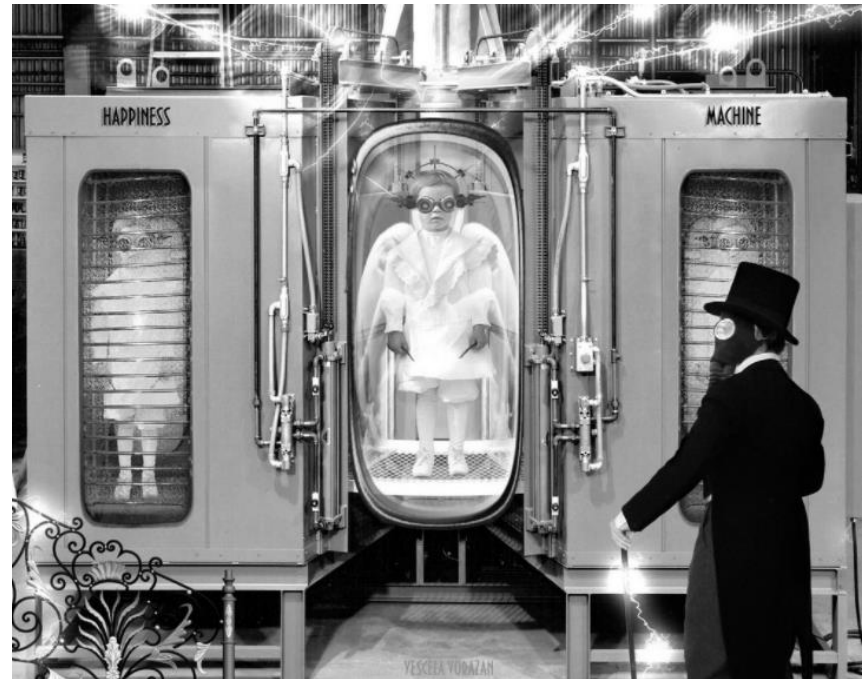


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Deception

- ▶ The first problem involves Deception, the discrepancy between your experience of life and how your life really is. This is taken to undermine how authoritative your experiences, in isolation from actual states of the world, are for mental state accounts of happiness (Haybron D. M., 2016, p. 355). Nozick's (1975, pp. 42-5).
- ▶ **The Experience Machine**
- Nozick
- ▶ Would you plug in?



Impoverishment

- ▶ *Impoverishment* focuses on how textured our lives are and pulls at the intuition that no matter how authentic an individual's positive experience are, some lives are diminished because they lack gravitas or richness. Plato's, as described in Haybron (2016, pp. 355-6), *Gorgias* is illustrative, describing the happy life of an individual who spends their existence scratching an itch. This seems eminently relatable when we consider either parts of our own life or the lives of wastrels we may have known.



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Deprivation

- ▶ Deprivation focuses on how the lack of certain common, characteristically human goods can undermine the degree of an individual's happiness (Haybron D. M., 2016, p. 356). By way of example, consider if Superman, who can fly on earth, was suddenly unable to do so. Despite being unable to fly, he claims to be experiencing happiness. The outcome is that, despite these deprivations, and Superman's claim to be experiencing happiness in the mental state sense, nevertheless, we may want to say there is something less than optimal about the loss of a capability to fly that was inherently part of Superman's capacities while on earth. Essentially, under conditions of deprivation, despite someone's authentically held positive experience of life, it seems possible that these lives are less happy in some sense.



Degradation

- ▶ Degradation focuses on the issue that individuals can live pleasant lives that are unenviable or unseemly (Haybron D. M., 2016, p. 356). Consider someone who likes “wallowing in mud like a pig” (Fletcher, 2016, pp. Loc 530-535), covering themselves in excrement while in public or bathing in a bathtub full of cockroaches. Centrally, in a quote uncharitably attributed to Jeremy Bentham, if your experience of mental states is central to how you view happiness then “quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin [a child’s game] is as good as poetry” (Crisp R. , 2007, p. 23). If your experience is sovereign, then there seems no way to differentiate the ways or activities you undertake that provide these positive mental states. Essentially, there may be ways of experiencing happiness that however authentically pleasurable, should count against happiness.



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Inauthentic lives



- ▶ Inauthentic lives focus on the disparity between positively experiencing life and not being true to yourself. The paradigmatic example being a homosexual man leading a conventionally heterosexual life (Haybron D. M., 2016, p. 356). Alternatively, consider the person who genuinely wanted to be an artist, but pursued a career in banking. In both these examples it is plausible their affective experiences are overwhelmingly positive.
- ▶ However, in these examples, despite the individual's authentic experience of positive mental states, they are not reflecting who they really are at their core, and this undermines their claims to happiness.

The shape of a life



- ▶ Finally, The shape of a life, a criticism of the organisational aspect of your experiences, is also seen as an objection to mental states accounts of happiness. This criticism focuses on the problem of viewing your positive experience of happiness, for SWB the affective and cognitive elements, in isolation from its shape and trajectory. This is integral to your happiness despite your positive experience of mental states. There is an organisational or narrative aspect to happiness such that even when lives have an equal amount of net pleasures, our preference is for a life with an upward trajectory rather than a downward trajectory (Haybron D. M., 2016, pp. 356-7). This undermines that positive mental states in isolation are sufficient for happiness.

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What is Happiness?

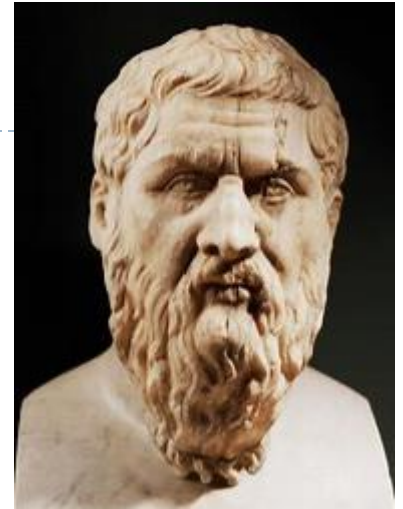


- ▶ **How is happiness related to morality?**
 - ▶ Central is understanding the tension between our happiness – which is predominantly concerned with our self, and morality – which concerns duties to others (Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, p. 47). The degree to which this is, or is not, reconciled is played out in the variety of connections between happiness and morality, both conceptual and causal (Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, pp. 48-9).
- ▶ leading the happy life is the moral life.
- ▶ morality is necessary but not sufficient on its own for happiness.
- ▶ there is no necessary connection between happiness and morality; but there can be a causal relationship.

What is Happiness?

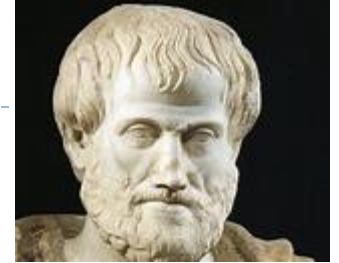
- ▶ How is happiness related to morality?
 - ▶ leading the happy life is the moral life.
- ▶ This group of views suggests that in leading a moral life you will necessarily be happy. Importantly, there is nothing else required from morality to be happy, if you are leading a moral life you are already leading a happy life (Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, p. 49). It attempts to reconcile the self and other regarding tensions between happiness and morality by suggesting that behaving in other regarding ways is essentially self-regarding. For example, to be consistently virtuous throughout your life will mean you are happy.

What is Happiness?



- ▶ How is happiness related to morality?
 - ▶ leading the happy life is the moral life.
- ▶ Plato - suggests virtue is sufficient for happiness. This is because justice involves inner harmony within our consciousness, and this harmony is concurrently a pleasant, peaceful experience of happiness (Vitrano, 2018, p. 40). Importantly, happiness has an affective element, but more prominently involves “living in an excellent way” (Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, p. 50).

What is Happiness?



- ▶ How is happiness related to morality?
 - ▶ morality is necessary but not sufficient on its own for happiness.
- ▶ Aristotle - is that morality is not sufficient on its own for happiness. Rather, happiness as conceived through virtue, is necessary but not sufficient. Aristotle has a prominent role for instrumental goods to provide the context or environment for someone to be happy. Happiness not only needs virtue, “it needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment” (Aristotle, 1998, p. 17). Essentially, along with virtue, you will need externalities like wealth or good health, physical beauty, and family and friends (Vitrano, 2018, p. 59).

What is Happiness?

- ▶ How is happiness related to morality?
- ▶ There is no necessary connection between happiness and morality; but there can be a causal relationship.
 - ▶ **Conceptually** - if you are moral, this says nothing about your happiness, one way or the other. For example, you can lead a happy life, and be morally considerate or vicious, and anywhere in between.
 - ▶ **Causally** - morality can be instrumentally beneficial or detrimental to your happiness in various ways. For example, that helping others makes you feel good.
 - ▶ Does getting pleasure or satisfaction out of helping others undermine your morality?
 - ▶ Or alternatively, transgressive behaviour takes a lot of effort to conceal and retards your internal experience of happiness; or your happiness is curtailed externally by societal norms or laws (Mulnix & Mulnix, 2015, pp. 51-5).
 - ▶ Does it cost you a lot of happiness to be immoral?



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A pluralism about Happiness?

This rich array of combinations of the dimensions of happiness, in combination provide an instantiation of a particular type of happiness. Further, it allows for a variety of types of happiness. The below shows how this occurs at a high level.

Dimension of Happiness	Answers to individual dimensions together	Types of happiness
Is happiness a mental state?	=	Type of Happiness
Is happiness descriptive or evaluative?		
How is happiness related to well-being?		
How is happiness related to morality?		
Is happiness within our control?		



Recap: why is this important?

- ▶ There are many happiness claims made in social science, the media and anecdotally in our lives. Getting a clearer understanding of what happiness is conceptually means we can be more discerning when considering happiness claims for ourselves or others
 - ▶ For example, to say that an individual, or an undifferentiated cohort (like the Economic Materialists) are definitively happier or unhappier is only correct for that type of happiness. We need to be sufficiently sensitive to these distinctions.
- ▶ Ultimately, many of us claim that happiness is our end (teleology) in life.

Take-aways!

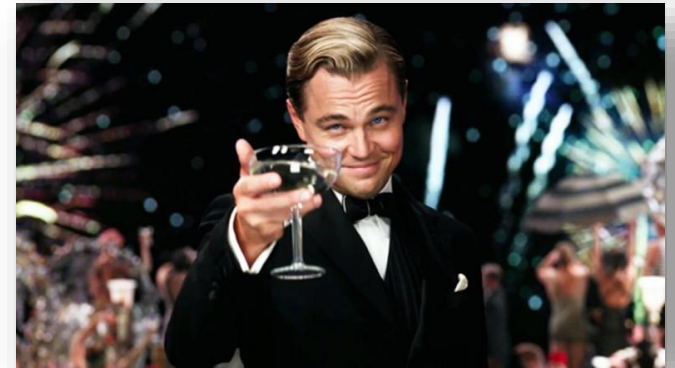
When we hear a happiness claim, we should immediately ask: “What do you mean by happiness?”. Have a healthy skepticism about happiness claims!

Greater interdisciplinary work between psychologists and philosophers in measuring happiness. e.g.

- Analogy with the Susan Wolf discussion of Meaning in Life “meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (Wolf, 2010, p. 8).
- Call for measures of happiness that involve both subjective aspects – how we experience the world, and objective aspects – things that are objectively vital to happiness

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- ← This work is strongly influenced by the seminal work in this field of Dan Haybron, and Jennifer & Michael Mulnix



Questions & Answers?



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