



Dan Haybron

# HAPPINESS

A Very Short Introduction

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Above all, I want to thank my most patient and incisive reader and advisor, my wife Elizabeth.



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# Chapter 1

## A remarkable fact

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I have been wondering at your peaceful slumbers, and that was the reason why I did not awaken you, because I wanted you to be out of pain. I have always thought you happy in the calmness of your temperament; but never did I see the like of the easy, cheerful way in which you bear this calamity.

Crito to Socrates, who awaits execution. From Plato, *Crito*

I asked the Pirahãs once during my early missionary years if they knew why I was there. ‘You are here because this is a beautiful place. The water is pretty. There are good things to eat here. The Pirahãs are nice people.’ That was and is the Pirahãs’ perspective. Life is good. Their upbringing, everyone learning early on to pull their own weight, produces a society of satisfied members. That is hard to argue against.

Daniel Everett, *Don’t Sleep, There Are Snakes*

## Happiness in unexpected places

In all of human history, there may never have been a better time to be alive. In fact economist Charles Kenny declared the period 2000–10 to be the ‘best decade ever’. Even with the wars raging in various parts of the globe, people are less likely than ever to die at the hands of others. We can expect to live *decades* longer than any generation until the last century. Worldwide, the average life expectancy is 68 years, more than double what it was in 1900. Dire poverty and many forms of oppression are on the decline. And you and I enjoy a material and cultural abundance undreamt of for the vast majority of human history. We are, by historical standards, *rich*.

So lucky are we that we can easily come to believe that those without such abundance must be miserable. Or, at least, far less happy than we.

This thought is not obviously true. Consider the Greek thinker Socrates. Yes, he more or less invented philosophy, and Western civilization while he was at it. But he also didn’t have television, a dishwasher, a furnace, air conditioning, a fan, a phone, or a clock. No Mister Steamy Dryer Balls, no Xbox, no iPod, iPad, or iAnything. Socrates inhabited what we would now call a ‘lesser-developed’ town called Athens, where no one had any of these things. There wasn’t even a World Bank to build them a dam. The wealthiest Athenians did have slaves, which was probably a plus (for them, not the slaves).

But in material terms they were, by today’s standards, poor. No refrigerator, no toilet, no toilet paper, no antibiotics, and no decent anaesthetics. In the evenings there was nothing to do, so you had no choice but to talk to other people. And drink wine, and eat Greek food. Sing a few songs, tell a few jokes. Look up at the starry sky. And test theories regarding the best sort of partner for exploring the pleasures of the flesh (see Plato, *Symposium*). On the bright side, Socrates did manage to grow old. But for drinking from the poison cup of hemlock, he would have grown even older.

What, no tears for Socrates? Perhaps you were under the impression that he was actually rather happy. Indeed, that is the standard story. Socrates’ indefatigable good cheer and equanimity, even in the face of death, were legendary, and just about all the major philosophical schools that followed held him up as a paradigm of the happy, flourishing man. Many things have been said of Socrates, but ‘pitiable’ is

not one of them. He had, by all indications, what even today's comfortable reader will recognize as a great life. Socrates didn't miss out on a thing.

Fast-forward a couple of thousand years. A team of psychologists ventures out to study well-being among three traditional, small-scale societies: the Amish, the Maasai, and the Inughuit. The Amish live in traditional farming communities in a manner much like that of a couple of hundred years ago, though they are happy to embrace new technologies that do not threaten their values of community and humility. The Maasai are herders whose members live in huts made of excrement, and whose men are expected to kill a lion with a spear if they really wish to prove their manhood. The Inughuit lead a hunter-gatherer lifestyle in Greenland, which is probably one of the less appealing places to be a hunter-gatherer.

The researchers applied a battery of measures of happiness and life satisfaction in each of these societies, including measures of positive and negative emotions. (No small job, that: to get the Maasai even to talk to these contemptible city-slickers, the lead investigator found it necessary to volunteer for a very, very painful scarification ritual, which essentially involves having pieces of your chest burned off, muscle and all, with a hot stick. If you so much as make a sound, you're a wimp.) Table 1 shows how they did compared to some other groups, looking just at self-reported satisfaction with their lives.

Measures of positive versus negative emotions also were quite favourable for all three groups, particularly the high-spirited Maasai. Many would take the results to show that these 'poor' communities are all happier than the average *college student*, and in two cases just as happy as the richest Americans. This would be an over-hasty conclusion, as we'll see. But if life is just a vale of tears for these folks, they've apparently not figured it out.

**Table 1 Life satisfaction of various groups**

| <b>Positive groups</b>                         | <b>LS</b> |
|--|-----------|
| <i>Forbes</i> richest Americans                | 5.8       |
| Pennsylvania Amish                             | 5.8       |
| Inughuit (Inuit group from Northern Greenland) | 5.8       |
| East African Maasai                            | 5.4       |
| International college students (47 nations)    | 4.9       |
| Calcutta slum dwellers                         | 4.6       |
| <i>Neutral point of scale = 4.0</i>            |           |
| <b>Groups below neutral</b>                    | <b>LS</b> |
| Calcutta sex workers                           | 3.6       |
| Calcutta homeless                              | 3.2       |
| California homeless                            | 2.9       |

*Notes: LS scores are based on responses to the statement 'You are satisfied with your life', on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).*

Similar results abound in cross-cultural studies of well-being, to the point that one recent scholarly tome on global trends in happiness was subtitled, 'the paradox of happy peasants and miserable millionaires'. To date the best international study of human well-being, the Gallup World Poll, has surveyed over 136,000 people in 155 countries, using a rich set of measures of life satisfaction, emotional experience, and other points of experienced quality of life. The happiest nation? By one life satisfaction measure, Denmark, which has had a habit of hogging the top spot in these kinds of studies.

In terms of daily experience—roughly, how pleasant or emotionally rewarding life is—top honours went to ... Panama. On that measure the United States placed 57th. In life satisfaction, it ranked a more respectable 14th. Costa Rica, which is poor but has no army, a healthy democracy, universal healthcare, and comparable life expectancy to the United States, ranked fifth on the planet in daily experience, sixth in life satisfaction. (For what it's worth, I recently asked a young woman who had spent some time living in Costa Rica whether such findings gibed with her experience. She seemed to think me daft even to pose the question—'Of course. Everybody's happy there.')

The only affluent countries to beat Costa Rica on either measure were the Netherlands and the Nordic countries. These results are not unusual.

You might wonder how reliable such studies are, a question we'll take up later. But personal observation of such populations, by happiness researchers and many other people, suggests that the numbers have some plausibility. Looking to the extreme end of the material spectrum, consider a recent account by linguist Daniel Everett. His book, *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes*, describes the Pirahã (pronounced 'pee-da-han'), a hunter-gatherer people with whom he lived for many years in the Amazon. Their way of life is bare-bones even by hunter-gatherer standards, and yet:

I have never heard a Pirahã say that he or she is worried. In fact, as far as I can tell, the Pirahãs have no word for *worry* in their language. One group of visitors to the Pirahãs, psychologists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Brain and Cognitive Science Department, commented that the Pirahãs appeared to be the happiest people they had ever seen. I asked them how they could test such a statement. They replied that one way might be to measure the time that the average Pirahã spends smiling and laughing and then to compare this with the number of minutes members of other societies, such as Americans, spend smiling and laughing. They suggested that the Pirahãs would win hands down.

This is just one of many written accounts of a similar nature. Another researcher has related to me in some detail his experience working with a hunter-gatherer tribe whose members quite enjoy the way they live, and whom he regards as having a very good quality of life. Some of them have left the tribe, met with success in our world, and returned nevertheless to their old lives in the jungle. This likely owed partly to a 'fish out of water' experience that anyone might have in a strange land and partly to the discrimination they faced in our world. But they also, simply, preferred their own way of life, and the tribe has refused offers to increase their material standard of living. Their happiness is not simply a product of ignorance about the wonders of plasma TV. They know about such things, but don't much care.



## 1. Maasai women

A note of caution is in order. There is a long and dismal tradition of painting indigenous peoples as leading idealized, idyllic lives—in effect reducing them to props in our own fantasies. Perhaps to distance themselves from this patronizing nonsense, commentators can go to some lengths to portray such peoples as vicious or pathetic, or take care never to put in a positive word about their way of life. This too is noxious rubbish, but I will not try to rebut it here. Interested readers can consult the literature and form their own judgements on this question.

But let's dispatch the romanticism: everybody has problems. However happy some hunters might be, they still have shorter lives and lose many of their children. I've been told, of more than one indigenous people, that they envied nothing in Western civilization but the healthcare. But that is actually quite a lot. Without it, I would not be writing this. If you read Everett's full account of the Pirahã, his claims about happiness are liable to seem reasonable, but he makes clear that their lives are hardly perfect. (Average life expectancy: around 45 years.)

It cannot be stated too emphatically that many poor people are by no means flourishing. Worldwide, poverty is a tremendous source of unhappiness. Regarding hunter-gatherer cultures, Everett himself notes that 'many others, if not all, that I have studied are often sullen and withdrawn, torn between the desire to maintain their cultural autonomy and to acquire the goods of the outside world'.

But then he adds, 'The Pirahãs have no such conflicts'. They like our stuff, but don't really want the aggravation that goes with getting it. Elsewhere, he relates his experience telling the Pirahãs the tragic tale of his stepmother's suicide. They crack up. It's not that they are mean: to them it is incomprehensibly, hilariously bizarre that anybody would do such a thing. They know plenty about pain—but not, apparently, the kind of searing, isolating spiritual agony that would drive someone to take her own life.

The world is a big place, with many kinds of poverty, or more accurately unaffluence. We should beware of simple generalizations about large swathes of humanity. From the observation that some peoples with meagre possessions seem happy, or unhappy, we should not assume that all such people are.

But here's the thing: from the conventional viewpoint of modern civilization, the mere fact that *any*

population could have such limited means, living at the zero point of what we call development, and give the appearance of doing pretty well, if not better than many of us rich folks, is absolutely remarkable. *It only takes one community like that, or even a Socrates, to raise some fairly profound questions.* And these are among the most basic questions that any civilized society must come to grips with. How is it possible to have so little, yet lead a rich and fulfilling life? Indeed, to be happy? What is happiness, anyway, and what really matters in life? What should our priorities be?

Consider your own case. You are, let us suppose, on your deathbed. What from your life would you most like to have just one more experience of? What would you most regret leaving behind? I can already tell you the first thing you'll want to say, if you're even remotely normal: more time with your loved ones. I would wager that, for most people in just about every corner of the world, that answer will simply dwarf all other contenders. What else, then? Here people are likely to begin parting ways, though I suspect that high on most lists would be such experiences as these: another sunset, another look at greenery or the ocean, a chance to hear the birds sing once more.

What most certainly will not be on the list: another peck at the mobile phone, or one more trip to the mall. How about an extra day at the office?

Time is the currency of life, and a poor person of 70 years has no less of it than a rich person. If you can spend much of that time in the company of people you love and taking in the wonders of a spectacularly beautiful planet, you've already got a lot going for you. If, to boot, you've got some interesting things to do, and aren't in too much physical or emotional pain, you might be just about there.

You don't have to be rich to enjoy these things, and plenty of materially poor people have all of them. Yes, money can help. But lots of rich people lack all of these things—mired in their own kind of poverty—and are miserable. The essentials of a good life are available even to people who don't own much—and even, we will see, to those who never manage to be happy. I would venture that most people experience enough love, enough beauty, and not so much pain, that they can honestly say that their lives are good. Go back and look at the life satisfaction numbers for the slum dwellers of Calcutta, also known as the City of Joy: positive. Life is hard, yes. But it is also, for most, good.

## **Defining happiness**

We need to get clearer on what we mean by happiness. You might wonder whether the whole business of defining happiness makes much sense. After all, more than a few people have suggested that happiness cannot be defined. The word has too many meanings, or is too obscure: a blank canvas on which to hang our longings. So trying to give a theory of happiness is just tilting at windmills.

But is it really? I don't think so. The first thing to do is give up the idea that any single account of happiness can capture everything we use the word to talk about. But the fact remains that we use it to talk about certain sorts of things we care about. So we can ask why we *care* about happiness, and whether some proposed definition makes sense of our practical concerns. One sign of an unhelpful definition of happiness is that it leaves mysterious why anyone should care about it.

In a nutshell, we can *reconstruct* the ordinary notion of happiness, taking the formless blob of everyday happiness talk and sharpening it into a form that helps us to think clearly about matters of importance. Instead of saying, unequivocally, that 'happiness is x', we should say that 'happiness is

usefully thought of as x'.

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The alternative? Silence. Stop trying to figure out whether people are right to care so much about happiness. Don't bother asking whether our way of life promotes or frustrates happiness. Worry not about whether your children are unhappy, or whether your divorce will actually make them happier, as you'd like to think. For none of these questions has any discernible meaning, and their import is completely up in the air.

We could do that. But it seems like a pretty foolish thing to do. 'Happiness' is a central term in our everyday vocabularies, and people use it all the time to think and talk about things they care about. Real concerns, real problems. It behooves those of us who get paid to study such things to help people think more clearly and intelligently about those concerns. And for that we need to figure out what the important things are that people use 'happiness' to talk about. We need a theory—a definition—of happiness. The word itself isn't important. It's the things we use it to talk about that matter.

In this book, 'happiness' is nothing more than a word for a certain state of mind. We will be asking, then, what that state of mind is; what brings it; and how important it is in a good life.

Some readers may be disappointed to hear that happiness is nothing more than a psychological condition. Isn't there more to life than that? Indeed there is, as most philosophers see things, myself included. Happiness is awfully important, but probably not the only thing that matters. This too may seem a bit deflating to some: perhaps you thought happiness was, pretty much by *definition*, the measure of a good life. Maybe you picked up this book with precisely that question in mind: you wanted to know about a lot more than just some state of mind. You wanted to read about what really matters in life. In which case you might be wondering if it's time for a refund.

We will get to the big questions in due course. Happiness, the state of mind, has such a grip on the popular imagination that a proper appreciation of its pursuit requires us to set it in the context of what, in general, matters for a good life.

While this book is about happiness, the state of mind, other books sometimes use the word for a value notion, *well-being*: a life that goes well for you. When the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) said something about 'happiness'—his word was *eudaimonia*—he was talking about the value notion. And his concern was not to understand a state of mind. He wanted to know what sort of life ultimately benefits a person, serves her interests, or makes her better off. Suppose a man leads a pleasant life of utter passivity, living like a pig and letting his potential go to waste. Can he really be doing well? This is a question of values, not psychology. To avoid confusion, I'll use the word 'well-being' when talking about what benefits a person, and save 'happiness' for the psychological notion.

So we've narrowed our focus to happiness as a psychological matter. With that in mind, we can identify three basic theories about what happiness is:

1. Emotional state theory: happiness as a positive emotional condition
2. Hedonism: happiness as pleasure
3. Life satisfaction theory: happiness as being satisfied with your life

Very roughly, the first two theories think of happiness in terms of *feelings*, while the life satisfaction



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