

Too Much of a Good Thing?
Freedom, Individualism, Autonomy
And the Decline of Happiness in Liberal Democracies

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Abstract: Liberal democracies are defended partly on the ground that they foster the happiness of their citizenry. Freedom and autonomy are held to be the principle means through which liberal societies promote this happiness. However, positive psychology indicates that happiness in liberal democracies has been declining in recent decades. Some evidence suggests that an abundance of freedom is a key factor behind the reduction in happiness. The paper concludes with some suggestions for how liberal democracies might combat declining happiness without compromising liberalism's commitment to freedom and autonomy.

Happiness, the Enlightenment and Liberal Democracy

The belief that earthly happiness is the primary goal of life was at the core of the Enlightenment (McMahon, 140-252). This view represented a rejection of a Christian worldview that had emphasized the need to conform to God's will and to seek salvation in the world to come. From the old Christian perspective, happiness was, at best, a reward in the next life. But the Enlightenment "translated the ultimate question 'How can I be saved' into the pragmatic 'How can I be happy?'" (Porter, 22). Indeed, the era was marked by "the increasing embracement... of the pursuit of temporal happiness as the *summum bonum*" (Ibid., 258). The Enlightenment's embrace of happiness could also be seen as rejecting an even older world view, that of the Ancient Greeks, who saw happiness as the province of the fortunate and high-born. Enlightenment thinkers held to the contrary that happiness could be sought and even attained by everyone. The key to this worldly happiness would be liberation – not merely liberation from political tyranny, but also liberation from the old irrational prejudices and traditions that tyrannized human minds. Governed by science and reason, a freer, more just, and happier world for all would emerge.

The Enlightenment's political theory of liberation was, of course, liberalism. By the late 18th-century, liberalism would be in part justified and fought for in the name of happiness. But the connection between happiness and liberalism was already evident in the previous century, at the dawn of liberalism. Consider the views of the most important early liberal theorist, John Locke. Though Locke had little to say about happiness in his *Second Treatise of Government*, he explored the role of happiness in his other works, where he saw the pursuit of happiness as both the universal spur of human action as well as the point of life on earth. "The business of men," Locke declared, "is to be happy in this world by the enjoyment of the things of nature subservient to life, health, ease, and pleasure, and by the comfortable hopes of another life when this is ended" (Porter, 100). Of course, as this passage makes plain, the pursuit of salvation still played a key role in Locke's vision of the good life, partly because eternal happiness in the afterlife was plainly and universally desirable but also because knowledge of a future eternal life and happiness provided comfort, and thus happiness, in this world. But, as Locke famously argued in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, the pursuit of eternal life should be an individual pursuit, not one dictated by the government or other forms of authority. Such freedom was necessary because, Locke held, individuals were presumptively the best judges of their path to salvation – and thus to their happiness:

There is only one [route] which is the true way to Eternal Happiness. But in this great variety of ways that men follow, it is still doubted which is this right one. Now neither the care of the Commonwealth, nor the right of enacting Laws, does discover this way that leads to Heaven more certainly to the Magistrate, than every private man's Search and Study discovers it unto himself (Locke, 36).

Here perhaps can be seen the genesis of the nexus between individual freedom and happiness in liberal thought. "Locke's ideas, like the revolution they aimed to uphold," declares Darrin McMahon in his *Happiness: A History*, "admitted a new place of happiness in the political vocabulary of the West" (McMahon, 188).

Locke himself stopped short of calling happiness, or at least pursuit of it, a *right*; but the 18th-century liberal revolutionaries would take that next step. The American Declaration of Independence declares the fundamental right of all individuals to pursue happiness and asserts that governments are created in part to secure that right. The document further affirms the right of the people to abolish any government that fails to protect those rights and to establish a new one that “shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” Similarly, the preamble to the Declaration of the Rights of Man sets “happiness for everyone” as the French revolution’s explicit goal. The 18th-century liberal revolutions thus marked the political triumph of this new thinking about the nature and purpose of human life – happiness for all, and in *this* world, not the next. But they also inaugurated a new understanding of the purpose of government vis-à-vis this new right: Governments henceforth would be seen not merely as protectors of natural rights but also as facilitators of individual and social happiness. Later liberals, most importantly John Stuart Mill in the 19th century, would further refine and extend Locke’s views regarding the connection between individual freedom and happiness. Following Locke, Mill argued that individuals are generally the best judge of their own wants, needs, and interests. Accordingly, a society and government that fosters individual autonomy and expansion of choices provides the surest route to increased individual and social happiness. However, in contrast to Locke’s, Mill’s liberalism, like his utilitarianism, was concerned solely with happiness in this life. With his harm principle, Mill expanded personal freedom to encompass not merely religious opinion, but all beliefs and lifestyles. Further, Mill called for a new social ethic, one that celebrated individuality and renounced social as well as governmental incursion into individuals’ zone of private choice. In *On Liberty* he wrote that this principle of individuality

requires liberty of tastes and pursuits, of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character, of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow, without impediment from our fellow creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them (71).

Happiness remained a central, albeit somewhat submerged, concept for John Rawls, the most influential liberal theorist of the latter half of the 20th century. Rawls argued that rational individuals, deprived of particular facts about themselves behind the veil of ignorance, would deem certain “primary goods” necessary in order to pursue their “rational life plans,” whatever their particular plan turned out to be. He then defined “objective happiness” as obtaining when a person is successfully *en route* to attaining his or her life plan (480-481). For Rawls then, a just society could be defined as a society that gives all persons equal opportunity to pursue happiness. While Rawls’s theory declined any role for *subjective* happiness – that is, the internal *feeling* of being happy that had been the focus of earlier liberals and utilitarians – the link between happiness and the individual freedom that liberalism secures remained.

Happiness and Liberalism Today

The efforts of Locke, Mill, Rawls and others to defend liberalism on the ground that it best fosters happiness must be deemed successful, at least if we use the policies, rhetoric and self-understanding of contemporary liberal governments as our gauge. Liberalism today is indeed defended partly on the ground that it is thought to provide the best arena for individuals to pursue happiness. The view that it is the proper role of liberal governments to foster the happiness of their citizens has been widely embraced, too. While fostering greater and greater happiness *per se* is seldom an explicit goal of liberal governments, proxy measures such as gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, median income, and unemployment rate clearly serve as indicators of overall societal well-being in the minds of government officials as well as the general public. Wedded to the economic assumption that more wealth and more choices translates into greater satisfactions of preferences, increases in GDP are assumed, at least tacitly, to indicate gains in collective happiness in a free and free-market society. Moreover, the Millian nexus between individualism and happiness has been widely accepted in liberal democracies. Personal choice and freedom of lifestyle are viewed as the route to happiness, and the ethic and values of individualism are celebrated as well. In liberal democracies, it is widely held that happiness entails genuine personal autonomy: finding and expressing one's true inner self, pursuing one's particular passions, developing one's own talents, or becoming inner-directed rather than other-directed.

Celebration and expansion of individual autonomy, including increases in wealth and consumer choice, represents the *liberal* component of liberal democracies. But democratic governance is widely seen as conducive to human happiness, too. Firstly, democratic governance is said to foster happiness by ensuring that government policies reflect citizens' needs and wants. Because individuals are presumptively the best judges of their needs and wants, and because satisfaction of needs and wants translates into happiness, democracy is thought to produce greater happiness than non-democratic governments. Secondly, democratic participation is thought to enhance subjective happiness because it is an important source of autonomy, which is in turn an important source of well-being. People who have more control over their lives are not only freer, they are happier, psychologists have found (Haidt, 220-221). In particular, democratic participation is said to increase happiness by helping satisfy what psychologists call the "effectance motive" – the fundamental human desire to interact with and control one's environment (Haidt, 220-221; Lykken, 23-24). After self-esteem "the belief that one is effective is more closely associated with happiness than anything else" (Lane, 234). Thus a feeling of greater control over one's political environment, and not solely one's personal environment, should pay rich dividends in happiness. Further, political participation can facilitate individuals' self-realization, insofar as it provides opportunities for people to develop skills, particularly the skill of rational deliberation, that are subject to public approval and criticism (Elster 1989, 147-150). Self-realization, in turn, is a particularly important source of happiness and life satisfaction.

Has Liberalism Made People Happier?

So liberal-democracies should in theory make their citizens happier. But, we may ask, has liberalism in fact delivered the goods? Have liberal governments led to happier societies? Fortunately, owing to the emergence of a new field known as positive psychology, the answer to this question need no long rely solely on speculative theory.¹ For most of its history, psychology has focused on the sources of human suffering – neurosis, psychosis, depression and other psychological maladies. But in the last several decades, some psychologists have begun to focus on the causes and nature of human happiness. Some have explored the various dimensions of happiness and subjective well-being, distinguishing between different kinds of positive emotions and pleasures, and also the different ways in which people make cognitive self-assessments of their well-being.² Others have explored the connections between social context and happiness, examining such factors as social relations, work, income, leisure time, ethnicity, and religion for their influence on life satisfaction and subjective well-being.³ And still other positive psychologists have sought to compare the happiness and life satisfaction of people in different countries and regions around the world.⁴

The positive psychologists' research is rich, nuanced and highly interesting. While it would be impossible to do justice to the range and depth of their work in the brief space permitted here, nonetheless I think a summary of their key findings relevant to my concerns in this paper can be made.

Positive psychology has found that the quality of individuals' social relations, employment, and leisure are the most important components for subjective happiness and overall life satisfaction (Argyle 1999; Argyle 2001, 71-88). People with lots of friends and close family relations tend to be happier than the lonely and isolated. Employment is a keen source of subjective well-being, too, partly because it provides an arena for self-development, partly because it is a source of self-respect, partly because being employed (usually) keeps people out of poverty, and also because jobs are important source of social contact (Argyle 1999; Argyle 2001, 89-109; Warr 1999). Greater leisure time typically translates into greater happiness, mainly because it permits more time to be spent with family and friends. (The unemployed, who have plenty of leisure time, are not happier than the employed, however.) Personal attributes, particularly health and social skills, are important, too (Argyle 1999). Individuals' happiness levels also appear to be governed by a kind of internal hedonic thermostat, which is largely determined by genetic endowment, that sets individuals' subjective sense of well-being at a certain level. Life events may temporarily knock people of their "set-point," but they usually return to their normal happiness level in time (Lykken, 33-60).

What does the positive psychologists' research have to say about the happiness of contemporary liberal democracies? In the broadest sense, liberal democracies must be judged successful in making their citizens happy. Cross-national studies measuring individuals' self-reported happiness and life-satisfaction levels find that the liberal

¹ Good introductions and overviews of positive psychology include Haidt 2006; Seligman 2002; Lykken 1999; Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz 1999; Argyle 2001; and Diener and Suh 2000.

² See, for instance, Kahneman 1999 and Kubovy 1999.

³ See, for instance, Argyle 1999 for a good overview of such studies.

⁴ See, for instance, Diener and Suh 2000.

democracies of Western Europe and North America are, on average, the happiest societies in the world (Veenhoven 2000; Argyle 1999, 178-199; Diener and Suh 1999). Most residents of these societies describe themselves as happy or very happy as well as satisfied or very satisfied with their lives. These high happiness levels are no doubt in part attributable to the relative prosperity and freedom of these countries. Most (though obviously not all) citizens of liberal democracies have been lifted out of poverty and also enjoy the other benefits that come with living in collectively wealthy societies, such as access to high quality health care, well functioning infrastructure, and physical security, all of which are strongly correlated with happiness.

Yet despite the relatively high levels of happiness in liberal democracies, there is good reason to suppose that gains in happiness have stalled in recent decades – or even that happiness has begun to decline. More troubling, the causes of this stagnation or decline may be attributable, directly or indirectly, to core values of liberalism, namely freedom of choice, autonomy and individualism. Liberal societies have become highly prosperous and have granted their citizens unprecedented freedom of lifestyle and a wide range of consumer choices. But, we may ask, do increases in income and consumer choice always lead to greater happiness? Does expanded choice in personal and work life always translate into greater satisfaction with one's life? Does democratic participation lead to greater satisfaction with public policy? Does such participation increase happiness by imparting a sense of autonomy and expanded control over one's life? Positive psychology has produced a great deal of evidence suggesting that the answer to all these questions is: *not necessarily*, especially in the most developed and wealthy liberal democracies. It is surely worrying news for liberal democracies if the very core values of liberalism have stopped paying hedonic dividends, and perhaps have even become impediments to happiness. Positive psychology indicates that the tie between happiness and liberalism may be unraveling.

The Declining Effect of Income on Happiness

Consider first the relationship between income and happiness. As has been well documented recently, gains in choice and aggregate income have not translated into greater happiness in the liberal democracies, at least in recent decades. In fact, positive psychologists have found that self-reported happiness levels have remained essentially flat in the wealthy market-democracies over the past 50 or so years, despite an average doubling of per capita income in that period (Seligman, 51-55; Argyle 2001, 132-135; Lane, 1-7, 59-77). Indeed, by some measures, happiness and life satisfaction have declined over this period. According to one study, the percentage of U.S citizens describing themselves as “very happy” dropped steadily in past 30 years, from 36% to 29% (Seligman, 165). The change, though small, appears to be real, given that the findings having been replicated in other studies (Lane, 19-21). Perhaps more troubling, rates of clinical depression have increased markedly, by as much as ten-fold in the United States since 1960 (Seligman, 117). Other liberal democracies have seen dramatic increases as well in recent decades (Lane, 20-23). Depression is, of course, strongly correlated with unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life, and, in this sense, a significant number of persons living in the advanced liberal democracies are much less happy than

their counterparts from the previous generation. Indeed, Richard Layard has argued that depression “is probably the largest single cause of misery in Western societies” (181).

The stagnation, or perhaps slight reduction, in aggregate happiness is no doubt in part attributable to the so-called hedonic treadmill effect – the human tendency to adapt hedonically to changes in one’s environment. One area of human experience that is particularly susceptible to this effect is wealth. People quickly adapt to increases in their income. In fact, there is little discernable correlation between income and happiness at the individual or aggregate level – with one important caveat: as long as the individuals or societies being surveyed are not poor. Below the poverty level, gains in income *are* correlated with gains in happiness. In fact, in countries where the GDP per capita is below \$8,000 (U.S.), purchasing power and average life satisfaction travel in the same direction (Seligman, 52-53; see also Argyle 2001, 132-134; Diener and Suh 2000). But above that level, the correlation between the two quickly breaks down. It appears that people do not adapt hedonically to their inability to purchase adequate food, shelter and security or to the blow to their self-respect that poverty may cause. But people can and do adapt to changes in circumstances – bigger homes, nicer clothes, fancier cars – that gains in income above the poverty level produce.⁵ The wealthy liberal democracies, and a few nonliberal countries as well, such as Singapore and Malaysia, have all surpassed the level at which aggregate income and happiness are correlated. Thus it should not be surprising that there is little correlation between GDP per capita and happiness at the aggregate level in such countries. Unfortunately, policy makers and the citizenry of such countries, to borrow a phrase from Robert Lane, still succumb to the “economistic fallacy” – the “common belief that happiness is in some sense proportionate to income” (64). Conventional wisdom – though perhaps not the wisdom of economists – has always held that money does not buy happiness, but positive psychology has provided scientific evidence for the claim. Why, then, the continued fixation on growth and rising incomes in the wealthy liberal democracies? Lane attributes the phenomenon to “cultural lag” (60). For most of their history, gains in income did produce gains in happiness, and “[l]ike other successful societies, market democracies must, by the logic of their own success, continue to emphasize the themes that have brought them to their current eminent positions” (Ibid.)

The Burden of Choice?

But it is not merely the hedonic treadmill effect that stymies the pursuit of happiness in liberal democracies. Choice itself, paradoxically, may be an impediment, at least in some circumstances. Numerous recent studies have shown that the dominant effect of increased choices is often anxiety, regret or even paralysis, rather than increased satisfaction. This has been particularly well documented by Barry Schwartz in *The Paradox of Choice: Why Less Is More* (2004). Schwartz argues that, particularly in the consumer world, abundance of choices can reduce, rather than augment, satisfaction. People in liberal democracies are confronted with a mind-boggling array of consumer choices. Economic theory teaches that expanded choices should allow consumers to

⁵ Such findings suggest one objective criterion for establishing the poverty line – namely, the point at which people step up onto the hedonic treadmill. Below that point, poverty relief programs are likely to be hedonically beneficially; above it not.

match their purchases more closely to their real preferences, resulting in greater satisfaction. But if the number of choices is too great, in their effort to make the best purchase, people often become mired in a taxing and time-consuming decision-making process, resulting in more anxiety than pleasure. And once their choice is finally made, they may be haunted by regret arising from their awareness that, given their limited time and knowledge, they might have made a less-than-optimal choice. This is especially true if they are maximizers – those who always strive to ensure that their choices are optimal rather than merely “good enough,” which is the goal of the “satisficers.” The evidence suggests that amid an ever-expanding variety of consumer choices, people are spending more time shopping but enjoying it less and are less satisfied with their purchases (Schwartz 2004, 18-19).

But expanded choice is not a potential drag on satisfaction merely in the relatively trivial realm of frozen pizzas, DVD players, and washing machines. It can also undermine the pursuit of happiness when individuals are faced with more important decisions, such as which health care and insurance plans to choose and how to invest for retirement. There has been an explosion of choices in these areas in recent decades, driven by a free-market ideology that says that more choice always benefits the consumer. But, as with consumer choices, people often find themselves overwhelmed and frustrated by the range of options in these sometimes literally life and death decisions. More worrying, a plethora of choices may actually make people objectively worse off by leading them to opt out of health and retirement plans. In the case of retirement investment, participation in company-backed retirement plans actually *declines* by 2% for each additional 10 funds offered, at least according to one recent study (Schwartz 2005). A similar phenomenon seems to be occurring as a result of the recent Medicare prescription-drug plan in the U.S., which provides eligible senior citizens a choice between some 600 or so plans. Apparently overwhelmed by the options, some seniors are declining to avail themselves of a substantial benefit (Ibid.).

In more and more areas of life in liberal democracies, it seems plausible to conclude, choices have been expanded in ways that undermine, rather than facilitate, happiness and the feeling of autonomy. Perhaps most disturbing is the possibility that the range of choices related to work and social relationships – family, friendships, love and marriage – has expanded to the point where subjective well-being is being harmed. These are the zones of human experience that, by far, play the most important role in determining an individual’s happiness and life satisfaction (Argyle 1999).

Now, it is important to point out that greater autonomy in work and social life is, in fact, positively correlated with happiness and life satisfaction. Individualistic societies – those that allow greater latitude for individuals to choose their jobs, their spouses, and their friends – are happier than collectivist societies (Diener and Suh 1999, 441-443). Moreover, people in liberal democracies, which emphasize the ethic of individualism, are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and their marriages (Ibid.). Also, people whose jobs give them “high decision latitude” are happier than those with less choice in their on-the-job decision-making (Seligman, 179). And people in individualistic societies are generally more satisfied with their marriages (though they get divorced at higher rates, too) (Diener and Suh 1999, 442).

Nonetheless there is reason to suppose that an abundance of freedom in work and social life may have reached a point of diminishing returns with respect to happiness and

life satisfaction. In some circumstances, a wealth of freedom in these areas may even undermine happiness. Schwartz has suggested that a partial explanation for the astonishing growth of depression in the world's liberal democracies might be found in the expanding array of choices that their inhabitants encounter in work and social relations, combined with the effects of living in highly individualistic cultures. Drawing upon Martin Seligman's theory of "learned helplessness," he notes that persons who tend to attribute their failures to their own shortcomings (rather than, for instance, the failings of others, bad luck, or transient factors) are much more likely to succumb to depression (Schwartz 2004, 206-208). The individualism characteristic of liberal societies encourages such personal explanations of failure. At the same time, the degree of freedom available to persons in liberal democracies, especially in the key areas of work, friendship, and romantic relationships, generates high expectations of success in these realms. Because these realms are regarded to be largely under individuals' control, people *expect* these aspects of their lives to produce great satisfaction. But when plans fall through, when goals are not attained, or when satisfaction does not attend attainment of those goals, it can be deeply distressing. This phenomenon of expectation of control outpacing ability to control may also partly explain the high and rising suicide rates in liberal democracies. Richard Eckersley, for instance, found in a study of 20 advanced Western nations and Japan that those societies that most emphasized individual autonomy and control also had the highest suicide rates (Eckersley and Dear, 2002).

Political Participation, Autonomy and Happiness

So perhaps freedom in the marketplace and freedom in social relations has past the point at which they continue to produce gains in happiness and life satisfaction. But freedom in liberal democracies encompasses not only consumer choice and freedom of lifestyle; it also entails the opportunity to participate in politics. As noted above, democratic politics are thought to contribute to happiness in part because they help ensure that public policy does not get too far out of alignment with citizens' preferences. And it is true that democratic societies are generally happier than nondemocratic societies (Diener and Suh 1999). But, we may ask, does the democratic *process* contribute to happiness and life satisfaction?

There is good reason to suppose it does not. We can start by noting that in one increasingly salient arena of politics – the area concerning debate over fundamental issues of morality, identity and religion – political participation tends to produce anger and resentment and to exacerbate tensions between opposing groups. Participation in such politics is painful in other words, and democratic deliberation only makes it more so. As Richard Posner has remarked, "A Pentecostal and an atheist, a pro-lifer and a pro-choicer, a pacifist and a foreign-policy 'realist,' a hunter and a vegan, do not reach a *modus vivendi* through discussion; discussion exacerbates their differences by bringing them into open contention" (Posner, 135). But, equally important, even in areas that do not concern fundamental issues of morality and identity, political participation in liberal democracies may fail to foster happiness. As I noted above, satisfaction of the effectance motive – the desire to control one's environment – is a key source of happiness. Unfortunately, as Lane has documented, for most people political participation usually does not *feel* like self-determination. Nor does it enhance a sense of autonomy or control

over one's world (Lane, 231-248). The feeling of autonomy is undermined rather directly, in the first place, because most people believe they have little effect on politics and that the government is generally not responsive to their needs or concerns. Voting, the key act of participation for most citizens, often produces a kind of ceremonial satisfaction, being motivated, as it usually is, by a sense of duty. However, the good feeling attending the voting act is often counteracted by a sense of anxiety, inadequacy and uncertainty (Ibid., 242-243). And, in any event, for most people voting produces little discernible impact on their world. "Democratic processes just don't feel like the self-determination of the private world" (Ibid.).

Invitation to Paternalism?

So it appears that key values of liberalism – autonomy, individualism, and happiness – are in tension, and in certain contexts at odds, with each other in contemporary liberal democracies. At the very least, the modern liberal democrat's assumption that freedom, autonomy and democracy walk hand in hand with happiness appears to be overly optimistic. Of course, the claim that freedom does not necessarily translate into happiness predates positive psychology. Earlier political observers noted that people often experience freedom as more burdensome than liberating. In the middle of the 20th century, thinkers such as Karl Popper and Eric Fromm sought to explain the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century as stemming partly from a desire, in Fromm's words, to "escape from freedom." Popper explored the roots of this desire in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and detected what he called the "strain of civilization" (5, 199). Freedom and self-determination, central elements of modern "open societies," lead to anxiety and a desire to return to the comfort of the "closed society," where custom and authority reign over the individual. The anxiety that comes with living in the open societies of liberal democracies is, as Popper said, a "cross" that we must bear in exchange for enjoying benefits of a free and progressive society (200-201). Perhaps the positive psychologists can be thought of having provided evidence of how weighty the cross may be in advanced liberal societies.

But what is to be done, then, about growing unhappiness in liberal democracy? We can reject straightaway any call to impose, in the interest of human happiness, the paternalism that Kant anathematized. Even if such paternalism could ensure greater human happiness – a very doubtful possibility – it would undermine the other key values of liberal democracy: individual autonomy and democracy, which are valuable ends in themselves. Happiness is a fundamental human value of liberalism, but it is not the only fundamental value. The dystopia depicted in Huxley's *Brave New World* – a kind of utilitarian paternalism – may have been a happy world, but it was also repulsive, in part because it denied individual and collective freedom.

And yet although the pursuit of societal happiness cannot justify the destruction of freedom, that does not mean that a just society can be indifferent to its citizens' subjective happiness and life satisfaction. Any desirable society must give due weight to happiness, and, at the very least, must strive to reduce excessive suffering. As I discussed at the beginning of this paper, happiness has been a central component of liberalism since its inception. Any satisfactory account of liberalism must be concerned with how well a liberal society fosters (or fails to foster) human happiness. As I hoped to have made

evident, there is much too be concerned about regarding happiness in contemporary liberal societies. They are suffering from an epidemic of depression, climbing suicide rates, and overall declining happiness and life satisfaction. These phenomena, I think, have received too little attention from political theorists. Unfortunately contemporary liberals, typically inspired by Rawls and Kant, tend to downplay or ignore the importance of individuals' subjective happiness, and instead focus almost exclusively on the need for liberal societies to foster individual autonomy.

The difficulty for liberalism is, as we have seen, that happiness and autonomy do not always coincide, and sometimes they conflict – and not just in the standard case where one person's freedom makes another person miserable. Freedom itself can be an impediment to the free person's happiness. In this sense, positive psychology has shown that the conflict between freedom and happiness is more vexing than is often supposed. I have no hope here of reconciling the tension between freedom and happiness in a theoretically coherent and rigorous way. But let me briefly suggest how liberal societies might begin to address the problem without compromising commitment to the core values of freedom and autonomy.

Redistributing Wealth

As I discussed above, there is little correlation between income and happiness in the wealthy liberal democracies. This appears to be because these societies have all passed the point at which gains in income continue to produce gains in happiness. However, for the minority of citizens in wealthy liberal democracies who remain in poverty, gains in income do produce gains in subjective happiness and life satisfaction. This provides a strong justification for redistribution of wealth to lift more citizens out of poverty. From the standpoint of a purely hedonic calculus, those who are taxed higher are not likely to be made less happy as a result of their lowered income, whereas those who are lifted out of poverty will benefit from substantial hedonic gain. In some respects, the policy recommendations that would seem to follow from positive psychology regarding income are in accord with the demands of Rawlsian justice. Both require that we attend to the conditions of the least well-off in society. But there is a key difference. Rawls's difference principle requires a just society to maximize the minimum income. But positive psychology finds little hedonic benefit from raising people's incomes after they exit poverty. Nor, it should be noted, is material inequality *per se* a source of unhappiness, at least at the aggregate level. There is no correlation between *Gini*, the standard measure of inequality of wealth distribution, and happiness in the wealthy democracies (Veenhoven 2000, 257; Lane, 33, 273).⁶ Of course, other benefits that typically flow from gains in income – especially access to health care, education, and leisure time – are correlated with happiness, so a just society must strive to decouple access to them from income, typically in the form of universal health care, free education, and establishment of maximum working hours. A Rawlsian will no doubt point out that the value of income does not reside in the happiness that it produces. Rather, it should be thought of as a primary good that enhances individuals' autonomy and their ability to

⁶ “The presumed link between equality and happiness fails to appear, at least where income equality is concerned. Average happiness is as high in countries with great income inequality as in nations where income differences are small” (Veenhoven 2000, 257).

pursue their “rational plan of life” (Rawls, 480-481). But it is far from clear whether income above the poverty level really does enhance a person’s autonomy in this sense.

It should be noted, however, that employment is generally more important than income for an individual’s happiness. This is mainly because employment provides a key source for self-respect, social contact, and opportunities to develop one’s skills. Indeed, the working poor are usually happier than those on welfare – even if the working poor have less income than those on welfare (Lane, 271). The efforts that governments typically take to raise or at least protect the income of the least well-off – minimum wage laws, redistribution of income, and, especially, employment security laws – can translate into higher unemployment rates. There is a fairly direct trade-off between raising the income of the poor and providing employment for them. Which government policy would maximize the happiness of the poor is therefore a complicated, technical matter. However, Richard Layard has argued that the welfare-to-work programs practiced in Denmark and the Netherlands appear to produce lower unemployment rates *and* lower poverty rates than the more severe and punitive unemployment policies practiced in the United States and Britain, and the more generous and permissive unemployment policies of Spain, Italy, France and Germany (Layard, 173).

Increasing Happiness by Limiting Choice?

If Barry Schwartz and others are right, expanded consumer choice can produce more anxiety and regret than pleasure and satisfaction, especially for persons who tend to be maximizers instead of satisficers. But surely the oversupply of consumer choices probably should not be considered among the more pressing problems facing liberal democracies. However, one subset of consumer choices – those involving health and income security – do seem to warrant special concern. A bad decision in the choice of, say, blue jeans or jam is not likely to have any serious detrimental effect (or positive effect, for that matter) on someone’s happiness. But a poor choice regarding retirement or health care can have grave consequences.

Here an attractive approach might be what Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein have dubbed “libertarian paternalism” (Sunstein and Thaler, 2003a). The idea behind such paternalism is to structure individuals’ choices with the aim of skewing them towards a particular outcome, rather than directly coercing people into certain behaviors. For example, a surprisingly large number of employees decline to enroll in employer-provided a retirement plans. Partly this stems from simple shortsighted behavior. As a remedy, libertarian paternalists have suggested making enrollment in employer retirement plans the *default* option for new employees, though individuals would still reserve the right to opt out of the plan. This simple change has had the effect of causing enrollment, in one case at least, to rise from 49% to 85% (Madrian and Shea). An even softer form of such paternalism, however, would be to simply reduce the number of investment choices offered to employees, or, in the case of prescription drug plans, to limit the number of programs available. As I noted above, this too has the effect of increasing participation.

Thaler and Sunstein argue that libertarian paternalism does not really violate the individual freedom of liberal societies. Rather, it is “an approach that preserves freedom of choice but that authorizes both private and public institutions to steer people in directions that will promote their welfare” (Sunstein and Thaler 2003a, 179). They note

that businesses and government invariably end up framing and thus influencing individuals' choices in one way or another. A business's decision to make non-enrollment in a retirement plan the default option will shape employees' decisions, too, after all. "The point is ... that paternalism, in the form of effects on individual choices, is often unavoidable. When paternalism seems absent, it is usually because the starting point appears so natural and obvious that its preference-shaping effects are invisible to most observers" (Ibid., 177). Why not then structure such choices in such way (informed perhaps by positive psychology) that leads to objectively better outcomes (e.g., keeping people out of poverty and ensuring better health care), and thus greater happiness?

The most vexing problem concerning freedom and happiness involves the apparent damage to happiness stemming from an abundance of choices in work and social life. Recall that Schwartz concluded that liberal society's emphasis on individual autonomy often leads to unhappiness and even depression and higher suicide rates. Liberal societies offer their citizens historically unprecedented choice in major life decisions – those involving career, family, friendships, and romantic relationships. Yet with this expanded autonomy comes expanded expectations of success, of happiness and of control over one's life. When individuals' life plans go awry or simply fail to live up to their high expectations, the fallout can be deeply distressing, especially in an individualistic culture that encourages people to blame themselves for their failings. The individualism of liberal societies also tends to erode social connections, which serve as a kind of inoculum against the anxiety and stress that accompany liberal individualism. Lane in fact partly attributes the decline of happiness and the rise of depression in liberal democracies to a dearth of such connections (Lane, 9): "My hypothesis is that there is a kind of famine of warm interpersonal relations, of easy-to-reach neighbors, of encircling, inclusive memberships, and of solidary family life" (Ibid.). Just as people weakened by hunger become susceptible to a host of diseases, this famine of interpersonal connection leaves people more vulnerable to despair and depression when they suffer the trials and traumas of ordinary life. But although families and friends are a source of comfort and support, they also incur commitments and obligations, and thereby inhibit individual autonomy, too. Liberalism and social ties are thus in tension with each other.

But how then might liberal governments deal with the problem of depression and general declining happiness that appears to be a side cost of individualism and freedom of lifestyle? Perhaps we can turn to the communitarians for guidance. Certainly the findings from positive psychology provide additional support for the communitarian critiques of contemporary liberal democracies. Communitarians such as Robert Putnam, Amitai Etzioni, Mary Ann Glendon have argued that too much emphasis on individualism imperils democracy by eroding civil society and social capital. Positive psychology has shown that such individualism can also erode happiness. Communitarian-backed efforts to reinvigorate families and communities – the areas of human experience that have the biggest effect on happiness – thus become more appealing (Lane, 336). Along with general efforts to energize local community organizations, such measures might also include backing workplace policies that make it easier for employees to spend time with their families and friends – flextime, expansion of paid and unpaid parental leave, work sharing – and that reduce unemployment (a strain on families and a keen source of unhappiness in its own right).

Political Autonomy versus Autonomy in the Microworlds

Finally to be considered is the evidence that political participation in liberal democracies contributes little to most individuals' sense of autonomy and control over their world. Naturally this finding can be seen as lending support to democratic theorists who criticize political participation in liberal democracies as being attenuated and anemic. They call for increasing local democratic control as well as expansion of democratic participation into other areas of life, especially schools and workplaces. Such efforts are said to have a variety of benefits, for example, fostering more inclusive representation of viewpoints, improving civic awareness, expanding empathy for others, resolving deep-seated political disputes, and fulfilling a fundamental human need to participate in politics.

Such aims are certainly praiseworthy, and expanded democratic participation may even help achieve them. However, my concern here is whether such participation makes people happier, especially by imparting a sense of control over their lives. Whether this is in fact the case is far from certain. As Lane and others have noted, it is principally in the "microworlds" of human experience that a sense of control over one's life has significant hedonic benefits (234, 335-336). Control over one's family and work life, in particular, are key components of most people's happiness and life satisfaction. But people's lack of control *per se* over, say, foreign policy or government spending is not likely to have much of an impact on their subjective well-being. "It is not collective self-government but individual control over one's small domain that teaches self-direction and its value" (Lane, 247). Workers, for instance, gain a sense of expanded control over their world when they are given greater control over their work tasks. But workplace democracy does not appear to produce this benefit (Lane, 246). As Lane concludes: "Life satisfaction drives political satisfaction rather than the other way around" (Lane, 240).

Conclusion

Political theory has of late focused a great deal on autonomy, equity, and democratic participation, but has given short shrift to individuals' subjective happiness and life satisfaction. As I have said, happiness is surely not the only human end, but it is nonetheless among the most important human ends, and, as I discussed at the start of this paper, expansion of happiness has from the beginning been a principal component of liberalism. Political theorists should not be indifferent to the evidence of declining happiness in liberal democracies. Because the loss of happiness (and, in particular, the spike in depression rates) appears to be connected to other core values of liberalism – freedom of choice, individualism, and autonomy – the problem of decreasing happiness is particularly difficult. I have suggested some ways to contend with the problem that do not seem to run afoul of the basic commitments of liberalism, but I acknowledge that they are no more than suggestions at this point. I hope at least to have convinced the reader will agree that it is worth pursuing these issues in greater depth.

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