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Happiness – a primer for theological engagement

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Abstract

This essay discerns themes in the interdisciplinary study of happiness. We distinguish between the concepts of *hedonic* and *eudaimonic happiness,* as well as the concepts of *well-being* and *quality of life*. We also discuss the role of some determinants of happiness (income, relationships, life phase, geography and religion). We conclude by suggesting points of contact (the flourishing agent, determinants of happiness, anamnesis and eschatology, and the quest for meaning) where theological engagement can significantly clarify and enrich the happiness discourse.

Keywords

Happiness, Well-being, Life satisfaction, Quality of life, Flourishing

Introduction

In recent decades, the theme of happiness has expanded its reach beyond the usual discussion in philosophy, literature and art to an ever-increasing range of scientific disciplines. Happiness (and co-terms like "well-being" and "life satisfaction") became the object of research in disciplines as diverse as economics (the "Economics of Happiness" is now a recognized sub-discipline), psychology (with "positive psychology" the main school of thought), sociology, neurology and interdisciplinary hybrid sciences like neuropsychology and social economics. Institutions like the Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organisation and the dedicated Journal of Happiness Studies also positively contributed to this assessment of the state of knowledge on the subject of happiness. With the development of interdisciplinary discourses on happiness, controversy also intensified on what really constitutes this seemingly elusive state of mind. Is it a sensual

experience, an emotion (like contentment, optimism or euphoria), is it hope or meaning, is it a state of mind or a set of values and an ethical disposition? In this essay we discern trends in this field of "happiness science", with a particular focus on sources from experimental psychology as published in journals like the Journal of Happiness Studies, and find points of contact for theological contribution to this discourse.

The study of happiness

The hedonic and eudaimonic schools

Research on happiness originates in two philosophical schools of thought going back to the Greek philosophers, commonly referred to as the hedonic and eudaimonistic schools. The hedonic school is based upon the presumption that the chief goal of life is to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. Hedonism sees happiness as the experience of pleasure, including the pleasurable experience associated with positive cognitive assessment of life circumstances. "Subjective well-being" is a widely applied concept and measurement, which stems from the hedonic view. Caunt et al (2013, p. 476) quote Diener on subjective well-being: "People experience abundant subjective well-being when they feel many pleasant and few unpleasant emotions, when they are engaged in interesting activities, when they experience many pleasures and few pains, and when they are satisfied with their lives." As such subjective well-being has a cognitive element of satisfaction or contentment with your life, as well as the affective element of more frequent positive than negative affect.

Whereas hedonism can be described as the view that well-being consists of maximum pleasure and minimum pain, eudaimonism is about the idea that well-being lies in the actualization of human potentials. People have final values and purposes, which they will pursue and try to fulfil beyond mere pleasure and pain criteria. Therefore this (Aristotelian) view states that "happiness forms part of a virtuous or ethical understanding of life. Eudaimonism conveys the belief that well-being consists of fulfilling or realizing one's daemon or true nature" (Wills, 2009, p. 55).

Eudaimonic happiness goes beyond the subjective experience of hedonistic happiness and is a more normative approach utilizing external criteria for

evaluating well-being, including the possession and practice of certain virtues (like compassion, self-sacrifice and authenticity). Therefore "psychological" well-being, in distinction from "subjective" well-being, "includes environmental mastery, a sense of purpose in life and positive relations with others" (Caunt, et al., 2013, p. 476).

Pleasure and good feelings are not necessarily to be seen as negative in virtue ethics (the eudaimonic school) (Joshanloo, 2013, p. 1860). Pleasurable feelings are just too temporary to be held as central to well-being. Pleasure can (and often does) accompany a eudaimonic life (in other words, subjective well-being can be the by-product of psychological well-being), but those pleasures are more (as Aristotle would describe them) "noble pleasures" (like learning) than "base pleasures" (like gluttony). The measure of the nobleness of pleasure is the extent of consistency with the human "telos" (goal or deeper meaning of human life). As such eudaimonic happiness is more a process of human growth (to be seen as "flourishing" or self-actualization) than a destination point, which is inherently unstable in any case (the momentary pleasure of the satisfaction of "lower" needs and desires).

Raibley investigated the link between episodic happiness (usually identified with the hedonic school) and "happiness in the personal attribute sense" (also known as well-being and identified with the eudaimonic school) (Raibley, 2012, p. 1106). When we are saying someone "is happy" we may indeed be referring to the fact that such a person is in high spirits, a good mood, feeling good, and is probably smiling. These emotional states are highly responsive to external circumstances and are therefore decidedly short-lived and notoriously unstable. Emotional states is distinct from values, temperaments and personality or character traits, which suggests a sort of "set-point" of happiness to which individuals tend to return as default positions. Happiness in the personal attribute sense refers more to an individual's disposition, therefore whether an individual is prone to seek the positive and to be on a constant quest for meaning and purpose, thereby engaging positively with his or her environment. The more persistent, pervasive and profound this disposition is, the "happier" one is (Raibley, 2012, p. 1109). This type of happiness can indeed be aligned with emotional responses, being either a very active emotional state (a very agile engagement with the environment) or very tranquil and calm (a

low activity state of peacefulness). Both states, however, stand in contrast to anxiety (high active negative disposition) and depression (low active negative disposition).

Raibly argues for the proper relationship between both episodic happiness and happiness in the personal attribute sense to subjective well-being. There is clearly a strong correlation, to the extent that a higher frequency of episodic happiness over a longer period of time can be symptomatic of trait happiness. Raibly eventually opts for the term "well-being" as overarching term including both episodic and trait happiness. He defines this "well-being" as agential flourishing:

> "The paradigm case of the flourishing agent is a person who successfully realizes their values and is stably disposed to do so. This person must have values, must desire to realize these values, and must possess a body and mind that are suitable for efficacious action on behalf of these values. Furthermore, this person must actually pursue and realize these values through their own effort – and experience appropriate emotional feedback on this entire process. The paradigmatically flourishing agent's valuational and motivational systems function fruitfully and harmoniously" (Raibley, 2012, p. 1116).

The "flourishing agent" is Raibley's suggestion of a shared space where well-being can relate to both hedonic and eudaimonic happiness. His definition suggests stable values (in the sense of a long-term and predictable preference for certain things, attitudes or activities) and actual engagement (an active quest for or pursuing of the realisation of these values). Flourishing in this sense then also includes certain "habits of the mind", like self-awareness and rationality (Raibley, 2012, p. 1117). Of course, one would also need the capacities (physically and mentally) to pursue the realisation of these values. The psychological capacities needed include a stance of engagement, self-acceptance, a sense of self-determination, positive relations with others, a sense of purpose and openness to personal growth and change (Raibley, 2012, p. 1118). The clear connection to emotional states (feeling upbeat, motivated, et cetera) indicates how intertwined well-being is with both episodic and personal trait happiness. On the other hand, episodic and personal trait happiness does not necessarily lead to and coincide

with well-being in the above-defined sense of flourishing as it does not necessarily include either the value-component or the capacities to realise value-based goal-setting.

Subjective well-being and quality of life

Raibley's notion of "the flourishing agent" endeavours an embrace of both hedonic (episodic) happiness and eudaimonic (trait) happiness under a unified theory. Expanded theories of subjective well-being and quality of life attempt the same and will be discussed in this section.

Subjective well-being

Jovanovic (2011, p. 631) notes that confusion exists in the use of the term "subjective well-being", because both a cognitive and an affective component are usually included in the construct, so that subjective well-being can have as components "satisfaction with life, positive affect and a low level of negative affect. Satisfaction with life represents the cognitive aspect of subjective well-being and it refers to global evaluation of a person on how his/her life looks like. Positive affect implies frequent experiences of pleasant emotions and low level of negative affect implies a relative absence of unpleasant emotional states" (Jovanovic, 2011, p. 631). Their empirical study tests the influence of personality traits (the five factors of activity, sociability, aggression, impulsivity, and anxiety) on the cognitive and affective aspects of subjective well-being, respectively. What they found, after establishing that subjective well-being indeed consists of affective well-being and cognitive well-being, is that the personality traits influence the affective well-being, but not so much the cognitive well-being of an individual.

Angner (2010, p. 362) argues for a distinction between well-being *simpliciter* and subjective well-being. Well-being *simpliciter* is "what we have when our lives are going well for us, when we are living lives that are not necessarily morally good, but good for us," which he then calls the core of well-being. The focus is on a non-moral utility or flourishing. Angner (2010, pp. 362-364) discusses the different views on well-being found in the literature: "mental-state" views see well-being as having an experiential component, "desire-fulfilment" (or preference-satisfaction) views focus on the extent to which desires and preferences are met as an indication of well-being,

and "objective" views attempt to eliminate any dependence on experience, and only look at objective conditions which are seen to be good or bad for human beings, irrespective of what feelings the condition bring to the fore.

Angner subsequently proposes his own taxonomy of subjective well-being under cognitive, affective or composite views. Subjective well-being can consist of a cognitive evaluation of one's life as a whole (it can also refer to certain attitudes). The affective view can refer to a hedonistic perspective where (maximum) pleasure and (minimal) pain are assessed or as mood or emotions. Composite views see subjective well-being as a state where the constituents can be a combination of cognitive and affective determinants. In his appropriation of the term preference hedonism Angner (2010, p. 366) links the emphasis on pain and pleasure with individual desire. When there is a fit between desire and the corresponding pains and pleasures, subjective well-being will be present.

In his attempt to develop a unified theory of subjective well-being Durayappah (2010, pp. 682-684) provides a fairly comprehensive overview of current theories and models of subjective well-being.

1. In the "Liking, Wanting, Needing" model, subjective well-being are determined by three perspectives. The first determinant would be "Liking", that is the classical "hedonic" perspective, namely maximising current experience of pleasure and minimizing current experience of pain. The second determinant would be "Needing", which focuses on the fulfilment of basic needs (for example as defined by the Maslow hierarchy). Fulfilled needs increase happiness and unfulfilled needs constrain the increase of happiness. The third determinant is "Wanting", which defines subjective well-being or happiness more in terms of a quest or journey, than a destination or result. Here, "subjective wellbeing is determined by the pursuit of desires or goals" (Durayappah, 2010, p. 682). Durayappah cites the 1994 research of Davidson showing that pleasure gained over the longer term while working towards a chosen goal is more than the short-lived feeling of contentment when reaching the goal.
2. In the "Multiple Discrepancy Theory" the result of different comparisons supposedly increases or decreases happiness and subjective well-being (upward comparison decreases satisfaction, as

the reality is worse than the expectation, and downward comparison increases satisfaction, as the reality is better than the expectation). Comparative standards may for example be against other people, past experiences, ideal levels of satisfaction (subjectively defined), and level of progress towards set goals.

3. A third theory distinguishes between "top-down" and "bottom-up" determinants, respectively signifying subjective and objective determinants. In the top-down approach, the emphasis is on an individual's subjective interpretation of events (attitude toward objective events) or an individual's values and goals, which inspire certain habits, which lead to more subjective well-being. The bottom-up approach emphasises the role of objective circumstances (age, marital status, income, education, et cetera) influencing an individual's subjective well-being.
4. The fourth theory is the "Orientations to Happiness" model. Seligman is a specific proponent of this theory, which is applied in research such as that of Peterson, Park and Seligman (2005). The three roads to happiness are defined here as the pleasant life (the hedonistic focus on positive emotions and pleasure), the engaged life and the meaningful life (the more eudaimonistic focus).
5. Finally Durayappah (2010, p. 684) also introduces Keyes' Mental Health Continuum, typifying high levels of psychological and social well-being as "flourishing" and low levels as "languishing".

Durayappah subsequently proposes his own "3P" model, which stands for Present, Past, and Prospect (future) as the temporal determinants of subjective well-being. The present relates to positive emotions, which have a consuming effect (being lost in the moment, not contemplating past and future). Measurement of subjective well-being's component of the "present" will focus on "experience". The past relates to a positive reminiscing, often accompanied by gratitude and ascribing meaning to past events and experiences. Measurement will focus on the individual's subjective evaluation of his or her past. The future relates to optimism or positive anticipation and the experience of purpose moving towards the future. Measurement will focus on the individual's sense of expectation.

Durayappah identifies "biases" when the different temporal determinants interact. These biases function as filters when influencing the individual's subjective well-being. The "duration neglect" bias, for example, describes the tendency to evaluate a past event of any duration, according to how it ends (in other words, its present state). The "impact bias", on the other hand, filters between past and future in that we overestimate the impact of past events on our future well-being, as well as overestimate the emotional impact of future events. Between future and present another bias also exists, namely the comparison of what could've been, or different outcomes envisioned and previously aspired to. The error in prediction or discrepancy between expected and real outcome filters the individual's assessment of subjective well-being. Finally Durayappah also gives credence to research suggesting that individuals may have a certain "set-point" of subjective well-being (among other factors influenced by personality) to which they keep returning as a kind of default position after adapting to positive or negative events in their environment (more on the set-point of happiness later in this essay). This would constitute a meta-bias having a generalized impact on an individual's subjective well-being levels.

Although certain types of individuals can be identified according to their primary preference for past (the "Documenter"), present (the "Doer) or prospect (the "Dreamer"),[1] Durayappah suggests that his 3P model should be seen as a cyclical model where the three temporal modes interact as an individual continuously assesses his or her subjective well-being. Life stages theory does suggest that there may also be "shifts in temporal attention" (Durayappah, 2010, p. 703) during human developmental phases (childhood focus is on present experience, young adults' focus is on future purpose and mature adulthood on finding coherent meaning in one's life story).

Durayappah's model suggests that reliving the past (reminiscing and reframing), and pre-experiencing the future (anticipation of the good) may lead to an increase in subjective well-being, as well as counter-

1 "The Dreamer finds the most happiness as he expects and plans for an event, hopes for an event, and/or anticipates an event. The Doer finds the most happiness in the feeling of the experience and in being in the moment. Finally, the Documenter gains the most happiness when processing the experience and understanding its meaning" (Durayappah, 2010, p. 697).

acting the biases which decreases subjective well-being. In the end, the integration of temporal modes around a eudaimonic view of happiness is what Durayappah would call the "great life". Purpose (prospect), self-determination (present) and meaning (past) interact to create sustainable subjective well-being, beyond the mere set-point happiness level of an individual. The latter more or less corresponds with the hedonic view of happiness, where present, past and future are directed towards positive emotional and sensual stimuli, which by definition is short-lived and "less rewarding because of their instability" (Durayappah, 2010, p. 707).

Quality of life

In his attempt to create order out of the interdisciplinary terminological chaos and the corresponding confusion over measuring instruments and criteria, Veenhoven (2000) suggests a two by two matrix providing taxonomy for different terms and measures. Concepts like quality of life (used especially in the medical sphere), well-being (psychology), welfare (sociology), wealth and development (economics) and blessing (theology) are sometimes used interchangeably in interdisciplinary discourse, with "happiness" as a "catch-all" umbrella term denoting the general field of human flourishing. Like Zapf before him[2], Veenhoven recognizes the difference between outer (objective) and inner (subjective) qualities, but adds the distinction between life-chances (opportunities) and life-results (outcomes). The possible discrepancies here (for example making the most of adverse conditions, or not utilising profitable conditions) determine eventual quality of life, and therefore needs to be taken into account in the definition of terms. Veenhoven then describes the outer and inner types of life chances, namely the "liveability" of the environment (also known as social capital) and the "life-ability" of the individual (the personal capacities also known as psychological capital). Veenhoven then gives credence to the notion that "a good life must be good for something more than itself" – that is "be useful" (Veenhoven, 2000, p. 7). He uses the easily misinterpreted

2 He finds the fourfold classification of Zapf (Veenhoven, 2000, p. 4) "elegant" but not particularly useful. Zapf distinguished between objective measures of life conditions (for example health) and subjective appreciation of life. When both are positive, he speaks of "well-being", when both are negative, of "deprivation". When objective measures are positive but subjective appreciation negative, there is "dissonance" and the combination of negative objective measures, but positive appreciation is "adaptation" (although it could also be denial or resignation).

term "utility of life", presuming thereby some higher values and probably best described as "meaning of life", although meaning then tends to be reduced to utility in a more restricted sense. This utility is an objective state, recognizable by outsiders, and inner awareness is not a prerequisite. The "appreciation of life" is the fourth aspect where the outcome reached is via an inner assessment process, mostly described as "subjective well-being", "life satisfaction" or "happiness" (in the subjective, limited sense).

This distinction by Veenhoven makes it possible to classify different disciplines' interventions to increase happiness in terms of the sub-area of "quality of life" where they are focusing. For example, liveability of the environment could be observed under ecological measures like climate, air purity and spaciousness; social measures like political freedom; economic measures like a nation's wealth, welfare system and income parity; or cultural measures like education, science and the state of the arts. Life-ability of an individual can refer to physical and mental health, knowledge, skills and lifestyle. Utility of life can be observed from relational aspects like care for friends, leaving a legacy, and the living of values like compassion and creativity. Appreciation of life can mean general appraisals of one's life on an emotional (mood) or cognitive (contentment) level, or specific appraisals of aspects of life like satisfaction with work, work-life balance, et cetera.

Citing a well-known definition of happiness as "justified satisfaction with life", Veenhoven sees the term "happiness" as covering all four of his described aspects of quality of life, as the subjective assessment should correspond with the objective conditions (whether external or internal) so that enjoyment of an otherwise "useless life" or the denial of or resignation towards abject conditions cannot *per se* be seen as happiness. Apparently, for Veenhoven, ignorance is not bliss.

From the taxonomy, instruments for measuring "happiness" or "quality of life" can now be evaluated, or at least classified for their applicability. A medical quality of life assessment's application (assessing among other factors physical limitations and pain levels) will be different from, say, a psychological assessment of "well-being" (measuring for example a combination of material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, social status and emotional well-being), a sociological assessment

of individual quality of life (looking for example at housing conditions, political participation, education and general life-satisfaction) and a socio-economic assessment like the Human Development Index (which looks at material wealth, education level and life-expectancy).

Veenhoven (2000, p. 32) concludes that quality of life cannot really be measured comprehensively as a sum-score of different sub-measures. "Chances" and "Outcomes" cannot be meaningfully added, for example, because abilities and environmental challenges need to match. It does not automatically make a person happy if he or she has certain capacities for which the environment has no use. "When human capacities fit environmental demands, there is a good chance that human needs are gratified. Only bad luck or wilful deprivation can block that outcome. Gratification of basic needs will manifest in a stream of pleasant experiences." (Veenhoven, 2000, p. 33)

Determinants of happiness

The set point of happiness

One of the reasons happiness studies abound, is not only to understand the determinants of happiness out of mere curiosity, but to be able to intervene to raise the level of happiness in individuals' lives and in societies as a whole, seeing that happiness has proven benefits (for example sociability, stronger immune systems, better self-esteem) (Caunt, et al., 2013, p. 476). The intriguing question is how much of one's personal happiness is under your control, and therefore susceptible to intervention.

Caunt et al (2013, p. 477) use Seligman's formula which accounts for stable and variable components of long-term happiness: H (enduring level of happiness) = S (personal set range) + C (circumstances) + V (factors under personal voluntary control), also called set-point, life circumstances, and intentional activity, respectively. This also defines major areas of research in happiness science, namely on how large the influence of the set-point (if there is such a level), specific life circumstances or specific behavioural or cognitive activities might be. The research cited by Caunt et al suggests an estimated 50% influence by the set-point (mostly personality traits like

high extraversion, low neuroticism, high optimism and high self-esteem)[3], 10% on circumstances and 40% on intentional activities.[4]

The surprisingly low level of influence ascribed to circumstances (which include such factors as geography, age, gender and marriage) is regarded as due to the adaptive ability of humans. After being either much less or much more happy than usual due to changes in external circumstances, happiness levels tend to return to the set-point fairly quickly. Circumstances most constantly predicting higher subjective well-being are being married, being religious, being employed, being healthy and being sufficiently wealthy to meet basic needs (Caunt, et al., 2013, p. 478).

The value of intervention

Intervention as suggested intentional activities could be divided in three types, namely behavioural, cognitive and volitional. Behaviourally, physical activities, meditation and mindfulness and social activities have been found to increase subjective well-being. Cognitive (attitudinal) activity increasing subjective well-being include practicing gratitude, forgiveness and coping cognitively with adversity. Volitional activities are about pursuing goals

3 Studies revisited by Gomez et al (2009, pp. 345-346) have shown a clear role for personality as a stable factor on subjective well-being (up to 39% of the variance in subjective well-being can be ascribed to personality factors). "A strong relationship between neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and all components of subjective well-being, whereas openness to experience shows close associations with the subjective well-being facets of happiness, positive affect, and quality of life" (Gomez, et al., 2009, p. 346). Especially extraversion (positive influence) and neuroticism (negative influence) stand out as personality factors influencing subjective well-being in individuals. Gomez et al found interesting age differences, namely that "extraversion is only a predictor of subjective well-being in young adults and the effect of neuroticism is more pronounced in old adults" (Gomez, et al., 2009, p. 345). . In terms of life events, the influence of negative life events on subjective well-being is stronger in young and middle-aged adults as compared to old adults. Also the influence of negative life events is stronger that positive life events. Further, they found that individuals can adapt to one life event at a time: "it seems that individuals are able to manage one critical life event, but if they are faced with two or more critical life events within a five-year period their subjective well-being decreases importantly" (Gomez, et al., 2009, p. 346).

4 The 2007 statistical study by Lucas and Donnellan has shown that 34-38% of the variance in observed scores is trait variance that does not change, while an additional 29-34% can be accounted for by an autoregressive trait that is only moderately stable over time. "Thus, although life satisfaction is moderately stable over long periods of time, there is also an appreciable degree of instability that might depend on contextual circumstances" (Lucas & Donnellan, 2007, p. 1091).

set according to one's interests and values, and maintaining hope and construe meaning in life (Caunt, et al., 2013, pp. 478-480). Because positive social relationships ("stable connections with family, friends, partners, and community") have been shown consistently to increase levels of subjective well-being, Caunt et al treat "Social Relationships" as a separate determinant category, instead of including it in the "Circumstances" category (Caunt, et al., 2013, p. 478). In their content analysis study, Caunt et al subsequently analyse the reports of people on their "recipes for long-term happiness", according to the 4 categories and 19 elements identified from their literature study, in order to not only reconfirm the value of those determinants, but also to see whether previously undocumented determinants arise. These new elements was statistically isolated and shown to be education, safety and mental well-being as circumstances, and as new activities to enhance subjective well-being hobbies and interests, travel and holidays, relaxation, nature, humour and laughter and good food (behavioural activities) and having social values and a philosophy of life (cognitive activities) (Caunt, et al., 2013, p. 487). Based upon the literature study and their findings in the content analysis, Caunt et al conclude in terms of a "recipe for long-lasting happiness":

> Happy people are those who (1) are actively involved in a number of close relationships and practice their social values in these relationships, (2) do not overrate the importance of circumstances or spend undue energy striving for circumstantial change, (3) enjoy satisfying and preferably active leisure pursuits, (4) actively and intelligently pursue (behavioural) activities and (cognitive) attitudes that are intrinsically rewarding and in line with their broader sense of purpose, and (5) have a general philosophy of living that helps them to navigate life's complexities." (Caunt, et al., 2013, pp. 494-495)

These findings are consistent with earlier control studies, for example that of Warner and Vroman (2011). They re-test in their new study the strategies identified by Lyubomirsky in 2007 as proven to effectively increase happiness, namely "expressing gratitude; cultivating optimism; avoiding worry, social comparison and self-focused rumination; doing acts of kindness; nurturing social relationships; developing new coping strategies; learning to forgive; increasing flow experiences; savouring life's joys; committing to goals; practicing religion or spirituality; and taking

care of your body" (Warner & Vroman, 2011, p. 1065). They also utilize the personality traits proven to predict set levels of happiness, especially extraversion and neuroticism. This is particularly interesting as the personality traits also correlate with the frequency of utilizing many of the "happiness inducing behaviour".

Nurturing relationships, cultivating optimism, acts of kindness, savouring, and exercise was the happiness inducing behaviour most frequently engaged in, while forgiveness, trying to avoid worry, spiritual activities, and meditation was the least frequent (Warner & Vroman, 2011, p. 1076). Some gender differences were discovered, notably that women reported engaging in nurturing social relationships more often than men. The largest gender difference was found for "flow" (being so absorbed in a present activity that past and future gets blended out), with men reporting flow about 2-3 times per week, while women only about once per week. "The happiness inducing behaviour that had the largest correlations with happiness was cultivating optimism, savouring, and avoiding worry. Nurturing relationships, gratitude, and acts of kindness had smaller (but still statistically significant) associations with happiness" (Warner & Vroman, 2011, p. 1077).

Positive interventions can indeed be effective. For example, well-being has been improved and depression decreased in a study where nine activities or "happiness exercises" were performed and tested in terms of their shorter and longer term influence on happiness levels (Gander, et al., 2013).[5] "All

5 The activities were:

i) Gratitude visit (Participants were instructed to write and deliver a letter of gratitude to a person they were grateful to, but whom they had never thanked appropriately)

ii) Three good things (Participants were instructed to write down three things that had gone well for them and an explanation why those things happened)

iii) Using signature strengths in a new way (Participants in this group received individualized feedback on their top five character strengths and were instructed to use one of their top five strengths in a new way)

iv) Three funny things (Participants were instructed to write down the three funniest things they experienced or did and an explanation why those things happened to them)

v) Counting kindness (Participants were instructed to count and report the acts of kindness they performed)

vi) Gift of time (Participants were instructed to offer at least three "gifts of time" by contacting/meeting three persons about whom they care in a week)

the presented interventions (except for three good things in 2 weeks) were associated with an increase in happiness and a decrease in depressive symptoms in comparison with the baseline (Gander, et al., 2013, p. 1254)

Interestingly enough, the interventions differed in their effect. The three funny things exercise were more powerful in its anti-depressant effect and also seemed to have a more immediate and intense effect of positive emotions, while the three good things intervention had a longer term and more cognitive effect. As for the reasons for the positive effect of the interventions, it is thought that the increased positive emotions build enduring personal resources. But more importantly, it seemed to increase mindfulness (being attentive to the moment) and self-regulation (the experience of self-determination).

Positive psychology had a large impact on recent theories of intervention seeking increased well-being in individuals. The use of "strengths classifications", notably "StrengthsFinder" and the "VIA (Values In Action)" inventory of character strengths use workplace talents (to support personal development and success at work) and universally valued character traits respectively. The premise is that working on one's strengths rather than one's weaknesses produces greater benefits for the individual. In the study by Quinlan et al (Quinlan, et al., 2012) the benefit of strengths-based interventions for increased well-being have been confirmed on the basis that the "use of one's strengths is engaging and fulfilling; therefore, development of an individual's top strengths should lead to increased engagement and achievement and so enhance well-being" (Quinlan, et al., 2012, p. 1147). However, working concurrently on weaknesses was shown beneficial as well, especially for women. The authors emphasized setting goals in strength-based interventions.[6]

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vi) One door closes, another door opens (Participants were instructed to write about a moment in their lives when a negative event led to unforeseen positive consequences) vii) Early memories (Participants were instructed to write down something from their early memories) (Gander, et al., 2013, p. 1244)

6 As to which strengths relates to subjective well-being (suggesting that the development of those strengths may also increase subjective well-being), the study of Proyer et al (Proyer, et al., 2013) showed, firstly that any strengths-based intervention does enhance well-being (compared to the control group). The study based its interventions upon the 2004 research by Park, which has shown that the (VIA) strengths of curiosity, gratitude, hope, love, and zest correlates the strongest to subjective well-being.

Income and happiness

The relationship between income and happiness has been studied extensively in different disciplines, notably in psychology and economics. One of the most controversial contributions to the sub-discipline of "happiness economics" has been an article by Richard Easterlin (1974) where he describes what since have been known as the "Easterlin paradox". A clear connection between income and life satisfaction was found on an individual level (Easterlin's data clearly showed that within countries the highest income status group also reported the highest happiness or life satisfaction). When national comparisons were made, however, happiness differences between richer and poorer countries were not clear from the data, as one would have expected on the basis of the within-country comparisons (Easterlin, 1974, p. 30). Easterlin's explanation has to do with comparison levels. The within country difference (it seems to be a question of proximity) has a larger effect than comparisons further away. What constitutes happiness seems to be the relative gap between current living levels and "the social norm". The results also attest to the adaptability of humankind and how happiness levels are a relative and not an absolute figure. Since Easterlin's original research was published, there has also been deeper analysis suggesting a "satiation point" beyond which further rise in income does not correspond to an equal rise in happiness levels. $7 500 (Inglehart & Klingemann in (NG, 2008, p. 259) and $12 000 (Kahneman, et al., 2006, p. 1909) have been offered as yearly per capita income levels beyond which the relationship of income to happiness becomes weak or non-existent. The premise is that once basic needs are fulfilled, more income does not substantially raise happiness level (a view consistent with classical needs models, like that of Maslow, which emphasises the role of social belonging and self-actualization beyond basic subsistence and safety levels.

The Easterlin paradox's appeal lay in the ideological concerns over a capitalistic market economy's negative consequences, notably concern over sustainability and inequality. "Money isn't everything," was the adage supported by the Easterlin paradox. However, the "Easterlin paradox" has also been criticized often, notably for its statistical analysis, and also for the "basket of countries" which data it relied on. Concluding that it is rather the "Easterlin illusion" and that "Happiness isn't everything" (Veenhoven

& Vergunst, 2013, pp. 18-19) should be welcomed as a necessary correction and voice of reason against underemphasizing the role of economic development for better societal living conditions, but should not silence the other voices of reason (equally well supported by research) that there are many determinants of well-being, and that economic factors (although more important in terms of happiness for the poor than for the rich) should not be over-emphasized as determinant of well-being. "Money can buy happiness, but only some" is the more nuanced conclusion by Luhmann et al (2011, p. 186) after their statistical study. They confirm the paradox that, although economic theory predicts more choices to become available when people have more disposable income and that would have to increase their happiness, correlation between income and subjective well-being remains low (0.18 in the World Values Survey, for example). They also confirm the non-linear shape of the relationship, according to the law of diminishing marginal utility and the consequence that the association between income and subjective well-being is larger with people in low-income categories and smaller in high-income categories. The same was found by the quoted 2008 study of Howell & Howell that correlation is 0.28 in low-income developing countries, and only 0.13 in high-income developing countries (Luhmann, et al., 2011, p. 186). They go deeper into the factors influencing happiness (both cognitive well-being and affective well-being) and find that stable factors (like personality traits) have a stronger correlation with income. It can be said that richer people is in general more satisfied than poorer people, due to stable factors which may be the cause of the higher income, instead of the other way round. They therefore ask for more research to be done on the influence of personality on the ability to generate income.

The main problem (Diener & Seligman, 2004) is that policymakers still tend to rely on pure economic indicators, most often aggregate indicators like Gross Domestic Product, which neglects firstly the inequality within nations, and secondly ignores the determinants of well-being for individuals, and for nations collectively. For example, comparison between Gross Domestic Product and life satisfaction indicators in the USA showed that although Gross Domestic Product has tripled in 50 years, life satisfaction levels remained flat (Japan and some other countries have similar patterns). The reason most often given for the flat trend of life satisfaction in the wake of income increase is that desires grow with

increased income, so that the gap between desire and income remains wide (this is also known as the "hedonic treadmill"[7]). Individuals can even experience decreasing happiness levels when aspirations grow quicker than the capacity to fulfil them.

Diener and Seligman (2004, p. 24) do not propose well-being indicators to replace economic indicators. Their approach is "beyond money" and not "instead of money". Insight is indeed needed in the benefits of measuring and promoting well-being, instead of thinking of economic growth as the be all and end all of national goals, hoping that through some sort of trickle-down effect everybody will be happy in the end. Rather, even though mediated and delayed, the advantages of increased well-being should be clearly recognized, including proneness to democratic government, higher income (yes, it also works the other way round with happier people eventually earning more), self-motivated and productive workers, physical and mentally healthier individuals and better social relationships (thus more stable and engaged communities)

Taking both the macro- and micro-economic perspectives into account, the common denominator remains that the greater the inequality of income distribution in a society or country, the higher the levels of dissatisfaction and alienation (Porritt, 2007, p. 63). As mentioned previously, this is due to the fact that contentment is not a matter of absolute but of relative wealth. The comparison gap influences the level of discontent. Recognizing in agreement with Layard that happiness depends as much on our inner lives and our social relationships than on our outer circumstances, Porritt also pleads for policy-making to attend more to qualitative improvements in society than mere quantitative improvements (economic growth, or "the limitless transformation of natural capital into man-made capital" (Porritt, 2007, p. 70). The problem he sees with using Gross Domestic Product as a measure of wealth of a country, is that it is an aggregate figure, measuring the flow of imports and exports and government expenditure, but not heeding the inequality of per capita income, the living circumstances

7 "Hedonic adaptation is a process by which the cognitive effects of a repeated experience (for instance, consumption) are reduced. A hedonic treadmill results when the adaptation occurs to the point where the experience is rendered neutral in its effect on well-being" (Keely, 2005, p. 335).

of people and the externalised costs for the natural capital transformed into products, endangering the longer term sustainability of the growth trajectory. The Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare, the Human Development Index, Happy Planet Index and Gross National Happiness are some of the alternative indexes proposed to include forms of measurements of well-being beyond economic growth. Needed is a "shift of emphasis from a 'production-oriented' measurement system to one focused on the well-being of current and future generations, i.e. toward broader measures of social progress" (Stiglitz, et al., n.d., p. 10).

So, if money cannot buy happiness, why do we still act as if it does? It is not because people are just uninformed (and in some deluded way believe that money will make them happy). It is rather that they are motivated by more factors than just the pursuit of happiness (Ahuvia, 2008, p. 491). Clearly people do not change their consumerist behaviour just because they are told "more stuff won't make you happier". Ahuvia postulates that subjective well-being is not the only value that people strive to maximize[8], that people make decisions favouring short-term gain and instant gratification and that "our behaviour reflects evolutionary motivational systems that aren't always in sync with our values. Specifically, people use consumption not just to be happy, but to manage their identity and social relationships" (Ahuvia, 2008, p. 504).

Relationships and happiness

Well-being also depends on the way in which the basic human needs to belong and to have close and long-term stable relationships are met (Diener & Seligman, 2004, p. 18). High income can in fact lead to isolation and decreased appreciation for the value of social relationships. Therefore economic indicators do not correlate well with social indicators, and economic policy-makers may tend to ignore this very important aspect, although it has a large effect on increasing well-being, which in turn leads to better productivity levels. This effect is too mediated and delayed for policy-makers to take it seriously.

8 There are others values people aspire to, for example power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security (Ahuvia, 2008, p. 497).

In an interesting cross-cultural study on "Visualizing the good life" (Bonn & Tafarodi, 2013) the authors examined people's beliefs on what makes for a "good life". They re-confirmed "being connected to other people in desirable ways is of primary importance for all the groups". Close and enduring relationships such as having close friends, having a good marriage or romantic partnership and having a happy family are universally thought of as constituting a satisfying, good, or worthy life.

Although many studies support the idea that married people are happier than unmarried people, this has always been one of the most controversial determinants of happiness. There are plausible reasons for marriage to enhance well-being, for example that marriage provides additional sources of self-esteem. Also, married people have a better chance of benefiting from a lasting and supportive intimate relationship, and suffer less from loneliness (Stutzer & Frey, 2006, p. 328). This evidence and explanations, however, are countered by the question whether marriage creates happiness, or whether it is the other way round, that happiness promotes marriage. Indeed, Stutzer and Frey (2006, p. 329) have found a selection process at work. Happier singles are more likely to opt for marriage. And "people who get divorced were not only less happy during marriage but also less happy before they got married" (Stutzer & Frey, 2006, p. 342). The selection effect is, however, only one part of the explanation for the evidence that married people are happier. Together with the said reasons, the authors also found that "potential, as well as actual, division of labour seems to contribute to spouses' well-being, especially for women and when there is a young family to raise. In contrast, large differences in the partners' educational level have a negative effect on experienced life satisfaction" (Stutzer & Frey, 2006, p. 326).

A South African study (Botha & Booysen, 2013) tested the role of institutionalization as a determinant of well-being in married and cohabiting couples, especially as South Africa is currently not as secularized as many other parts of the world. Institutionalization is supposed to bring more certainty of the sustainability of the relationship and more social approval, thereby enhancing well-being. They do find significantly higher satisfaction levels among married individuals, but when factors like religiosity, income, education and health are accounted for, the satisfaction levels are more alike.

Work and family are the two life domains where basic life needs can be fulfilled. However, when incompatibility or role conflict between work and family arise, individuals are less likely to experience life satisfaction. On the other hand, the two domains can also be mutually beneficial and in their synergy enhance an individual's well-being. In their 7 year longitudinal study of MBA students, Masuda and Sortheix have found that giving priority to family goals over work and leisure goals lead to higher life satisfaction after 7 years from reporting such goals. Additionally, this effect was mediated by family satisfaction. Interestingly enough, they additionally found that family priority goals led to higher life satisfaction when those families also have a strong set of core family values (Masuda & Sortheix, 2012, p. 1131).

Phase of life and happiness

Blanchflower & Oswald (2008, pp. 1733-1734), in their overview over studies concerning the relation between well-being and age, found the classical stance that the happiness curve tend to remain flat, or slightly rising in age, to be countered by numerous studies which suggest and have proven a U-shaped curve. Their statistical analysis of several datasets confirms these results and shows the highest probability for "mental distress" in middle age (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008, p. 1746). Their result covers 72 countries' data spanning several decades, and show that this U-shape of happiness is robust, showing up consistently in the different countries and for both genders. The authors suggest that it may be due to the possibility that "individuals learn to adapt to their strengths and weaknesses, and in mid-life quell their infeasible aspirations" (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008, p. 1747). Other suggestions are that cheerful people live longer and that there is a selection effect at work in the U-shape. In later age more gratefulness can also set in, as one sees peers die and value the blessings in the remaining years.

There are, however, conflicting reports, even showing a slight inverse U-shape, implying that people are at their most satisfied in middle-age (Easterlin, 2006). The trend then rises slightly from age 18 onwards, and declines slowly after middle-age. The contradicting studies seem to be the result of definition problems, and which composition of indicators the measurement of well-being consists of. The U-shape is measuring

subjective well-being, while Easterlin's study includes a composite of objective (circumstantial) and subjective measurements. This creates an effect where trends offset each other. For example, somebody may feel accomplished and content in old age, but deteriorating health offsets that. Family life, financial situation, work and health, are the four domains Easterlin includes in his assessment. Negative impacts of other areas, were offset by the increasing satisfaction in the domain of financial situation with age. In all of the domains, the levels of satisfaction depend on the perceived fulfilment of goals and expectations, and less on the objective and absolute circumstances, as many economic models would contend.

In the study by Burr et al (2011) higher "positive affect" (happiness or satisfaction) was reported in retired individuals by females as well as those with better finances, fewer illnesses, and higher self-transcendence, openness to change and conservation values.[9] The impact of finances on affect was stable over time, but the effects of health and values increased across the 3 years studied by the authors. One possible explanation for the increased effects of values and health is that "values and health status manifest in patterns of activity and social engagement that may have accumulating benefits or deficits. For example, being concerned with helping others may result in reciprocated help that returns to the individual over time; placing high importance on status and wealth may lead to goal frustration, an effect that compounds over time; being creative and interested in seeking new experiences and pleasure may aid in establishing healthy activity patterns in retirement that promote positive experiences and prevent negative ones; and finally, having illnesses may result in activity restriction and social disengagement, the negative effects of which may multiply as years go by" (Burr, et al., 2011, p. 35).

9 "Conservation values are related to the pursuit of conformity to social norms, upholding tradition and customs, and maintaining security of the individual person and of society. Conservation values have been found to be higher among older adults, suggesting they have increasing importance across the lifespan. Among younger adults they are associated with lower affective well-being and guilt-proneness. In contrast, among retirees conservation values may be linked to enhanced affective well-being through their emphasis on tradition or religion which may provide retirees with social connectedness, purpose, and meaning, as well as through their emphasis on maintaining health. As such, conservation values are also consistent with emotionally-meaningful present-oriented goals." (Burr, et al., 2011, p. 21)

Geography and happiness

Brereton et al (2008) were able to show the impact of geographical factors on subjective well-being. Isolating data according to GIS classifications, the authors found "that climate has a significant influence on well-being, with wind speed negative and significant, but increases in both January minimum temperature and July maximum temperature are positive and significant. Access to major transport routes and proximity to coast and to waste facilities all influence well-being. However, the manner in which they enter the happiness equation differs depending on the amenity in question. Proximity to landfill is found to have a negative effect on well-being. Proximity to the coast has a large positive effect, but its influence is a diminishing function of distance. Additionally, the impact of proximity to major transport routes has different effects depending on the type of and distance to the amenity in question, for example while reasonable proximity to international airports increases well-being, close proximity to major roads decreases it. It may be that, in the former case, the positive effect of access outweighs the negative effect of noise, while the opposite may be true in the latter case." (Brereton, et al., 2008, pp. 394-395)

Religion and happiness

When religion is not only seen from a dogmatic perspective, but from the viewpoint of worldview, values, meaning of life, et cetera the influence of religion on well-being becomes clear:

> "People's immediate reactions to events will be influenced by their worldview and the way they understand the world. Since this is a primary function of religion (providing meaning to events), it is reasonable to think that religious beliefs will have an effect on immediate understanding and responses to events" (Wiegand & Weiss, 2006, pp. 37-38).

Beyond the adherence to religious observances Swinyard et al (2001, p. 18) include the aspect of religion as "quest". This is about "facing complex, existential questions (of life's meaning, of death, of relations with others) and resisting clear-cut, oversimplified answers. An individual who approaches religion in this way recognizes that he or she does not know, and probably never will know, the final truth about such matters. Three aspects are included in this dimension: (1) readiness to face existential

questions without reducing their complexity, (2) seeing self-criticism and perception of religious doubts as positive, and (3) openness to change." They hypothesized that religion, as quest would correlate negatively to life satisfaction, as it is commonly associated with more uncertainty, complexity, worry and guilt. However, positive correlation was found. The positive influences can lie in valuing one's doubts and asking questions about the meaning of life. It may also be possible that "happy people simply have greater tolerance for ambiguity" (Swinyard, et al., 2001, p. 28).

The correlation between religiousness and happiness may also be ascribed to the security that certain dogmatic beliefs bring (for example the promise of immortality and the clear distinctions between good and evil). The social support (and perceived acceptance by and conformity to) the religious group may also play a strong part. Of course, it can also be shown that excessive religious fixation can also produce depression or mental disorders (Snoep, 2008, p. 208).

The important distinction between spirituality and religious adherence should be made. Studies suggest that the spirituality component is more conducive to well-being than religious adherence per se (Joshanloo, 2011, p. 915). It can be argued that religious adherence only produces well-being in as far as it is a conduit for spirituality (and the meaning or "spiritual intelligence" it mediates), or when it provides other proven determinants of subjective well-being, like enduring and satisfying social relationships.

Conclusion: Entry points for theological engagement

Meaningful theological engagement in the happiness discourse is increasingly visible, for example in the 1996 work of Vincent Brümmer and Marcel Sarot (Happiness, Well-Being and the Meaning of Life: A Dialogue of Social Science and Religion), the work of Ellen Charry (like her God and the art of Happiness, 2011) and the collected theological essays edited by Brent Strawn (The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness, 2012). The purpose of this essay's interpreted overview of trends in the study of happiness, especially as it emerges from experimental psychology, is to delineate areas where the voice of the Judeo-Christian tradition can be enlightening and provide much-needed worldview perspectives which may

move the discussion closer toward the seemingly ever-elusive integrated understanding of happiness. The following four entry points are suggested where theological engagement with the interdisciplinary discourse on happiness could be most fruitful:

1. *The flourishing agent.* In the Judeo-Christian tradition the Hebrew 'asrê and the Greek *makarios* is associated with happiness or blessing. The meaning links closely to what Raibley above described as "flourishing". Probing the background and context of these terms in the Biblical texts from a Judeo-Christian anthropological perspective may shed some light on what it mean to flourish as a human being.

2. *Determinants for happiness.* On each of the determinants of happiness, as explicated in this essay, the Judeo-Christian tradition has significant contributions to make in the interdisciplinary discourse. For example, the value of community, compassion and *koinonia* speak to the value of relationships in human flourishing. The value of income is placed in perspective by the theological discussion on materiality and consumerism. The value of geography links to the prominence of a "land theology" in the Old Testament, as well as the appreciation for the beauty (and conservation) of creation. Life phases are prominent in generational thinking in the Bible and in particular the affirmation of both youth and old age.

3. *Anamnesis and eschatology.* "The invitation to 'hope backward' into the realm of memory and to 'remember forward' into the realm of hope" (Ford, 1982, p. 46) is the constant task of the chosen people of the Old Testament and the body of Christ in the New Testament. Linking to Durayappah's model of temporal determinants of subjective well-being, theological engagement can be very significant.

4. *The quest for meaning.* That which constitutes a meaningful life is core to Biblical theology. It is also closely related to the notion of "calling" and "mission". A life given to that, which is larger than itself, which includes the notion of "sacrifice" and which can be modelled on the life of Jesus Christ are some of the themes where a theological contribution to the happiness discourse can be of value.

"Seek God, not happiness" said Dietrich Bonhoeffer. However, in the Judeo-Christian worldview these two need not be mutually exclusive. "If you seek God alone, you will gain happiness: that is the promise" (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p. 84).

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