

# Scientific Answers to the Timeless Philosophical Question of Happiness

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## Abstract:

This chapter aims to serve as an introduction to the science of happiness, by providing a catalogue of the main questions that have been posed about the topic across millennia. I cover the various answers that have been offered to these questions, by philosophers and more recently by research psychologists. The chapter starts with the questions of what happiness is and how it can be measured, after which I turn to explore the possibility, desirability, and justifiability of happiness. The last portion of the chapter is devoted to the perennial question of how to be happy.

## Keywords: Well-Being, Happiness, Philosophy

Academics who love their jobs sometimes hold their own study topic in exaggeratedly high esteem, deeming it to be among the most consequential topics ever to be studied, if not the most. As a scholar of happiness, however, I cannot help feeling somewhat justified in that belief. I am not alone in thinking that happiness, by whatever name we refer to it and however we go about looking for it, is a most fundamental and universal human aspiration. It is “the motive of every act of every man” (Pascal, 1995), “the goal of all goals” (Ricard, 2006), the “supreme good” —that which we always choose for its own sake and not as a means to something else (Aristotle, 2000). Given the centrality of happiness to the human experience, it is not surprising that the annals of humanities are replete with inquiries into it: From the Bhagavad Gita to the Bible, from the Stoics to Michel de Montaigne, from Tolstoy to the Dalai Lama, the intellectual and spiritual masterpieces of history unfailingly probe into the existence, nature, and attainment of happiness.

In the last couple of decades, the timeless question of happiness also began to interest psychologists, who used empirical methods to investigate the causes, correlates, and consequences of happiness. The result has been the vibrant field of Positive Psychology and its ever-expanding contribution to the understanding of happiness. This accumulation of knowledge also meant that questions about happiness that have vexed thinkers for millennia could now be answered with more confidence—some of them, if not all (Kesebir & Diener, 2008). My goal for this chapter is to survey the main questions that come up when philosophers (and lay people alike) think about this topic: Is happiness possible? How much of it is in our hands? Isn't it selfish to want to be happy? How to be happy?

I will delve into these and similar questions and whenever possible, indicate where the current empirical science of well-being stands relative to the various ideas proposed by philosophers. My intention is neither to provide a comprehensive history of the idea of happiness, nor offer a philosophical account of the meaning, nature, or value of happiness. Philosophy is sometimes referred to as “the art of wondering” and this chapter, in keeping with that, is meant as an overview of what philosophers most wonder about happiness. As such, it aspires to serve as an introduction to and preparation for the more detailed treatments of the myriad aspects of happiness that are covered in this Handbook.

## What Is Happiness?

Philosophers studying happiness agree, if on nothing else, on the challenges of defining the term. Notwithstanding the variety of definitions, when philosophers write about happiness, they typically use the

term in one of two broad senses (Haybron, 2008). The first usage, similar to the lay understanding of the term, regards happiness as a state of mind: It denotes a preponderance of positive emotions and positive attitudes toward one's life and its diverse components. The second usage of happiness, on the other hand, refers to a life of well-being or flourishing, a life that is good for a person, benefits the person. It is more about "doing good" than "feeling good".

These two different usages in philosophy roughly correspond to the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic theories of happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonic approaches conceive of happiness in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance, where the pleasure and pain may pertain not only to those of the body, but also those of the mind and the heart. Hedonic theories of happiness are considered to be "subjectivist", in that they ground happiness in people's subjective states, like their felt emotions and personal evaluations (Haybron, 2011). Eudaimonic approaches, on the other hand, emphasize the process of living well and aspects of positive psychological functioning that go beyond positive emotions and evaluations (Jayawickreme, Forgeard, & Seligman, 2012; Ryff, 1989; also see Heintzleman, this volume). Unlike hedonic theories, eudaimonic theories do not assume that what is good *to* the person is necessarily good *for* the person. Instead, they specify certain objective qualities or psychological states that need to be present for happiness (e.g., virtuous activity, autonomy, positive relationships), independent of what the person cares about or likes.

To what extent hedonic and eudaimonic happiness overlap is both a philosophical and empirical question. It is easily imaginable that a person could feel subjectively happy without leading a life of virtue and flourishing. Likewise, it is possible that a flourishing, meaningful, virtuous life would not always be accompanied by high degrees of positive affect. Hence, hedonic and eudaimonic happiness appear to be distinct concepts, and the most desirable life presumably requires high levels of each. That said, it stands to reason that hedonic and eudaimonic happiness are interdependent to a certain degree, and subjectively and objectively desirable ways of existing overlap considerably. This was at least the stance of many ancient philosophers. Even Epicurus, whose name has become synonymous with hedonism, believed that virtue and pleasure were interdependent and that it was simply impossible "to live pleasantly without living prudently, honorably, and justly" (1994, p. 31).

Empirical attempts to distinguish hedonic happiness from eudaimonic happiness have proved to be challenging, yielding mostly inconsistent findings. These inconsistencies are in no small part due to the multiplicity of conceptual and operational definitions for each construct, especially eudaimonia (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008). Another difficulty is that both constructs are currently being studied subjectively, and there is no separate gold-standard measure against which to compare the merits of the two approaches. Citing these and other reasons, some scholars have argued that although of philosophical interest, the constructs of hedonic and eudaimonic happiness do not translate well to scientific inquiry and drawing a sharp line between them might have unintended costs to the progression of well-being research (Kashdan et al., 2008). For now, it seems fair to conclude from the research that hedonia and eudaimonia are very strongly correlated, even if they may be distinct concepts. This close overlap echoes the intuitions of many ancient philosophers, including Aristotle, for whom happiness was acting virtuously and feeling good because of that.

## **How to Conceptualize and Measure Happiness?**

As difficult as it may be to converge on a single definition of happiness, to be able to study it scientifically, we need to define and operationalize it. Psychologists pioneering the study of happiness dealt with this challenge by proposing the concept of "subjective well-being" (SWB; Diener, 1984). SWB refers to people's evaluations of their lives and encompasses both affective and cognitive elements. These elements include life satisfaction (global judgments of one's life), satisfaction with important life domains (satisfaction with one's relationships, work, health, etc.), high levels of positive affect, and low levels of negative affect.

SWB emphasizes the subjective nature of happiness and holds human beings to be the best judges of their own happiness. In this regard, it is akin to hedonic theories, which ground happiness in a person's subjective states, and differs from the more prescriptive conceptualizations of happiness such as Ryff and Singer's (1996) construct of psychological well-being and Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory. These approaches, more in the eudaimonic tradition, specify certain needs (such as relatedness, self-acceptance, or meaning and purpose in life) as imperative to human well-being.

The measurement of happiness in current psychological research overwhelmingly relies on self-reports—for constructs from both hedonic and eudaimonic traditions. This democratic method of regalating personal authority to ordinary people in matters of happiness would likely meet with disapproval from classical philosophers such as Socrates, who had little faith in the intellectual prowess of the masses

(Haybron, 2007b). Yet self-reports seem the most suited method to study subjective well-being, which by definition prioritizes people's own evaluations of their lives. This does not change the fact that self-reports of happiness suffer from the same limitations that characterize other self-report measures, such as being fallible to memory biases, mood or context effects, and social desirability concerns (e.g., Deaton & Stone, 2016; Haybron, 2007a; Schwarz & Strack, 1999; Lucas, this volume). Notwithstanding this, research suggests that these effects are far from being large enough to render self-reports of happiness unhelpful (Lucas & Lawless, 2013). In fact, several studies attest to the reliability and validity of self-report happiness measures in informing research (e.g., Diener & Suh, 1997). Still, implementing multimethod assessments of happiness whenever possible (e.g., informant reports, experience sampling, smiling behavior), would be advisable (also see Scollon, this volume). Happiness is a construct without a gold standard measure, but the available methods, albeit imperfect, are still adequate enough to substantially contribute to our understanding of it.

## Is Happiness Possible?

The answer to the question of whether happiness is possible clearly depends on the way we define happiness. If we conceive of it as a perfect, pure, and perpetual state—a complete absence of negativity and constant positivity—it indeed seems unattainable, as well as unrealistic and unhealthy. When Hegesias of Cyrene, also known as Peisithanatos (the death persuader) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC argued that happiness was unattainable, life was not worth living, and that the sage would choose death (Matson, 1998), he probably was holding such an idealized view of happiness. Although probably none of them were as extreme in their pessimism as Hegesias, many philosophers throughout history saw human happiness as either impossible or at least quite improbable, given the nature of the world and the nature of humans. Of course, we should remember that many a distrustful stance toward the possibility of happiness was advanced in a social context of much lower quality of life and more common unhappiness relative to modern times (Veenhoven, 2005).

Leaving extreme and idealized versions of happiness aside, it seems entirely possible for people to experience predominantly positive emotions and be satisfied with their lives. At any rate, this is what worldwide surveys suggest. In an article titled “Most People Are Happy,” Diener and Diener (1996) reviewed the available evidence and concluded that an overwhelming majority of individuals fall in the positive range of the happiness scale, including people with apparent disadvantages, such as quadriplegics or those in the lowest income groups. Likewise, 86% of the 43 nations included in Diener and Diener's study had average happiness levels above the midpoint of the happiness scale. Available evidence suggests that humans, on average, have a predisposition to mild levels of positive moods and happiness (Diener, Kanazawa, Suh, & Oishi, 2015). For such a disposition to be evolutionarily feasible, it should have some adaptive functions. Research strongly supports this view, by showing that positive emotions help people build intellectual, psychological, social, and physical resources, thereby increasing the likelihood of adaptive behaviors such as creativity, planning, mating, and sociality (Diener et al., 2015; Fredrickson, 1998).

## How Much Control Do We Have Over Our Happiness?

The psychological discoveries of the last decades refute the pessimistic idea that happiness is impossible. But *for whom* is it possible? Can anybody who sets their mind to it become happy, or happier? How much of our happiness is up to us? Early answers to these questions were not very encouraging: The concept of happiness in antiquity largely centered on fortune, and happiness was regarded as something that might be bestowed on the person by the gods or by fate, if they were lucky (McMahon, 2006; Oishi, Graham, Kesebir, & Galinha, 2013). The etymology of the word “happiness”, at least in Indo-European languages, carries the traces of the same understanding. In English, for instance, happiness comes from the Old Norse root *hap*, meaning luck or chance, whereas the words for luck and happiness are identical in German to this day (*Glück*).

Despite the incontrovertible role of chance, happiness in many philosophers' eyes was still something that could be successfully pursued. Both in the West and the East—from Aristotle to the Stoics, from Daoism to Buddhism—philosophical and spiritual traditions aimed to transform people's way of being, so that they could achieve wisdom and happiness (Hadot, 1995; Lenoir, 2015). Many of them advocated “spiritual exercises”, such as looking at oneself from a distance or reflecting on one's mortality, which are not that different from modern positive psychological interventions. Their intuition that happiness is something that can be developed through willful activity overlaps with the current understanding of “well-being as a skill” and is compatible with research on the determinants of happiness. Accordingly, a person's happiness level is determined by three major factors: (1) a genetically determined

set point for happiness, (2) life circumstances (e.g., age, gender, education, culture), and (3) factors under one's voluntary control, such as the activities and practices one chooses to engage in (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005).

After surveying the literature, Lyubomirsky and colleagues (2005) concluded that among these components, the genetically determined set point explains about 50% of variation in happiness, whereas life circumstances account for only 10%, and intentional activities are responsible for the remaining 40%. Recent meta-analyses suggest that the heritability of well-being might be even lower, in the 32-41% range on average (Røysamb & Nes, this volume). We should bear in mind that the estimates for the influence of genetic and situational factors are not fixed statistics, but depend on the population and the situational factors involved. Still, the lesson from research on the determinants of happiness is that although some factors outside of our control constrain our chances for greater happiness (e.g., genes, unalterable life circumstances), we still have significant room for increasing our happiness levels through personal effort (also see Layous, this volume). The possibility of change is reinforced by studies revealing the brain's neuroplasticity—the capacity of neural circuits underlying social and emotional behavior to change in response to experience (e.g., physical exercise, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness meditation) and support positive outcomes (Davidson & McEwen, 2012).

### **Is Hedonic Adaptation Inevitable?**

Any discussion about the possibility of happiness would be remiss not to mention concerns about adaptation. Adam Smith, in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, writes about “the never-failing certainty with which all men, sooner or later, accommodate themselves to whatever becomes their permanent situation” (2002, p. 172). The so-called hedonic treadmill theory—the idea that our emotional systems adjust to almost anything that happens in our lives, good or bad—has been embraced as a guiding principle in happiness research since the early studies showing that lottery winners are not happier than controls and that even paralyzed accident victims revert approximately to their initial levels of happiness (e.g., Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Relatedly, the set-point theory posits that major life events (e.g., marriage, unemployment, illness) affect a person's happiness only temporarily, after which the person's happiness level regresses to a default determined by heritable factors (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996).

The implication of these assertions is that attempts at becoming happier are ultimately doomed to fail, and that the search for the causes of happiness may be quite pointless. Accumulating research, however, contradicts the hopelessness of this message. The recent consensus in the field is that people do not adapt quickly and/or completely to everything and a person's happiness level can be permanently altered (Lucas, 2007; Sheldon & Lucas, 2014; Tay & Kuykendall, 2013; see Luhmann & Intelisano, this volume, for an overview). Systematic reviews of therapeutic and positive psychological interventions further support the conclusion that long-term positive changes to happiness-related personality traits (e.g., neuroticism, extraversion) and increases to subjective well-being do happen (Bolier et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2017). Interventions that cultivate character strengths and thereby increase well-being (e.g., Niemiec, 2017; Quinlan, Swain, & Vella-Brodrick, 2012) similarly attest to the malleability of eudaimonic happiness.

### **Is Pursuing Happiness Self-Defeating?**

Another argument raised against our capacity to exercise control over our happiness has been that the search for happiness will necessarily be self-defeating—that the harder we strive for happiness, the further we will retreat from it. Schopenhauer, for instance, observed that wherever joy makes its appearance, “it as a rule comes uninvited and unannounced, by itself and sans façon” (Schopenhauer, 2001, p. 409). Several other philosophers, including Aristotle, agreed that happiness should not be pursued directly as a goal, but should be found along the way as the byproduct of virtues and virtuous activities. In the words of John Stuart Mill, only those are happy who “have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end” (Mill, 1944, p. 100).

It is easy to see that the pursuit of happiness could thwart happiness under certain circumstances. Being obsessed with or feeling compelled to be “happy” are undoubtedly not healthy states of mind, and especially combined with misguided notions about happiness (e.g., rejection of negative emotions), such a quest could hurt a person's well-being (Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011). Even under less extreme conditions, “trying to make oneself as happy as possible” could prove deleterious to one's well-being, to the extent this effort leads to high levels of self-consciousness and self-monitoring (Schooler, Ariely, & Loewenstein, 2003). After all, it is unhappiness that is associated with high levels of self-focus, whereas happy moods are typically characterized by low self-focused attention (Green, Sedikides, Saltzberg, Wood, & Forzano, 2003; Ingram, 1990).

Yet at the same time, as noted above, we find support for the effectiveness of interventions to increase happiness, suggesting that deliberately pursuing happiness does not necessarily have to be self-defeating. Philosopher Frederic Lenoir (2015) writes about pursuing happiness “while being supple and patient, without any excessive expectations, without stress, with hearts and minds in a state of constant openness”. This sounds like a healthy way of seeking happiness, especially when accompanied by an accurate understanding of where happiness lies and where it does not.

## Is Happiness Justifiable?

Happiness might be desirable, and even possible, but is it also justifiable? Aren't happy people stupid, self-centered, or at least deeply insensitive to the problems darkening the world? Although such criticisms against happiness carry an air of plausibility and even nobility, some reflection reveals that they rely on a distorted understanding of happiness—one of giddy, empty-headed, relentless positivity. Studies operationalizing happiness as subjective well-being or life satisfaction fail to substantiate claims about it being an egotistic, apathetic, or otherwise objectionable state; instead, they disclose the opposite pattern. Growing evidence suggests that happiness is causally related to many favorable outcomes in life. Among other things, happiness and positive affect have been shown to foster better health, better work performance, better social relationships, and more altruistic behavior (De Neve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2013; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). The positive relationship between happiness and socially desirable outcomes also holds true on a national level: Happier countries tend to score higher on generalized trust, volunteerism, and democratic attitudes (Tov & Diener, 2008). Claims about happiness entailing “a well-fleshed indifference to sorrow outside it” (Eliot, 1996, p. 796) lose their credibility in the face of such findings. Rather, as elaborated on by the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004), happiness seems to provide the fuel—the physical, intellectual, and psychosocial resources—that enable people to go out in the world and solve problems.

Another notable argument in defense of the justifiability of happiness is that our personal happiness is deeply connected with the happiness of everyone else. The happier we are, the happier we make others, both through our virtuous actions and through the contagious, uplifting effect of our positive emotions. When we conceive of happiness as something in the service of others and the world, it feels less like self-absorbed indulgence and more like a moral duty. French author André Gide expresses this sentiment eloquently when he writes: “There are on this earth such immensities of misery, distress, poverty and horror that the happy man cannot think of it without feeling ashamed of his happiness. And yet no-one can do anything for the happiness of others if he cannot be happy himself. I feel an imperious obligation to be happy.” (as cited in Lenoir, 2015).

The notion that the ultimate aim of the quest for happiness should be to serve others in wiser and more effective ways is common in many ancient teachings, including Buddhism (Ricard, 2006). Indeed, some commentators have noted that an important difference between contemporary forms of the quest for happiness and ancient forms is that the latter saw a strong bond between the individual good and the common good (Lenoir, 2015). Whereas improving individual well-being and improving society went hand in hand in the eyes of Plato, Aristotle, Confucius or the Buddha, increasing levels of individualism and consumerism in the modern era changed this: People started to pursue their individual happiness less and less as part of a larger collective happiness project. While there might be some merit to this observation, the accumulating evidence about the positive societal outcomes associated with happiness and the accompanying efforts to make happiness a public policy concern (Odermatt & Stutzer, this volume) point to a turning of the tide.

## Where and How to Find Happiness?

Let us say that we arrived at the conclusion that happiness is desirable, possible, and justifiable. Therefore, we want to pursue it. Yet how should we go about this? Where does happiness lie? And where does it not? How can we cultivate it? Philosophers throughout ages have offered various and at times contrary answers to these questions. Yet, clearly, some advice is sounder than the rest, and some methods of achieving happiness are more effective than others. In this section, we will look at philosophical and empirical answers offered to the question of where and how to find happiness.

Before turning to where happiness lies, however, I want to devote some discussion to where it does *not* lie. It is well established that people are prone to make mistakes in predicting what will make them happy, holding on to some “myths of happiness” (Gilbert, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2013). What are some of these less fruitful ways of seeking happiness, as revealed by philosophers and psychologists?

### Seeking Happiness in Pleasure

In everyday English, we use the word “hedonist” to describe somebody who seeks fulfillment in pleasure, and especially in sensory, bodily ones. In philosophy, hedonism is more broadly defined as the view that our happiness depends wholly on how we feel, that all and only positive experiences are good for us (Gregory, 2015). Many arguments can be and have been raised against hedonism, the most famous one being Nozick’s (1974) “pleasure machine” thought experiment. Nozick imagines an extremely effective brain stimulation machine that would allow a person to experience whatever pleasurable or desirable experience they could want, while floating in a tank all the time, and not being aware of it. Would you plug into this machine, choosing it over real life? If pleasurable experiences were all that mattered in life, then people would want to be hooked up to the machine, however, typically they do not, suggesting that there is more to happiness than hedonism fails to capture.

Another reason why chasing pleasures is a suboptimal happiness strategy lies in the fact that pleasures, by their nature, are fleeting. The quest for pleasures could thus easily mutate into an endless cycle of ups and downs, with bursts of pleasure being followed by a sense of disillusionment, deprivation, and craving for more. Especially in Buddhism, it is a common idea that happiness should not depend on all our experiences being pleasurable and that prioritizing pleasure could lead us into a trap of unhealthy, unhelpful patterns. Indeed, the constant pursuit of rewarding stimuli and “highs” is a hallmark of addiction disorders and come with grave costs. These ideas are consistent with findings showing that seeking happiness primarily in pleasure is associated less strongly with subjective well-being than seeking happiness in engagement or meaning (Schueller & Seligman, 2010). Furthermore, whereas engagement and meaning orientations to happiness were positively associated with educational and occupational attainment in a large sample of adults, a pleasure orientation was associated negatively, highlighting its potential costs.

### **Seeking Happiness in Money and Consumption**

Aristotle believed that wealth was a necessary ingredient of happiness (1991). Stoics, in contrast, believed that material possessions and wealth were in no way required for happiness. Inhabiting the middle ground were the Epicureans, who maintained that although we should have sufficient money to shelter us from harm and pain, money ceases to offer greater levels of happiness beyond a certain threshold. Empirical research on the relationship between income and happiness supports this latter view. In a worldwide sample of over 1.7 million respondents, Jebb, Tay, Diener, and Oishi (2018) have demonstrated that despite substantial variation across regions, higher incomes stopped contributing to more positive life evaluations at \$95,000, and to higher emotional well-being at \$60,000 to \$75,000. Thus, we can say that an adequate amount of money is a necessary condition of happiness, albeit not a sufficient one.

Whereas having money can have a beneficial effect on well-being, at least until a certain point, valuing and wanting money too much turns out to have a detrimental effect. Materialism, defined as viewing possessions and acquisitions as central to one’s life and essential to one’s happiness (Richins & Rudmin, 1994) has been consistently linked to lower well-being (Dittmar, Bond, Hürst, & Kasser, 2014; also see Kasser, this volume). Wanting money seems to have an especially toxic influence on happiness, if it is fueled by motives such as seeking power, showing off, and overcoming self-doubt (Srivastava, Locke, & Bartol, 2001). These findings dovetail with studies demonstrating that placing a strong emphasis on extrinsic goals (e.g., wealth, fame, an attractive image) relative to intrinsic goals (e.g., affiliation, personal growth, community) is linked to poorer psychological and physical well-being (Kasser, 2003).

### **Seeking Happiness in the Fulfillment of Our Desires**

Desire fulfillment theories of well-being, in their simplest form, hold that well-being consists in the satisfaction of the desires or preferences of the person (Heathwood, 2015). Desire theories have been enjoying wide acceptance among philosophers and economists, and they also overlap with how lay people commonly conceive of happiness—as satisfying the needs and desires of the ego, as in “I’d be happy, if only I could get everything I want, and get rid of everything I don’t want”. Yet expecting the universe to yield to all our wants is not very realistic, suggesting that we might be setting ourselves up for disappointment if we have our happiness depend too much on the gratification of our desires. This does not even take into consideration the fact that not everything we desire turns out to be good for our well-being—that in the words of Saint Teresa of Avila, “there are more tears shed over answered prayers than over unanswered ones.”

Furthermore, research shows that happiness is not necessarily the result of good things happening to oneself. For one, as noted earlier, people’s circumstances in life, including their marital status, income, or their personal history (e.g., having experienced a childhood trauma, having won a prestigious award) account for a fairly limited amount of happiness differences among people (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Similarly, when Diener and Seligman (2002) compared “extremely happy” students (upper 10% of the happiness distribution) to students with average happiness levels, they found that the two did not differ from each other in the number of objectively positive and negative life events. These findings corroborate

one of the most frequently encountered ideas in ancient wisdom, namely that happiness is less a matter of what happens to us and more a matter of how we see the world and respond to it.

Especially in Stoicism and Buddhism, there is a strong sense that it is not external causes that determine our happiness, but our state of mind. These philosophies emphasize that enduring happiness becomes possible once we transform the way we look at the world. The notion that our mental outlook—such as what we pay attention to and how we interpret what we encounter—has a major impact on our happiness receives wide support from research (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Lyubomirsky, 2001; also see Margolis & Lyubomirsky, this volume). In keeping with this, many positive psychological interventions are variations on training people to notice positive things more frequently and interpreting things in a more positive light (Quoidbach, Mikolajczak, & Gross, 2015). To sum up, although there is nothing wrong with having desires and striving after goals, tying our happiness too tightly to their attainment appears to be less productive as a happiness strategy than training ourselves to love life even when things do not go our way.

## How to Cultivate Happiness?

We have contemplated some methods of seeking happiness that presumably are less effective in leading to enduring happiness. In this final section, I want to turn to methods that bear more promise, as proposed by the distinguished minds of the past and as revealed by modern research. Specifically, I will argue that happiness will become more achievable if we cultivate (1) healthy habits of the body, (2) a healthy relationship with ourselves, (3) healthy habits of the heart and mind (i.e., virtues), (4) healthy relationships with others and (5) a healthy connection to a larger beyond (e.g., God, nature).

### Healthy Habits of the Body

We would be hard-pressed to find any philosopher, or any ordinary person for that matter, who would contest the crucial importance of bodily health to happiness. Our well-being is affected by our physical health, and at the same time it affects our physical health: Happier people are more likely to be physically healthier and live longer (Diener & Chan, 2011; also see Cross, Hofschneider, Grimm, & Pressman, this volume). This bidirectional relationship suggests that working on our health would benefit our happiness, just as working on our happiness would benefit our health. Studies consistently show that cultivating healthy habits of the body, such as eating well (e.g., increased consumption of fruits and vegetables), exercising, and getting enough sleep improve well-being (e.g., Conner, Brookie, Carr, Mainvil, & Vissers, 2017; Mujcic & Oswald, 2016; Reed & Buck, 2009; Steptoe, O'Donnell, Marmot, & Wardle, 2008).

### A Healthy Relationship with Oneself

It has been said that the self is at once our greatest ally and fiercest enemy (Leary, 2004). Self-generated thoughts and feelings can cause a great deal of unhappiness (Ingram, 1990) and the self can be so burdensome at times that the urge to escape it takes self-destructive forms such as drug and alcohol abuse, binge eating, and even suicide (Baumeister, 1991). Through both conscious and unconscious routes, how we relate to ourselves has a powerful impact on how we relate to others and the world around us, and is therefore essential to well-being. What then makes for a healthy relationship with oneself?

The self-construct that has been most robustly linked with happiness and mental health is self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Self-esteem refers to a feeling born from the *I*'s evaluation of the *me*—it is a general sense of comfort and happiness with all the things one is. A love for oneself and a love for life typically go together, explaining the link between happiness and self-esteem. Crucially, not all types of high self-esteem are created equal, with some being healthier and more conducive to well-being than others. More preferable are types like “true self-esteem” (Deci & Ryan, 1995) or “optimal self-esteem” (Kernis, 2003), which entail a firmly grounded sense of self-worth and calm self-confidence, standing in opposition to fragile, unstable, or overly contingent forms of self-esteem.

Self-compassion (Neff, 2003) and a quite ego (Bauer & Wayment, 2008) have also been proposed as alternative ways of relating to oneself that bypass some potential pitfalls of self-esteem. Both of these constructs emphasize self-acceptance and an awareness of the self's interdependence with others. Recently, humility and, defined more broadly, hypo-egoic functioning have also been attracting interest from researchers (Brown & Leary, 2016; Tangney, 2000). These constructs are defined by low levels of self-focus and self-centeredness, which are considered foundational to well-being in many spiritual and religious traditions. Buddhist notions of happiness, for instance, regard attachment to the self as the source of our most disruptive thoughts and a main impediment to inner peace. Inspired by this understanding, Dambrun and Ricard (2011) proposed that self-centered psychological functioning attracts considerable suffering and leads to unstable, fluctuating happiness, whereas a selfless psychological functioning is

linked to authentic-durable happiness.

### **Healthy Relationships with Others**

The history of philosophy had its own share of misanthropes, like Arthur Schopenhauer, who argued that loneliness was a superior condition to human company. This view, fittingly, was hardly popular however, and is powerfully contradicted by research. The desire to belong is considered a fundamental human motivation, and its satisfaction through love, friendship and close emotional ties is robustly linked to well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Reis & Gable, 2003). In contrast, loneliness and poor quality social relationships have been strongly associated with low emotional and physical health (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). It must be true that “it is man, who is essential to man’s happiness” (Tatarkiewicz, 1976, p. 130), and as much as some may believe that hell is other people, so, apparently, is heaven. To cultivate happiness, then, it is critical to cultivate close relationships characterized by mutual trust, caring, and understanding.

### **Virtues: Healthy Habits of the Heart and Mind**

Frequently figuring in philosophers’ discussions on the happiest, best possible life is the concept of “virtue”. Aristotle, for instance, believed that happiness (eudaimonia) lay in the exercise of virtue. Taking this idea to its logical conclusion, Roman Stoic Cicero maintained that a man in possession of virtue could be happy even while being tortured (McMahon, 2006). More recently, Hursthouse (1999) argued that possessing virtue does not necessarily result in happiness, as luck plays an irrefutable role in human affairs, yet it is the only reliable bet for a happy, flourishing life—just as adopting a healthy lifestyle is the best bet for being healthy, even though it does not guarantee perfect health or longevity. Is there any merit to these claims? Does possessing and exercising virtue truly lead to happiness?

Studies conducted in the last decades using the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) yielded substantial evidence for the association between happiness and virtue. For example, in a large-scale study Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) showed that almost all of the 24 character strengths in the VIA classification correlated with global life satisfaction, even though the strengths of love, gratitude, hope, curiosity, zest, and perspective/wisdom emerged as most strongly linked to life satisfaction (correlations in the .35 to .60 range). Experimental and longitudinal studies further corroborate the age-old wisdom that virtue leads to happiness (e.g., Proctor et al., 2011; Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013). After reviewing the literature on the relationship between happiness and virtue, Kesebir and Diener (2014) concluded that while virtue leads to happiness, there is also support for the notion that happiness leads to virtuous behavior. They have argued that these reciprocal causation dynamics are conducive to virtuous cycles running from virtue to happiness to virtue, potentially leading to enhanced happiness and enhanced virtue over time. This account is also parallel to Bishop’s network theory of well-being (2015), according to which “having well-being is to be ‘stuck’ in a self-perpetuating cycle of positive emotions, positive attitudes, positive traits, and successful engagement with the world” (p. 8).

The question about whether virtue leads to happiness is at some level also a question about human nature: Is it fundamentally good, or is there an insurmountable conflict between the love of self and love of others? A portrayal of human nature as deeply egoistic has characterized the writings of many thinkers, from Thomas Hobbes to Adam Smith to Freud, and might even have been inherited from the Christian doctrine of original sin (Lenoir, 2015). Yet recent scientific studies from diverse disciplines cast doubt on this pessimistic conception of human nature (Ricard, 2015) and suggest that humans might flourish in loving and giving (also see Helliwell, Akin, Shiple, Huang, & Wang, this volume).

### **A Healthy Connection to a Larger Beyond**

Transcending the self and connecting to something larger than the self (e.g., God, universe, nature) has been regarded as a recipe for happiness across ages (Haidt, 2006; Leary, 2004). Self-transcendent connections act as a powerful source of meaning and purpose, which are critical ingredients of well-being (also see Steger, this volume). Connection to nature, for example, has been widely documented to contribute to well-being (Bratman, Hamilton, & Daily, 2012; Hartig, Mitchell, de Vries, & Frumkin, 2014; McMahon, this volume) and a sense of meaning in life seems to mediate the association between nature connectedness and well-being (Howell, Passmore, & Buro, 2013).

For a lot of people, religious faith is the central self-transcendent connection in their lives and a major provider of a sense of meaning and purpose. Although the positive association between happiness and religiosity might depend on societal factors, religious people on average still report higher subjective well-being, and the enhanced sense of purpose they report does not depend on societal conditions (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011; Newman, this volume). Self-transcendent emotions such as compassion, gratitude, and awe have also been linked to greater physical and emotional well-being (Stellar et al., 2017), echoing the insight that self-transcendence might be a more promising strategy for cultivating happiness than



strategies focusing heavily on the self.

## Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to familiarize the reader with the crucial questions that define the philosophy and science of happiness. Relying on philosophers' careful thinking and using the methods of science, we have been able to provide some initial answers to questions that have vexed humanity for millennia. It is simultaneously thrilling and touching to realize that while the questions asked about happiness are timeless and will stay the same centuries hence, the answers offered will become much more precise and accurate with time. We are fortunate to be living in an era when our understanding of the causes and conditions of happiness is growing day by day, and grateful to all the thinkers and scholars, ancient and modern, who asked these questions and provided the answers.

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