

## *The Pursuit and Nature of Happiness*

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ABSTRACT. This paper challenges the idea that happiness—taken to be a subjective mental state marked by positive affect—is something that depends upon and arises from the satisfaction of interests. While this understanding of happiness seems to follow from reflection on the paradox of happiness, empirical research concerning the production of happiness tells us a different story, and suggests that whether or not we are happy is largely independent of whether or not we satisfy our interests. Following analysis of this research, I argue that whether or not we are happy depends instead mostly on how our minds are doing.

### I. INTRODUCTION

There is a familiar story philosophers like to tell about happiness. Happiness, they claim, is something that we cannot get by intentionally aiming at it. But it is something that we can attain through indirect pursuit, by putting it out of our minds and pursuing the set of interests and passions whose satisfaction will generate happiness. Happiness, according to this story, is the mental state that arises from having a meaningful and fulfilling life, marked by the satisfaction of interests and passions.

In this paper I will argue that, while the familiar story gets some important elements right, it goes fundamentally astray in its conception of happiness as something that arises from the satisfaction of one's interests and passions. Drawing on psychological research regarding the pursuit of happiness, I'll argue that happiness is not like this at all. Whether or not we experience happiness has little to do with the satisfaction of interests and passions and with *what* we are pursuing more generally. If I'm right, this means we have to rethink how it is we typically understand the nature of happiness.

I'll start by exploring the familiar story in greater detail, tracing its roots back to Bishop Butler's influential arguments against egoism. I'll then turn to empirical research exploring the conditions that affect our levels of happiness, and use this research as a foundation for analyzing the familiar story. As is consistent with Butler's usage and with the psychological literature we will be considering, my discussion will take 'happiness' to refer to a state of subjective well-being marked by positive affect. This could be a state of pleasure, a state of satisfaction, or even just a state of enjoyment. For the purposes of this discussion, what is most important is that it is a state characterized by positive affect, however that affect is best nuanced.

## II. THE FAMILIAR STORY

The familiar story sketched above is one clearly articulated by Bishop Butler. His approach is an interesting one: Butler wants to refute the position of psychological egoism and its associated claim that we constantly seek to advance our self-interest. At the same time, he wants to defend the notion that happiness, properly conceived, is something both attainable and worthwhile. While at first we might think these are competing claims, in that they force Butler both to deny that we are motivated by self-interest and to claim that we ought to pursue happiness, Butler pieces together these claims with a simple yet powerful observation: the best way to attain happiness, he argues, is by setting it aside and not letting our interest in being happy motivate our everyday pursuits.

This observation has become known, variously, as the paradox of hedonism, the paradox of egoism, the paradox of egoistic hedonism, and so forth, but I'll refer to it here simply as the paradox of happiness. The paradox of happiness holds that direct, intentional efforts to maximize one's happiness will not maximize one's happiness. The direct pursuit of happiness is thus self-defeating.

Butler spells out the paradox in terms of self-love, arguing that the more self-love engrosses us, the less likely we are to advance our private good: "private interest is so far from being likely to be promoted to the degree in which self-love engrosses us, and prevails over all other principles, that the contracted affection may be so prevalent as to disappoint itself, and even contradict its own end, private

good” (Butler 1726, 49). Since Butler, both Mill and Sidgwick have invoked the paradox in their discussions of hedonism, and the phenomenon it points to has become commonplace. As is often said, the best advice we can give to the sad person desperate to be happy? Stop worrying about being happy and find something else to focus on.

The paradox of happiness is fundamentally based in an empirical, observational claim about the efficacy of direct pursuits of happiness. But philosophical discussions of the paradox move very quickly from this observational claim to make a point about the nature of happiness itself. Thus, for example, Butler’s discussion of the paradox goes hand-in-hand with his philosophical analysis of happiness. Because happiness is not something that can be pursued directly, Butler reasons that happiness itself must be something that arises from other pursuits, which he describes in terms of particular passions.

Particular passions, according to Butler, are passions directed at a specific object. We can, for example, have a particular passion for Nordic skiing. As a particular passion, the object is solely the experience of skiing: the agent who has this particular passion wants to ski. She satisfies her particular passion through skiing. Most of us, of course, have a wide range of particular passions. According to Butler, it is through the pursuit of particular passions, rather than the pursuit of self-interest or happiness more generally, that we attain happiness. Given the paradox of happiness and its observation that directly pursuing happiness (here, self-interest) is self-defeating, what we need to do is set aside concerns for happiness, develop particular passions, and pursue those. This, Butler argues, is the recipe for happiness. Happiness arises from the gratification of particular passions. “The very idea of interest or happiness,” he argues, “consists in this that an appetite or affection enjoys its object.” Moreover, “the very idea of interest or happiness ... implies particular appetites or passions, these being necessary to constitute that interest or happiness” (Butler 1726, 20).

What Butler does here is put forward a view of happiness according to which happiness depends upon the satisfaction of particular passions and interests insofar as it is something that arises from their satisfaction, and is something that depends upon what we are doing. This, he seems to think, is the natural way to think about happiness in light of the paradox of happiness. We know that when we just sit around and try to pursue ‘happiness’, that we end up failing to either become or increase our happiness. It makes sense, then, to think that we ought to stop worrying about happiness, and start thinking about what kinds of passions and interests we have.<sup>1</sup>

This line of reasoning has become somewhat commonplace within contemporary discussions of happiness. The most influential contemporary theories of happiness present views of happiness according to which happiness depends upon what we are doing—upon whether or not what we are doing satisfies us or gives us pleasure. The ‘life satisfaction’ view of happiness, for instance, describes happiness as arising from a positive evaluation of how one’s life is going. While perhaps

not directly linking happiness to satisfaction of particular passions, in reality the life satisfaction view presents a view according to which happiness depends upon *what we are doing and how we feel about what we are doing*. It is, ultimately, a felt response to the conditions of our life.

The most plausible hedonistic views also tie happiness, interpreted here as pleasure, to the pursuit of passions and interests, thereby also presenting a view of happiness according to which happiness depends on what we are doing and how we feel about what we are doing. Thus, for instance, Sumner describes classical hedonistic views, such as Mill's, as embracing a broad view of pleasure that "comprehends any and all experiences which we like (dislike) or find agreeable (disagreeable) for their own felt qualities" (1996, 142). On this picture, we feel pleasure, and so experience happiness, by engaging in experiences that we find agreeable. The experience of happiness is thus dependent on the attitudes we take toward those experiences. Feldman's influential theory of attitudinal hedonism makes this connection explicit. He describes attitudinal pleasures as the pleasures one takes in a state of affairs "if he enjoys it, is pleased about it, is glad that it is happening, is delighted by it" (Feldman 2004, 56). In a move that ought to remind us of Butler's analysis of particular passions, Feldman writes that "attitudinal pleasures are always directed onto objects, just as beliefs and hopes and fears are directed onto objects" (2004, 56).

While each of these views cashes out the details in ways that are importantly different from Butler's view, they nonetheless maintain the basic structure we see within Butler's view, which is that happiness depends upon and is contingent to the kinds of things we pursue in our lives—it depends upon and is contingent to the content of our pursuits. We've seen that this is a natural way to respond to the paradox of happiness, insofar as the paradox of happiness encourages us to recognize that we can't become happy simply by thinking exclusively about our happiness.

In what follows here, however, I will show that the analysis of happiness invoked in the familiar story is misguided. While, as we will see, the pursuit of happiness is anything but straightforward, the explanation of its complexity isn't as simple as the familiar story purports. And, perhaps most important, the best explanation we have of the pursuit of happiness calls into question the standard picture of happiness attached to most discussions of the paradox, which we see so nicely described by Butler and which, as we've seen, has influenced many contemporary theories of happiness. Happiness, I will argue, is not something that arises from the pursuit and satisfaction of interests and passions. It, quite simply, has not a lot to do with what we are doing and how we feel about what we are doing, but rather has to do with how well our minds are doing. This distinction is a nuanced one, but an important one that has significant implications for how we think about happiness.

I will begin by considering a challenge presented to the familiar story by psychological research on adaptation, research that Millgram (2000) thinks ought to

lead us to reconsider the weight and role we typically assign to happiness. I then evaluate this challenge and argue that, in contrast to a strong form of the adaptation hypothesis, there do seem to be some things that are resistant to adaptation, and that can enhance or detract from our happiness levels. I will go on to argue, however, that the familiar story cannot explain why these factors are ones that can influence us, and that to make sense of their influence, we have to abandon the familiar story and its hypothesis that happiness arises from the satisfaction of one's interests. In its place, I present a view of happiness as that which is the product of the well-functioning mind. I conclude by briefly exploring some of the implications of this view of happiness.

### III. THE ADAPTATION HYPOTHESIS

The process of adaptation has been discussed widely in the context of the theory that there exists, for each of us, a happiness set-point that is genetically determined. According to defenders of this theory, our experience of happiness is hard-wired, and variations in happiness between individuals are explainable by appeal to genes rather than to life circumstances. Lykken and Tellegen (1996), for instance, find genetic variability to be the most significant factor in determining happiness levels, accounting for at least between 44 percent to 52 percent (and maybe as much as 80 percent) of variance in levels of happiness, while other factors (socioeconomic status, education, marital status) accounted for only 3 percent of variance. Twin studies affirm this genetic basis, leading Lykken and Tellegen to claim that "the reported well-being of one's identical twin, either now or 10 years earlier, is a far better predictor of one's self-rated happiness than is one's own educational achievement, income, or status" (1996, 188). Adaptation is often brought up to support this claim, the idea being that a significant reason why lasting changes are elusive is because we so readily adapt to any changes in our lives. The adaptation hypothesis thus holds that regardless of what is going on in our lives, we return to the same general level of happiness we started with—we return to our happiness set-point.

While, as I'll discuss in the next section, the adaptation hypothesis is not uncontested, studies on adaptation seem to demonstrate that most of us have a remarkable ability to adapt our affective response to significant life changes, be they the most 'challenging' changes (e.g., becoming a paraplegic) or the most 'beneficial' changes (e.g., winning the lottery). Research suggests that while such changes may have a temporary effect on one's happiness levels, they, remarkably, seem to have no lasting effect. Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulmans's influential studies on adaptation, for instance, showed that while both lottery winners and paraplegics experienced changes in their happiness levels immediately following their life-changing event, the change was not permanent, and individuals in both groups returned to their original levels of happiness within two years (1978).

Why do our affective states seem so quick to adapt? The adaptive process seems to be an important part of how we are able to endure change. Change presents us with stress, and adaptation allows us to alleviate that stress. Haidt provides an interesting neurological analysis of adaptation, writing:

Adaptation is, in part, just a property of neurons: Nerve cells respond vigorously to new stimuli, but gradually they ‘habituate’, fighting less to stimuli that they have become used to. It is *change* that contains vital information, not steady states. Human beings, however, take adaptation to cognitive extremes. We don’t just habituate, we recalibrate. We create for ourselves a world of targets, and each time we hit one we replace it with another. After a string of successes we aim higher; after a massive setback, such as a broken neck, we aim lower ... we surround ourselves with goals, hopes, and expectations, and then feel pleasure and pain in relation to our progress. (2006, 26)

Life changes bring about a change in expectations: even a small boost in one’s salary generates higher expectations about what one will be able to do with all of that extra money; one’s expectations increase as one’s salary increases, and the degree of positive affect one experiences ends up remaining the same. This analysis surely explains studies showing that within the United States, there is only a small (0.12) correlation between wealth and reported happiness (Diener et al. 1993) and of why happiness levels in the United States seem to have remained the same even despite dramatic increases in income levels (Campbell 1981; Easterlin 1974, 1995).

While we might be tempted here to think that, with respect to happiness, we can prevent our affective states from adapting by controlling our expectations, the adaptive process seems to be more firmly engrained than this, with much of the adjustments being made automatically and beyond our conscious control. Frederick and Loewenstein (1999) find that adaptation can result from a number of different inputs and arise from a number of different processes—processes ranging from the automatic adjustment of sensory processes, such as when we adapt to foul smells so much that we may no longer notice them, to the overt actions we take to divert our attention away from troubling thoughts, to a conscious change of goals and expectations in response to frustrated efforts to attain previous goals. Thus while adaptation is something that we can consciously stimulate, it is also one that happens automatically, largely as a protection mechanism insofar as adaptation reduces the impact of repeated stimuli.

This evidence suggests that the process of adaptation is a central component in the production of happiness, insofar as it regulates our affective responses to the events and circumstances of our lives. And through the process of regulation, adaptation essentially ends up neutralizing the effects other factors have upon one’s happiness. It neutralizes not only the effect a new car or house can have upon our happiness, but also the effects a new promotion can have. Adaptation even promises to neutralize the effects of attaining any milestone, no matter how much that milestone may be cherished. These events may fulfill some of our interests

or particular passions, but if the adaptation hypothesis proves correct, there will be no corresponding lasting impact on our affective states. This, in turn, suggests that our experience of happiness is independent of whether or not we satisfy our interests, for whether or not we do so promises to have little effect on how happy we are.

The adaptation hypothesis thereby gives us good reason to question the idea that happiness is contingent to our pursuits and so presents a serious challenge to the familiar story. We've seen that a standard way of thinking about happiness, attributable to Butler, is as something that (a) arises from the satisfaction of our interests and particular passions; and (b) can be pursued indirectly, by focusing on developing and pursuing interests and satisfying particular passions. Yet, if the process of adaptation is as powerful as the evidence suggests, then both of these fall short. Happiness neither arises from the satisfaction of our interests and particular passions, nor can be pursued indirectly via their pursuit. Developing and pursuing interests, while important for other reasons, is not the fail-safe route toward becoming happy or increasing one's happiness that the familiar story takes it to be.

### 3.1 EVALUATING THE ADAPTATION HYPOTHESIS

The process of adaptation is likely something with which we are all familiar. Too often we find ourselves having grown accustomed to something we thought would deliver long-lasting satisfaction and pleasure. And, as we have seen, if the adaptation hypothesis is correct, its implications for how it is we think about happiness are dramatic: for if the adaptation hypothesis is correct, the paradox of happiness goes much deeper than we initially thought. It is not just the direct, intentional pursuit of happiness that will prove to be unsuccessful, it is *any* pursuit of happiness—direct or indirect—that will be unsuccessful.

Millgram (2000) advances this line of argument in his analysis of adaptation. He suggests that empirical research on adaptation calls into question the very point of reflecting on happiness, which he describes in terms of utility. While it might make sense to think about happiness when we are making minor decisions, for there can be some minor improvements we can make to our happiness level, given adaptation, we ought not to think about happiness when making more serious decisions. This, he thinks, drives a serious wedge into the plausibility of utilitarian theories:

Utilitarianism proposes as the criterion of moral choice that the option be selected that will most increase (or least decrease) overall utility. But if it were true that in normal circumstances nothing one does is going to make much of a difference to anyone's utility, or is not going to make the right kind of a difference, then utilitarianism would not have in fact provided a satisfactory criterion of moral choice. As it turns out, something like this is actually the case. (Millgram 2000, 116)

If the adaptation hypothesis holds, it does call into question the meaningfulness of reflecting on happiness, and the plausibility of attributing to happiness the kind of normative value that the utilitarian—among others—grants it. It should also, rightly, shake our commitment to the familiar story.

Recently, however, the adaptation hypothesis and its associated postulation of there being a happiness set-point has been called into question, as new research emerges suggesting that there are, in fact, things that can enhance (or detract from) our happiness levels. This research, we will see, requires close analysis in order to determine its implication for the adaptation hypothesis and its implications for how we ought to understand the pursuit and nature of happiness.

To begin with, some of the classic studies supporting the adaptation hypothesis have been called into question. While the infamous study on lottery winners (Brickman et al. 1978) challenges the influence of money upon one's levels of happiness, the idea that there is *no* correlation between increases in income and increases in happiness has recently been challenged. In contrast to earlier studies, Stevenson and Wolfers (2008) find that there is, in fact, a correlation between GDP and subjective well-being and argue that there is no satiation point beyond which increases in wealth do not track further increases in happiness. Others find that there is a satiation point, but that it is much higher than was previously thought. Kahneman and Deaton (2010) stress, sadness, anger, and affection that make one's life pleasant or unpleasant. Life evaluation refers to the thoughts that people have about their life when they think about it. We raise the question of whether money buys happiness, separately for these two aspects of well-being. We report an analysis of more than 450,000 responses to the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, a daily survey of 1,000 US residents conducted by the Gallup Organization. We find that emotional well-being (measured by questions about emotional experiences yesterday, for instance, find that happiness levels stabilize only after income levels hit \$75,000 a year—those whose incomes are below this mark do show a correlation between their income and happiness levels.

The hypothesis that we can completely adapt to disability (suggested by Brickman et al. 1978) has also been contested. While Brickman et al. found that those with spinal cord injuries eventually return to similar levels of happiness than they started with, their studies didn't compare levels of happiness between those with and without such disabilities. When we do this comparison, it becomes clear that those with disabilities tend to be less happy than those without (Dijkers 1997), suggesting that adaptation is not as powerful as originally thought. Like Brickman et al., Dijkers focused on those disabled by spinal cord injuries, yet research on other disabilities—particularly disabilities that result from chronic or progressive diseases—show varying degrees of adaptation, suggesting that these diseases are even more resistant to adaptation (Antonak and Livneh 1995; Livneh and Antonak 1994).

A more general challenge to the adaptation theory comes from Diener, Lucas, and Schollen (2006).<sup>2</sup> These psychologists argue that the rate and degree of



adaptation varies between individuals and is influenced by life events. They criticize earlier studies on adaptation for drawing conclusions without having measures of pre-event levels of happiness and argue—quite plausibly—that longitudinal studies on happiness levels pre-, during, and post-event are necessary to establish adaptation (Lucas 2007a). Moreover, Lucas’s longitudinal studies (Lucas 2007a) suggest that some life events, such as changes in marital, employment, and health status, do generate lasting changes to happiness levels. Forced unemployment, for instance, correlates with lower life satisfaction scores not only during the periods of unemployment, but two years (and often longer) after unemployment ends (Lucas et al. 2004).

If these studies prove what many take them to prove (and, again, we have to examine them closely to determine this), it looks like the adaptation hypothesis is less powerful than we might have thought and that to respond to the phenomenon of adaptation we may not need to go to the lengths Millgram suggests. More specifically, it looks like maybe there are some things that do influence our happiness levels in important ways, such as whether or not we have enough money to live comfortably, whether or not we are gainfully employed, how our personal relationships are going, and whether or not we are faced with a life-changing disability. But a closer look at the design of these studies shows that we ought to be cautious about taking their results to be decisive against the adaptation hypothesis. The concern is thus: at least some of these studies seem to be tracking reported life satisfaction rather than affect, thereby leaving it open that our affective responses to these life events might very well adapt, even if our reported appraisals of life satisfaction do not. This, I think, leaves a more moderate version of the adaptation hypothesis intact, as long as we take it as a general claim about how we commonly respond to life changes.

Lucas’s studies on unemployment, marital status, and disability explicitly examine judgments of life satisfaction, where subjects rank how satisfied they are with their lives on a scale from 1–10 (Lucas et al. 2003; Lucas et al. 2004; Lucas 2007b). The original studies on adaptation, however, examined degrees of pleasure experienced by participants. Brickman et al.’s (1978) studies on lottery winners and accident victims specifically tested *hedonic* adaptation. They asked subjects how *happy* they were, and had them rate how much *pleasure* they found in various activities. While Lucas’s critique of the methodology of Brickman et al.’s studies is well taken, it behooves us to recognize that they are testing different kinds of subjective well-being and that much of the evidence we have for thinking that permanent changes in happiness are possible draws on cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction and may not necessarily call into question the adaptive process with respect to positive affect.<sup>3</sup>

The reasonable conclusion, as I’ve suggested, is to see the adaptation hypothesis as a general claim about how we tend to react to changes in our lives. We have within us an adaptive process that tends to neutralize the effects changes in our

lives have upon our affective states. But that we have this mechanism within us does not mean it is immune to outside influences and that there is nothing that can interfere with it. To the contrary, there are, in fact, several identifiable factors that interfere with adaptation.

As we turn to a discussion of these factors, and more generally to a discussion of the kinds of things that can inhibit or enhance adaptation, it will help to keep in perspective where this all stands with respect to the pursuit and nature of happiness. I've argued thus far that the adaptation hypothesis casts suspicion over the familiar story insofar as adaptation neutralizes the effects the satisfaction of interests and passions has on the degree of happiness that we experience, such that it is a mistake to understand happiness as the familiar story does, as something that arises from the satisfaction of interests and passions. A further blow to the familiar story comes through consideration of the various things that do seem to prove resistant to adaptation and do seem to have lasting effects on our happiness, factors whose influence the familiar story is unable to explain.

Let us start by looking at the very specific life circumstances that seemingly prove resistant to adaptation and so that seemingly make long-lasting impacts on one's happiness levels. Being subject to chronic noise, for example, has ongoing effects on one's affective states. In a longitudinal study of whether or not residents would adapt to noise generated by a recently built highway in their neighborhood, Weinstein (1982) found no evidence of adaptation in a 16-month period and, in fact, found increasing annoyance with noise levels (and associated negative affect) over the course of this time. These results are well replicated.<sup>4</sup>

Having a lengthy, heavy traffic laden commute is another life circumstance that seems resistant to adaptation (Koslowsky and Kluger 1995). While there is much disagreement about the exact cause of the stress (Is it the time? Is it the traffic?), there is widespread agreement on the negative effects of commuting and its resistance to adaptation.<sup>5</sup> Time, it seems, will not help us adjust, and having this kind of stressful daily commute is likely to have lasting effects on our mood.

Here are, thus, two factors that influence our happiness: being around noise and having a lengthy commute. Right away, it should be clear that any possible explanation of *why* these circumstances impact our happiness is not going to appeal to how they contribute to the satisfaction of our interests. This, remember, is the explanation to which the familiar story is committed. The familiar story holds that happiness arises from and is dependent on the satisfaction of interests and particular passions. If this is so, then any explanation of why something prevents us from being happy must appeal to its effects on the satisfaction of interests and particular passions. Clearly, though, this is not the best explanation of why being around noise and having a lengthy commute negatively impact our happiness. (Indeed, lengthy commutes are often the means we take to satisfy our interests.) We must, thereby, move away from the familiar story.

As we move away from the familiar story and its picture of happiness as

arising from the satisfaction of interests and passions, we can begin to refine our understanding of happiness by looking at that which the factors that influence our happiness have in common. When it comes to being around noise and having a lengthy commute, what these circumstances seem to have in common is that they each have a negative impact on one's cognitive functioning: they both present stressful conditions that interfere with the mind's very capacity to function. This has been tested directly with respect to noise (Cohen and colleagues (1980; 1981)) find that children in noisy schools perform lower on cognitive tasks than children in the control group, a point also established in Weinstein's research on college students living in noisy dorms (Weinstein 1978) and to the lengthy commute, which Koslowsky and Kluger find to be highly correlated with, among other things, a difficulty in concentrating (1995).

This hypothesis—that those factors that influence our happiness do so not because they are related to the satisfaction of our interests but because they impact cognitive functioning—also helps to make sense of the other factors often identified to influence happiness levels. Consider, for instance, meditation. Recent research suggests the power of meditation is so great that meditating may even change one's happiness set-point. Davidson and colleagues (2003) use neuroimaging to examine the effects of meditation and found meditation to be correlated with greater activity in the left prefrontal cortex, which is thought to indicate levels of contentment.<sup>6</sup> The explanation of this cannot be that people satisfy their passions through meditating. Rather, the best explanation of the effect of meditation upon one's happiness levels must draw on the widely established cognitive benefits of meditation (Cahn and Polich 2006).

A similar explanation holds for the effect 'flow' activities, such as drawing or rock climbing, appear to have upon our happiness levels, although the connection here takes a little more work to uncover. In fact, some might argue that flow activities represent an interesting kind of challenge to the line of argument I pursue here, insofar as flow activities appear to deliver a kind of happiness that is contingent to pursuing interests.

Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow is well known. In an expansive study in which subjects recorded their enjoyment levels throughout the day, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that subjects experienced the most enjoyment when they were engaged in activities that challenged them and allowed them to use skills to successfully meet those challenges. These activities—which he describes as flow activities—seem to generate a state of pure enjoyment. Subjects engaged in flow activities find that they are effortlessly engaging in the activities, and often lose track of time while they are so engaged—they find themselves caught up in the activity and in the exercise of skill it prompts.

Do flow activities generate this state because they satisfy an individual's passions? While I think it is true that flow activities generally do represent activities that fulfill an individual's passions, research on flow activities suggests that the

reason flow activities generate the state of enjoyment that they do is because flow activities tap into our skills and allow us to put those skills to use. Csikszentmihalyi, for instance, describes flow activities as having “as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experiences. Play, art, pageantry, ritual, and sports are some examples” (1990, 72). But he goes on to stipulate that the reason why these activities generate enjoyable experiences is because of the way they are structured (and, presumably, not because they satisfy interests): “Because of the way they are constructed, they help participants and spectators achieve an ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable” (1990, 72).

The benefit of flow activities is thus not that they satisfy some interest, but that they provide the subject with opportunities to exercise skill. And this fits nicely with my overall suggestion that we move away from the familiar story and its dependence on the pursuit of interests, and toward an understanding of happiness that emphasizes and highlights the role of cognitive functioning.

#### IV. COGNITIVE FUNCTIONING

I’ve argued that psychological research on the kinds of things that influence our happiness paints a dramatically different picture of the nature of happiness than we find in the familiar story. The familiar story portrays happiness as something that arises from the satisfaction of interests but, in fact, it appears that what is most important in the production of happiness is to have a well-functioning mind, rather than the satisfaction of our interests and passions.

One natural explanation of why cognitive functioning is so important is that it enhances adaptation. Adaptation, after all, is a largely automatic process designed to protect us from the stress of repeated stimuli. It is our mind’s—and our body’s—natural way of responding to new situations or to changes in our situations. And, as with other automatic processes, there are certain things we can do to enhance it, and there are certain things we do that interferes with it. It stands to reason that those things that interfere with our cognitive functioning, such as being around noise, will also interfere with the adaptive process. Likewise, those activities that enhance our cognitive functioning, such as meditation, seem also to thereby enhance the adaptive process.

But is enhancing the adaptive process necessarily a good thing? Is it necessarily a *bad* thing to interfere with the adaptive process? After all, adaptation brings us both up, from painful experiences, and down, from highly pleasant experiences. While there might be some instances in which it would be advantageous to impair the adaptive process, it nonetheless is important to recognize that, overall, the adaptive process functions to keep us feeling positive. As we have seen, adaptation is widely thought to be a defensive measure, insofar as it allows us to adapt to challenging circumstances while reserving affective bursts to alert us to change. Gilbert

and colleagues, for instance, include adaptation as part of what they call the ‘psychological immune system’, whose very function is to protect us from experiencing bad emotions—in their words, “to protect the individual from an overdose of gloom” (1998, 619).

Not only should we see the overall point of the adaptive process as one which helps us to experience positive emotions, there is also the well-established fact that the set-point or range for most of us is a positive one. Most of us experience positive affect as our default, so it is not as if the adaptive process always brings us to neutral, rather, it more likely brings us to a position of positive affect.<sup>7</sup> This also makes sense from a functional perspective. As Diener and colleagues (2006) explain, there is much evidence suggesting that feeling positive affect makes people feel comfortable exploring their environment, more eager to set new goals, and even more successful in attaining those goals. They conclude that “the ubiquity of a positive emotional set point, in concert with the less frequent experience of unpleasant emotions, likely results from the adaptive nature of frequent positive emotions” (Diener et al. 2006, 307). There is thus good reason to think that the overall process of adaptation is a beneficial one, and this behooves us to do what we can to enhance it.

The familiar story presents happiness as a state that depends upon the satisfaction of particular passions and interests and as something that necessarily arises from their satisfaction. But we can now see that this view is misleading. If there is anything that happiness depends upon, it is upon the cognitive functioning of our mind and, I’ve suggested, the process of adaptation it sustains. Happiness simply does not seem to be the kind of thing that arises from the satisfaction of particular passions and interests and that can be pursued as an aim. Rather, happiness is a reflection of how our minds are doing.

With this understanding of the nature of happiness in hand, let us now turn to examine briefly the larger implications of our departure from the familiar story. I’ll first explore its implications for our understanding of the paradox of happiness, and then will explore its implications for how we ought to begin to structure our lives. While we very often structure our lives by thinking about how it is that we can be happy, and how we can help others be happy, I will argue that we can more productively structure our lives by thinking about how we can enhance our cognitive functioning. This, in turn, calls for a shift away from focusing on the normative value of happiness and toward a focus on an objective form of well-being defined in terms of cognitive functioning.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.1 THE PARADOX OF HAPPINESS

As we’ve seen, the paradox of happiness holds that direct, intentional efforts to maximize one’s happiness will not maximize one’s happiness and that the direct pursuit of happiness is thus self-defeating. We’ve seen that the familiar story tries to make sense of the paradox of happiness by positing happiness as something

that must arise from the gratification of particular passions and interests, rather than the gratification of a desire for happiness. Now that we know this move to be mistaken, how ought we to respond to the paradox of happiness?

The research we have considered affirms the empirical observational claim invoked by the paradox. Thinking about happiness and engaging in direct intentional efforts to promote one's happiness do not tend to be successful. And, in fact, some research suggests that the reason these efforts are unsuccessful is that they interfere with the process of adaptation that ultimately does seem to be the thing that produces happiness. Gilbert and colleagues find that the adaptive process appears particularly susceptible to attentional control—focusing our attention on how happy we are (or not) seems to disrupt the adaptive process. As soon as we start thinking about the particular situation we find ourselves struggling to adapt to, we prevent ourselves from adapting to it. They conclude that “one of the hallmarks of the psychological immune system [which includes adaptation] is that it works best when no one is watching, and when its operations are explicitly scrutinized, it may cease functioning altogether” (1998, 619).<sup>9</sup> That thinking about whether we are happy, and thinking about what will make us happy, and scrutinizing the degree to which we find each of our activities satisfying, interferes with the adaptive process helps to explain why the paradox of happiness arises.

The phenomenon of adaptation also helps to explain why it is that our efforts to pursue happiness are so unsuccessful. The fact is that, when we think about happiness and what will make us happy, not only do we mistakenly associate happiness with the satisfaction of interests, we tend to greatly underestimate the process of adaptation and so end up making very bad predictions. In a series of influential studies, Gilbert and colleagues describe a related phenomenon of ‘immune neglect’, which leads people to “overestimate the duration of their negative affective reactions” (1998, 619–20). We think, for instance, that it will be the end of the world if we do not receive tenure, and so forecast significant unhappiness in the face of being denied tenure, but we're probably wrong about that: Gilbert and colleagues (1998) asked assistant professors facing a tenure review to forecast both how happy they would be if they were granted tenure, and how unhappy they would be if they were denied tenure. Subsequent follow-ups showed they were wrong about both: they overestimated both how happy they'd be to receive tenure and how unhappy they'd be were they denied tenure. If we can be wrong about the extent to which something we are so deeply vested in as we are the tenure process will contribute to our long-term happiness, imagine how wrong we can be about the degree to which a new car, or a new house, or a different school, will make us happier.

The paradox of happiness thus runs much deeper than we might first think; thinking about whether or not we are happy and what will make us happy promises to interfere with our happiness on a very fundamental level. This suggests that we ought, as Butler suggested, to set aside concerns of happiness. But, if what we are really interested in is increasing happiness, we should not replace them with a

focus on our particular passions and interests. Rather, we ought to replace them with a focus on enhancing our cognitive functioning. This, we have seen, seems to be the key to happiness. We ought to think about the things we can do to enhance our cognitive functioning and structure our lives accordingly. We ought to begin to see cognitive functioning itself as normatively valuable. This means, I will now argue, that we ought to move away from emphasizing the importance of subjective well-being, and replace it with an emphasis on an objective form of well-being that encompasses a state of psychological flourishing.

#### 4.2 EUDAIMONIC WELL-BEING

I've argued that it doesn't make much sense to focus attention on happiness because (a) given the paradox of happiness, doing so tends to be counterproductive and (b) subjective well-being ultimately depends upon cognitive functioning. For most of us, it makes sense to focus on doing what we can to enhance our cognitive functioning.<sup>10</sup> Doing so points us toward reflection on the nature of psychological flourishing, something that psychologists describe in terms of 'eudaimonic well-being' (Ryan and Deci 2001; Ryff and Singer 2008).<sup>11</sup> Eudaimonic well-being describes a state of optimal psychological functioning; one marked by a lack of pathologies and higher performance on cognitive tasks. While eudaimonic well-being is highly correlated with happiness (more on this to come), it itself describes an objective form of well-being: it is a form of well-being that does not depend upon the possession of favorable attitudes toward one's life, or upon a state of positive affect more generally. It is, quite simply, a state of psychological health.<sup>12</sup>

According to many psychologists, whether or not we experience eudaimonic well-being, and so experience the enhanced state of cognitive functioning distinctive to it, depends upon whether we engage in the kinds of experiences that satisfy our innate psychological needs. Innate psychological needs are drives that typically move individuals to engage in certain kinds of experiences, making it the case that when they do so, they experience enhanced cognitive functioning, while when they do not, they experience pathologies (such as decreased cognitive functioning, higher levels of depression, and so on). While psychologists differ in how exactly they carve out the needs, research affirms that most of us have needs to feel connected to other people; to engage in experiences that allow us to exercise skill, especially over our environments; and to engage in actions that we identify with, and that we feel as if we are the origin.

These are the kinds of experiences central to the development of eudaimonic well-being, and that will enhance our cognitive functioning. As we think about how to live our lives, these ought to be the kinds of experiences we focus on, both because there is value to being in a state of psychological health, and, as the above discussion has suggested, because when we are in a state of psychological health, we are most likely to be happy.

This correlation—between engaging in experiences that satisfy innate psychological needs and experiencing sustained levels of happiness—is one that Sheldon and colleagues (2010) have studied explicitly. In a six-month longitudinal study, researchers split participants into two groups. One group was tasked with pursuing self-set goals related to their innate psychological needs, while the comparison group was tasked with pursuing self-set goals related to their life circumstances, such as where they lived or what they owned. Researchers then measured levels of positive affect and life satisfaction at intervals throughout the study. The results showed that success or failure in the need-related goal tracked significant increases and decreases in reported subjective well-being, while success or failure in circumstance-related goals had very little impact.

We've seen from many different angles that the most significant factor in the production of happiness appears to be the degree of cognitive functioning the individual is able to sustain. Now we have some real insight into how it is that we can best enhance our cognitive functioning: this is by satisfying our innate psychological needs.

## V. CONCLUSION

While the position that happiness is something that arises from and is dependent upon the satisfaction of our interests is well-engrained within much of our ordinary and philosophical thinking about happiness, research on the pursuit of happiness shows us that happiness—taken to be a state of subjective well-being marked by positive affect—really has nothing to do with the satisfaction of interests and has everything to do with our cognitive functioning. I've argued that this gives us good reason not only to abandon the familiar story, but also to reorient the kind of normative value we attach to happiness. Given the essential role that cognitive functioning plays in the production of happiness, we ought to think about how we can best enhance our cognitive functioning, by engaging in experiences that satisfy our innate psychological needs and generate the state of eudaimonic well-being that represents a state of psychological flourishing.

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## NOTES

1. Mill describes a similar view in his autobiography, where he writes that the only people who are happy are those “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. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way” (1873, 117).
2. Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, and Diener 2003, 2004; Lucas 2007a.
3. One of Lucas’s studies on disability includes a ‘general health questionnaire’, which measures psychological distress, in addition to the life satisfaction scale (2007b). This comes closer to measuring positive affect, although is not as explicit as the measures employed by Brickman and colleagues. Results of the general health questionnaire showed more, but not complete, adaptation than he found with respect to life satisfaction. This, I think, is consistent with the line of argument I pursue here, which is that adaptation occurs primarily with respect to positive affect rather than life satisfaction.
4. See Frederick and Loewenstein (1999).
5. See Koslowsky (1997) for review.
6. See also Davidson (2004) and Urry et al. (2004).
7. For review, see Diener et al. (2006).
8. This focus on enhancing cognitive functioning gives rise to the challenging question of how happiness functions for those with mental disabilities. One might think a consequence of the current argument is that those with severe mental disabilities cannot be psychologically happy. Drawing this conclusion, however, would be unwarranted. The research discussed here is conducted on those without mental disabilities, and the conclusions should be limited to this group. It would be a mistake to think that those with disabilities cannot be happy, for of course they are. What is most likely is that, just as their minds function differently, the manner in which their minds generate happiness is also different and adaptive to their disabilities.
9. See also Kahneman and Thaler (2006) for discussion of how attention affects adaptation.
10. Again, we ought to expect a different prescription for those whose minds operate in significantly different ways.
11. While there are clear similarities between the psychological account of eudaimonic well-being and Aristotle’s understanding of eudaimonia, my discussion here will be limited to a discussion of the psychological account. For discussion of the comparison, see Besser-Jones (2014).
12. There are some interesting points of similarity between eudaimonic well-being and Haybron’s emotional state view of happiness, which includes similar dimensions of psychic flourishing with the understanding of happiness itself (Haybron 2008). My proposal is significantly different than Haybron’s, however, insofar as eudaimonic well-being is an objective form of well-being that, I’ll argue, gives rise to the separable positive affective states the familiar story associates with happiness.

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