

## Chapter 1

# The Happiness Agenda: The Next 10 Years

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# 1

The central task of institutions is to promote the behaviours and conditions of all kinds which are conducive to happiness.

Concern for happiness and the alleviation of suffering goes back to the Buddha, Confucius, Socrates and beyond. But looking back over the first ten years of the World Happiness Report, it is striking how public interest in happiness and well-being has grown in recent years. This can be seen in newspaper stories, Google searches, and academic research.<sup>1</sup> It can also be seen in books, where talk of happiness has overtaken the talk of income and GDP.<sup>2</sup> Although this growth in interest started well before the first *World Happiness Report* in 2012, we have been surprised at the extent to which the Reports have appeared to fill a need for a better knowledge base for evaluating human progress.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, policy-makers themselves increasingly talk about well-being. The OECD and the EU call on member governments to “put people and their well-being at the heart of policy design.”<sup>4</sup> And five countries now belong to the Well-being Economy Government Alliance.<sup>5</sup>

## The Basic Ideas

A natural way to measure people’s well-being is to ask them how satisfied they are with their lives. A typical question is, “Overall, how satisfied are you with your life these days?” People reply on a scale of 0-10 (0= completely dissatisfied, 10= completely satisfied). This allows people to evaluate their own happiness without making any assumptions about what causes it. Thus ‘life satisfaction’ is a standard measure of well-being.

However, an immediate question arises of what habits, institutions and material conditions produce a society where people have higher well-being. We must also ask how people can gain the skills to further their own long-term (or sustainable) well-being. The World Happiness Reports have studied these questions each year, in part by comparing the average life satisfaction in different countries and seeing what features in the population explain these differences.<sup>6</sup> The findings are clear. The ethos of a country matters – are people trustworthy, generous, and mutually supportive? The institutions also matter – are people free to make important life decisions? And the material conditions of life matter – both income and health.

These are broadly the conditions identified by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>7</sup> He identified a person who was high in these attributes – character virtues and sufficient external goods – as achieving “eudaimonia.” In particular, he stressed the importance of the person’s character, built by mentorship and habits, and he famously defined eudaimonia as “the activity of the soul according to virtue”. In other words, high eudaimonia required a virtuous character, including moderation, fortitude, a sense of justice, an ability to form and maintain friendships, as well as good citizenship in the polis (the political community). Today we describe the outward-facing virtues of friendship and citizenship as “pro-social” attitudes and behaviour. For the Greeks, and us, living the right kind of life is a hard-won skill. The Greeks used the term *arete*, which means excellence or virtue. Individual virtue



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is essential, as is pro-sociality. Our modern evidence also shows that the development of virtuous behaviours needs a supportive social and institutional environment if it is to result in widespread happiness. Aristotle, too knew this through his investigation of the constitutions of Athens and other city-states of ancient Greece.

A society where the average citizen exhibits strong virtues and high eudaimonia will also be one where the average citizen experiences high life satisfaction. To see why this is true we have only to consider how far our own life satisfaction depends on the behaviour and attitudes of others. So to have a society with high average life satisfaction, we need a society with virtuous citizens and with supportive institutions. At the level of

society, the two terms go hand-in-hand. Effective institutions support character development; virtuous citizens promote effective institutions.

Being virtuous generally makes people feel better. In several studies, some people were given money to give to others, while others were given money to keep – the former group became happier.<sup>8</sup> That

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happier people are more likely to help others is also shown in Chapter 4 of this Report, and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> And in Prisoner's Dilemma games in laboratories, it has been shown that when people choose to behave cooperatively, they experience increased activity in the reward centres of the brain.<sup>10</sup>

But virtue is not always and necessarily rewarding. For example, some full-time voluntary caregivers (looking after vulnerable children or elderly parents) have quite low life satisfaction.<sup>11</sup> Thus, when we look at individuals, life satisfaction and eudaimonia are not identical. We need, for example, special institutions to support the hard work of caregivers. Caregiving is rewarding but also difficult and painful and needs social support. The general policy point remains, however. We should train individuals in virtue and eudaimonia – both for their own sake and that of others.

The central task of institutions is to promote the behaviours and conditions of all kinds which are conducive to happiness. But before we come to institutions and research, there are two other fundamental issues of principle. The first is the **distribution of happiness** – as compared with its average level. Unlike the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, we do not think the average level of happiness (or the simple sum of happiness, per person) is all that matters. We should care about the distribution of happiness and be happier when misery can be relieved. Most ethical systems emphasise that the world (and “creation”) is for everybody, not merely for the lucky, the rich, or the favoured. One obvious step in this direction is to guarantee minimum human rights (including food, shelter, freedom, and civil rights). Thus the **UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights**<sup>12</sup> is an integral component of the happiness agenda. Without such basic human rights, there would today be many more people living in misery. Yet the agenda of the Universal Declaration is still far from fulfilled, and its realisation remains a central task of our time.

A second issue is equally vital: **the well-being of future generations**. In most ethical systems, and from the happiness perspective, happiness matters for everybody across the world and across generations. Today's decisions should give due weight to the well-being of future

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generations and our own. In technical terms, the discount rate used to compare the circumstances across generations should be very low, and indeed much below the discount rates typically used by economists. Future well-being must be given its due. For this reason, the **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**<sup>13</sup> are also a vital component of the happiness agenda.

In short, the interests of others (human rights) and of a sustainable environment (SDGs) are integral to happy lives rather than something that is either additional or in conflict with them.

## Priorities for Institutions

Thus, there is now the potential for a real well-being revolution, that is, a broad advance in human well-being achieved by deploying our knowledge, technologies, and ethical perspectives. The appetite for such an advance is growing, and the knowledge base of how to promote human well-being is exploding.

Based on what we have learned from the life evaluations of millions of survey respondents around the globe, we now more clearly understand the key factors at work. To explain the differences in well-being around the world, both within and among countries, the key factors include<sup>14</sup>

- physical and mental health
- human relationships (in the family, at work and in the community),
- income and employment
- character virtues, including pro-sociality and trust
- social support
- personal freedom
- lack of corruption, and
- effective government







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Human beings do not spring into the world fully formed, like mushrooms, as Hobbes once suggested. Nor do they have tastes and values which can be taken as given, as the economists Becker and Stigler once suggested.<sup>15</sup> Their characters, habits, and values are formed by the social institutions where they live and the norms which they absorb from them. For example, the Nordic countries have the highest well-being, though they are not richer than many other countries. But they do have higher levels of trust and of mutual respect and support.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the well-being revolution will depend on the performance of the social institutions in each country. The objective of every institution should be to contribute what it can to human well-being. From our existing knowledge, we can already see many of the key things that institutions have to do. Let us take these institutions in turn.

### **Governments and NGOs**

Thomas Jefferson once said, “The care of human life and happiness is the only legitimate object of good government”.<sup>17</sup> This echoes Aristotle’s belief that politics should aim to promote eudaimonia. The overarching objective of a government must be to create conditions for the greatest possible well-being and, especially, the least misery in the population. (Fortunately, as we show later, it is also in the electoral interest of the government to increase happiness since this makes it more likely that the government will be re-elected).

Thus, all policies on expenditure, tax and regulation need to be assessed in terms of their impact on well-being. Total expenditure will probably be determined by political forces, but which policies attract money should depend on their likely effect on well-being per dollar spent.<sup>18</sup> We already have rough estimates of some of these effects and what follows reflects this evidence.

Policy choices should always take proper account of future generations (“sustainability”) and the need to preserve basic human rights. The fight against climate change is, of course, international, and each government should play its proper role in this inescapable commitment.

There is evidence that other things being equal, countries with higher levels of government social expenditure (but not military expenditure), backed by the revenues to pay for them, have higher well-being.<sup>19</sup> Social expenditure leads to higher happiness, especially in countries with trusted and effective governments (see Chapter 3). This is more than coincidence, as where social and institutional trust are deservedly higher, people are more prepared to pay for social programs, and governments are more able to deliver them efficiently. But, whatever the scope of government, there is always a key role for charitable, voluntary organisations (NGOs) – in almost every sphere of human activity. The rationale for an NGO is its contribution to well-being, and every NGO would naturally evaluate its alternative options against this criterion.

### **Health Services and Social Care**

Many health services already evaluate their spending options by their impact per dollar on the number of Quality-of-life-Adjusted Life Years (QALYs) – a procedure similar to that needed for all government expenditure. Since resources are limited, this is the only approach that can be justified.

One clear finding is that much more needs to be spent on mental healthcare and public health. For example, modern evidence-based psychological therapy for depression and anxiety disorders has been shown to save more money than it costs. (The savings are on reduced disability benefits, increased tax payments and reduced physical healthcare costs).<sup>20</sup> Even more proactive than providing mental health care, a focus on mental health promotion – or promoting the conditions for good mental health and preventing the onset of mental illness – has been shown to be cost effective.<sup>21</sup>

Many problems of mental and physical health can be prevented by better lifestyles (e.g., more

exercise, better sleep, diet, social activities, volunteering, and mindfulness). We must also acknowledge that these lifestyle choices take place within social and physical environments – shaping these environments to make the “right” choice the easy choice is important, as we know that individual behaviour change is difficult. Governments and health systems have a role to play in helping to shape the environments in which we live to facilitate ways of living that promote well-being. Community organisations have a major role to play here. So does ‘social prescribing’ by general medical practitioners. These are areas for major expansion.

But, whatever happens, millions of vulnerable children and adults will need further help. These include children who are orphaned or have mental or physical disabilities, disabled adults of working age (including those living with an addiction disorder), and the vulnerable elderly. In a well-being strategy, these people have high priority.

### **Schools**

In promoting positive well-being, schools have a standing start. But they do not always take advantage of it, and, even before COVID, the well-being of adolescents in most advanced countries was falling, especially among girls.<sup>22</sup> This has been attributed partly to the increased pressures of exams and partly to social media. There are many ways in which schools can improve well-being, and many do. First, there is the whole ethos and value system of the school, as shown in relations between teachers, pupils and parents. Second is the practice of measurement – by measuring well-being, schools will show they treasure it and aim to improve it.<sup>23</sup> Finally, there is the regular teaching of life skills in an evidence-based way, where many methods based on positive psychology have been found to be effective.<sup>24</sup>

### **Business and Work**

Business plays a huge role in the generation of well-being. It supplies customers with goods and services, provides workers with income, employment and quality of work, and provides profits to the owners. Business operates within a

framework of law, and its existence is justified by its contribution to well-being. In 2019 the US Business Roundtable, representing many of the world’s leading companies, publicly asserted that business has obligations to the welfare of customers, workers and suppliers as well as shareholders. There is now a major industry of consultants who advise companies on how to promote worker well-being – both for its own sake and because of its benefits to the shareholder.<sup>25</sup> One US time-use study showed that the worst time of the day for workers was when they were with their boss.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, some workplaces have much to gain from a well-being revolution.

### **Community Life: Humans as Social Animals**

Adult life consists of more than work. It contains family life and all kinds of social interactions outside the home. As Aristotle said, Man is a social animal. A clear finding of well-being research is the massive role of social connections in promoting well-being – and the corresponding power of loneliness to reduce it.<sup>27</sup>

One major form of connection is membership in voluntary organisations (be it for sports, arts, religious worship, or just doing good). The evidence is clear: membership in such organisations is good for well-being.<sup>28</sup> A society that wants high well-being has to make it easy for such organisations to flourish. The power of human connections to improve life is, of course, not restricted to formal organisations – time-use studies show that almost any activity is more enjoyable when done in friendly company.<sup>29</sup>

### **Environmental Agencies**

It is also the job of society to protect the environment – for the sake of present and future generations. There is powerful evidence of how contact with nature and green space enhances human well-being.<sup>30</sup> It is the job of environmental agencies and central and local governments to protect our contact with nature. But there is also the overarching challenge of climate change, where our present way of life can only be protected by major international effects to reduce to net zero the emission of greenhouse gases.





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### Rule of Law

The legal system has, of course, many functions. It has to uphold human rights, adjudicate civil disputes and punish crime. On punishment, the well-being approach is clear. There are only three justifications for punishment: deterrence of future crime, protection of the public today, and rehabilitation of the offender. There is no role for retribution. And the overriding aim has to be reintegration of the offender into society. For offenders in prison, this requires real effort, and the Singapore Prison Reform of 1998 provides a good example of prisoners, wardens and the community collaborating to enable prisoners to have better lives, in which they return to the institutions later as volunteers rather than prisoners.<sup>31</sup>

### Individuals and Families

So far, we have discussed institutions outside the family. But for most people, their family affects their well-being as much as any other institution. How families function, and indeed how all institutions function, depends ultimately on individuals and their objectives in life. According to the well-being approach, the greatest overall well-being will only result if individuals try in their own lives to create the most well-being that they can (for themselves and others).<sup>32</sup>

### Belief Systems

The goal of civic virtue has, of course, been promoted throughout the ages. It was central to

the teachings of Aristotle as well as Confucius and most of the world's religious faiths. It is now being promoted by secular movements like Action for Happiness,<sup>33</sup> Effective Altruism<sup>34</sup> and the World Wellbeing Movement.<sup>35</sup> More movements of this kind are needed.

## Research Priorities

To complete the well-being revolution will, however, require a lot more knowledge. So here are some priorities for further research, following the sequence of our previous arguments.

### Happiness and Virtue

A first key issue is how to cultivate and promote virtuous character and behaviour. If we compare one society with another we can see that countries with superior social norms tend to achieve higher levels of well-being. For example, in chapter 2 of each World Happiness Report, we show the positive effects of living in a more generous, trusting and supportive society. There are two reasons for this relationship. First, virtuous behaviour by one person makes other people feel better. But second, there is evidence that when an individual behaves virtuously, she herself feels better. But we also need more naturalistic studies of the relation between people's values and their individual happiness.

Going on, if virtue matters so much, the key question is how to help people to become more virtuous. Aristotle introduced this question in the *Nicomachean Ethics* more than 2,300 years ago. The Buddha, Hindu philosophers (in the *Bhagavad Gita* and elsewhere), Jewish and Christian theologians, Islamic thinkers, and others have long asked the same questions.

This subject is difficult to study empirically because we do not have sufficient quantitative measures of virtuous values and behaviour. The most common question used by Britain's Office of National Statistics is, "Do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?" But what we really want to know is whether the things people do are actually worthwhile. Returning lost wallets is an example of pro-social behaviour with strongly positive well-being effects<sup>36</sup> and deserves more regular monitoring by surveys and experiments. The frequency of other benevolent behaviours is surveyed regularly in the Gallup World Poll, and found to support happiness.<sup>37</sup> There is evidently vast scope for far more research on individual character, virtues, and well-being, and we strongly encourage such research.

The problem of how to study behaviour may be easier to solve with children because teachers observe them closely enough to be able to rate their behaviour. In such studies, many strategies in schools have been found to improve behaviour. The most striking of these is the Good Behaviour Game,<sup>38</sup> where students are rewarded for the average behaviour of their group. Many life-skills programmes have also been found to influence behaviour.<sup>39</sup> But for adults, it is not enough to say that better values lead to greater happiness. We also need to know how to promote virtues, including self-control, moderation, trustworthiness, and pro-sociality.

### Cost-Effectiveness Experiments and Models (for Government and NGOs)

A second major need concerns the effective use of public money to increase happiness and (especially) to remove misery. If the aim of all public spending is to increase the level of well-being, policy proposals (and existing policies) should keep a focus on long-term well-being.<sup>40</sup>





In some cases, it may be possible to quantify a policy's effects on the level and distribution of well-being. In other cases, the effects will be complex and downstream, yet the long-term implications of the policies for well-being may still be subject to scrutiny, with due regard for long-term uncertainties.

Scrutiny of the links between policy and well-being will require new tools, including experimental methods when appropriate, combined with complete monitoring of the well-being of all those affected. Evaluations of past policies in terms of their impacts on the subjective well-being of the affected individuals and communities are still rare. Closing that research gap will require a change in outcome measures at both the individual and community levels. Even where well-being itself is not included, research based on the determinants of life evaluations in the relevant populations can still be used to provide weights to attach to the various other outcomes. This is a key step in moving from a list of well-being objectives to specific policy decisions.

### Measurement

The World Happiness Reports use subjective life evaluations as their central umbrella measure of well-being, with positive and negative emotions playing important mediating roles. The evidence thus far available suggests that several different forms of life evaluation, including the Cantril ladder, satisfaction with life, and being happy with life as a whole all provide similar conclusions about the sources of well-being.<sup>41</sup> They are, therefore, interchangeable as basic measures of underlying well-being. Short-term positive and negative emotions are also useful to measure the impact of fast-changing circumstances. They also provide important mediating pathways for longer-term factors, especially those relating to the quality of the social context.<sup>42</sup> That emotions and life evaluations react differently to changes in the sources of well-being in just the ways that theory and experiments would suggest<sup>43</sup> adds to the credibility of both.

There is much also to be gained by complementary information about well-being available from examining neural pathways,<sup>44</sup> genetic differences,

and what can be inferred from the nature of how people communicate using social media (see Chapter 5). These are all active and valuable research streams worthy of further development. The future measurement agenda should also seek much better measures of the quality of the social and institutional fabric that is so central to explaining well-being.

Such subjective measures should, of course, be complemented by the continued collection of various kinds of objective measures, such as measures of deprivation (hunger, destitution, lack of housing), physical and mental health status, civil rights and personal freedoms, measures of values held within the society, and indicators of social trust and social capital.

### The Effect of Well-being

Finally, there is the issue of the effects of well-being on other valued outcomes – such as longevity, productivity, pro-sociality, conflict, and voting behaviour. Such effects add to the case for improving well-being. Some of these effects are well documented,<sup>45</sup> but work on the political and social effects of well-being is in its infancy. Some studies show that higher well-being increases the vote share of the government<sup>46</sup> and that well-being is more important than the economy in explaining election results. Similarly, low well-being increases support for populism.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, well-being will be at the centre of future political debate. But it needs a lot more work.

### Conclusion

Increasingly, people are judging the state of affairs by the level and distribution of well-being, both within and across generations. People have many values (like health, wealth, freedom and so on) as well as well-being. But increasingly, they think of well-being as the ultimate good, the summum bonum. For this reason, we suggest that the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 and beyond should put much greater operational and ethical emphasis on well-being. The role of well-being in sustainable development is already present, but well-being should play a much more central role in global diplomacy and in international and national policies in the years to come.

# Endnotes

- 1 See Layard (2020, p.9).
- 2 See Barrington-Leigh (2022).
- 3 This is illustrated by the increasing number of references, even when compared to the triggering 'beyond GDP' concept, as shown in Figure 3.1 of chapter 3 of WHR 2022.
- 4 See EU Council (2019) and remarks by OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría, Brussels, July 8th, 2019 (<https://www.oecd.org/social/economy-of-well-being-brussels-july-2019.htm>).
- 5 New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Scotland and Wales.
- 6 See for example Table 2.1 in this report.
- 7 'Ancient ethical theories are theories about happiness – theories that claim to have a reflective account of happiness will conclude that it requires having the virtues and giving due weight to the interests of others' Annas (1993), p. 330.
- 8 See Aknin et al. (2019, p. 72). For a fuller review of pre-registered studies, see Aknin et al. (2022).
- 9 See Kushlev et al. (2020), Kushlev et al. (2022), Rhoads et al. (2021), Brethel-Haurwitz et al. (2014) and Aknin et al. (2018).
- 10 See Rilling et al (2002).
- 11 See Zeller (2018).
- 12 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- 13 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. For the links between the SDGs and happiness, see De Neve and Sachs (2020).
- 14 The importance of these variables appears both in cross-country context, as in Table 2.1 of Chapter 2 in this Report, and in analysis of individual responses, as shown, for example in Table 2.4 of *World Happiness Report 2022*, or in Clark et al. (2018).
- 15 See Stigler and Becker (1977).
- 16 As shown in Chapter 2, when large numbers of cash-containing wallets were experimentally dropped in 40 different countries, the percentage returned was 81% in the Nordic countries, 60% elsewhere in Western Europe, and 43% in all other countries combined. The underlying data are from Cohn et al (2019).
- 17 See Jefferson, T. (2004).
- 18 See Layard and De Neve (2023) and Frijters and Krekel (2021).
- 19 See Table 16 of Statistical Appendix 2 of Chapter 2 of *World Happiness Report 2019*. See also Flavin et al (2011), O'Connor (2017), and Helliwell et al. (2018)
- 20 See Layard and Clark (2014) particularly Chapter 11. See also Chisholm et al. (2016).
- 21 See Le et al. (2021).
- 22 See Cosma et al. (2020); Marquez and Long (2021). Krokstad et al (2022); McManus et al (2016); Sadler et al (2018).
- 23 See #BeeWell Report (2022)
- 24 See Durlak et al. (2011) and Lordan and McGuire (2019).
- 25 See Edmans (2012)
- 26 See Krueger (2009, p. 49).
- 27 See Waldinger and Schulz (2023).
- 28 See Helliwell and Putnam (2004).
- 29 13,000 Londoners asked on half a million occasions about their momentary happiness were happier in the company of a friend or partner, regardless of the nature or location of their activity. The overall results relating to the physical environment are in Krekel & MacKerron (2020), with the social context interactions reported in Helliwell et al. (2020) at p. 9.
- 30 For example Krekel et al (2016) and Krekel & MacKerron (2020).
- 31 See Leong (2010) and Helliwell (2011).
- 32 This is the pledge taken by members of Action for Happiness.
- 33 <https://actionforhappiness.org/>
- 34 <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/>
- 35 <https://worldwellbeingmovement.org/>
- 36 See Figure 2.4 in *World Happiness Report 2021*.
- 37 As with the role of donations in Table 2.1 of each year's Chapter 2. There were more increases in several types of benevolent acts in 2022, as reported in *World Happiness Report 2022*.
- 38 See Kellam et al. (2011) and Ialongo et al. (1999).
- 39 See Durlak et al. (2011) and Lordan and McGuire (2019).
- 40 See Layard and De Neve (2023) especially Chapter 18.
- 41 See *World Happiness Report 2015*, p. 15-16.
- 42 For example, Table 2.1 of *World Happiness Report 2022* shows that the coefficients for social support, freedom and generosity are materially lower in column 4 (where emotions are included) than in column 1 (where they are not) while the coefficients for income, health and corruption are unchanged.
- 43 For example, the level of workplace trust is an important determinant of both life evaluations and daily emotions, but with different patterns: high workplace trust lessens the size of the weekend effect for emotions, while life evaluations do not display any weekend patterns.
- 44 For example, see Davidson & Schuyler (2015).
- 45 For a range of outcomes, see Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) and De Neve et al. (2013). On longevity see Steptoe and Wardle (2012) and Rosella et al. (2019), on productivity see Bellet et al. (2020), and for subsequent income see De Neve and Oswald (2012).
- 46 See Ward (2019), Ward (2020), and Ward et al. (2021).
- 47 See Nowakowski (2021).



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