

The Creepy New Economics of Pleasure

by Deirdre N. McCloskey

Before 2013 begins, catch up on the best of 2012. From now until the New Year, we will be re-posting some of The New Republic's most thought-provoking pieces of the year. Enjoy.

IN THE FIRST PANEL of a *Peanuts* strip—the preceding ones had been about Lucy scolding her little brother, Linus, for not being a good brother—Lucy asks what Linus is offering her: “What’s this?” “A dish of ice cream.” Then Linus explains: “I brought it to you in order that your stay here on Earth might be more pleasant.” She smiles genially, and uncharacteristically: “Well, thank you ... You’re a good brother.” In the final panel, Linus walks away smiling: “Happiness is a compliment from your sister!”

That about sums it up. Pleasure is to be achieved by things like dishes of ice cream. Psychologists have shown rigorously that people are most pleased exactly as you might have thought if you are a human being: when eating, say, a heaped pastrami on rye at Manny’s Deli off Roosevelt Road in what was once the garment district of Chicago. Happiness, by contrast, is more complicated, though it can also be pursued at Manny’s. It is the pleasure of kosher comfort food, down to the diminishing marginal utility of that last bite—but it is also expressing one’s urban identity and Chicago-ism, even at the costs of the considerable inconvenience in getting to Manny’s and braving the insults of the countermen. It is introducing your friend, a naïve gentile, to the Jewish side of the City of the Big Shoulders, affirming thereby your philo-Semitism. It is participating in the American democracy of a 1950s cafeteria. It is facing, too, the cost of a little addition to the love handles. And it is a compliment from your sister. Pleasure is a brain wave right now. Happiness is a good story of your life. The Greek word for happiness is “*eudaimonia*,” which means literally “having a good guiding angel,” like Clarence the angel in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. The schoolbook summary of the Greek idea in Aristotle says that such happiness is “the exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope.”

But nowadays there is a new science of happiness, and some of the psychologists and almost all the economists involved want you to think that happiness is just pleasure. Further, they propose to calculate your happiness, by asking you where you fall on a three-point scale, 1-2-3: “not too happy,” “pretty happy,” “very happy.” They then want to move to technical manipulations of the numbers, showing that you, too, can be “happy,” if you will but let the psychologists and the economists show you (and the government) how.

On a long view, understand, it is only recently that we have been guiltlessly obsessed with either pleasure or happiness. In secular traditions, such as the Greek or the Chinese, a pleasuring version of happiness is downplayed, at any rate in high theory, in favor of political or philosophical insight. The ancient Chinese sage Zhuangzi observed of some goldfish in a pond, “See how happy they are!” A companion replied, “How do you know they are happy?” Zhuangzi: “How do you know I don’t know?” In Christianity, for most of its history, the treasure, not pleasure, was to be stored up in heaven, not down here where thieves break in. After all, as a pre-eighteenth-century theologian would put it—or as a modern and mathematical economist would, too—an infinite afterlife was infinitely to be preferred to any finite pleasure attainable in earthly life.

The un-happiness doctrine made it seem pointless to attempt to abolish poverty or slavery or wife-beating. A coin given to the beggar rewarded the giver with a leg-up to heaven, a *mitzvah*, a *hasanaat*; but the ancient praise for charity implied no plan to adopt welfare programs or to grant rights of personal liberty or to favor a larger national income. A life of sitting by the West Gate with a bowl to beg was, after all, an

infinitesimally small share of one's life to come. Get used to it: For now and for the rest of your life down here, it's your place in the great chain of being. Take up your cross, and quit whining. What does it matter how miserable you are in this life if you'll get pie in the sky when you die? Such fatalism in many religions—"God willing," we say, "*im yirtzeh hashem*," "*insh'Allah*," "*deo volente*"—precluded idle talk of earthly happiness.

Then, in the eighteenth century, our earthly happiness became important to us, in high intellectual fashion. By 1776, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" was an unoriginal formulation of what we all, of course, now admitted that we chiefly wanted. John Locke had taught, in 1677, that "the business of men [is] to be happy in this world by the enjoyment of the things of nature subservient to life, health, ease, and pleasure"—though he added piously, "and by the comfortable [that is, comforting] hopes of another life when this is ended." By 1738, the Comte de Mirabeau wrote to a friend, recommending simply, "[W]hat should be our only goal: happiness."

"Our only goal." To see how strange such a remark is, consider whether it could have been uttered by a leader of opinion in 1538. Martin Luther? Michelangelo? Charles V? No. They sought heavenly, artistic, or political glory—not something so domestic as happiness. Yet, in the late seventeenth century, even Anglican priests commenced preaching that God wanted us to be happy as much as holy. They called it "eudaemonism." Anglicans and, astonishingly, some New England Congregationalists turned against the old, harsh, Augustinian-Calvinist line. We are not, declared the eudaemonists, mere sinners in the hands of an angry God, worms unworthy of grace. We are God's beloved creatures, his pets.

The eudaemonistic turn was a Very Good Thing, resulting in fresh projects to better our stay here on Earth, some of them remarkably successful. Democracy was one, since, if you followed the fashion for universal happiness, it became impossible to go on insisting that what really mattered was the pleasure of the Duke or the Lord Bishop. Enlightened despots of the era claimed to seek the good of all, which paradoxically gave the populace the idea that maybe they themselves could do it.

Parallel with the stirrings of democracy and its accompanying welfarism, advocating for hospitals and free public education, was a new bourgeois dignity and liberty. Starting in Holland and England, and in the North American colonies of the English, the paired bourgeois revaluations combined to cause modern enrichment. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1835 that "all the English colonies [in North America] at the time of their birth ... seemed destined to present the development of ... the bourgeois and democratic liberty of which the history of the world did not yet offer a complete model." Or again about the first industrial nation: "Looking at the turn given to the human spirit in England by political life; seeing the Englishman ... inspired by the sense that he can do anything. ... I am in no hurry to inquire whether nature has scooped out ports for him, and given him coal and iron."

As a result, real income per head commenced rising after 1800, from the hopeless \$3 a day that humanity had endured since the caves to the \$125 a day that increasing portions of the world now enjoy—and anyway to the \$30 a day that the average human now consumes, including Chadians and Bangladeshis in the average with the Japanese and Americans. It's ten times more stuff, more access to clean water, a higher life expectancy, and even, for the middling, more dishes of ice cream and more pastrami on rye. And, for the swiftly rising percentage of \$125-a-day folk, it means more Mozart and more college degrees.

In 1789, in bourgeois England, the newish doctrine of happiness was made fully "scientific" in method by Jeremy Bentham. That the pursuit of happiness rightly considered is the goal of life was by then routine, having been given contemporary philosophical dress in modern eudaemonism by, among others, David Hume. And, in a move typical since Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Bentham in 1789 construed

“happiness” as simply “pleasure.” “Pain and pleasure ... govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think.”

What Bentham uniquely brought to eudaemonism, in his *Principles of Morals and Legislation* and subsequent writings, was an analytical, almost mathematical, precision. Almost, indeed, to the point of lunacy: His system has been described as “a chaos of precise ideas.” Bentham declared in effect that we are equipped with happiness meters on the tops of our heads, from which utils can be measured and then added up across people to determine the right course of social action—prisons with central guard towers, say, or a Nicaraguan canal, or animal rights, or the repeal of the laws against usury. Bentham’s young friend John Stuart Mill explained in an obituary essay in 1838 that the routine idea of eudaemonism was given new force by a “method of detail— ... of never reasoning about wholes until they have been resolved into their parts, nor about abstractions until they have been translated into realities.”

“But,” Mill continued, “this system, excellent for keeping before the mind of the thinker all that he knows, does not make him know enough; it does not make a knowledge of some of the properties of a thing suffice for the whole of it.” Despite Mill’s complaint—he was a considerable economist as well as a great philosopher—the worldly philosophers of modern economics gradually substituted their knowledge of parts for the whole. Benthamism became the doppelganger of “political economy,” later to be renamed—more “scientifically”—“economics.” You can still see Bentham in the cost-benefit analysis of a new freeway or in the measurement of national income per person per day. And the economists persuaded many. As the economist Robert Nelson argued recently, by the late twentieth century, a Benthamite economics had become the secular religion of liberal societies. There is no God, and Jeremy Bentham is his prophet.

To such analytical utilitarianism was added, in the late nineteenth century, the experimental methods of the psychologists, especially in Germany. In that dawn, the best scientists were briefly hopeful that the happiness meters on the tops of our heads could actually be detected and went about testing people for them. But about the time of World War I, sadly, the psychologists grew discouraged in their neo-positivistic project of measuring happiness. There seemed to be no way to compare Connor’s happiness with Lily’s, or even to be sure of the course of Lily’s utils over time, and never a way of assigning comparable numbers to them both. The psychologists and then the economists came to realize that there are no meters on our heads.

The economists at the time consoled themselves with what was known as “ordinalism.” You can watch me making an actual choice at Manny’s between a pastrami sandwich or, for the same money, a corned beef sandwich. By my choice, I reveal that I get more pleasure from the pastrami. I rank the two in order. Yet neither a psychologist nor an economist can tell how much more pleasure I get—10 utils for corned beef, say, as against 16.876 for pastrami. Utils sound nice and scientific, but, unlike inches of mercury in a thermometer or pounds of air pressure in a container, they have no natural units. Francis Ysidro Edgeworth remarked in 1881 (though he was still then hopeful that the “cardinal” measurement of utils might be possible), “We cannot *count* the golden sands of life; we cannot *number* the ‘innumerable smile’ of seas of love; but we seem to be capable of observing that there is here a *greater*, there *less*, multitude of pleasure-units, mass of happiness; and that is enough.” (Edgeworth, though a mathematical and quantitative scientist, was no barbarian: He was quoting Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, line 90, which he read in the Greek; and the “golden sands” is from Alfred Lord Tennyson.) His followers in economics settled into tricks for seeing what basket of goods might be preferred to another and gave up trying to measure utils. (They gave up Greek drama and English poetry, too.)

What the economists could measure pretty easily, though, was the money you have for buying sandwiches or paying the rent. Income is not your happiness and doubling it will not make you twice as happy—but it does measure your capability for action. As early as the late seventeenth century, the

English “political arithmeticians” had generalized a single person’s income to GDP, which is itself an additional example of early modern eudaemonism and the new concern for the economic welfare of the nation. By correcting a rise in national income for merely monetary inflation—the same pastrami sandwich that in 1960 cost \$1.50 is going for \$7.00 in 2012—they could know how much the nation’s capability in pastrami and housing and Mozart concerts had increased. The biggest scientific discovery using GDP is the measurement of what economic historians call “the Hockey Stick”: that rise (on the blade, you see) from \$3 to \$125 a day.

How sad, though, the economists said: The deeper happiness is not measurable. And yet, in the form of national income and cost-benefit analysis, a quantifiable shadow happiness lived on, giving comfort to the saddened behavioral scientists. Bentham, carrying his happiness meter under his arm, strides like a ghost through economic talk. The revered Daniel Kahneman once wrote a paper called “Back to Bentham?” “The Benthamite approach,” Eric Posner and Cass R. Sunstein observed in a volume called *Law and Happiness*, “never really went away.”

YET RECENTLY, the measurers have ventured on a greater pleasure than mere ordinalism in happiness and capability in income. From the 1950s to the 1970s, economists such as George Katona and Bernard M.S. van Praag, and sociologists such as Hadley Cantril and Norman Bradburn, and then in the 1980s, on a big scale, psychologists such as Martin E.P. Seligman, Norbert Schwarz, Frank Fujita, Richard J. Davidson, the Diener family (Ed, Carol, Marissa, and Robert), and of course Daniel Kahneman re-started the once-abandoned project of measuring happiness quantitatively. In the 1990s, some economists, a subgroup in the new “behavioral economics,” delightedly joined the psychologists in measuring happiness as self-reported declarations of one’s level of happiness, and assigning self-reported numbers to them, and adding them up, and averaging them across people and eras. Some of the quantitative hedonists have taken to recommending governmental policy for you and me on the basis of their 1-2-3 studies; and some of them are having influence in and on the Obama administration.

Damn the ordinalism, they declare, full speed ahead! The Leiden School in the Netherlands boldly went where no ordinalist had gone before. As Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Schwarz put it in the editorial preface to their influential collection, *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, which appeared in 1999, “Our aim ... was not at all modest: we hoped to announce the existence of a new field of psychology.” And, on the basis of a new psychology, they announced a new social engineering: “we propose,” they continued, “that nations should begin monitoring pleasure and pain through on-line experience recording among samples of respondents.” So Bhutan’s fourth Dragon King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, proposed to do in 1972 and then, with the help of happiness measurers, did. The better to tax, nudge, and compel you to be happy.

Bruno Frey is a cultivated Swiss and a brilliant insider critic of economics, but he has the usual longing among economists to count the golden sands of life. In his book *Happiness: A Revolution in Economics*, he acknowledges in a lone sentence that philosophers at least have had some thoughts about the matter: “For centuries, happiness has been a central theme of philosophy.” He attaches to the lone sentence six citations—six citations and no further discussion out of more than 600 items in his bibliography from this usually thorough scholar. But the six philosophers are merely the officially recognized sort, as though Frey supposed that *The Rubaiyat* or *Sense and Sensibility* or for that matter *Groundhog Day* had nothing to say about human happiness. You are walking out of the theater in Athens in 429 B.C. having just seen the new hit, *Oedipus the King*. Socrates walks up to you with a clipboard and asks you where your “happiness” lies on a three-point scale. He is inquiring into an imagined calculative hedonism of 1-2-3, or, as the good folks with clipboards want to call it, “hedonics.”

It’s not science. At the most lofty level of scientific method, the hedonists cheekily and with foreknowledge mix up a “non-interval” scale with an “interval” scale. If you like the temperature in

Chicago today better than the one on January 15, you might be induced by the interviewer to assign 2.76 to today and a 1.45 to January 15. But such an assignment is of course arbitrary in God's eyes. It is not a measure in her view of the difference *even in your heart* (since to her all hearts are open) between a nice day and a cold day. By contrast, an interval scale, such as Fahrenheit or Celsius temperature on the two days in question, does measure, 1-2-3. God doesn't care which scale you use for hedonics as long as it's an interval scale. Non-interval scales merely rank (and classifications merely arrange). We couldn't base a physics on asking people whether today was "hot, nice, or cold" and expect to get anything quantitative out of it.

Recording the percentage of people who say they are happy will tell you something, to be sure, about how people use words. It's worth learning. We cannot ever know whether your experience of the color red is the same as mine, no matter how many brain scans we take. (The new hedonism is allied, incidentally, with the new brain science, which merrily takes the brain for the mind.) Nor can we know what red or happiness 1-2-3 is in the mind of God, the "objective happiness" that Kahneman speaks of as though he knew it. We humans can only know what we claim to see and what we can say about it. What we can know is neither objective nor subjective, but (to coin a word) "conjective." It is what we know together in our talk, such as our talk about our happiness. Con-jective: together thrown. No science can be about the purely objective or the purely subjective, which are both unattainable.

If a man tormented by starvation and civil war in South Sudan declares that he is "happy, no, very happy, a regular three, mind you," we have learned something about the human spirit and its sometimes stirring, sometimes discouraging, oddity. But we inch toward madness if we go beyond people's lips and claim to read objectively, or subjectively, their hearts in a 1-2-3 way that is comparable with their neighbors or comparable with the very same South Sudanese man when he wins an immigration lottery and gets to Albany.

A laboriously achieved finding of the new science of hedonics is that, if you plot real incomes of a bunch of people against their "happiness" numbers, the upward tending plot levels off as income gets high. It has a ceiling, called in the trade the "hedonic treadmill." And so there is no point in getting more income, either for a person or for a nation. The conclusion is offered all over the new literature. In a way, it is the only conclusion. It is the essence of the "set-point" result, for example, which says that, if you lose the use of your limbs, you will in a year or so be pretty much as "happy" as you reported before. And so we can trim the tort award to a paraplegic.

But wait a minute. The scale is 1-2-3. Of course it levels off: The ceiling, namely 3, is built into the question, and so the survey researcher gets back what she put in. When did you stop beating your wife? If the plot is correctly scaled to have no built-in upper limit, the findings on which so many of the "policy" proposals depend disappear.

One is gratified, of course, that 1-2-3 findings are based on massive, carefully done surveys by the National Opinion Research Center or the German Socio-Economic Panel or replicated in experiments in the laboratories. That's great. So the happiness numbers can then be compared and averaged and put into scatter plots, yes? It's therefore science, right?

No, not right. The literature regularly depends, for example, on a misuse of the bankrupt notion of "statistical significance," which even the Supreme Court of the United States, not known for its statistical savvy, in 2011 dismissed for lack of scientific standing (in *Matrixx v. Siracusano*, 9–0). Virtually every paper by economists using the 1-2-3 surveys takes "statistical significance" to be the same thing as scientific significance. Bernard van Praag and Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell, for example, in an amazingly thorough book called *Happiness Quantified: A Satisfaction Calculus Approach, Revised Edition*, do so. Yet dozens upon dozens of theoretical and applied statisticians since the early twentieth century have

pointed out that the sampling improbability of a result is not, after all, the same thing as the clinical or economic or legal importance of the result. It is like the pre-election surveys that ask people now to “vote” for or against President Obama in 2012. The sampling “error” is always 2 or 3 percent (because the sample size is always about 1,000 or 1,500 and the probability of a “yes” is about 50 percent: The math of the binomial calculation is left as an exercise for the reader), which is carefully reported by the journalists as though it were the error in predicting the actual election. But the error in the important prediction has nothing to do with mere sampling error. If unemployment gets below 8 percent, Obama will win, whatever the “significance” of the survey results now. If he is discovered to practice adultery, he will lose. And so forth: The real error has nothing to do with the sampling error. In view of this widely practiced absurdity of confusing low sampling error with human importance, one is not made happy to hear from van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell that “in the years since the first edition of this monograph in 2004 hundreds of papers have been written where ‘happiness equations’ are estimated.” If “hundreds” is taken to be, modestly, 50 a year, then by now we have more than 300 papers based on a statistical absurdity.

And the literature simply strides past the problem evident since the first criticisms of Bentham—that utils cannot be compared among people. This is not merely a technical matter. It is also a matter of human dignity. Suppose that Connor and Lily have the same happiness-producing circumstances of income and health and so forth. Yet Lily’s reported “very happy” value of 2.8 exceeds Connor’s meager 1.4. Well, then: Lily must be a better machine for making happiness than Connor is. Never mind that Lily-utils have nothing to do with Connor-utils. We are in the realm of “Why is a mouse when it spins?” (The answer, of course, is, “The higher the fewer.”)

There is in fact substantial biological and psychological evidence that some people are more cheerful than others—just in case you didn’t already know that. So, let’s see: What are the “policy implications?” Shoot the Connors? Give all the money to the Lilys? “A Brahmin,” noted a Hindu lawyer, “is entitled to exactly five-and-twenty times as much happiness as everyone else.” If it would please 99 people to feed on the hundredth, then util-maximization says, get out the cooking pot.

It’s like placing a value on people’s lives for legal cases or for determining airplane safety. Two Connors equal one Lily? Yet the value-of-life calculation, though a trifle ghoulish, has at least the excuse that, for various serious purposes, we must do it and implicitly do, whether we like it or not, when we decide how much airplane inspection to have. But a happiness measurement has no purpose, except perhaps to throw into doubt the calculations of the value of a human life. A plane filled with depressives—like one filled with lawyers—should get fewer safety checks than one for the cheerful.

Happiness, moreover, is surely multiple, and not “ $H = 2.718$.” The brisk adding up by utilitarians of sexual pleasure and career satisfaction and family love and the exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope, as many psychologists have shown, does not make a lot of sense. Daniel McAdams, for example, argues for three levels of personality: dispositional traits (such as capacity for pleasure in the ordinary business of life), characteristic adaptations, and the stories of our lives that we tell. But narrative—which will routinely demand painful challenges in order to acquire a dignified seriousness, lest one be reduced to the cattle pleasure that Aristotle properly despised—is not like eating ice cream. It is like getting a compliment from your sister, an episode in the story you build of your relation to her. Edgeworth said we could detect a “mass of happiness.” No we can’t. “It would not make sense,” wrote Martha Nussbaum in a wise and devastating assault in 2008 on the new hedonics, “to ask people to rank all their pleasures along a single quantitative dimension: this is just bullying people into disregarding features of their own experience that reflection would quickly reveal.”

Before Bentham and Immanuel Kant, it was taken as obvious that the good life was multiple: involving the Principal Seven Virtues, for example, the primary colors of a virtuous and therefore happy life—

prudence, temperance, courage, justice, faith, hope, and love. Humans do after all experience the tragedy of choice, which is the conflict of such virtues. Love for your father conflicts with your hope to go to Smith College, as Jane Addams found in her own life. Antigone's faithfulness to her king conflicts with her love for her brother. Happinesses are not fungible. Happinesses are multiple, dappled things, and couple-colored. W.C. Fields was asked, off the record, for his views on sex. "On or off the record," said he, "there may be some things better than sex, and some things worse. But there's nothing exactly like it." The knock-down argument against the 1-2-3 studies of happiness comes from the philosopher's (and the physicist's) toolbox: a thought experiment. "Happiness" viewed as a self-reported mood is surely not the purpose of a fully human life, because, if you were given, in some brave new world, a drug like Aldous Huxley's imagined "soma," you would report a happiness of 3.0 to the researcher every time. Dopamine, an aptly named neurotransmitter in the brain, makes one "happy." Get more of it, right? Something is deeply awry.

Decades ago, I was in Paris alone and decided to indulge myself with a good meal, which, you know, is rather easy to do in Paris. The dessert was something resembling *crème brûlée*, but much, much better. I thought, "I shall give up my professorships at the University of Iowa in economics and history, retire to this neighborhood on whatever scraps of income I can assemble, and devote every waking moment to eating this dessert." It seemed like a good idea at the time. It deserved a 3.0.

Here's the mental experiment, first proposed by the philosopher Robert Nozick under the name of the "experience machine": Suppose you could experience any life you wanted, such as a combination of Cleopatra and Queen Elizabeth and Billie Jean King, with happy endings sprinkled all around. I mean that you would feel you had experienced it, in all the grittiness of daily life, with its pleasures and its suitably modified pains. Would you do it? Let's make it tougher than Nozick did: After being hitched up to the machine for half an hour in which all life is experience, the actual you dies. Would you take it? No, of course not.

You would if you could experience alternative and "happier" lives as though going to a movie or reading a novel, and then go home. That's why movies and novels are life lessons, for better or worse. But, unless you were about to die anyway, such experiential, pot-of-pleasure, 1-2-3 "happiness" is not something for which you would trade your actual, admittedly somewhat crummy and often extremely painful life. The cherishing of *your* life is part of true happiness, and it comes with consciousness. The point is made by numerous modern philosophers—Mark Chekola, for example, as earlier by Robert Nozick and David Schmidtz. But it was made, too, by other philosophers and theologians and poets back to Confucius, Lord Krishna, and before.

The result of ignoring all such arguments and carrying on measuring what cannot be measured is just what you might expect. The so-called "empirical" results thus achieved, in the cases in which they could not anyway be discerned by an alert 12-year-old girl, are often scientifically unbelievable. Frey, for example, reports on results from 1994–1996 in the United States that claim the bottom decile of income earners to be "happy" to the extent of 1.94 on the three-point scale, compared with 2.36 for the top decile. Yet does anyone really believe that an American earning \$2,586 a year in 1996 prices and living in crime-ridden public housing was only 18 percent less happy than someone earning \$61,836 and living on a pleasant suburban street? Remember: the scales are supposed to be "interval," God's measurement. But, if you do not believe the 18 percent, then you are not justified in plotting such a number on a chart with other variables—that is, taking a non-interval scale for an interval scale.

I realize that many of my respected colleagues in economics are willing to believe such an impossible thing, even before breakfast. One of the proponents of happiness studies, the eminent British economist Richard Layard, is fond of noting that "happiness has not risen since the '50s in the U.S. or Britain or (over a shorter period) in western Germany." Such an allegation casts doubt on the relevance of the

“happiness” so measured. No one who lived in the United States or Britain in the '50s (I leave judgments on West Germany in the '70s to others) could possibly believe that the age of *Catcher in the Rye* or *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* was more fulfilling than recent times.

SO IS ALL THE research on the psychology of happiness mere academic hokum? No. What makes people happy is well worth knowing, and it can be ascertained without descending into Benthamism and can be done with due attention to the evidence of 4,000 years of recorded human reflection. Mill remarked of Bentham that he “failed in deriving light from other minds.” He could distinguish poetry from prose only, he said, because “prose is when all the lines except the last go on to the end. Poetry is when some of them fall short of it.” Bentham, like a Samuelsonian economist and a Kahnemanian psychologist, dismissed Plato and Shakespeare and all the wisdom of literature as “vague generalities.” “He did not heed,” Mill continued, “or rather the nature of his mind prevented it from occurring to him, that these generalities contained the whole unanalyzed experience of the human race.”

In fact, the “positive psychology movement” created in the '90s by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (I will just call him “Mike”) and Martin E.P. Seligman and now hundreds of other psychologists do useful research on the good life with full attention to what we know. It is “positive,” concerned with psychological strengths, as against the steadily growing number of alleged weaknesses (once homosexuality, now still gender crossing) proposed in successive editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Mike, for example, discovered around 1974 that good lives involve what he calls “flow,” the absorption in a task just within our competence: “in the zone,” as we say, or indeed “feeling flow,” which is how he came up with the word. I remember him in the early '70s explaining to me his technique for spotting it, by having people carry pagers, a recent invention, which Mike would randomly activate and have the subject write down in a notebook what she was doing and thinking right at that moment. Brilliant. The idea of flow has been fruitful as science, and it deeply acknowledges the humanities, too. The researchers have mercifully never attempted in a Benthamite manner to compare the amounts of flow achieved by Roger Federer at break point with the flow achieved by Miles Davis on *Kind of Blue*.

In 2004, there appeared a gratifyingly sensible compendium of positive psychology, closely edited by two leaders in the field, Seligman and Christopher Peterson, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. In 664 large pages, 40 scientists from clinical and social psychology and related fields present a “manual of the sanities.” The conclusion? The same as *Groundhog Day*: People are happier when they perform the virtues, in fact the very seven virtues of the Western tradition (found also in the literature and philosophy of the East and South and no doubt the North): prudence (the virtue beloved of economists), justice, temperance, courage, faith (as identity), hope (as purpose), and love.

One component in a positive psychology is a prudently adequate income, as Mike and the rest would agree, and as Aristotle said in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Material resources, for a life affording scope, are not everything, of course; but they are something. The great economist, historian, and demographer Richard Easterlin introduced happiness studies into economics in 1974. He concluded recently that “how people feel they ought to live ... rises commensurately with income. The result is that while income growth makes it possible for people better to attain their aspirations, they are not happier because their aspirations, too, have risen.” True. A poor Glaswegian maiden with an IQ of 140 in 1800 could aspire to no better position than head cook in an aristocratic house, and was very glad of that, not least because her equally intelligent mother had aspired merely to head milkmaid. The new cook was “happy.”

Yet there is a surprisingly puritanical edge to the new hedonics, especially about the pleasurable income other people have. Easterlin argues that “economic growth is a carrier of a material culture of its own that ensures that humankind is forever ensnared in the pursuit of more and more economic goods.” The hedonicists see modern levels of consumption as vulgar, an arms race for status that the tax system should be arranged to stop. Hedonics has become a branch of the century-old campaign by the American clerisy

against “consumerism”—that is, the getting of the silly stuff to which the non-clerisy are so enslaved, unlike our own refined consumption of opera tickets and adventure holidays. Hedonic puritanism characterizes the writings of the brilliant economist Robert Frank and the brilliant sociologist Juliet Schor and the brilliant economist Tibor Scitovsky and, a century ago, the brilliant economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen. All brilliant, but scientifically and ethically mistaken.

Social science since Veblen has discovered a decisive reply to the brilliant, endlessly repeated claim that other people are vulgarly enslaved. It is: We are humans, and any level of income is a “carrier of a material culture”—\$3 a day and \$125 a day, equally. Meal-taking or shelter-building or tale-telling “ensnares” people, whether Eskimos riding snowmobiles or Mad Men on the train to Westport. The economic historian Stanley Lebergott asked long ago, “What society is committed to mere physical survival?” and quoted, with Lebergott’s liberal learning, Alfred North Whitehead: “Men are children of the Universe with ... irrational hopes. ... A tree sticks to its business of mere survival; and so does an oyster.” We don’t. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, says, “Men do not merely ‘survive.’ They survive in a definite way,” the way of the tribe. “Consumerism,” such as the extra-caloric value of a meal of rabbit meat shared over the campfire by beloved fellow Bushmen in German East Africa in 1900 or of beer and chips shared over a dollar-limit poker table with beloved colleagues in Hyde Park in 1980, characterizes all human cultures. Sneers at “consumerism,” or the hedonics now used to back the sneers, are scientifically and politically unjustified.

Easterlin wants us to resist such consumerism and become “masters of growth.” One would want to watch who is the master, or “us.” Easterlin would probably agree that getting a Federal Bureau of Happiness involved would not be such a good idea. But surely in an ethical sense he is right. It’s good and right to persuade each other to take advantage of modern freedom from want for something other than playing computer games and eating more tacos and buying that third diamond bracelet.

Yet it is puritanical to bemoan the plenitude, as the hedonists and many environmentalists do now, and have done for decades, again and again and again. Better to light a lamp than curse the darkness. We should be busy advising each other to make the ensnaring worthy of our humanness, gladly ensnared by the celebration of the mass or by Georges Seurat’s *Sunday on La Grande Jatte* or by the final hours of a cricket match for the Ashes at Lord’s on a perfect London day in July.

The recommendation to be ensnared by what is ennobling—and the enactment of the ensnaring—has been a staple of world art and literature since the beginning. Maybe the hedonists should get a museum pass or a library card. Ignoble enslavement in gluttony and pride has nothing especially to do with the modern growth from \$3 to \$125 a day—except that, because of it, a vastly larger percentage of humanity can indulge in vaster vulgarities. Yet, because of the liberal education made possible by the same enrichment, more and more people are open to the advice to do better with their lives. The advice should be sweetly persuading, not a taxed, or a compelled, or even a nudged one. There are regions of meaning for free adults that social policy, even benevolently applied, should not penetrate.

Ominously, however, happiness studies have been diverted into an applied science. The happiness measurers very much want to direct us and are itching to engineer a happy society. They do not know what they are talking about, but are very willing to put “policies” about it into practice anyway. In a finely argued but erroneous book of philosophy, for example, Daniel Haybron a few years ago made a case partly on the basis of the new science of happiness against what he calls “liberal optimism,” or the belief since the eudaemonic movement and the bourgeois revaluations of the eighteenth century that “people tend to fare best—and pretty well at that—when empowered to shape their [own] lives.” He doubts it. But on what basis, since psychology is singularly ill-equipped to yield such doubt? As Haybron himself points out, tests on college kids do not range across enough experience. History is more to the point. Of course people make mistakes about their lives, and sometimes spend their lives badly. But as even Haybron

acknowledges, the liberal experiment since 1700 has yielded gigantically better lives in every sense for a constantly increasing number of us. Haybron, and many of the elite critics of how other people spend their time on Earth, is an admitted pastoralist and disdains the sick hurry of modern life. Yet is he himself not living a happy life, which his ancestor around 1800—who in any case died in childhood and childbirth—did not?

THIS BRINGS US to the deepest humanistic criticism of the 1-2-3 economists. If we economists are not going to get any deeper than such a dubious pot-of-pleasure theory, perhaps we ought to rely on what we can measure scientifically and relevantly. We can measure national income, for example, or the U.N.'s Human Development Reports, which serve as reasonable indexes of human potential. It's what I call "scope," or what Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum call "capabilities"—the ability to read, for example, or the potential to become the founder of a new business, or the scope to cultivate a talent as an artist. Having an income of \$125 instead of \$3 gives the scope to do much more. The ancestors of the pro- or anti-hedonic professors Kahneman, Easterlin, Frank, Schor, Veblen, Frey, and Layard, or Csíkszentmihályi, Seligman, Haidt, Chekola, Nozick, Schmitz, McCloskey, Nussbaum, and Sen, were illiterate peasants or impoverished street vendors. They did not have the scope to achieve "happiness" in a dignified human sense. Now, for the first time, billions of humans can, whether or not they report "happiness" as 1 or 2 or 3.

Easterlin claims, joining here as he does not on many other issues the pastoral critics of innovation in the line of Henry David Thoreau, that modern growth has spawned a "materialistic and individualistic culture." Common though the claim is, there is little evidence for it, even in the life of Thoreau. The historian Lisa Jardine finds in the paintings and other exotic goods admired in Europe from 1400–1600 a "bravura consumerism," which she regards as an admirable expression of the spirit of the Renaissance and of "the fierce pride in mercantilism [by which she seems to mean "merchant-ness," not its more usual meaning of protectionist economic policies] and the acquisitiveness which fueled its enterprises, ... a celebration of the urge to own, the curiosity to possess the treasures of other cultures." Such urges are not always bad, and they are not confined to Europe in the industrial era.

"Industrialization," writes the historian Peter Stearns without, it appears, troubling to examine the evidence, "has brought a steady increase in materialism. ... Consumerism, always associated with industrialization as cause and effect, focuses personal goals on the acquisition of goods, from Main Street to Moscow." Yet industrialization has given us the scope to cultivate ourselves. And, for all the chatter in the journals of opinion about the horrible materialism of modern life, psychologists find that poor people put more, not less, value on the possessions they have than people with more. One recent survey by Patrick T. Vargas and Sukki Yoon notes that "cultural critics frequently assert that people living in Western nations hold a stronger belief than those in less developed nations (or [our impoverished] past societies) that happiness comes from increased affluence and material possessions, yet evidence in [the] literature [on that same questionable 1-2-3 "happiness," alas] suggests otherwise." Such findings seem plausible, even on economic grounds. Diminishing returns make your eighth Windsor chair less fascinating.

Stearns's conventional wisdom again: "Other [non-capitalist] cultural activities, including art, the humanities, religion, and the people who specialize in them, tend to lose ground." No, they do not. In the growing number of affluent countries, the museums and concert halls are packed. High culture has in fact always flourished in eras of lively commerce, from fifth-century Greece through Song China and Renaissance Italy down to the Dutch Golden Age or the flowering of American high culture after World War II, with the additional stimulus then from much extended higher education. Among the 30 democratic countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reporting such statistics today, some 27 percent of the adult population 25 to 64 years old have completed tertiary education, ranging from Turkey's 11 percent up to Canada's 48 percent. Such booming cultural activity

makes for many lives beyond materialism. The economist of culture Tyler Cowen often observes that more artists are alive today than any time before. During the '60s, more professors were hired in U.S. post-secondary institutions than all who had gone before. The expansion of higher education yielded, for example, a big audience in the United States and Britain for serious literary fiction.

Terry Eagleton, who is a superb if determinedly left-wing professor of serious literary fiction in English, makes the conventional claim of a “monstrously egoistic civilization [the bourgeois] have created.” Eagleton knows better than such a cliché when he teaches Chaucer and his Pardoner, or Shakespeare and his Iago—representatives of monstrously egoistic civilizations of church or castle. To yearn for a simpler time, when getting and spending was not so much with us, is mostly a version of the pastoral. It has been repeated in every world literature in every age, independently of the sociological evidence. Theocritus and Horace sang a golden age of nymphs and shepherds. In 1767, Adam Ferguson lamented, Eagleton notes, the “detached and solitary” people of Scotland, whose “bands of affection are broken.” By 1800, Wordsworth and Goethe and by 1840 Disraeli and Carlyle and Dickens joined the lamentation, and on and on, to the anti-bourgeois, anti-consumerism critics of our own day. The clerisy’s version of a Norman Rockwell world, whether in the childhood of our parents or in the Golden Age of Kronos, is the time in which we were not so obsessed with consumption.

But it is not so and never has been. Consumption itself is a matter of talk, and modern lives give many more materials with which to talk. “The object,” Sahlins observes, “stands as a human concept outside itself, as man speaking to man through the medium of things.”

And, if seen through history rather than through Hellenistic pastoralism or German Romanticism, the *gemeinschaft* of olden times looks not so nice. The murder rate in villages in thirteenth-century England was higher than the worst police districts now. Medieval English peasants were in fact mobile geographically, “fragmenting” their lives. The imagined extended family of “traditional” life never existed in England. The Russian mir was not egalitarian, and its ancientness was a figment of the German Romantic imagination. The once-idealized Vietnamese peasants of the '60s did not live in tranquil, closed corporate communities. The sweet American family of “I Remember Mama” or “Father Knows Best” must have occurred from time to time. But most were more like *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. As the feminist economist Nancy Folbre remarks, “We cannot base our critique of impersonal market-based society on some romantic version of a past society as one big happy family. In that family, Big Daddy was usually in control.”

Love, in short, is arguably thicker on the ground in the modern Western capitalist world, or at any rate is not obviously thinner on the ground than in the actual world of olden and allegedly more solidarity-drenched times. There is your happiness.

The descendent in today’s Glasgow of the dairy maid or the cook, in whom the old intelligence shines, is richer because the society in which she lives has moved from \$3 to \$125 a day. She has hugely greater scope, capabilities, potential, real personal income for what Wilhelm von Humboldt described in 1792 as *Bildung*, “self-culture,” “self-development,” life plans, the second-order preferences fulfilled that make for inner and outer success in life. She leads a life in full—fuller in work, travel, education, health, acquaintance, imagination.

A well-fed cat sitting in the sun is “happy” in the pot-of-pleasure sense of happiness studies. The pussy is a 3. But what the modern world offers to men and women and children as against cats and other machines for pleasure is not merely such “happiness,” but a uniquely enlarged scope to realize themselves. True, one can turn away from *Bildung* and read celebrity mags all day. Yet billions are enabled to do more. And they can also have, in proper moderation, more cat-like, materialistic, economist-pleasing “happiness” if they wish. Good for them. These are your sands of better life, though unmeasurable.

One could conclude about the 1-2-3 hedonists what Mill concluded about Bentham: “no one, probably, who, in a highly instructed age, ever attempted to give a rule to all human conduct, set out with a more limited conception either of the agencies by which human conduct *is*, or of those by which it *should* be, influenced.” The literature and the philosophy of grown-ups since Mesopotamia provide better concepts. Mill remarked that Bentham was always a boy. We do not need more Benthams, or more boyish games of 1-2-3. We do not need more hedonomics or utilonomics or freakonomics. We need humanomics, which may be not an -omics at all, and a liberal society supported by it, the one that has given us the scope to flourish if we are so inclined.

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