

# Happiness for the Dismal Science

1.

Some philosophers, starting from Ancient Greece, said: “What is more important topics than happiness?” In fact, we can wish opposite things, but in a certain sense only one thing is common to each of us: **try to be happy**. Or the least unhappy. The problem that some try to be happy accumulating, for example, money, power and sex partners. Others choosing to be Islamic kamikaze or to look for God in a desert. This is a political problem!

I am not an economist, but I read a lot about the way economists deal with this problem. In fact, it is striking that economists today play the leading role in interdisciplinary studies on happiness. This is a sign: happiness itself is considered an economical aim. In an Asian country, Bhutan, the dictator promoted, besides the Gross National Product (GNP), a Gross National Happiness (GNH). Of course, in a country quite poor and without democracy, the rate of happiness is especially high...

In the 20th century, economics had dealt with the pure analysis of exchange value, and not of use-value. In other words, it was only concerned with “preferences revealed” through the market, and not with the ultimate reasons for these realized preferences. Economists had only to deal with the *means* to reach *ultimate ends* which, according to the hegemonic philosophy in economics (Utilitarianism) are pleasure, happiness, satisfaction and individual well-being (terms considered more or less synonymous by Utilitarianists). The principle set out in the American Constitution on the right to the pursuit of happiness, albeit inspired by Utilitarianism, is tautological, since for Utilitarianists human beings *by their very essence* can do nothing other than to pursue happiness. But what is happiness? No problem, it coincides to the figure many of us today write down in their emails or text messages:



And what is unhappiness? Very simple, this:



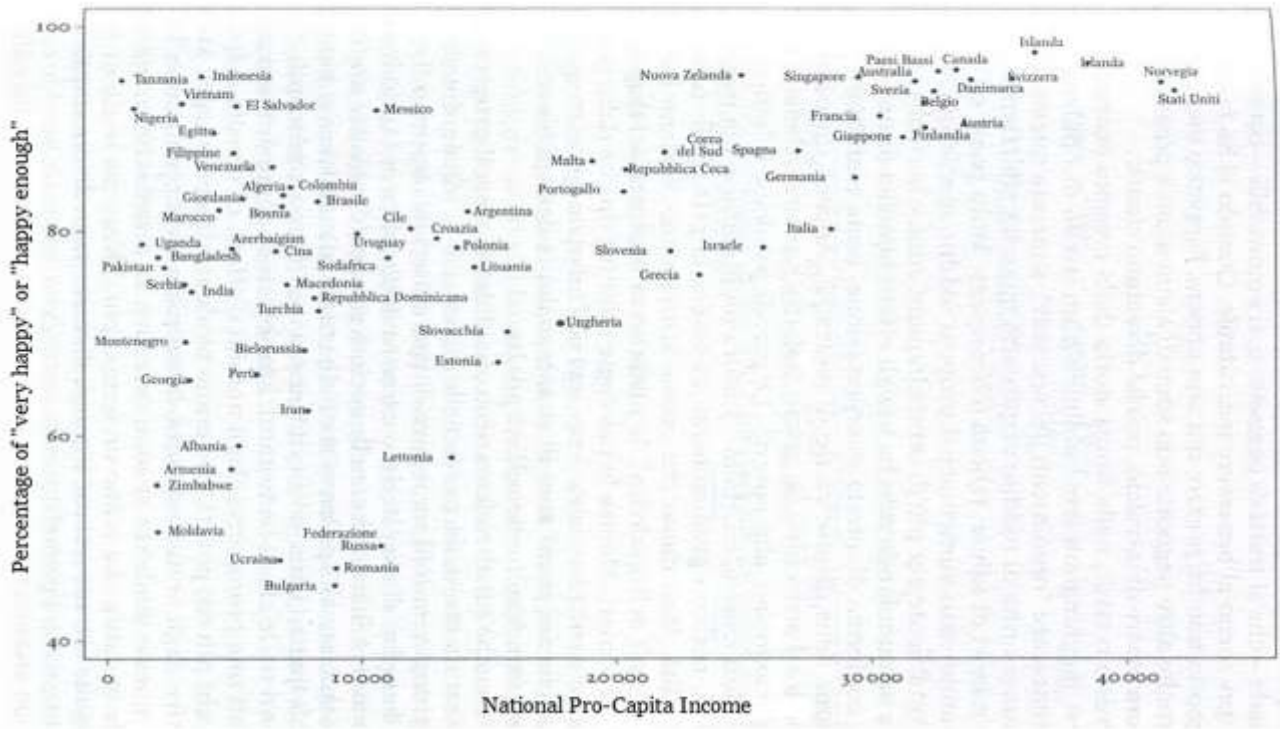
To aim for non-happiness or unhappiness is **not** something human for Utilitarianists, for whom we are all *forced* into the pursuit of happiness, i.e. of utility. By contrast, as we shall see, this aim is not plausible for those I shall call *anti-eudaimonologists* (from *eudaimonia*, happiness), for whom human beings do not seek happiness, but essentially are driven by enjoyment. For Utilitarianism, utility consists of the subjective sensations which make up the pleasures of life or allow us to avoid displeasure. Precisely because political economics limited itself to trade and exchange, it neglected pleasure, and thus drew the epithet “dismal science” given to it by the poet Thomas Carlyle.

In recent decades, however, this dismal science – excited by its theoretical and practical failures – has increasingly sought to invest directly in the aims (life's pleasures) as well as in the means (economic exchange). But with these broadened horizons, should we not fear an imperialism of *homo economicus*' logic, which would turn even the meaning of our lives into an economic calculation and engineering? I shall try here to assess the core of this shift in economics.

2.

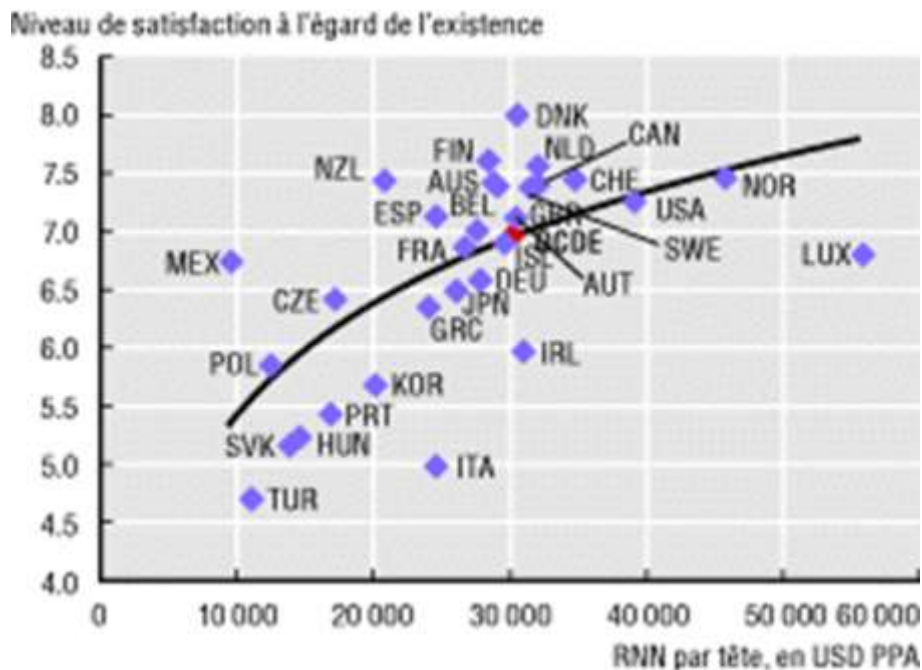
Today many economists question *why* we buy one thing over another and wonder *what we should buy* to feel better. Of course, deep down many researchers and professors are motivated to sell politicians what they call *Evidence Based Politics*: if they were to discover what makes people globally happier or less unhappy, they could supply politicians with effective recipes for maximizing the satisfaction of their voters – and so assuring their re-election. By increasing the GNH, politics would leave the uncertainty of ideologies to become a technocracy formed by expert ‘**eudaimonocrats**’.

So, alongside traditional rankings which classify countries according to GNP, and beyond the colorful case of Bhutan, we now have others that classify them according to “quality of life”, “national well-being”, “life satisfaction” and so on. Charts comparing happiness in different countries are available. The one below correlates the level of happiness to the per capita national income in each country, but it is quite old, it dates to the 90s.



As you see, Croatia is there. In the 90s, you the Croatians declared a little bit unhappier than the Chileans, a little bit happier than the Poles, and as much happy (or unhappy) of Uruguayans and Italians.

Another map, drawn by Gallup poll, is updated to 2006. It concerns only a selection of countries (Croatia is excluded), in which poorer countries are not considered.



The central curved line includes countries where the increase of happiness and the increase of GNP are harmonious, consistent. More a country is far from this line, more it shows a gap between happiness and wealth. If a country is *up on the line*, this means that this country is happier than it should be, referring to its economical wealth. If a country is *down on the line*, this means that this is unhappier than it should be considering its wealth. As you see, the countries which are “too happy” in relation to the “right” balance between happiness and richness are Mexico, New Zealand and Denmark. I am impressed by the fact that the country which is “too unhappy” in relation to the right balance is a country I know well: Italy.

But, do such maps make any scientific sense, or any sense at all? Do they grasp something real? Are they not a pure artifact of “happinology”?

In fact, these maps are the product of a very simple calculation of happiness: individuals in a sample are asked: “How happy do you consider yourself on a scale of 1 to 3?” All you obtain in this way is what people *say* about their being happy or not, not whether they *really are* happy or unhappy. But economists usually have an empiricist philosophical background, for which what one feels is *ipso facto* equivalent to what one is. *Feeling* happy is *being* happy, or more, *believing* to be happy *is* to be happy; in the same way that *being* in love is just *feeling* in love. If a prisoner at Auschwitz were to reply “I am quite happy”, no one has the right to tell him “oh no, you *must be* unhappy in a Nazi concentration camp!” Any question about the essence of happiness is sidestepped, assuming that subjects always know what they're talking about when they say “I'm happy rank 3” or “I'm unhappy rank 1”. For Utilitarian empiricism appearance and essence coincide.

This utilitarianist philosophy banishes any cultural relativism: the concept of happiness is considered identical in all cultures. For example, in Gallup Poll, researchers give for granted that in the two countries which are the most inconsistent in relation to the correspondence Happiness/Wealth – Denmark and Italy – the word and concept *felicità* (Italian) and *lykke* (Danish) have an identical meaning, happiness.

For this reason, the utilitarianist finds it difficult to explain, for example, why on average the French describe themselves as unhappier than Americans do, even though ‘quality of life’ indicators are higher for France than they are for the US. This is due to the fact that for Americans *stating their happiness* is a narcissistic duty more important than it is for the French. The latter ones have basically absorbed the vision of Baudelaire and other *dandies*, for whom happiness is something vulgar, for

ordinary people. Terms such as ‘happiness’ have various meanings in different cultures; ‘*happiness*’ is not the same as the French ‘*bonheur*’ or the German ‘*Glück*’. What changes above all is the value each culture gives to *the project* or *the duty* of being happy. These differences might explain why the inhabitants of Nigeria and Tanzania (FIG. in file “Graphs”, 3<sup>rd</sup> slide) claim to be happier than those of Japan and Finland.

However coarse this type of research may appear, some interesting correlations do emerge yet. Let us take the map shown before (file “Graphs”, 3<sup>rd</sup> slide) correlating happiness and national income; it is striking that the countries on the diagonal line, bottom left to top right, are all culturally Judeo-Christian and Western: a sign that in these countries, in contrast to others, income and claims of happiness are closely related factors.

Age, on the other hand, is not a significant factor to predict whether someone will state his happiness or unhappiness, **while employment and love are:** *single* and *unemployed* women and men, even if wealthy, declare themselves unhappier than average. For most people everywhere, the crucial condition for enjoying one’s own existence is to work and be loved in order to love.

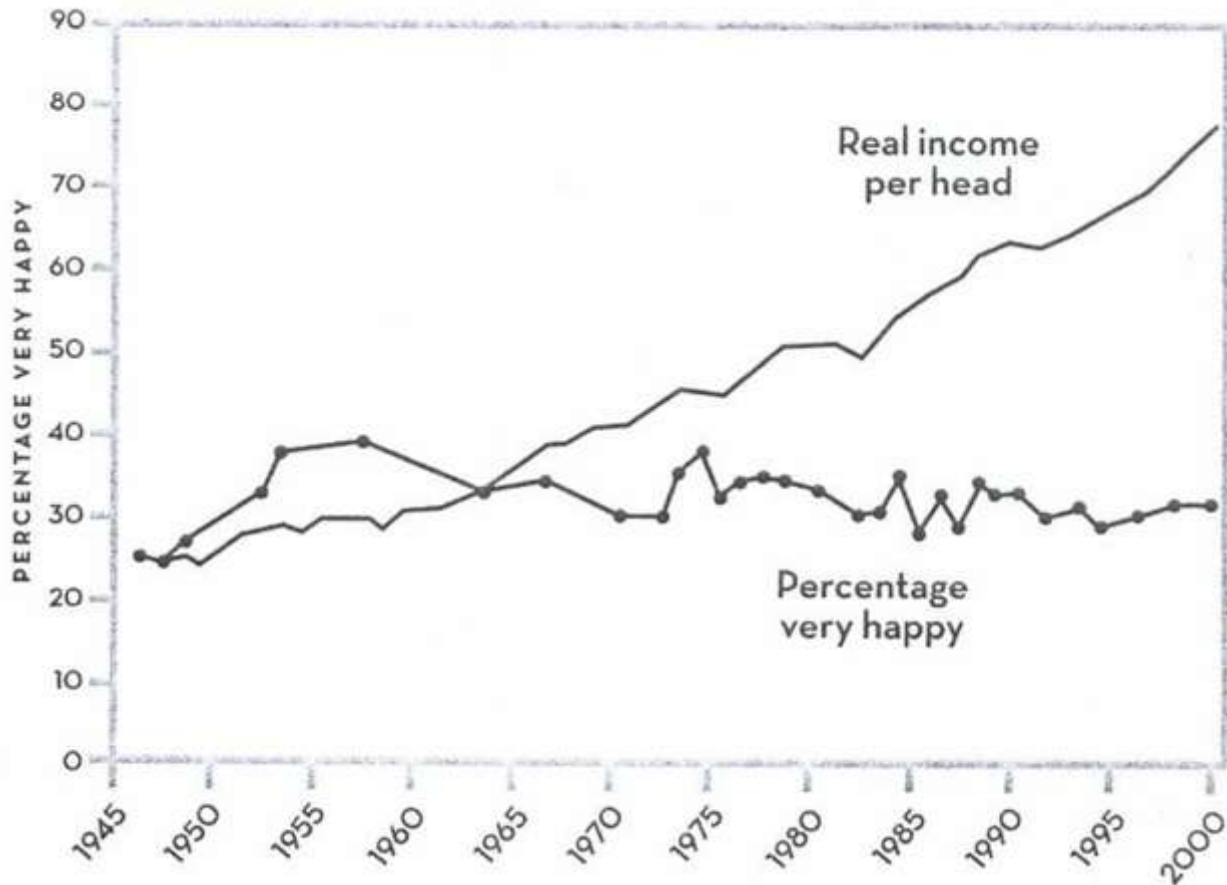
‘Eudaimonology’ thought it had made a landmark discovery in 1974 when it formulated “**The Easterlin Paradox**”, which stated:

- There is within a single country a low correlation between income and happiness.
- The richest countries are not necessarily the happiest.
- Variations in people's happiness seem to depend very little on variations in income and wealth.

In the last 40 years, pro capita GNP in Western countries has dramatically increased, without any parallel increase in the average rate of individual happiness.

This is true, for example, for Americans between 1945 and 2000.

## Income and happiness in the United States



Between 1945 and 2000 there was no increase in ‘happiness’ among the Americans, though for the period in question the per capita income in China rose by 300%. Confirmation of the old saying that “money doesn't buy happiness”. Yet Eudaimonologists often forget to stress the point that even the huge increase in both public spending and leisure time in the second half of the 20th century did not produce any notable variations in people's rates of happiness. Note that this ‘paradox’ (but why paradox?), according to which the economics of happiness is not correlated to economics proper, is perceived by specialists as a great achievement of economics applied to happiness!

Instead, recent research – most probably inspired by social-democratic wishes – has tried to show that a correlation exists between lesser economic equality and higher malaise in a country. Wilkinson & Pickett (2009) showed that wealthy but less egalitarian countries register more mental health problems, a higher use of drugs, lower life expectancy, more obesity, lower scholastic performance, higher teenage and out-of-wedlock pregnancies, more violence, more incarcerations and punishment,

and lower social mobility compared to more egalitarian countries. Moral of the story: everyone, even the wealthy, is damaged by inequality.



Richard WILKINSON & Kate PICKETT,  
"The Spirit Level". Why more equal societies almost always do better"  
Penguin Books, 2009

Wilkinson & Pickett show that less egalitarian countries have more serious problems than more egalitarian ones in many sectors:

- Mental Health & Drug Use
- Physical Health & Life Expectancy
- Obesity
- School Performance
- Pregnancies in Adolescence and out of Wedlock
- Violence
- Incarceration & Punishment
- Social Mobility

The trouble is rather that while Eudaimonologists are usually centre-left, the data they collect maliciously support a paternalistic and conservative vision. For

example, it appears that a stable family life, especially marriage, and religious faith, contribute to happiness, while divorce tears it apart.

(The question then is: are a stable family, marriage and faith in God *causes* for saying-to-be happy or its *effects*? And up to what point does a married person in a stable, church-going family feel *obliged* to say to herself that she is happy? And in general, is not an inborn disposition towards happiness the primary cause of a tranquil and "conformist" life, more than any political or social policymaking? Were this the case, the importance of politics in our concrete lives would have to be reassessed. And maybe the importance of the genetic of each would have to be increased.)

3.

The debate among both economists and ‘psychologists of the economy’ has focused on these two rival approaches. The Utilitarianist approach derives from philosophical empiricism and finds in the Nobel Prize Daniel Kahneman one of its most prestigious representatives. In this perspective, happiness is always *what I feel in the present*, and can be measured both by explicit questions (such as: “how do you feel right *now* about the concert you *just* heard?”) and perhaps by a fMRI to verify the activation of the cerebral centres of happiness.

The “Capabilities” approach, whose main representative is another Nobel prize, Amartya Sen, refers to the original meaning of the Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. This criterion is no longer correlated to the presence of each individual life experience, but to what Sen calls *capabilities*, i.e. to the *possibility* or *power* each of us has to do satisfying things or ‘find fulfillment’. An Auschwitz prisoner might say “I’m happy”, but his *capabilities* are extremely limited.

“Capabilitism” (I apologize for this horrid neologism) is an ‘economics with a humane face’, which starts from this question: “If people living in totalitarian and despotic regimes declare themselves happier than those living in free and tolerant societies, should we then conclude that the former societies are better than the latter?” The “capabilitist” answer is no. We cannot consider a society of “happy slaves” happy. In short, the “capabilitists” would like to reestablish a certain morality of happiness and make it socially congruent and shareable. So, their philosophical gamble consists in saying that while economics has so far been individualistic, it needs to become inter-subjective, relational. The term *relational* is very much in



favor today among the Western intelligentsia. And, indeed, there is a great insistence on the importance of ‘relational goods’, like friendship, good neighborly relations, mutual empathy, and so on. The immaterial wealth.

Then, we have a third approach, well described by the title of Paul Ormerod’s article: *Against Happiness*, which aims to demolish eudaimonology as a whole, both Utilitarianists and Capabilitists:

Public expenditure, leisure time, crime, gender, inequality, income inequality – none of these are in any way correlated with measures of happiness over time [...] So one could conclude either that the attempt to improve the human lot by social and economic policy is futile or the data is not telling us anything of value.

It is to this trend of "anti-happiness" that psychoanalysis essentially belongs. (I stress this point because I practice as a psychoanalyst.) In fact, happiness or less unhappiness were never acknowledged as either a focus or goal of analysis by any of the main psychoanalytic currents. Basically, all psychoanalysts have always believed in what Freud wrote--even if he wrote it before he invented psychoanalysis, in 1895:

“...[Y]ou will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health, you will be better around against that unhappiness”.

Thus the aim of analysis is neither to achieve the patient’s happiness, nor to simply get rid of the neurotic misery, but rather to transform the misery into an unhappiness against which one could defend oneself! Analysis seemingly aims for a coexistence with an unhappiness deprived of the (neurotic) misery, with a sort of “rich” unhappiness.

An analogous contempt for “the happy society issue” animates so-called ‘post-modernist’ thinkers. The very concept of *happiness* is discredited as ‘ideological’ in the Marxist sense, insofar as it is identified with the acquisition or possession of material or immaterial goods - such as power, prestige, love, knowledge, etc. This cultural nebula pursues the Dionysian vocation of Nietzsche: what matters is not *happiness* but *jouissance* (a French word). The paradigm of the “woman or man of enjoyment” is the hero who takes enjoyment in doing battle for her Cause, not to be confounded with ‘the causes of happiness’ in the Utilitarianist sense. Che Guevara, by going to Bolivia and confronting death, did not pursue his ‘happiness’, but rather *he enjoyed* his Cause. At the core of post-modernist, including Marxist, philosophies there is a certain aristocratic contempt for “goods for the masses”. Some Utilitarian eudaimonologists say that “happiness is earning a hundred dollars more than your

brother-in-law”. Is it true? Happiness calculates not enjoyment but the levels of envy within a community. For the post-modernists, instead, their reference is not my neighbor who aspires to earning a hundred dollars more, but heroes like Nelson Mandela or Aung San Suu Kyi, who do not seek happiness, but *enjoy* their commitment to overcome or die. Eudaimonologists, by focusing on the possible causes for happiness, lose sight of the fact that each of us, working for one’s own Cause, establishes one’s own criteria of “a life good enough”.

4.

Essentially, both the utilitarianist and “capabilitist” approaches start from an undeclared and unquestioned assumption: that both individual and collective forms of happiness (experienced or planned) are congruent and homogeneous. A happy society would be one where the mean population is happier than the mean in other societies. In other words, happiness is not bound to contrasting *projects for a good life*. Yet, among a country’s citizens there is no general consensus on the collective or individual criteria for “happiness” or a “good and beautiful life”. The divergence in ways to “try to live well” is always removed from the analytic space of the eudaimonologists, who unwittingly adopt a totalitarian image of society. This is the image of a nation with no conflict over what meaning to give to our lives. It is taken for granted that the well-being of societies is commensurate to individual well-being, and that the essential reasons for being happy or unhappy are the same for everyone. These researches – even when they appeal to sophisticated philosophical concepts – scotomizes, erases the conflict between the criteria of a ‘life good enough’, a discordance which is in fact at the core of global political and ethical conflicts. Whether by force or persuasion, every human being fights alongside others in order to impose on others still his own *project of happiness*.

And finally, the anti-eudaimonologists repeat over and over that any ideal of happiness is an illusion, an “ideology”. But the fact remains that, when asked, most people around the world would declare themselves happy. Which is in contrast with some pessimistic theories, from Schopenhauer to Baudelaire and Freud, according to which human beings are essentially unhappy, miserable. In fact, the belief in a fundamental unhappiness underlying the human condition is confined to an intellectual “dandy” elite with a humanistic background. In short, to claim the impossibility of happiness is a sign of social distinction, a highbrow thing. But even if most people were to admit to have failed in their search for happiness, the fact

remains that every human being can do nothing less than to adopt any strategy necessary to enjoy a 'life good enough'. And even if reaching happiness may be impossible, the desire to live well enough is still necessary for each of us.