



Happiness and Politics¹

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ABSTRACT

Over the last thirty years, happiness research in psychology, economics and philosophy has been discussing the proper meaning of happiness and its main determinants. Moreover, the idea has spread within academic and political circles that it may be legitimate for institutions to engage in “politics of happiness”. This article presents a critique of the project of promoting happiness through public policies.

Keywords: Happiness; Institutions; Pluralism; Public Policy; Morality; Subjective Well-Being;

RÉSUMÉ

Durant les trente dernières années, la recherche sur le bonheur en psychologie, économie et philosophie a porté sur la manière appropriée de concevoir le bonheur et ses principaux déterminants. De plus, l'idée s'est répandue dans les cercles académiques et politiques que les institutions pouvaient être légitimes à mener des « politiques du bonheur ». Cet article présente une critique du projet de promotion du bonheur par l'entremise des politiques publiques.

Mots clés : Bonheur; Institutions; Pluralisme; Politique Publique; Moralité; Bien-Être Subjectif

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, industrialized countries have been increasingly concerned with happiness.

People are working harder, are under more stress and are finding themselves with less free time. It is no wonder that they are not especially happy. But how could more wealth bring about such consequences?...The situation is bad enough to make some people question the value of economic growth altogether. After all, we make serious sacrifices as a society in order to maintain a high growth rate (Heath and Potter 2004 p.100).

As a result, 'more and more people, including governments and economists, are becoming frustrated with the shortfalls of GDP as an indicator of the true well-being of individual people and society more widely' (OECD Observer 2011, p.7). Part of the frustration stems from the lack of correlation between, on the one hand, economic growth, affluence or income and, on the other hand, life satisfaction, well-being or happiness.

There is nothing new here. Forty years ago, Richard Easterlin (1974) observed a paradox (the so-called 'Easterlin Paradox' or 'Happiness Paradox')²: while material wealth had dramatically expanded in countries like Japan or United States since the Second World War, happiness (as measured by self-reported happiness and life satisfaction) had not followed the same path. Such an observation echoes the basic anti-consumerist critique according to which we would have been sacrificing our well-being on the altar of materialistic gods, namely obsessive consumption and vain economic growth (Hirsch 1976; Scitovsky 1976). Recent psychological studies and population surveys have presented new material evidence of the loose connection between affluence and happiness (Easterlin et al. 2010).

This stagnation of happiness is the starting point of the latest developments in happiness studies, which encompass psychology, philosophy and economics. Beyond the academic interest, there is clearly an institutional scope. The 'most important question', according to Derek Bok, is 'whether growth should retain such a dominant place in the domestic agenda' (Bok 2010, p.206). Grossly speaking, happiness research has been concerned with three questions. The first concerns the determinants of happiness. Through surveys, psychological devices or brain imaging, the goal has been to identify the sources of happiness. The second has to do with the proper meaning of happiness: what is happiness about? Pleasure? Self-development? The last raises institutional implications. How to design our institutions in order to promote happiness, or more happiness-friendly environments?

Regarding the last question, numerous authors advocate for reforms of public policies based on happiness research (Bok 2010; Halpern 2009; Layard 2005; Ng and Ho 2006). They promote politics of happiness because happiness would be the most important objective for our institutions. In spite of the variety of reasons invoked to justify such importance, a recurrent one is the value of happiness in individual life. Since each of us wants to be happy,

² The paradox consists of three parts. (1) Within a country, richer individuals are on the average happier than individuals with more modest means. (2) Until a certain point, populations of richer countries are happier than populations of less affluent ones. (3) However, and the paradox lies here, longitudinal studies show that the constant increase of GDP (or GNP), mostly in developed countries, has not translated into a similar increase of happiness.

it would imply that all of us would want to be happy, as individuals, but also as a political community (Kenny and Kenny 2006). Institutions would then have the obligation to favour this objective or to advance active policies that promote happiness. Such an obligation would be even more pressing in a context marked by the 'Happiness Paradox'. Because of the priority of economic growth and pure increase of goods and services, the current situation would be suboptimal in regard to human welfare understood as subjective well-being (SWB), life satisfaction and so forth. Then, the marginal impact of economic growth on happiness would warrant a shift in social priorities (Bok 2010, p.207).

This article challenges the assumption that underlies such a position. Without denying that happiness could be the most important goal in one's life, or one of the most important, it tackles the public role that various authors attribute to happiness. My central argument is that politics of happiness may be less desirable than it might appear at first sight. I engage the intuition that happiness would constitute an uncontroversial public good. My key idea is that the political worth of happiness cannot be derived without further justification from the worth individuals confer on it in their lives. It is not because an objective appears intuitively worthy as well as an indispensable constituent of the good life from an individual perspective that institutions are warranted in fostering it.

I take issue with the politics of happiness: what could be the normative implications of basing part of our public policies on happiness? However, any discussion of the normative dimension of this question ought to confront two difficulties.

(1) There is not a single conception of happiness, but several, which are of two kinds: *hedonia* and *eudaimonia*, from which may be derived two normative positions: *hedonism* and *eudaimonism*. (2) There is usually a lack of clarity about the conception endorsed when a given author makes the case for politics of happiness (Bruni and Porta 2007, p.xvii). On that matter, SWB is not that well distinguished from life satisfaction. As noticed by Luigino Bruni (2004, p.22), '[a]nother common characteristic of this debate is the loose use of the term happiness. Although the prevalent meaning of happiness is the subjective well-being, almost every author has his/her own definition of happiness'. For instance, Frey appeals to both a hedonistic conception derived from Daniel Kahneman's objective happiness and SWB, while considering that happiness cannot be reduced to a hedonistic conception and, by way of consequence, that it is close to *eudaimonia* (Frey 2008, p.18). By doing so, he mobilizes at least three different conceptions of happiness. Consequently, the normative implications of attributing to the state the role of promoting one conception or another are nebulous.

In order to clarify the moral challenges posed by politics of happiness, this paper is structured along the lines of the main conceptions as identified by the research in psychology. I discriminate four conceptions (objective happiness, SWB and two forms of *eudaimonia*) and discuss each of them in isolation. One may find such a choice artificial, but those interested in the implications of politics of happiness have no alternative but to look to the literature in psychology and philosophy in order to elaborate typical conceptions that could serve a consistent normative analysis. This methodology should not imply that all the research mentioned in these pages agrees on the role of institutions regarding the promotion of happiness. On the contrary, most researchers are agnostic on the political consequences of their research.

Concerning the structure of this article, it begins with brief remarks that illustrate the political importance attributed to happiness by some authors and clear up some conceptual points. The second and third sections detail the main conceptions of happiness by following the divide between the hedonistic and eudaimonic traditions.

Regarding *hedonia*, incarnated in Daniel Kahneman's so-called 'objective happiness' and in SWB, two points are made. Firstly, it is demonstrated that the two versions are less distant from each other than the inclusion of self-assessment in SWB may lead us to presume at first blush. Secondly, such conceptions raise concerns about respect for axiological pluralism and strategic behaviours.

Regarding *eudaimonia*, it is shown that the strong version, where clear components of the good life can be identified, is objectionable because it is monistic. In other words, it has the attributes of a full-blooded conception of the good life, which, again, conflicts with respect for pluralism. The soft version, which claims that the role of institutions would not lie in the promotion of a clear conception of the good life, but in the means for being happy, is probably more attractive, though it weakens the claim made by some authors that happiness research would have a revolutionary impact.

To sum up, the article advances two theses: (1) happiness constitutes a controversial ground for politics, (2) in order to avoid the most controversial aspects of politics of happiness, it seems necessary to retreat to a view where the role of the government is to secure the means to be happy, which does not contrast with arguments mobilized in the field of social justice.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

A political scope is clearly embedded in happiness research. For instance, Robert Frank considers the lack of causation between increased wealth and happiness as a 'message of considerable importance for policy-makers' (Frank 1997, p.1832). Institutions ought to concentrate their efforts on happiness and its determinants and relegate economic growth as a secondary objective. Richard Layard claims that the weak impact of income growth on happiness 'should cause each government to reappraise its objectives, and every one of us to rethink our goals' (Layard 2005, p.4). Bok affirms that '[t]here are powerful arguments for making happiness a focal point for government policy' (Bok 2010, p.45).

The Private-Public Continuum

Various authors interpret happiness research as justifying a global shift that transcends the strict private sphere. Besides being a major personal goal, happiness is one of the most (if not the most) important objectives for a political community. The underlying logic is summed up by Arthur Brooks: 'if everyone wants happiness – then isn't it reasonable to assume that a decent nation will, at minimum, create the conditions in which its citizens can best pursue happiness?' (Brooks 2008, p.2) The weight of the argument is in the assumed continuum between the centrality of happiness in personal lives and its social relevance. It is because happiness would constitute the most important personal goal that it would justify its pursuit at the collective level. Yew-Kwang Ng affirms that 'happiness is the ultimate objective of most, if not all people' (Ng 1997, p.1848). Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer

consider that happiness is ‘one of the most important issues in life – if not *the* most important issue’ (Frey and Stutzer 2005b, p.208).

The stagnation of life satisfaction, then, supports arguments in favour of politics of happiness. It ties an empirical claim (the stagnation of self-reported happiness in industrialized societies for several decades despite the dramatic growth of GDP) to a normative one (promoting happiness is a legitimate objective for institutions). The justification is furnished by the intuitive value of happiness. For instance, Layard considers that ‘happiness is that ultimate goal, because, unlike all other goals, it is *self-evidently good*. If we are asked why happiness matters, we can give no further, external reason’ (Layard 2005, p.113 emphasis added). Without turning it into the unique focus of public policy, other authors consider that happiness should be a major political end.

In this regard, politics of happiness offers an interesting test for anyone concerned with public decision-making because it blurs the frontier between the individual and collective dimensions of morality. Since ‘being happy’ is seen as a personal good, it is tempting to “move up” by attributing to institutions a substantial role in this matter. The problem with the value of happiness and, more importantly, the derivative obligations ascribed to institutions is that such a continuum may be morally challenged. It is not because something appears highly valuable in individual life that institutions are entitled to pursue it (Duncan 2010, pp.172-173). The forthcoming sections develop an argument in favour of such discontinuity by underlining ethical issues that stem from transforming happiness into a public goal. In other words, there are solid reasons for remaining cautious in front of the idea that institutions may legitimately promote principles or values that are individual goods.

Before proceeding with our detailed argumentation, it is worth noting that some goods fall outside the scope of institutions for various good reasons. Religious and existential beliefs are illustrative cases. No topic is perhaps as important as the meaning of life. However, it does not follow that institutions should take an active part in the promotion of a specific understanding of human destiny. Nor does it mean that institutions should adopt a complete “hands-off” position. They could still be seen as having a duty to provide to individuals the proper conditions for searching by and for themselves for such a meaning. But it is a different question since it only implies offering a broad range of material conditions necessary for the realization of everyone’s conception of the good life.

I will return to this point below. In any case, if one wants to prove the obligation for institutions to promote happiness, there is a double necessity of (1) assessing the value of happiness *per se*, and (2) proving that (1) requires institutions to act towards its promotion. The central question is not whether happiness has any value, but whether happiness has a political value (and, in this case, which interpretation of happiness should prevail).

As already noted, happiness might be regarded as the main focus of existence. Finding the perfect life partner, realizing our dreams, and having our personal worth recognized might all be included in the list of the components of the good/happy life. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between affirming that happiness is essential for individuals and claiming that institutions should promote it. Decoupling these two dimensions is obviously at odds with the standard position held by proponents of politics of happiness. For instance, Brooks states that ‘the pursuit of happiness is a deeply *moral* obligation, on both the personal and the national level’ (Brooks 2008, p.16).

In that sense, the filiation with the old utilitarian project that saw in institutions the main vectors of happiness is blatant. It was characteristic of the public happiness movement in France and Italy (Porta and Scazzieri 2007) as well as of British utilitarianism. As voiced by the nineteenth-century economist Stanley Jevons: ‘no social transformation would be too great to be commended and attempted if only it could be clearly shown to lead to the greater happiness of the community’ (Paul 1979, p.279). In that vein, Bentham’s felicific calculation is omnipresent in the contemporary literature when considering the political impact of the happiness research (Bok 2010, pp.9, 32). Some of the most prominent authors go beyond a simple reference to Benthamian heritage by claiming that the happiness ‘revolution’ (Frey 2008) resides in the scientific possibility of measuring happiness (Bok 2010, p.204; Frey 2008, p.ix) and proceeding to interpersonal comparisons (Ng 1997).

Maximizing or Promoting Happiness

Before continuing, two points are worth making. Firstly, it should be noted that not all happiness research contains political implications. Numerous authors do not hold strong views on the political consequences of their work. So I mention psychological research on hedonia and eudaimonia only for the purpose of uncovering some consequences of the endorsement of this or that conception by institutions. Secondly, and more importantly, proponents of politics of happiness do not defend strict identical views, but they have certain characteristics in common. For instance, they usually mix Benthamian happiness, SWB, life satisfaction and eudaimonia together, sometimes, but not always, without noticing the difference. They also share the intuition (in a more or less explicit way) that happiness is, or may reasonably be considered as, the main goal of the human existence, which is the basis of their justification for politics of happiness. In addition, they appeal to the idea that institutions have a key role to play *à propos* the promotion of happiness.

Still, these intuitions bring up a central question: is happiness’ value intrinsic or instrumental? Arguably, happiness is an intrinsic good for the vast majority of authors. They consider it as the ultimate goal in life. It is a good that potentially everyone chases for its own sake. In addition to this view about the intrinsic value of happiness, authors call on further arguments related to the derivative benefits of happiness (e.g. social trust or work productivity). Nevertheless, it does not eclipse the fact that happiness is first and foremost an intrinsic good. It would be difficult to find an author to claim the opposite, precisely because it would undermine the passage from the personal value of happiness to its political consequences.

Some divergences exist, however. One involves the political use of happiness research. It should be noted, before going any further, that this research can be, and actually is, used to justify different political goals, some of them being antagonistic (Duncan 2010, p.174). While most authors are social reformists, some of them advance more conservative goals (Brooks 2008). This shows that politics of happiness does not belong *in itself* to a conservative or reformist agenda. It also means that once it is invoked, all the work of situating happiness within a larger institutional and political framework that includes other political values and principles has to be done.

The most important divergence relates to maximization, which is, at first glance, central to the project. ‘Recent research on happiness and subjective well-being has prompted a re-

examination of the traditional utilitarian principle that the maximization of happiness should be adopted by governments as an aim of law and public policy' (Duncan 2010, p.163). If some authors consider that happiness, assimilated to well-being, or welfare could and ought to be maximized (Halpern 2009, pp.14-16), others do not explicitly endorse the project of a 'felicific calculus' (Frey 2008, p.162).

This uneasiness regarding happiness maximization rests on two arguments. The first one is a technical impossibility. Happiness functions are presumed to suffer from a similar impossibility to the one postulated by Kenneth Arrow (1951) for the social welfare function (Frey 2008, p.162): the impossibility of aggregating individual ordinal preferences at the collective level. Despite this stance, the implications of the cautious position endorsed by Frey and others are unclear. While affirming that happiness functions are empty, like welfare functions, he also claims that the recent research has made it possible to measure utility, assimilated to happiness, which suggests that comparing them could be the next step once the technical difficulty is removed.³

Such a cautious argument does not go against happiness maximization because it would be morally dubious, but because it is materially unfeasible *in the current state of the science and knowledge*. The progress of sciences might remove this obstacle. In short, the rejection of maximization on technical grounds does not call into question its desirability. The objective, if unattainable, could remain attractive.

The second obstacle is moral. Frey identifies the opposition to maximization, voiced among happiness researchers, as grounded in pluralism of the sources (or conceptions) of the good (Frey 2008, p.164).⁴ Happiness would be an individual goal among others, so it would be problematic for institutions to try to maximize it since it *may* be done at the expense of other goods. As put by Amartya Sen:

It is quite easy to be persuaded that being happy is an achievement that is valuable and that in evaluating the standard of living, happiness is an object of value (or a collection of objects of value, if happiness is seen in a plural form). The interesting question regarding this approach is not the legitimacy of taking happiness to be valuable, which is convincing enough, but its *exclusive* legitimacy. (Sen 1989, pp.7-8)

Notwithstanding some cautious statements in the literature on happiness, I contend, controversially maybe, that the difference between maximization and promotion of happiness is not as large as usually claimed. They may be conceptually different, but they are pragmatically close to each other, or at least they lead to similar political recommendations. Actually, what is the difference between a position that identifies the determinants of happiness in order to promote them and one that tries to maximize happiness by impacting its determinants?

³ Confirming this point, Frey states that '[t]he measurable concept of happiness or life satisfaction allows us to proxy the concept of *utility* in a satisfactory way. It proposes the opposite of something that was considered a revolution in the 1930s, when Sir John Hicks, Lord Lionel Robbins, and others claimed that utility cannot and need not be measured. This was a great advance...But the situation has changed dramatically since the 1930s. Psychologists have taught us how to measure happiness and thus to fill the concept of utility with life' (Frey 2008, p.ix).

⁴ He mentions also the respect for individuals and the rejection of a benevolent dictator without expanding on them (Frey 2008, p.165).

There is certainly a difference, though, in the recognition of the plurality of other goods than happiness, as pointed out by Frey and Sen. But, if we set aside the aberrant assumption that nothing other than happiness matters, a radical position which is seriously endorsed by few, if any, all other positions seek to optimize happiness under a variety of moral constraints. But the objective when one appeals to the psychological studies showing that federalism, marriage, autonomy at work, and so on, are good for happiness is to promote these elements because they are good for happiness. And since happiness is mostly measured by self-reports of satisfaction, it equates to trying to maximize such self-reports and, then, the global satisfaction with life. From an empirical point of view, this distinction between promotion and maximization seems to be mostly one of rhetoric, if we exclude the possibility to maximize happiness without any concern for other political values or principles.

This article can be interpreted as a tentative effort to flesh out this moral obstacle to the promotion/maximization project by giving substance to some of the worries about the implications of happiness research. It is then important to detail the main conceptions identified by the research, how they overlap and oppose each other, in order to sketch out a critical account of the normative implications of politics of happiness.

When considering the thesis that happiness should become one of the main focuses (if not the principal focus) of institutions, it is important to be clear about the kind of happiness that we are talking about. It is obvious that the sort of happiness promoted by institutions has an impact on the political recommendations. In that respect, two major conceptions of happiness, which significantly differ in their nature, are identified by the literature: hedonistic (HH) and eudaimonic (UH) (Bruni et al. 2008a, p.3; Ryan and Deci 2001; Waterman 1993). Roughly speaking, HH equates happiness to pleasure (*hēdonē*), while UH assimilates it to human flourishing (*eudamonia*).⁵ In the first case, a person is happy if she experiences positive feelings and avoids negative ones or if she is satisfied with life. In the second case, she is 'happy' if she perfects her abilities.⁶ These conceptions constitute the material of the next two sections.

HEDONISTIC HAPPINESS (HH)

This section deals with the hedonistic conceptions through two sub-sections. The first one compares the two versions of *hedonia* ('objective happiness' and subjective well-being). I claim that the two versions of HH are not very distant from each other when one considers *their normative implications*. The second subsection presents two critiques that apply to both versions: one about the proper metric of *hedonia* and the other about the kind of strategic behaviour that politics based on *hedonia* could sustain.

⁵ Some psychologists tackle the pertinence of this division for two reasons: either eudaimonia would be difficult to test and assess or it would be rooted in pleasurable mental states (Kashdan et al. 2008; Biswas-Diener et al. 2009; Waterman 2008).

⁶ Such descriptions may appear too simplistic due to the existing diversity of eudaimonic or hedonistic conceptions of happiness. But, since the ambition of this article is, as announced, to reveal some political and normative implications of promoting happiness, the identification of four stereotypic positions on happiness is sufficient to do the job.

Objective Happiness and Subjective Well-Being

HH has two main formulations: ‘objective happiness’ and subjective well-being (Alexandrova 2005).⁷ Daniel Kahneman provides a formulation of the first version when he revives the Benthamian approach through the concept of ‘experienced utility’ (Kahneman et al. 1997). In that scheme, happiness is assimilated to pleasurable mental states. There are two main methods of collecting data from individuals (Kahneman and Krueger 2006). The Experience Sampling Method consists in self-monitoring pleasure at the very moment individuals experience it (Larson and Csikszentmihalyi 1983). The result is a compilation of data about how people feel in real time, i.e. when they go through a given experience. This is obtained through the use of electronic devices allowing participants to immediately rate their level of satisfaction. The Day Reconstruction Method consists in asking participants to assess their levels of happiness at the end of the day by keeping a diary about their activities.

The second formulation is SWB (Diener 1984, 1994). It is usually understood as a combination of three elements: positive affect, negative affect and self-assessment (Pavot 2008). ‘Subjective well-being, perhaps the central concept within the subjective tradition, is a broad notion thought to encompass *general satisfaction with one’s life*, positive feelings and the absence of negative feelings’ (Alexandrova 2005, p.302, emphasis added). The self-assessment dimension appears in polls and surveys with questions like ‘On the whole, how do you feel about life?’⁸ By comparison with objective happiness, what really counts is the evaluation derived from (or validated by) critical self-assessment. It departs from pleasure *per se* by introducing an evaluative component. It is then an “objective happiness plus”. The assumption is that immediate measurements are poor indicators since people constantly revise the past in light of their current judgments and readjust how happy they think they are. This self-reassessment is at the core of SWB⁹. It is presumed to increase the stability and reliability of the measurement of HH.

At first blush, it is possible to tackle the distinction between the two conceptions by affirming that most of our evaluations of past events continually change. Take divorce, for instance; it does not carry an identical meaning or the same feelings one day, one month, one year or ten years after. Retrospective evaluations of a given state of affairs often evolve over time. This variability then raises the question of the choice of the relevant moment for elaborating on individuals’ well-being. Moreover, does the shift from happiness as a current pleasurable state to a retrospective assessment really make a difference in the sense that the second will not suffer from the same defects as the first?

Self-reported measurements of happiness are vulnerable to misrepresentations and miscalculations, whether the estimation is immediate (pleasure) or delayed (SWB). The

⁷ Even if we present this division, its analytical pertinence is not fully obvious. Some authors who defend the *objectivist* view tend to see their work as belonging to the SWB tradition. Indeed, it does not change much the perspective adopted here since the article does not purport to offer a definitive view on happiness or to describe what authentic happiness is, but focuses on the implications of politics of happiness.

⁸ SWB is a composite index made of the compilation of answers regarding satisfaction in different life-domains.

⁹ For the rest of the section, emphasis is put on SWB’s self-evaluative component since this is what differentiates it from objective happiness.

human brain alters the perceived worth of past experience in various ways. It might be to protect the integrity of the self (described by Daniel Gilbert as ‘cooking the facts’ (Gilbert 2006, p.176)) or it may result from perceptive or evaluative biases (as shown by the work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky). Psychological studies show that individuals perform poorly when they have to compare feelings, contentment or happiness through time, i.e. to forecast future pleasure or remember past experience (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2001; Gilbert 2006; Gilbert and Wilson 2000). Now, from a SWB perspective, how to accommodate the fact that people suffer at a distance from the same kind of biases that impair their immediate evaluation of pleasure and how to still find some reliability in retrospective self-assessments?

SWB might escape this by accentuating the subjectivist side of HH. A possibility is to conceive happiness as a temporary truth, emerging from a dynamics of successive re-evaluations. The “true assessment” of one’s happiness is then a built-in and evolving process, without any guarantee that the valuation reached in t will not be substantially modified or invalidated by the subject herself in $t+1$. Successive self-assessments by a given individual become a series of different (and probably divergent) truths about her SWB. As self-assessments have only a temporary value, it is futile to care too much about this variability; what really matters is to accept a relativist account of happiness.

However, the political implications of such a position might be troubling. A critic may object that institutions, by founding their policies on SWB, rely too heavily on citizens’ present feelings or fantasies, even when they are making retrospective judgments. To summarize, institutions take the chance of implementing policies that citizens do not truly desire, or will not desire anymore, which will undermine their real interests or not generate lasting satisfaction.

The unreliability of feelings experienced during a specific event in regard to the true interests of the individual in question is an objection with a solid record in philosophy under the form, more or less, of *false consciousness*. In short, it stipulates that people are regularly misled by their sentiments, perceptions or conceptions of the world, which lead them to make major judgmental mistakes in their evaluations of actions or states of affairs. At the extreme, the argument claims that when people feel happy, they are not as happy as they think they are. From Plato’s cave allegory to Marxist alienation, there is a recurrent idea in philosophy and social sciences that feelings are not reliable because the sensible world or an ideological superstructure distorts them in an opposite direction to individuals’ true interests.

Even without alluding to alienation, adaptive preferences address a similar challenge to subjectivist approaches (Bruni et al. 2008a, p.6; Sen 1999, p.62). In front of restricted life prospects, individuals adapt their expectations by lowering them. The implication is that people often mobilize deflated preferences, which are adjusted for objectives people think, wrongly or rightly, are reachable for them. In this kind of situation, what could be the value of self-assessments? Do they offer an accurate representation of how people actually fare, i.e. an adequate image of the actual well-being of a given population?

In order to preserve the subjectivist dimension of SWB as a continuous self-reassessment, it might be replied that one should remain cautious in front of judgments that tend to question too stringently people’s representations or free choices, even when these choices appear unwise or self-harmful (Sugden 2008, p.300). The precaution would be even more pressing

in liberal democracies because the alternative – to bypass individuals’ own judgments about how they perform – would be unacceptable regarding democratic standards related to the respect for individual freedom and choices.

In fact, the argument that individuals would be alienated in such a way that their capacity for genuine self-assessment would be drastically impaired has to meet two critiques. The first is that the argument is too extreme, i.e. that it would imply strong assumptions on human behaviour that could not be empirically assessed. The second, the most important, is that it violates the principle of respect for individuals and their choices, which is the basis of liberal democracies. This rebuttal of the alienation argument is even stronger when one considers that adhering to the alienation critique might justify overriding individual judgments on numerous matters, especially concerning self-orientated preferences that do not harm others (Sugden 2008, p.307).

However, if this anti-paternalistic answer to the alienation argument could be fairly successful in defending the subjectivist account embodied in HH and makes the case for prohibiting institutions from disregarding individuals’ mental states, it does not offer strong justifications to promote happiness at the political level. In other words, HH seems to provide more convincing arguments for limiting than legitimating the intervention of institutions.

Alienation, miswanting or adaptive preferences highlight an important issue for public decision-making: how to guarantee that biases affecting individuals do not have a regressive form, especially when applied to retrospective evaluations? Likewise, such myopia of individuals in front of their true interests challenges not the salience of the analytical distinction between objective happiness and SWB, but the pertinence of this distinction from an institutional perspective in terms of political implications.

If the main difference between the two forms of HH has to do with the objectivity and reliability of individual judgments, there are some reasons to see no deep-seated difference between objective happiness and SWB in regard to biased judgments since biases may affect current perceptions and evaluations as well as retrospective ones (Kashdan et al., p.222). Because both relate at the end to mental states and subjective mechanisms, both are vulnerable to perceptive and evaluative distortions. Consequently, both ought to provide mechanisms that guarantee that these potential defects will not “pollute” the information collected by institutions. By doing so, both have to depart from their subjectivist account in order to include elements of external evaluation.

More than the promotion of SWB, one may claim that, when contrasted with objective happiness, the particularity of politics based on SWB lies in the importance attributed to individual autonomy. According to this view, the value of SWB depends on the individual capacity for self-critical thinking. By doing so, priority is given to the self-assessment part over the perception of pleasure or displeasure. To be sure, a given assessment could still be erroneous or harmful, considering the subject’s own perspective (e.g. her true interests). However, the value that institutions attribute to self-reports provided by agents who demonstrate high levels of critical thinking could be accepted as fair approximations of their “true interests”.

Nevertheless, is SWB still about HH since it prioritizes cognitive abilities over pleasures? Stated differently, is it a mild form of eudaimonic happiness? This doubt is reinforced when

one considers the nature of obligations that institutions could face for guaranteeing SWB. Actually, these obligations concern more the provision of the necessary conditions for critical self-evaluations than the promotion of any specific result or content. In other words, politics of happiness would have to enhance something like ‘procedural autonomy’ (Dworkin 1988), i.e. the means for autonomy (e.g. investments in education or the provision of publicly reliable information) rather than a specific understanding of it (e.g. acting virtuously). Consequently, this conception is no longer hedonistic, but eudaimonic.

In fine, issues of cognitive biases, misrepresentation and other defects, when individuals account for what makes them happy or satisfied with life, blur the distinction between the two types of HH if both are to be interpreted as dealing with mental states. An additional point is that basing public policies on this account of happiness asks for a guarantee that immediate or retrospective measures of pleasure or well-being will be resilient enough through time to give clear indications about what enhances one’s happiness. In that case, the sort of *hedonia* that can be of some use for institutions takes the form of SWB, which resembles the eudaimonic conception of happiness.

Objections

Besides the fact that objective happiness and SWB are both vulnerable to perceptive and evaluative biases, two difficulties stem from the hypothetical duty for institutions to promote happiness understood as pleasure or SWB. (1) The first one is related to the *definition of the metric*. In few words, such a metric would capture biased judgments from individuals, be hostile to pluralism and express a moral commitment that is not shared within the population. (2) The second one refers to the possible rise of patterns of *strategic interaction* in the process of distributing resources according to the happiness criterion. Politics of happiness based on HH may offer strong incentives to individuals and groups to deflate their self-reported levels of happiness or inflate their expectations in order to benefit from additional resources and opportunities.

(1) To begin with, the mere possibility to engage in politics of happiness depends on the *identification of a yardstick*, which may refer to strict hedonistic pleasures or self-assessments. In the first case, it records everything that could boost individuals’ mental states, ranging from food enjoyment to sexual intercourse to pure aesthetical experience (in so far that they incur a positive feeling). The metric is then pleasure (for maximization purposes) and pain (for minimization purposes). In the second case, if the metric lies in self-reported levels of satisfaction, then what is evaluated is self-assessments and, indirectly, autonomy. Institutions should take into consideration the content of individual self-reports of SWB and the individual capacity to produce such self-reports (which includes elements such as complete information on the different options of life, a proper education, and so forth).

Thus, it is primordial for institutions to establish the conception of HH they are concerned with and elaborate a criterion for measurement. In addition, all citizens need to value this metric. Or, at least, it must refer to elements that, even if each of them is not unanimously shared, contribute on the overall (i.e. as a bundle) to general happiness. If it is impossible for every component of happiness to be equally valued (or valued at all) by every individual, the bundle of elements itself has to refer to a standard flexible enough to measure the situation of

every member of a given society on her own terms. In sum, the chosen metric should accommodate most, if not all, conceptions of happiness.

Any endeavour to base politics of happiness on such a metric has then to face three main objections: the frailty of human knowledge, the respect for the pluralism of happiness views and happiness as a contestable conception of the good.

The frailty objection. Both pleasures and self-assessments have the advantage of respecting the 'first-person standpoint', i.e. respecting one's evaluation of one's own happiness (Barrotta 2008, p.150). However, the precedent sub-section cast some doubt on the value of self-reports when elaborating public policies, mostly due to their regressive form in the presence of widespread cognitive biases. How to be sure that self-reports are reliable if they change through time, especially because individuals constantly discover that they have been the victims of misvaluations? How to be sure that individuals properly identify what makes them happy and that they will undertake the necessary steps?

Again, if objective happiness is the metric, institutions then have to boost immediate pleasures, which are prone to miswanting, misvaluations, and so forth, according to happiness research itself. Political decisions rooted in such information might then be detrimental to long-run happiness, which triggers the question of the political value of HH. In short, is objective happiness a reliable tool for institutions in order to determine what makes people happy in the long run? Turning to SWB does not solve the difficulty. It is equally vulnerable to the frailty objection (despite the retrospective dimension of self-assessments) and, consequently, faces the same difficulty in providing a firm ground for public decision-making. As the previous section already discussed this objection, further development is not required.

The pluralistic objection. Even if we concede that individuals may, under realistic assumptions, accurately assess their past and present happiness as well as predict their future happiness, there is still the issue of pluralism (Barrotta 2008), which is about the capacity of the politics of happiness to accommodate the diversity of the human views on happiness. Defining a common measure of happiness that is politically workable is a difficult task since the content of a worthy existence is highly malleable and influenced by numerous factors, such as religious views, family, friends, job, past events, self-reassessment, and so forth. Two individuals randomly picked do not attribute to these elements the same weight. Many arbitrages exist between work, family, moral and religious values, political principles, and so forth. The institutional measurement has to be flexible enough (which means able to recognize a large range of happiness components) to support most of these combinations. The metric has to enable all possible mixes of components that promote the overall happiness.

In response, one may convincingly argue that self-reports could provide such a measurement since they rely on people's own perceptions without prejudging the factors that contribute to SWB. The fact that institutions monitor and promote SWB does not mean that they take any stance on the constitution of the reported SWB. However, there is a practical and important distinction between monitoring and promoting happiness. The affirmation that institutions do not have to take any strong stance on individuals' happiness when *tracking general life satisfaction* (questions such as 'On the whole, how satisfied are you with your life?') is actually right. But, when they either try to have a finer grained view on this global evaluation

(its causes and determinants) or implement politics of happiness, they cannot do otherwise than to list and test for specific domains (work, family, religiosity, political opinions, and so forth) (Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2008).

The pluralistic objection, then, raises the question of the elements that should be included in this monitoring process. Because people disagree on the happy life and its components (Hausman 2010, p.329), politics of happiness must take that into account. In that respect, a pluralistic conception of happiness faces two opposite challenges. The first one is to be able to accommodate all (most) of the determinants of happiness that matter for people, i.e. to be sufficiently inclusive. The second challenge is to elaborate consistent politics of happiness, i.e. politics that still foster happiness and not something else, and politics that do not promote contradictory goals in regard to happiness or other political principles, i.e. not to be too inclusive. For instance, having a fulfilling job and being autonomous at work contribute largely to happiness, as does being married. But the rights of women to have access to jobs, flourish and enjoy equal work autonomy, power and wages should not be undermined by some political measures to promote marriage and couple life.

The valuation objection. Even if we concede, for the sake of the argument, the fact that some features are recurrent among most of the different conceptions of happiness (social relatedness, romantic relations, work, commuting time, and so on) or the fact that life satisfaction is broadly enough conceived that it includes any determinant while remaining consistent, people may still disagree on the value of happiness itself (Wilson 2008). As Ronald Dworkin remarks on utility maximization: ‘once any more detailed specification such as “happiness” or “success in one’s aims” is chosen, it becomes evident that the goal of maximizing utility so defined, even when feasible, is unfair, because at least some people would not take utility so characterized as of dominant importance in their lives’ (Dworkin 2002, p.309).

As an illustration, people with a neurotic personality may consider existential reflections, expressing mental states far remote from happy ones, as what ultimately gives value to life.¹⁰ As a result, they are more vulnerable to stress, dissatisfaction and a sense of delusion and are more prone to premature death (due to cardiovascular and other stress-related diseases), divorce, and so on, than the rest of the population. Without a doubt, they may be profoundly dissatisfied with particular aspects of their existence, which will be reflected in their self-assessments in one way or another. But it is reasonable to assume that, overall, they are not willing to re-examine their conception of the good and change their way of life as a whole because happiness, in the hedonistic sense, is not the ultimate value from their own point of view. Actually, most individuals do care about other things than happiness. More, they are often eager to experience intense dissatisfaction in pursuing them. Parenthood is a fascinating case since having kids has been proven to negatively impact happiness, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction and mental well-being (Nattavudh Powdthavee 2009). Despite these brute facts, most of us still want kids and are ready to sacrifice a lot to have them.

An existence dominated by elements that rank highly on a hedonistic scale could then be judged unfeasible or unattractive for various good reasons. A given individual may have

¹⁰ This attitude toward life characterizes a large part of the contemporary intellectual history, from brute forms of nihilism to existentialism, Romanticism or the literature of the absurd.

other priorities and consider that she cannot afford to pursue or indulge herself in striving for happiness for sound reasons (e.g. higher achievements or a glorious cause). Thus, public policies designed to promote happiness (as pleasure or SWB) can be perceived as partial and disrespectful of people's intimate commitments due to a *parti-pris* in favour of a particular conception of the good life. A possible response is to consider that the appropriate goal for institutions is not to bolster happiness *per se*, but to support some underlying factors (e.g. job autonomy, right of political participation), which is the same response as the one given to the pluralistic objection, with the difference, however, that the worth of these factors is not primarily grounded in happiness.

On the one hand, their value may be intrinsic. This means that the value of these factors will not be conditional on their contribution to the overall happiness. However, considering them as intrinsically valuable undermines the label "politics of happiness". If work autonomy, harmonious relationships, a fulfilling job, and the rest are valued for themselves because they are inherently good for individuals, the connection with happiness is remote. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that their value is instrumental. The ultimate worth is situated in something like a self-centred development. The role of institutions would then be to provide the largest possible array of such factors (or to guarantee access to them) to allow the realization of most of the conceptions of the good (including conceptions of happiness). Such an approach resembles eudaimonia, in particular in the case of SWB, because it guarantees individuals the material and psychological capacity to conduct retrospective self-assessments in a manner that they judge adequate according to their own standards.

If we set aside the frailty objection that discards the validity of self-reports of happiness, the pluralistic and teleological objections indicate the same direction. By shifting to the constituents of happiness, the response to these objections is to revise the institutional focus and move the cursor from happiness to its determinants. It becomes, then, a different argument, where the role reserved for happiness is unclear.

(2) The second critique is based upon the idea that politics of happiness are prone to generate problems of *strategic interaction*.¹¹ It highlights potentially perverse redistributive effects that may arise because, by trying to promote happiness improvements, institutions may actually shape a context of choice that generates collective action problems. An extreme case is the emergence of races to the bottom¹² where the competing claims on resources that individuals present to institutions escalate because individuals manipulate, consciously or not, their self-reported happiness.¹³

¹¹ 'Two or more parties must find themselves in a well-structured situation of mutual impingement where each party must make a move and where every possible move carries fateful implications for all of the parties. In this situation, each player must influence his own decision by his knowing that the other players are likely to try to dope out his decision in advance, and may even appreciate that he knows this is likely. Courses of action or moves will then be made in light of one's thoughts about the others' thoughts about oneself. An exchange of moves made on the basis of this kind of orientation to self and others can be called strategic interaction' (Goffman 1969, pp.100-101).

¹² A race to the bottom is a perverse competition where players gradually degrade their respective situations without being able to opt out of this unhealthy interaction (e.g. two producers who compete by cutting their prices, even under their break-even point).

¹³ The problem is acknowledged in the happiness research, but without being fully engaged on its political grounds. For instance, while Frey writes that '[w]hen individuals become aware that the

This kind of behaviour could have two causes. It may result from either the *positional nature of human satisfaction*, i.e. the fact that people compare themselves with others and express satisfaction/dissatisfaction according to their relative position (status)¹⁴, or a *conscious manipulation* by some individuals of their self-reports. In both cases, strategic interaction emerges because, when promoting happiness at the social level, individual achievements in terms of happiness serve as points of reference and comparison. However, as the access to such information is not direct, institutions usually have to rely on the expressed feelings, opinions or moods of individuals themselves, and this indirect access allows various conscious or unconscious strategic uses of these self-reports. In other words, happiness is in large part context-sensitive (Frank 1999), and, if the institutions have the goal to roughly equalize or improve the well-being of all, strategic behaviours pose a problem.

The *positional nature of human satisfaction* problematizes politics of happiness in two ways. The first issue concerns *efficiency*.¹⁵ If most of individual happiness is context-sensitive, i.e. if an important part of individual satisfaction arises from one's relative position, the pertinence of investing public resources to enhance or promote happiness is questionable. Such investments may only have a marginal impact on the overall level of happiness. It is a question of efficiency since these resources could have been used to pursue other goals, such as improving the material conditions of people, offering them access to basic necessities, or financing goods that derive their value from something other than happiness (like public goods).

The second issue is *equity*. Individuals with high expectations are favoured by such public policies (Harrod 1958) since they need more resources than the average for reaching comparable levels of happiness.¹⁶ If the main criterion for redistributing resources is objective happiness or SWB, a part of the population, due to the expensiveness of the preferences they hold, will monopolize a larger share of the collective resources by comparison with those who have more modest pretensions or who are satisfied with less, which is the case, for instance, for people with adaptive preferences. This last aspect reinforces the concern for equity since people who hold adaptive preferences are usually among the worse-offs. So, in that sense, politics of happiness may not treat them on equal footing with the holders of expensive preferences. Since one of the principles of societies that proclaim to be preoccupied with equality is not to deteriorate the situation of the worse-offs, politics of happiness may be problematic.

Conscious manipulation roughly raises similar worries to those raised by the positional nature of satisfaction. The only difference lies in the intention of the agents. In the precedent

happiness level they report influences the behavior of political actors, they have an interest in misrepresenting it' (Frey 2008, p.167), he does not discuss further the potential implications.

¹⁴ There is a large body of literature on this idea that individual satisfaction is context-dependent and, in particular, depends on others' situations. It covers themes like distinctive competition, positional goods, conspicuous consumption and status-seeking (Duesenberry 1949; Frank 1999; Hirsch 1976; Mason 1998; Veblen 1994).

¹⁵ Here, there are two ways to understand efficiency: (1) *narrowly*, i.e. from the happiness point of view, and (2) *broadly*, i.e. from the perspective of the collective use of resources. The strategic objection covers these two dimensions.

¹⁶ It mirrors the well-known objection against welfarism based on the compensation of expensive tastes (Dworkin 2002, pp.48-59).

case, individuals were not consciously using their self-assessments to influence institutions. It was only individual adaptation, as a human fact, that gave rise to the strategic interaction. In this case, the situation is slightly different because some individuals or groups may manipulate their self-reported happiness. Despite the fact that this line between a non- (fully) conscious and a conscious behaviour may be difficult to draw, it is still possible to consider that overt manipulation fuels non-cooperative behaviour and escalating claims.

In any case, politics of HH provides strong incentives to manipulate self-reports and gear up the claims addressed to institutions. Not only are individuals with higher expectations than average at an advantage, but the context also becomes vulnerable to races to the bottom fuelled by interpersonal comparisons of achievements. Imagine that I envy your new SUV, which causes me profound displeasure. Retrospectively, I could prefer the anterior situation where I had a bigger, cooler or more expensive automobile than yours. I might invoke my unhappiness to force institutions to subsidize my new car or to seize yours. In spite of the caricatural nature of these examples, they demonstrate a simple point: HH is likely to lead to 'politics of envy', i.e. politics led by pure aversive feelings at the expense of other morally relevant considerations.¹⁷

The problem is not only that some individuals receive more resources due to the nature of their preferences. It has also to do with upward adjustments, not of the preferences themselves, but of the individual demands. It is the consequence of basing public policies on happiness as a mental state to which institutions have only an indirect and loose access (self-reports). The threat is reinforced if we take seriously the assertion, commonly made by happiness research, that a large part of happiness has a strong comparative component due to the importance of context-sensitive behaviour (Frank 1999). The fact that most satisfaction could result from interpersonal comparisons of standing (i.e. positional concerns), which leads to manipulation and suboptimal outcomes, casts doubts upon the possibility and desirability of improving the overall happiness understood as *hedonia* in a significant manner.

In conclusion, politics of happiness based on HH can be challenged for two reasons. Firstly, the hedonistic metric may be hard to identify, be unreliable, conflict with moral diversity or impose a specific conception of the good. One may still argue that happiness does not need to be the unique political goal. As seen with SWB, autonomy can also be valued as a condition for happiness. In that case, the whole argument switches toward attributing to happiness a remote function or toward eudaimonia, which is a different conception of happiness. Also, in this case, autonomy is valued only insofar as it promotes happiness, which traduces the fact that a variety of political goods (freedom, equality, political stability, etc.) derive their value from their contribution to happiness. But without detailing it, it is sufficient to note that such a view represents a strong stance, far from being uncontroversial.

Secondly, the project of promoting or maximizing HH contains a major drawback in terms of strategic interaction. It gives both a premium to those who hold expensive views on happiness and, as a consequence, an incentive to others to gear up their demands. If the repartition of collective resources has to be partly sensitive to individual expectations, then

¹⁷ This point is backed up by the large literature on positional concerns and status seeking (Carlsson et al. 2007; Frank 2005; Hirsch 1976; Nattavudh Powdthavee 2009; Solnick and Hemenway 1998; Zizzo and Oswald 2001).

there is a double risk: to subsidize some costly preferences (at the expense of less costly ones) and to give a premium to individuals for inflating the requirements for satisfying their preferences. In other words, apart from the perfectionist tendency, politics of happiness based on HH are vulnerable to strategic and suboptimal behaviour.

EUDAIMONIC HAPPINESS

Eudaimonic happiness is the second sort of happiness. It has the advantage of avoiding some of the previous difficulties related to HH's subjectivist tone. Contrary to the hedonistic version, what counts here is a more objective criterion: the fulfilment of human possibilities that lead to the actualization of the *true self* (*daimon*). Happiness is about cultivating one's inner-self and/or acting in a virtuous manner, i.e. developing virtues that enhance one's moral character. The concept of happiness includes not the direct sensitive outcome (current or reassessed feelings), but the possession and cultivation of specific personal endowments. These endowments are supposed to lead to a more profound and valuable contentment, tracking the maturation of specific dispositions rather than a current mental state.

As framed by positive psychology's pioneer, Martin Seligman, 'the good life is using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic happiness' (Seligman 2002, p.13). In other words, individuals have to develop their own capacities, qualities or virtues in order to reach a pleasant life, but also a 'meaningful' one, a 'good life', the sole path to 'authentic happiness'. Seligman's statement can be interpreted in two manners. According to the first, happiness consists in having a good life with clearly identified features. A moral blueprint is available to individuals prior to their action and experience that allows them to evaluate the content and success of their existence. According to the second, the idea is principally to secure the *means* for happiness rather than any particular outcome, which are essential to flourish as a human being. These interpretations delimit the contours of two views about eudaimonic happiness.

This section shows that the disrespect for pluralism and the aggravation of axiological conflict conveyed by the first version of UH (UH 1.0) may justify retreating to a less exigent conception of UH (UH 2.0) as the strongest ground for politics of happiness. Yet, this move calls into question what value happiness research actually adds to existing theories of justice.

Eudaimonic Happiness 1.0 (UH 1.0)

This first view mobilizes a conception of human perfection rooted in ancient Greece, especially in the works of Plato and Aristotle, who contrasted the lower part of the soul (encompassing animal instincts and corporal pleasures) with the upper one (the domain of intellectual and moral human abilities) (Aristotle, *De Anima*, II, 3, 410b10-410b27, 413b24-415a13; Plato, *Phaedo*, 82-84; , *Republic*, IV, 440b-445e). During the modern period, Immanuel Kant held a similar view: to be human is to be autonomous, i.e. being one's own moral ruler as a rational being who is capable of self-reflexivity. More recently, Alasdair MacIntyre defines the virtues as 'those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* and the lack of which will frustrate his movement towards that *telos*' (MacIntyre 2007 p.148). Rather than merely instrumental in the sense that virtues would be needed in order to reach happiness or completeness, they are intrinsically valuable

as constituting the good (*telos*). They are more than the constituents of happiness understood as *eudaimonia*: they constitute happiness.¹⁸

The eudaimonic tradition runs through the history of philosophy. Even if not centred on virtues *per se*, John Stuart Mill is convinced that intellectual pleasures are morally superior to physical ones because human beings actualize their capacities by the cultivation of a noble character (Kreider 2010, pp.64-65). This character is the expression of rationality as the distinctive feature of the human condition. 'Mill gives more value to the 'higher pleasures' because, like Aristotle, he associates happiness with the development and exercise of the distinctly human higher rational capacities' (Kreider 2010, p.61). Despite the fact that a happy life is an 'existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments both in point of quantity and quality' (Mill 1863, p.17), intellectual pleasures are still more valuable than physical ones. This is what distinguishes eudaimonia from hedonia. In other words, quality is the most important dimension when it comes to evaluating the goodness of an existence, and for assessing this quality, Mill appeals to the judgment of qualified judges, i.e. an elite (Mill 1863, p.15).

Mill's case is interesting. Although he is a liberal, strongly committed to the toleration of the diversity of ways of life he finds of no value or he even abhors, like Mormons' polygamy (Mill 1859, p.165), he resorts just the same to strong moral valuations of choices, paths and forms of life. In the background, there is an unambiguous model of human flourishing. This line of thought may support public policies based on a perfectionist view according to which, to put it simply, 'high culture' and the development of rational abilities are necessary components of a good life (Mill 1873).

One may convincingly argue that though Mill articulates a perfectionist view concerning private life, the personal qualities to be developed and the nature of pleasures to strive for, he still respects the plurality of life styles. Then, Mill *de facto* draws a line between his personal conception of the good and his political commitments. Such a line is perceptible in *On Liberty*, where he defends a pluralistic view according to which people must be free to follow whatever conception of the good life they hold if they do not impose harms on others.

This separation between public and private spheres enhanced by a pluralistic view of human ends is, however, not an option available for many of those who advocate for politics of happiness since they see in happiness the good of the polity, no matter the conception of happiness they mobilize (as expressed by authors like Bok, Brooks or Layard, and suggested by others). In addition, as evoked above, part of the justification for the public value of happiness comes from its worth in personal life. Within this framework, eudaimonic happiness carries important political implications. My view is that this full-blooded theory of the good life (UH 1.0), with components supposedly easy to identify (e.g. by an elite), can be disputed on political grounds for at least two reasons: one has to do with *monism*; the other is related to *social stability*.

(1) Considering the unidimensionality of human flourishing, which can only be expressed through the development of the highest virtues or abilities, UH 1.0 seems at first blush to be

¹⁸ 'For what constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to secure such a life. We thus cannot characterize the good for men adequately without already having made reference to the virtues' (MacIntyre 2007, p.149).

a *monist moral theory* (Berlin 1969) according to which ‘there is ultimately only one real value, and that all others can be reduced to it’ (Weinstock 1997, p.497). This moral absolutism contains two opposite options regarding the individual ability to cope with this ideal of personal flourishing.

(a) Everyone is considered to be able to access this superior form of life (i.e. to develop her abilities). Consequently, any failure to do so is “only” a problem of insufficient means provided by institutions or insufficient will/effort on the individual’s side.

(b) Not everyone is considered to be able to access this superior form of life (i.e. to develop her abilities). Then the judgment has a clear elitist tone (Kashdan et al. 2008, p.227) and induces a moral gradation of human capacities, or even individuals themselves.¹⁹

The first interpretation is implausible, while the second is morally contestable. Regarding (a), an approach stipulating that happiness lies in the development of the highest human capacities is utopian if it presumes that everyone could live in accordance with its prerequisites. A quick look around makes obvious that individuals perform differently regarding the development of their higher capacities or the enjoyment of intellectual pleasures, some because they are unable to do so due to some limits or handicaps, others (probably the majority) because it is not the kind of life they want to lead.²⁰ Again, the discussion revolves around the sort of constraint that moral pluralism imposes on institutions and the rules they abide by. By promoting the highest human achievements as incarnating the ‘authentic’ happiness or human nature, institutions exhibit a bias in favour of a specific conception of the good life, while disadvantaging other conceptions by situating them at a lower level of human flourishing.

The second, more restrictive, interpretation – (b) – raises the question of the moral acceptability (or even worthiness) of social distinction. It is the most plausible thesis: since the very nature of intellectual abilities and achievements is to be positional as a matter of fact, they are not accessible to everyone at the same time. One cannot be smart or have good taste while everyone else around has the same characteristics. For some people to display good taste or intellectual abilities, it is necessary that others be perceived as having bad taste or being less brilliant. It is the very logic of social distinction (Bourdieu 1979). UH 1.0’s enjoyment is then not accessible to everyone. Excellence is of a comparative nature. The same goes for moral character, the possession of virtues, and so forth. It is the lot of perfectionist views to reserve recognition of individual value to the few. If it were not the case, there would be nothing to admire in the cultivation of virtues.

¹⁹ An example of (a) is the attempt to create model citizens put in force by the French Republic, which is visible in the conception of the role devoted to public education. An example of (b) is the Athenian Republic and its moral division of the residents.

²⁰ There is still the critique that people who do not have this eudaimonic goal on their personal agenda are incapable of properly perceiving where their ‘true interests’ lie. This line of argumentation is morally problematic, not so much because it would claim that people sometimes fail to recognize their true interests. It would be foolish to deny this, especially because it is assessed by observation. What is controversial is the assertion that these ‘true interests’ would be of a *eudaimonic* nature.

One may not see any problem in this state of affairs. However, the problematic dimension is when such a view comes with a controversial *parti-pris* concerning the involvement of institutions in shaping society along the lines of this ideal, about what is of worth and what constitutes a good life. More than a moral gradation of life choices, it traduces a moral gradation of life achievements. It may imply contempt toward people who are unable to live up to these standards since the development of highest abilities or the cultivation of mind pleasures symbolizes the core of human dignity.

In the end, UH 1.0 is a subtle form of moral blaming. Those who diverge from the “norm” are exposed to depreciative judgments regarding their incompleteness or their lack of concern for an achieved life or the exigencies of human nature. The downside is more marked when eudaimonia is considered to express human dignity (Kreider 2010, p.60). Then, it is difficult not to perceive UH 1.0 as a threat to the individual sense of self-respect, i.e. a menace to one of the most basic human needs (Rawls 1999, §67).

(2) This last remark paves the way for pragmatic considerations that reinforce the claim that happiness, as a strict comprehension of human flourishing, may not be an appropriate criterion for public life. Promoting a specific conception of happiness can lead to *the aggravation of the whole level of disagreement within the society* (e.g. on abortion, euthanasia, religion, etc.). By promoting UH 1.0, institutions do actually inject another dose of discontent into the current mix. People disagree about cultural, religious or moral matters, so happiness might become an additional source of discontent in the case where one particular conception is endorsed by institutions. This critique is the practical side of the monist objection. In addition to being objectionable on the ground of respect for diversity, promotion of eudaimonic happiness may set up a deleterious social context.

It should be acknowledged that the fact that public policies sometimes increase the level of disagreement within society is not forcibly a bad thing.²¹ Part of democracy’s nature can be seen as the exercise of regulated normative conflict. Thus, there may be convincing reasons to believe that, in the end, disagreement about happiness could enhance democracy (in terms of moral richness and individual engagement). But it is still a mistake, both factually and morally, to deduce from the (contestable) observation that everyone is striving for happiness that everyone is actually striving for the same kind of happiness and that institutions should promote a specific conception of it.²² Politics of eudaimonic happiness will never be consensual. On the contrary, it will multiply controversies about the objectives of institutions and the ultimate meaning of life.

Any advocacy of politics of happiness has then to take this into account by offering not only empirical but also normative evidence that moral diversity is not unduly restricted and that social stability is not undermined. The minimum expectation is that such an issue has to be engaged by the literature on politics of happiness, which is seldom the case. This is the reason why the distinction between what is morally good at the individual level and what is politically desirable has to be thoroughly accounted for and discussed by the portion of the

²¹ On the contrary, there are positions that consider that political and moral conflicts constitute the heart of a healthy democracy (Maclure 2003, pp.7-8).

²² The diversity of the conceptions of happiness is recognized by most of the authors in happiness studies. It is the reason why a position like Frey’s may be interpreted as favouring UH 2.0 over UH 1.0.

happiness literature that purports to convey political implications. Without a shadow of doubt, 'authentic happiness', 'human excellence' and 'high pleasures' might be primordial in one's life.

The reason why so many individuals value virtues and seek to strengthen their moral character is intuitively sound. There is no need to quarrel about that (and psychologists like Seligman do not go further). Indeed, it does not follow that institutions are bound to any moral obligation to promote this kind of happiness. UH 1.0 is a personal conception of the good to which individuals are free to adhere or not. The quest for happiness, as well as the definition of its contents and conditions, is a private matter, and there are sound arguments why it should remain so. Institutions must abstain from enforcing or promoting human flourishing. Although developing one's intellectual abilities and virtues might improve one's quality of life and boost one's sense of self-realization, the case for turning eudaimonic happiness into a political goal carries problematic consequences.

EUDAIMONIC HAPPINESS 2.0 (UH 2.0)

The fourth conception presents happiness, under the form of *eudaimonia*, as a process rather than a specific and well-defined content. Human flourishing is still central, but it takes as many forms as there are individuals. In that context, institutions have the responsibility to make this quest possible for everyone, i.e. to guarantee access to some factors that enhance happiness and life. As Corey Keyes and Julia Annas express it, 'the challenge that many governments around the world now want...is the promotion and protection of flourishing citizens' and, first and foremost, 'the greater challenge is that not enough people are functioning well in a life about which they also feel good' (Keyes and Annas 2009, p.200). Put differently, individuals should have access to the bundle of necessary means for experiencing a flourishing life.

This interpretation bears strong similarities to the capability approach developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, especially when it comes to considering that happiness is better understood in terms of human flourishing and when this flourishing is presented as diverse in its forms as there are individuals (Sen 2008, p.26). Then, institutions should guarantee to individuals access to basic eudaimonic enhancers. It does not mean that the two approaches are identical. For instance, among the list of capabilities, there can be elements that *a priori* do not improve happiness (like the concern for other species than human beings). In any case, the concept of capability refers to the capacity of an individual to function properly, i.e. to self-develop and produce valuable outcomes. While the list of capabilities evolved from one author to another (e.g. Nussbaum 2000), they share the idea that something that looks like UH 2.0 should be promoted. In short, when happiness is conceived as eudaimonia, i.e. the ability to self-flourish, whatever flourishing is, it is difficult to notice a deep difference between capability and happiness approaches.

This second version of eudaimonia may be regarded as an indirect response to the critique addressed to HH in terms of respect for pluralism. UH 2.0 also adopts a more neutral posture than UH 1.0 by avoiding any substantial definition of happiness and by restricting its scope to the provision of the means for happiness. Instead of being preoccupied by some precise achievements, institutions are concerned with the means. This is not about happiness in

itself, but about securing the conditions for being happy understood in its eudaimonic sense. The shift away from UH 1.0 is not trivial. The priority becomes to ensure that everyone has the adequate material and psychological conditions for a satisfying life with a proper functioning.

Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer, for instance, seem to endorse such a position when, following the Self-Determination Theory established by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, they claim that happiness is related to the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness, which improve individuals' 'procedural utility'. People experience an increase in their well-being not only by reaching goals they have been striving for, but also according to the manner that they reach such goals. It departs from the mainstream view in economics of looking at the outcome as the single source of satisfaction (Frey and Stutzer 2005a, p.92).

The immediate consequence is that institutions have the duty to provide individuals with the means and conditions that are supposed to increase their procedural utility. They should guarantee a context where individuals have a sense of control over their lives, are able to express their talents and are socially included. UH 2.0 resembles, then, theories that attribute to institutions a moral obligation to provide goods or resources necessary for the pursuit of the kind of life chosen by individuals for themselves, without a direct mention of the outcomes.²³

Actually, UH 2.0 may appear as restating the positions held by authors coming from different traditions, especially John Rawls or Amartya Sen, regarding the duty for institutions to guarantee the means, conditions, primary goods or capabilities for leading a good self-endorsed life (or to guarantee the ability to function properly). If such a duty lies, following the Self-Determination Theory, in securing the conditions for autonomy, recognition and social inclusion, it is difficult to see in which sense happiness research imposes additional requirements on institutions compared to traditional conceptions. This interrogation mirrors Ronald Dworkin's judgment when he writes that '...suggesting that people should be made as nearly as equal as possible in their capacity to realize the "complex" achievements of happiness...advocates not for something new, but only for a form of equality of welfare' (Dworkin 2002, p.301).

This lack of originality does not raise any particular problem if we keep in mind that major theoretical shifts are rare in political theory. Most of the time, it is about refining and clarifying concepts, practices and institutions within well-established theoretical frameworks. However, the affirmation or even the simple suggestion that happiness research is revolutionary is misleading if happiness is formulated as UH 2.0. Actually, relaxing direct appeals to happiness understood as a certain outcome (in order to ground public policies) leads to this lack of originality. The choice could be interpreted as between appearing 'revolutionary' while holding disputable moral views, or being less controversial while defending not so original views.

²³ It should be noted that such proximity depends on the conception of autonomy mobilized. In case of a substantial conception of autonomy, i.e. a conception that postulates that autonomy is more about a specific content than a procedure, 'procedural utility' comes closer to UH 1.0. Confirming this doubt, Deci and Ryan include in their definition of autonomy 'choosing to act virtuously' (Deci and Ryan 2008, p.7).

One reply might be that, rather than offering a radical new view on the issue, politics of happiness is just a complement to traditional approaches like the capability one (Bruni et al. 2008b).²⁴ Two remarks on this affirmation: first, as the revolutionary tone is skimmed off, why insist on it except if the revolution is not political but has more to do with epistemology of economics? But, it is dubious that authors like Bok, Frey, Halpern, Layard or Ng would agree with this statement since they present happiness as having a political scope of its own. Secondly, a finer-grained theory would be necessary in order to balance, for example, the support to means that increase procedural utility and other political values (like respect for individual autonomy). As far as possible, authorities must refrain from defining which capabilities should be sustained and from advocating for a precise conception of the happy life. They should not be tempted to impose a given conception of happiness through the choice of certain capabilities or constituents (Sugden 2008). The point is even more pressing if one considers the importance of individual autonomy, stressed by Deci and Ryan, for reaching high levels of well-being and social functioning.

Respecting individual autonomy implies, first and foremost, respecting the diversity of happiness conceptions that autonomy induces, and this challenge has to be met by any theory that proclaims the value of happiness as a source of deep political reforms (or even revolution).

CONCLUSION

This article argued that the political value of happiness is not self-evident and does not entitle institutions to promote it without any further qualification. Even if we are to admit the validity of the Easterlin Paradox²⁵, happiness research still does not make the case in favour of politics of happiness. More solid arguments are required for supporting both its intrinsic value in personal life (since it is possible to find valuable ways of life that do not value happiness) and, more importantly, its derivative political worth. In fact, three considerations need to be emphasized as conclusions.

The first point is about happiness as a justificatory framework for politics. There are two cases when considering the sort of recommendations that politics of happiness may lead to. The first case is constituted by morally unproblematic recommendations (e.g. to provide means for self-development, which is both a characteristic of UH 2.0 and the capability approach). The right question is then: what is the normative strength that appeals to happiness add to the existing arguments? To be honest, it is not obvious that politics of happiness really make a significant difference. For instance, which is the most convincing argument for curbing unemployment? Is it that unemployment renders people unhappy or that it deprives them of the necessary resources for a decent material life and self-respect? It may be argued that the additional normative weight produced by happiness is marginal in numerous cases. A manner of reformulating the issue is to define the conditions under which happiness research adds something of value to the existing justifications for our institutions. It should be demonstrated that politics of happiness, when they do not advocate for a radical

²⁴ This position is also defended in the special issue of the *Review of Social Economy* published in 2005 (vol. LXIII, no2, June 2005).

²⁵ Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers contest its accuracy (Stevenson and Wolfers 2008).

shift, represent a gain over theories at hand *in regard to the objectives (enhancement of capacities for self-centred development) that less controversial forms of happiness (mostly UH 2.0) pursue.*

For morally problematic recommendations (e.g. promoting traditional or religious values and commitments, shaping individual preferences, etc.), the case for politics of happiness is even more difficult to make since such justifications have to be strong enough to override legitimate concerns like respect for pluralism, for instance. The case can be made in two manners: either by justifying the embedded moral monism of such approaches and curbing individual preferences, or by proving that the defects identified in this paper are not a major source of worry and can be dealt with. But, so far, I have found no such argument in the literature.

Secondly, on practical grounds, the preceding discussion should not lead to the incorrect inference that literature on happiness is useless. Only the implications of politics of happiness are questionable as well as the solidity of the normative justifications for conducting politics of happiness. From this perspective, the slide from the personal value of happiness to its public priority raises some concerns. However, not all studies on happiness share this characteristic. Considered as a whole, happiness research may lead to stimulating attempts to monitor public policies through new indexes (Kesebir and Diener 2008; Sen 2008, p.26). For one thing, HH could provide useful indicators for identifying groups or individuals who face severe defective conditions of life. Realizing that people in a certain area or who belong to a certain group constantly rate below other groups regarding SWB or life satisfaction provides a reason for institutions to investigate the causes of such differences. Indeed, it does not constitute a *prima facie* ground for intervention. Since the objective is to correct the underlying material conditions and not happiness *per se*, public intervention is conditional to the assessment of material impairments that are normatively relevant.

Finally, the stagnation of happiness (if true) may be seen not as a problem that calls for a remedy, but as the proof of the delusive nature of happiness for a political community. Actually, the 'relative income' hypothesis (Duesenberry 1949)²⁶ (which could be expanded beyond its initial scope by arguing that an important part of satisfaction with life flows from relative standing) leads to the conclusion that no matter how institutions act, the overall level of happiness will remain constant through time since individuals' happiness heavily depends on interpersonal comparisons (of income, achievements, and so forth).²⁷ In other words, happiness would have a zero-sum form; what some people gain has to be deducted from

²⁶ The relative income hypothesis states that the consumption and saving habits of a given individual are strongly related to the habits of other individuals.

²⁷ 'In the simplest case, in which the expenditures of every other person are given equal weight, the utility obtained by a given individual depends on the ratio of his expenditure to the national per-capita average. The farther he is above the average, the happier (*sic*) he is; the farther below, the sadder. Moreover, if the frame of reference is always the current national situation, then an increase in the level of income in which all share proportionately would not alter the national level of happiness. A classical example of the fallacy of composition would apply: An increase in the income of any one individual would increase his happiness, but increasing the income of everyone would leave happiness unchanged. Similarly, among countries, a richer country would not necessarily be a happier country' (Easterlin 1974, p.112).

others. If it were the case, would institutions not have then to relax their concern about happiness? Put differently, is the focus on happiness the solution or part of the problem? Do politics of happiness not take the risk of worsening positional concerns and the distinctive competition that lies at the heart of human satisfaction?

Leaving this question untouched, this article did not aim at rebutting the very principle of institutional intervention. It rather underscored some moral issues that studies on happiness stimulate. It also voiced some scepticism about the intrinsic political value of happiness and its potential role in shaping our institutions and public policies. But, it leaves open the possibility to integrate happiness into public policies as a secondary and complementary feature of our collective life. Ultimately, what counts are the material conditions enjoyed by individuals. In this respect, happiness research has an important value for helping to identify social defects, but it probably goes too far when it suggests that happiness could be the guiding principle of our societies.

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