

2 CONCEPT OF HAPPINESS

Ruut Veenhoven¹

2/1 **Definition of happiness**

2/2 **Components of happiness**

2/2.1 Hedonic level

2/2.2 Contentment

2/2.3 Relative impact in the overall evaluation of life

2/3 **Difference with related concepts**

2/3.1 Difference with other qualities of life

2/3.2 Difference with other satisfactions

2/4 **Variable aspects of happiness**

2/5 **Focus on 'present' happiness**

2/6 **Why this concept?**

The word 'happiness' is used in various ways. In the widest sense it is an umbrella term for all that is good. In this meaning it is often used interchangeably with terms like 'wellbeing' or 'quality of life' and denotes both individual and social welfare. This use of words suggests that there is one ultimate good and disguises differences in interest between individuals and society. Here the word happiness is used in the more limited sense of subjective satisfaction with life.

Below I will first present a formal definition of happiness ([section 2/1](#)). Within this concept of overall happiness, I then distinguish two 'components' of happiness: hedonic level and contentment ([section 2/2](#)). Then I delineate happiness from related notions, first from other qualities of life ([section 2/3.1](#)) and next from other concepts of satisfaction ([section 2/3.2](#)). I go on to note the variable aspects of this concept, that is, dimensions that are not included in the concept as such ([section 2/4](#)). The concept is restricted to present life ([section 2/5](#)). Finally, [section 2/6](#) summarizes the reasons to define happiness in this way. This matter is discussed in more detail elsewhere. See [Veenhoven 1984](#)_(chapter 2) and in [Veenhoven 2000](#)_(section 1).

¹ Last update May 2015

2/1 Definition of happiness

Overall happiness is the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her own life-as-a-whole favorably. In other words: how much one likes the life one leads. The key terms in this definition may be elucidated as follows.

Degree

The word 'happiness' is not used to denote positive appreciation of life only. It refers to a degree, like the concepts of 'length' or 'weight', it denotes more or less of something. When we say a person is happy, we mean that he or she judges his or her life favorably rather than unfavorably.

Individual

The term happiness is used to describe the state of an individual person only; it does not apply to collectivities. Thus, a nation cannot be said to be happy. At best, most of its citizens consider themselves happy.

Subjective

Happiness denotes a subjective appreciation of life by an individual. So, there is no given 'objective' standard for happiness. A person who thinks he/she is happy, really is happy, even if that person is misinformed.

Judgment

The word 'happiness' is used where somebody has made an overall judgment about the quality of his or her life. This implies an intellectual activity. Making an overall judgment implies assessing past experiences and estimating future experiences and estimating average quality of life.

One consequence of this conceptualization is that the word 'happiness' cannot be used for those who did not make up their mind. One cannot say whether a person is happy or not, if that person is intellectually unable to construct an overall judgment. Thus, the concept cannot be used for animals or small children. Nor is the concept applicable to people who did not reflect on the quality of their life or could not reach a conclusion.

Overall

The evaluation of life aimed at is an overall judgment. It embodies all criteria for appreciation, which figure in the mind. In the past hedonists used to equate happiness with sensory pleasures only; however, there are more modes of appreciation. Apart from the sensory system, cognition and affect also enable individuals to appraise their life. Thus, evaluations also involve cognitive appraisals, based on aspirations, expectations and values. The evaluation also draws on affective conditions, in particular on average mood (cf. [section 2/2.1](#)).

The word 'happiness' refers to a judgment, which integrates all the appreciation criteria used. Thus, the idea that one has all one has ever desired

does not necessarily make a person happy. Despite all material endowments such a person may feel pain or be depressed. Similarly, the appraisal that one's life is 'exciting' does not necessarily mark oneself as happy either; life may be too exciting to be enjoyable. A Chinese curse says: "May you have interesting times".

Life-as-a-whole

We do not use the word 'happiness' to characterize satisfaction with specific aspects of life, such as marriage or work. 'Happiness' refers to satisfaction with life-as-a whole. It covers past, present and anticipated experiences.

This does not mean that all things ever experienced are given equal weight in the evaluation. As stated above, evaluation involves a sifting and ordering. In this process some aspects may be emphasized, and others ignored. Past life experiences for example, seldom enter the evaluation process in their original phenomenological Gestalt. What is taken into consideration is mostly a shallow representation of what one tasted previously.

Own life

The term 'happiness' concerns the evaluation of one's own life, not of life in general. A pessimistic 'Weltanschauung' does not necessarily characterize someone as 'unhappy'.

Favorably

Evaluation always embodies appreciation; a conclusion as to whether one likes something or not. The term 'happiness' refers only to judgments concerning this aspect. Happiness judgments concern the dimension extending from appreciation to depreciation, from like to dislike or from 'satisfaction' to 'dissatisfaction'. All humans are capable of appraisals of this kind, though not all humans can generalize all appraisals into a judgment of life-as-a-whole.

The criterion of 'favorableness' is very close to what is called 'pleasantness'; however, it is not quite the same. The term 'favorableness' concerns the appreciation involved in all evaluations, while the term 'pleasantness' refers exclusively to direct affective experience. As such it is more characteristic of the affective component of happiness (cf. section 2/2.1) than of overall happiness itself.

2/2 Components of happiness

2/2.1 Hedonic level

2/2.2 Contentment

2/2.3 Relative impact in the overall evaluation of life

When evaluating the favorableness of our life, we tend to use two more or less distinct sources of information: our affects and our thoughts. One can decide that one feels fine most of the time and one can also judge that life seems to meet ones (conscious) demands. These appraisals do not necessarily coincide. We may feel fine generally, but nevertheless be aware that we failed to realize our aspirations. Or one may have surpassed one's aspirations, but nevertheless feel miserable.

Using the word 'happiness' in both these cases would result in three different kinds of happiness, the overall judgment as described above and these two specific appraisals. Therefore, the latter specific appraisals are seen as 'components' of happiness. To mark that difference, I refer to the encompassing judgment (the core concept) as **overall happiness**. A synonym for overall happiness is 'life-satisfaction'. The components are referred to as 'hedonic level of affect' (affective component) and 'contentment' (cognitive component).

The distinction between 'affective' and 'cognitive' aspects of happiness is quite common in the literature but seeing these as components of overall happiness is not.

2/2.1 Hedonic level of affect

Hedonic level of affect is the degree to which various affects that someone experiences are pleasant in character. Hedonic level of affect is not the same as 'mood'. We experience different kinds of mood: elated moods, calm moods, restless moods, moody moods, etc. Each of these moods is characterized by a special mixture of affective experiences, one of which is 'hedonic tone' or 'pleasantness'. The concept of hedonic level concerns only the pleasantness experienced in affects; that is, the pleasantness in feelings, in emotions, as well as in moods. So, a high hedonic level may be based on strong but passing emotions of love, as well as on moods of steady calmness.

A person's average hedonic level of affect can be assessed over different periods of time: an hour, a week, a year, as well as over a lifetime. The focus here is on 'characteristic' hedonic level. That is so to say: the average over a long time span such as a month or a year. The concept does not presume subjective awareness of that average level.

2/2.2 Contentment

Contentment is the degree to which an individual perceives his/her aspirations are met. The concept presupposes that the individual has developed some conscious wants and has formed an idea about their realization. The factual correctness of this idea is not at stake. The concept concerns the individual's subjective perception. When we assess the degree to which our wants are being met, we may look both backwards and forwards. We may assess what life has brought up to now and may estimate what it is likely to yield in the future. The concept concerns the case where someone combines both the past and the future in an assessment.

2/2.3 Relative impact in the overall evaluation of life

If these components serve as subtotals in the overall evaluation of life, what is then their weight? Most scholars stress contentment, for instance Andrews & Withey (1976) suggest that individuals compute a weighted average of earlier life-aspect evaluations, while Michalos' (1985) multiple discrepancy theory assumes comparisons of life as it is with various standards of how it should be.

Yet there are good reasons to assume that overall life-satisfaction is mostly inferred from affective experience. One reason is that life-as-a-whole is not a suitable object for calculative evaluation. Life has many aspects and there is usually not one clear-cut ideal model it can be compared to. Another reason seems to be that affective signals tend to dominate; seemingly cognitive appraisals are often instigated by affective cues (Zajonc 1980). This latter point fits the theory that the affective system is the older in evolutionary terms, and that cognition works as an addition to this navigation system rather than a replacement.

This issue has important consequences for the significance of happiness. If appreciation is a matter of mere comparison with arbitrary standards, there is little of value in a positive evaluation; dissatisfaction is then an indication of high demands. If, however, happiness signals the degree to which innate needs are met, life satisfaction denotes how well we thrive. This issue is considered in more detail in [Veenhoven \(2009\)](#).

The latest research suggests that hedonic level dominates in the overall evaluation of life (Kainulainen et.al. 2015).

2/3 Difference with related concepts

2/3.1 Difference with other qualities of life

2/3.2 Difference with other satisfactions

This concept of happiness can be further clarified by noting the difference with related notions. Below we will first distinguish enjoyment of life from other qualities of life (section 2/3.1) and then discern happiness from other enjoyments (section 2/3.2). Note that many of these different concepts are often called by the same name.

2/3.1 Difference with other qualities of life

The term 'quality of life' suggests that all merits can be integrated in one final scale of worth. This is not the case. The term is merely an umbrella for different notions of what is good. Below I will delineate four qualities of life and show that the concept of happiness fits only one of these.

Four qualities of life

Quality-of-life concepts can be sorted using two distinctions, which together provide a fourfold matrix. That classification is discussed in more detail in [Veenhoven \(2000\)](#).

The first distinction is between chances and outcomes that is, the difference between opportunities for a good life and the good life itself. This is the difference between potentiality and actuality. I refer to this as 'life-chances' and 'life-results'. Opportunities and outcomes are related but are certainly not the same. Chances can fail to be realized, due to stupidity or bad luck. Conversely, people sometimes make much of their life despite poor opportunities.

A second difference is between outer and inner qualities of life, in other words between 'external' and 'internal' features. In the first case the quality is in the environment, in the latter it is in the individual. Lane (1994) made this distinction clear by distinguishing 'quality of society' from 'quality of persons'.

The combination of these two dichotomies yields a fourfold matrix. This classification is presented in [scheme 2/3.1](#). In the upper half of the scheme, we see two variants of potential quality of life, with next to the outer opportunities in one's environment, the inner capacities to exploit these. The environmental chances can be denoted by the term *livability*, the personal capacities by the word *life ability*. This difference is not new. In sociology, the distinction between 'social capital' and 'psychological capital' is sometimes used in this context. In the psychology of stress, the difference is labeled negatively in terms of 'burden' and 'bearing power'.

The lower half of the scheme is about quality of life with respect to its outcomes. Two kinds of outcomes are distinguished, outcomes for the environment and outcomes for oneself. The external worth of a life is denoted by the term *usefulness of life*. The inner valuation of it is called *enjoyment of life*. These matters

are of course related. Knowing that one's life is useful will typically add to the enjoyment of it. Yet not all useful lives are happy lives and not every good-for-nothing really cares. This difference has been elaborated in discussions on utilitarian moral philosophy, which praises happiness as the highest good. Adversaries of this view hold that there is more worth to life than just pleasures and pains. Mill (1861) summarized this position in his famous statement that he preferred an unhappy Socrates to a happy fool.

Scheme 2/3.1

Difference with other qualities of life

	<i>Outer qualities</i>	<i>Inner qualities</i>
<i>Life chances</i>	Livability of environment	Life-ability of the person
<i>Life results</i>	Usefulness of life	Satisfaction with life

Livability of the environment

The left top quadrant denotes the meaning of good living conditions, shortly called 'livability'.

Ecologists see livability in the natural environment and describe it in terms of pollution, global warming and degradation of nature. Currently, they associate livability typically with preservation of the environment. City planners see livability in the built environment and associate it with such things as sewer systems, traffic jams and ghetto formation. Here the good life is seen as a fruit of human intervention.

In the sociological view, society is central. Firstly, livability is associated with the quality of society-as-a-whole. Classic concepts of the 'good society' stress material welfare and social equality, sometimes equating the concept with the welfare state. Current notions emphasize close networks, strong norms and active voluntary associations. The reverse of this livability concept is 'social fragmentation'. Secondly, livability is seen in one's position in society. For a long time, the emphasis was placed on the 'under-class' but currently attention has shifted to the 'outer-class'. The corresponding antonyms are 'deprivation' and 'exclusion'.

Livability is not what is called happiness here. It is rather a precondition for happiness and not all environmental conditions are equally conducive to happiness.

Life-ability of the person

The right top quadrant denotes inner life-chances. That is: how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life. Sen (1992) calls this quality of life variant 'capability'. I prefer the simple term 'life-ability', which contrasts elegantly with

'livability'.

The most common depiction of this quality of life is absence of functional defects. This is 'health' in the limited sense, sometimes referred to as 'negative health'. In this context, doctors focus on unimpaired functioning of the body, while psychologists stress the absence of mental defects. In their language, quality of life and wellbeing are often synonymous with mental health. This use of words presupposes a 'normal' level of functioning. Good quality of life is the body and mind working as designed. This is the common meaning used in curative care.

Next to absence of disease, one can consider excellence of function. This is referred to as 'positive health' and associated with energy and resilience.

Psychological concepts of positive mental health involve autonomy, reality control, creativity and inner synergy of traits and strivings. A new term in this context is 'emotional intelligence'. Though originally meant for specific mental skills, this term has come to denote a broad range of mental capabilities. The training professions favor this broader definition.

A further step is to evaluate capability in a developmental perspective and to include acquisition of new skills for living. This is commonly denoted by the term 'self-actualization'. From this point of view a middle-aged man is not 'well' if he behaves like an adolescent, even if he functions without problems at this level. Since abilities do not develop alongside idleness, this quality of life is close to the 'activity' in Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia. This quality concept is also currently used in the training professions.

Lastly, the term 'art of living' denotes special life-abilities; in most contexts this quality is distinguished from mental health and sometimes even attributed to slightly disturbed persons. Art of living is associated with refined tastes, an ability to enjoy life and an original style of life.

Ability to deal with the problems of life will mostly contribute to happiness as defined here but is not identical. If one is competent in living one has a good chance at happiness, but this endowment does not guarantee an enjoyable outcome.

Usefulness of life

The left bottom quadrant represents the notion that a good life must be good for something more than itself. This assumes some higher values. There is no current generic for these external outcomes of life. Gerson (1976: 795) refers to these effects as 'transcendental' conceptions of quality of life. Another appellation is 'meaning of life', which then denotes 'true' significance instead of mere subjective sense of meaning. I prefer the simpler 'utility of life', while admitting that this label may also give rise to misunderstanding.

When evaluating the external effects of a life, one can consider its functionality for the environment. In this context, doctors stress how essential a patient's life is to its intimates. The life of a mother with young children is given higher value than the life of a woman of the same age without children. Likewise, indispensability at the workplace figures in medical quality of life notions. At a higher level, quality of life is seen in contributions to society. Historians see quality in the addition an individual can make to human culture, and rate for example the lives of

great inventors higher than those of anonymous peasants. Moralists see quality in the preservation of the moral order and would deem the life of a saint to be better than that of a sinner. In this vein, the quality of a life is also linked to effects on the ecosystem. Ecologists see more quality in a life lived in a 'sustainable' manner than in the life of a polluter. In a broader view, the utility of life can be seen in its consequences for long-term evolution. As an individual's life can have many environmental effects, the number of such utilities is almost infinite.

Apart from its functional utility, life is also judged on its moral or esthetic value. For instance, most of us would attribute more quality to the life of Florence Nightingale than to that of a drunk, even if it appeared in the end that her good works had a negative result in the end. In classic moral philosophy this is called 'virtuous living' and is often presented as the essence of 'true happiness'. Here the focus is on mere 'experiential' happiness; on how much one likes the life one lives. The difference is well expressed in the earlier mentioned statement of Mill that he preferred an unhappy Socrates to a happy fool. Moral excellence is clearly not the same as feeling good.

Core meaning: Subjective satisfaction with life

Finally, the bottom right quadrant represents the inner outcomes of life. That is the quality in the eye of the beholder. As we deal with conscious humans, this quality boils down to subjective satisfaction with life. This is commonly referred to by terms such as 'subjective wellbeing', 'life-satisfaction' and 'happiness' in a limited sense of the word.

Humans can evaluate their life in different ways. We have in common with all higher animals that we can appraise our situation affectively. We feel good or bad about particular things and our mood level signals overall adaptation. As in animals these affective appraisals are automatic, but unlike other animals it is known that humans can reflect on this experience. We have an idea of how we have felt over the last year, while a cat does not. Humans can also judge life cognitively by comparing life as it is with notions of how it should be.

Most human evaluations are based on both sources of information, that is: intuitive affective appraisal and cognitively guided evaluation. The mix depends mainly on the object. Tangible things such as our income are typically evaluated by comparison; intangible matters such as sexual attractiveness are evaluated by how it feels. This dual evaluation system probably makes the human experiential repertoire richer than that of our fellow creatures.

In evaluating our life, we typically summarize this rich experience in overall appraisals. For instance, we appreciate several domains of life. When asked how we feel about our work or our marriage we will mostly have an opinion. Likewise, most people form ideas about separate qualities of their life, for instance how 'challenging' their life is and whether there is any 'meaning' in it. Such judgments are made in different time-perspectives, in the past, the present and in the future.

Mostly such judgments are not very salient in our consciousness. Now and then, they pop to mind spontaneously. Though not in the forefront of consciousness

all the time estimates of subjective enjoyment of life can be recalled and refreshed when needed. This makes these appraisals measurable in principle.

2/3.2 Difference with other satisfactions

Even when we focus on subjective satisfaction with life, there are still different meanings associated with the word happiness. These meanings can also be charted in a fourfold matrix. In this case, that classification is based on the following dichotomies: Life-aspects versus life-as-a-whole and passing delight versus enduring satisfaction.

Above, we have seen that appraisals of life can concern aspects, such as marriage or work-life, and one's life-as-a-whole. The word 'happiness' is used in both contexts. Obviously, such appraisals are linked. Enjoyment of aspects of life will typically contribute to the satisfaction with life as a whole (so-called bottom-up effect), and enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole appears to foster the satisfaction with life-aspects (top-down). Still, these are not identical matters. One can have a happy marriage but still be dissatisfied with life-as-a-whole or be satisfied with life-as-a whole despite an unhappy marriage.

Next, the experience of enjoyment can be short-lived or enduring. Again, the word happiness is used for both phenomena. Sometimes it refers to passing moods and on other occasions to stable satisfaction. Once more, these matters are related but not the same.

When combined, these distinctions produce the fourfold matrix presented in [scheme 2/3.2](#). The distinction between part and whole is presented vertically, and the distinction between passing and enduring enjoyment horizontally.

Scheme 2/3.2

Difference with other satisfactions

	<i>Passing</i>	<i>Enduring</i>
<i>Life aspects</i>	Pleasure	Domain satisfaction
<i>Life as a whole</i>	Peak experience	Life satisfaction (happiness)

Pleasure

The top-left quadrant represents passing enjoyments of life-aspects. Examples would be delight in a cup of tea at breakfast, the satisfaction of a chore done or the enjoyment of a piece of art. I refer to this category as 'pleasures'. Kahneman (2000:4) calls it 'instant-utilities'. This quadrant represents hedonistic happiness,

especially when the focus is on sensory experience. The concept of happiness used here is broader, however. It concerns both overall satisfaction and life-as-a-whole. Though fleeting enjoyment obviously contributes to a positive appreciation of life it is not the whole of it.

Domain satisfaction

The top right quadrant denotes enduring appreciation of life-aspects, such as marriage satisfaction and job-satisfaction. This is currently referred to as domain satisfactions. Though domain-satisfactions depend typically on a continuous flow of instant-satisfactions, they have some continuity of their own. For instance, one can remain satisfied with one's marriage even if one has not enjoyed the company of the spouse for quite some time. Domain-satisfactions are often denoted with the term happiness: a happy marriage, happy with one's job, etc. Yet here the term happiness is used in a broader sense, not for the satisfaction with aspects of life, but for the satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. One would not call a person happy who is satisfied with marriage and job, but still dissatisfied overall because his health is failing. It is even possible that someone is satisfied with all the domains one can think of, but nevertheless feels depressed.

Top-experience

The bottom right quadrant denotes the combination of passing experience and appraisal of life-as-a-whole. That combination occurs typically in top-experiences, which involve short-lived but quite intense feelings and the perception of wholeness. This is the kind of happiness poet's write about. Again, this is not the kind of happiness aimed at here. A moment of bliss is not enduring appreciation of life. In fact, such top-experiences even seem detrimental to lasting satisfaction, possibly because of their disorientating effects (Diener et. al. 1989).

Core meaning: lasting satisfaction with one's life-as-a-whole

Lastly, the bottom-right quadrant represents the combination of enduring satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. This is what I mean with the word happiness. A synonym is 'life satisfaction'. This is the meaning the utilitarian philosophers had in mind when talking about happiness. When speaking about the 'sum' of pleasures and pains they denoted a balance over time and thus a durable matter.

2/4 Variable aspects of happiness

Happiness judgments may differ in several respects. I mention some to illustrate what is not in the definition used here.

One difference is in their certainty: some people are rather definitive about their appraisal of life, whereas others vacillate. Though one may attribute less value to the latter appraisals, the concept applies. Doubtful happiness is still happiness.

Another point of variation is how well considered the judgment is; some people judge rather intuitively, while others engage in elaborate contemplation. Likewise, appraisals of life are probably not always equally appropriate. Like any perception they can be distorted in various ways, such as by misattribution and self-deceit. This is commonly referred to as 'false happiness'. Distorted judgments of life are clearly less valuable as an indicator of apparent quality of life. Nevertheless, inappropriate happiness is still happiness. I do not reserve the word for denoting the 'truly good'

2/5 Focus on 'present' happiness

Evaluations of one's life may concern different periods of life: earlier life, current life and (expected) future life. This database is restricted to evaluations of 'present' life. These evaluations are probably colored by reminiscences of past happiness, and by hopes for the future. Yet they are not the same; one can be satisfied with present life in spite, or even because of, earlier misery. Likewise, one can be unhappy now, but optimistic about the future.

2/6 Why this concept?

We have considered *how* happiness is defined above. Now I will discuss the reasons *why* that conceptualization is preferred above the many other definitions of happiness that have been proposed. In answering this question, I return to the above discussion, in particular to that on the difference with related concepts in section 2/3.

Why not include life-chances?

In [scheme 2/3.1](#) happiness is placed as an actual outcome of life and distinguished from concepts that denote good chances. In this respect the present conceptualization differs from current associations of the term with paradise and good health.

The main reason for limiting to outcomes is to be found in the purpose of this study. The goal is to find out which conditions are most conducive to happiness. If we include conditions in the definition of happiness we get into circular reasoning. Happiness must be conceptually distinguished from its possible determinants.

A second reason is that the quality of life-chances cannot be grasped comprehensively. Another look at [scheme 2/3.1](#) may help to explain why not. Each of the top quadrants involves different qualities that cannot be meaningfully aggregated. In the livability quadrant one cannot add 'fresh air' to 'social justice'. Neither can one sum 'physical health' and 'school intelligence' in the life-ability quadrant. Moreover, the two top quadrants can neither be added in an overall index of life-chances. It is not the *sum* that matters, but the *fit* of living conditions and life abilities. A competitive free market society may set too high demands on insecure and slow people but may be the right pond for energetic individualists. There can be various fitting combinations of conditions and abilities and we cannot really reason out in advance what the best combinations are. Hence the quality of preconditions can only be assessed by their outcomes, and of all outcome variables happiness is the most comprehensive one. This implication is discussed in more detail in [Veenhoven 2000](#) section 3.

The third reason is found in the aim for ethical neutrality. Notions about chances for a good life are heavily loaded by moral preferences about how life should be. Ideas about livability of society are largely guided by political ideology and notions about required competencies draw also more on normative thinking than on systematic observation. So, if we would include such notions into the definition of happiness we would not get beyond common prepossession.

Why not include utility of life?

If one accepts that life-chances should not be included in the concept of happiness, one can still argue that all outcomes are considered and not just individual enjoyment of life. This would mean that the utility quadrant from [scheme 2/3.1](#) (left bottom) is also included. There are in fact definitions of this kind. For instance, Tatarkiewics (1973) defines happiness as 'justified' satisfaction with life. He does not

call a useless life happy even if it is enjoyed by the lay-about. There is a point in combining the good and the pleasant, but there are also serious arguments against doing so.

The main problem is that there is no clear criterion to judge the utility of a life. If we focus on contributions to the environment, there is a multitude of possible effects in various spheres that can hardly be assessed and certainly not aggregated in a meaningful index. Problems are even greater if we judge life on moral criteria of perfection. In fact, we get stuck in the morass where most philosophy of happiness has ended.

Even if we could agree on some major utilities, there are still insurmountable problems. One is that external effects depend on context, raising children is less of a contribution to humanity in an overpopulated world than when the human species is about to die out. This is linked to the question of degrees of usefulness, how many books should an academic write to lead a useful life? The idea of 'justified' enjoyment requires that some minimal level can be pinpointed. Last, but not least, the combination of these things would blind us to their actual interrelations. If we throw usefulness and enjoyment in one tub, we cannot see which useful behavior adds to the enjoyment of life and which detract from it. Hence this conceptualization precludes well-informed choice.

Why not emphasize short-lived pleasure?

A focus on subjective enjoyment of life (the bottom right quadrant in [scheme 2/3.1](#)) does not necessarily imply a restriction to the 'overall' enjoyment of ones 'life-as-a-whole' (right-bottom quadrant in [scheme 2/3.2](#)). Happiness is often described as short-lived satisfaction (left quadrants in [scheme 2/3.2](#)), in poetry and advertisement.

The reason to focus on enduring enjoyment is obviously that we use the concept to learn more about the merits of lasting conditions, such as the organization of society and of personal lifestyles. If we define happiness as short-lived delight, we will not become much wiser. The concept leads us then to shortsighted pleasure seeking. This is fact a common argument against utilitarianism. A false reproach however, since the utilitarian concept of happiness does not restrict to passing pleasure. Jeremy Bentham (1789) defined happiness as the 'sum of pleasures and pains'. He used these words 'pleasure' and 'pain' to denote all enjoyable and aversive experience. Not only sensory feelings, but also higher appraisals such as the joy of understanding and one's remorse when looking at personal failure. The word 'sum' refers to the whole of this experience and would involve all the criteria for appraisal used (overall) and application on all life-domains (life-as-a-whole).

The most basic reason for focusing on overall enjoyment of life is that this brings us closest to the most relevant biological signal. In our biological signal system short-lived likes and dislikes lead us toward or away from particular things, for instance a liking for sweet tastes guides to nutritious foods and a dislike of bitter tastes keeps us away from most poisonous fruits. Yet these sensory experiences tell us little about our wider adaptation. This is rather the function of the hedonic level in moods, which is not linked to specific objects of appreciation. As noted above, mood

level signals typically whether we are in a 'right pond' or not, it indicates to what extent the whole of our needs is being met, and this is precisely what we want to know. In this line of reasoning we could even restrict to the hedonic level (the affective component described in section 2/2.1).

Why focus on life-as-a-whole?

Next the question why satisfaction with work or marriage is not denoted as happiness.

One answer is again that the aim of the endeavor requires an encompassing concept. If people are quite satisfied with their marriage and work but not with their children, family and the government, there is clearly something missing. Such lacks reflect in the overall judgment of life, at least when these latter domains bear relevance.

Another reason is that domain-satisfactions are largely cognitive constructs, and hence quite vulnerable to social comparison and fashion. This is particularly true for satisfaction with easily comparable things such as income. Reversibly, estimates of overall enjoyment of life draw typically on unreasoned affect. This point is discussed in more detail in Veenhoven 2009).

Why focus on present happiness?

Lastly, why does this database limit to present happiness? The main reason is that present happiness bears most information about how well the individual is doing. Since it draws on recent affective experience it is the most likely to reflect need gratification (remember [section 2/2.3](#)). Notions of past and future happiness can be mere dreams. In fact, there are indications that present unhappiness can give rise to rosy views of happiness in earlier periods and instigate wishful expectations of future happiness.

REFERENCES

Andrews, F. M. & Withey, S. B. (1976)
Social indicators of well-being New
York, U.S.A., Plenum Press.

Bentham, J. (1789)
An introduction into the principles of morals and legislation London

Gerson, E.M. (1976)
On Quality of Life
American Sociological Review, 41: 793 - 806

Kahneman, D. (1999)
Objective happiness
In: Kahneman, D., Diener, E. & Schwarz, N. (eds) 'Well-Being: The foundations of
hedonic psychology', Russell Sage Foundation, New York, pp. 3-25.

Kainulainen, S. Saari, J. & Veenhoven, R. (2015)
Life satisfaction is more a matter of feeling than having what you want Paper
in preparation

Lane, R.E. (1994)
Quality of life and quality of persons. A new role for government?
Political theory, 22: 219-252

Michalos, A. (1985)
Multiple Discrepancy Theory (MDT)
Social Indicators Research, 16: 347-413

Mill, J.S. (1863)
Utilitarianism
Fontana Press 1990 (20th print)

Nagpal, R. & Sell, H. (1985)
Subjective wellbeing
Sero Regional Health Paper No. 7, World Health Organization, New Delhi

Sen, A: (1992)
Capability and wellbeing
In: Sen, A. & Nussbaum, M. (Eds.) 'The quality of life', Clarendon Press, Oxford, UK,
pp. 30-53

Sheeney, G. (1982)
Pathfinders
Sidwick & Jackson, London

Tatarkiewics, W. (1973)

Analysis of happiness

Nijhoff, The Hague, Netherlands

Veenhoven, R. (1984)

Conditions of happiness

Kluwer (now Springer), Dordrecht, Netherlands

Veenhoven, R. (1991)

Is happiness relative?

Social Indicators Research, 24: 1-34

Veenhoven, R. (2000)

The four qualities of life: Ordering concepts and measures of the good life:

Journal of Happiness Studies, 1: 1-39

Veenhoven, R. (2009)

How do we assess how happy we are?

in: Dutt, A. K. & Radcliff, B. (eds.) 'Happiness, Economics and Politics: Towards a multi-disciplinary approach', Edward Elger Publishers, Cheltenham UK, ISBN 978 1 84844 093 7, Chapter 3, page 45-6

Zajonc, R.B. (1980)

Feelings and Thinking: Preferences Need No Inferences American Psychologist, 35: 151–175.