

## **AFFECTIVE STATES, HAPPINESS, AND WELL-BEING INTRODUCTION**

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# DOSSIER:

## AFFECTIVE STATES, HAPPINESS, AND WELL-BEING:

### INTRODUCTION

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Affective states and happiness have been the subject of much philosophical discussion over the last decades. The roles that desire and pleasure are likely to play in our being happy have received considerable attention. Intuitively, one might think that it is indeed enough to experience many pleasures or to satisfy most of our desires to be happy, but things are obviously far from being that simple. Many pleasures seem to compromise our happiness in the more-or-less long term, while the satisfaction of many desires may leave us indifferent or give way to bitter disappointments. Moreover, understanding happiness only in terms of pleasures or satisfied desires may oversimplify the picture. Our different positive emotions also probably play an important role in happiness. Whereas pleasure is often characterized as a felt sensation with a positive valence, but without intentionality, it is generally agreed that emotions have a richer evaluative aspect, notably because they have intentionality: to feel pride about an achievement, for instance, is a state that is directed at this achievement, which consists in evaluating it as a success, and that is at the same time endowed with a positive valence. From this point of view, emotions seem to play an important role in the appraisal of what is important for our happiness. More generally, the idea that people can be happy simply because they feel a lot of pleasure or because their desires are satisfied, and this independently of their overall emotional life, is implausible. The emotions that people feel, in fact, also say something about their relation to the world and about the way events affect them, and they are in this sense richer than the simple positive feeling of a pleasure or the satisfaction of a desire.

The picture becomes even more complex because philosophers have also distinguished between happiness and well-being. A typical way to understand this distinction is to say that happiness is a descriptive concept that refers to the psychological state of a person, whereas well-being is a normative concept, used to determine whether a person's life is going well or is flourishing, according to a certain standard. Haybron (2008) offers the following example, inspired by Kagan's "deceived businessman" objection (Kagan, 1994): let's imagine that George is completely satisfied with his life, that he feels fulfilled, while those close to him mock him without his knowledge. They all make him believe that they love him because he is rich, whereas they cannot stand him. Intuitively, it

seems that George is happy, but that his life does not conform to some of our expectations about what a flourishing life is supposed to be. It seems indeed conceivable that people can feel happy while their levels of well-being remain low. Theories of well-being, from this point of view, usually try to specify which things are likely to be good for an individual in themselves, in a non-instrumental way (Fletcher, 2016). Thus, things that are likely to increase an individual's well-being are said to have prudential value. While happiness thus designates the psychological state of a person, well-being will rather refer to a normative evaluation of that person's life. A crucial question is then to determine the weight to be given to happiness in the well-being of an individual. To assert that happiness is an essential component of an individual's well-being is to assert that happiness also has a prudential value.

The aim of this issue is to explore the different links between affective states, happiness, and well-being, and its focus will be on the psychological and metaethical issues that these questions raise. While some contributions focus on elucidating the nature of the affective states that contribute to happiness, others aim at a more general characterization of happiness as an emotional condition and of its relation to well-being. Some contributions also seek to define the conditions that an affective theory of well-being should satisfy to be convincing. Before going into the details of these contributions, however, I would like to map the major theories of happiness today, as well as the links that can be forged between affective states, happiness, and well-being.

The most well-known theory about happiness is probably hedonism, which consists in claiming that happiness is a positive hedonic balance of pleasures over pains. Thus, a happy individual would simply be one who, on average, experiences more pleasures than pains. On this approach, it is natural to think that pleasure also has a prudential value, and that our well-being increases because our pleasures increase on average. This theory has the advantage of explaining in a relatively simple and intuitive way why things contribute to both our happiness and our well-being: it is simply because their experience is pleasurable. This approach has many other advantages, but it has also met with a certain number of recurring objections, the main one being that pleasure does not always seem to contribute in a decisive way to our well-being. This is because, on the one hand, certain pleasures seem superficial (such as the pleasure of scratching oneself or drinking a cheap beer) and, on the other hand, because we can easily conceive of individuals who would experience many pleasures through a machine giving them the illusion of living all sorts of events, but who would not appear to us to be happy or fulfilled, notably because we would probably not want to exchange our life for theirs (Nozick, 1974).<sup>1</sup>

The other major theory of happiness focuses on how satisfied we are about our lives. According to this approach, a person's happiness varies according to that person's level of satisfaction with his or her life as a whole. In other words, happiness depends on the judgment we are likely to make about our life, considering whether it is in line with our goals and our expectations or whether it has

a meaning for us (the priority to be given to these different ingredients is of course subject to discussion). Let us note in favour of this theory that many empirical studies consist in mobilizing this kind of judgment of satisfaction: research in psychology on “subjective well-being” (which is in fact equivalent to happiness as we have defined it), for example, often consists in asking individuals how satisfied they are with their lives on a scale of 0 to 10. This theory thus puts more emphasis on the cognitive dimension of happiness than on its felt dimension, since happiness depends here above all on a judgment that we make about our lives. Based on this kind of approach, Sumner (1996) proposed that we conceive of well-being as a form of authentic happiness. According to him, well-being would thus refer to a happiness that is both informed and autonomous. In order for my judgment of satisfaction to be reliable, indeed, it seems necessary that it take into account as much information as possible about my own life, but this judgment should also be formulated without my being under the influence of a form of conditioning or habituation to disastrous living conditions for which I will have eventually developed an adaptive preference.

Still, it is tempting to criticize this theory for placing too much emphasis on the reflective dimension of happiness (Haybron, 2008). At the very least, it seems conceivable that people could be satisfied with their lives, while having disastrous emotional experiences. Conversely, one can imagine people who would be dissatisfied with their lives without being unhappy for all that: one can regret certain career choices or the obligation to live with a smartphone, while otherwise enjoying a certain level of happiness. In order to take into account this affective dimension of happiness, Haybron puts forward the emotional-state theory, according to which happiness consists in the overall positive emotional condition of a person. This condition is characterized by various properties and, in particular, by the fact that a happy person is supposed to manifest a “propensity” to experience positive emotions and moods, which enable that person to respond favourably to the various circumstances that affect his or her life. A happy person, in this sense, is one who is not easily disturbed by small everyday troubles and who generally displays a kind of welcoming emotional attitude. Happiness, according to Haybron, would then have a prudential value insofar as it constitutes an aspect of personal fulfillment that is at least a part of well-being. This approach thus suggests an alternative to both hedonistic and life-satisfaction theories, while retaining their respective strengths. As with hedonism, the emotional-state theory bases itself on affective states, but it does so by appealing to the vast palette of our emotions and moods, not only to our pleasures. As with the life-satisfaction theory, it also emphasizes a form of satisfaction, but one which would be understood as a felt affective state rather than a judgment.

The emotional-state theory has been the subject of much debate for more than a decade, and many of the contributions in this issue are devoted to discussing some of its aspects. Thus, Haybron himself opens this issue by first reminding us of some of the central aspects of this theory, before returning to the difficulties posed by his description of happiness in dispositional terms. To be happy,

according to Haybron, implies a form of emotional resilience that can be understood as a disposition to experience positive emotions and moods over the long term, despite the occasional episodes of sadness that we may experience. In this article, Haybron attempts to clarify the metaphysical characterization of happiness as a dispositional state. He understands happiness as a concept that allows us to evaluate the functional condition of an individual: it is an indicator of that individual's level of well-being and ability to respond to the events he or she encounters. Happiness, in this sense, would not be a passing state, but rather a general state, as is the state of our health or the state of an engine. Far from being mysterious, happiness would thus consist in a certain operational state that designates the "preparatory condition" of an individual who is disposed to respond favourably to events, just as an engine can be in a condition that allows it to function well. Conversely, depression would also be a dispositional state insofar as it consists in being disposed not to go well and not to be able to respond favourably to the events we encounter. Haybron also points out that the dispositional character of happiness is presupposed by empirical research on subjective well-being, since it is precisely this background state that we refer to in order to assess our level of satisfaction with life.

Many philosophers have followed the path opened by Haybron with the emotional-state theory and developed different variants of this view. In the second article of this issue, Rossi and Tappolet propose, for example, that we conceive of happiness as the positive balance that results from our different affective states, such as our pleasures, our emotions, and our moods. What is decisive for an affective state to contribute to our happiness is its "centrality," a concept that was already crucial in Haybron's theory. According to Haybron, a state is central if it disposes us to experience other affective states. An enduring positive mood, for instance, is central if it also disposes us to experience other positive emotions. Rossi and Tappolet understand "centrality" somewhat differently: a central state, according to them, refers to what we value, where valuations should be understood as sentiments like love or hate. The different affective states that contribute to our happiness can all be understood, according to Rossi and Tappolet, as perceptive states, whose function would be to track certain evaluative properties (an emotion of fear can track the dangers that threaten what we care about, a sentiment of love can track loveable persons, etc.). If these states are correct (i.e., if we fear something that is dangerous, or love someone who is loveable), then the happiness resulting from these states would itself be correct. And well-being itself, according to Rossi and Tappolet, would then be a state of appropriate or correct happiness.

In the third contribution of this issue, Antti Kauppinen turns to the relationship between virtue and happiness, understood once again as an emotional condition. He particularly challenges the idea that the possession of virtues is necessary to be happy. Basing himself on a careful examination of neo-Aristotelian positions, Kauppinen argues that they generally defend a conception of happiness that is not credible, insofar as virtues are likely to require us to put ourselves in danger or to renounce something we desire, so they would be likely to generate a certain

number of unpleasant affective states. However, Kauppinen readily admits that virtues can be conducive to happiness, but he argues that there is no necessary causal connection between possessing a virtue and being happy. To the extent that virtue does indeed involve a concern for things that are valuable, then the virtuous agent will be likely to have positively valenced experiences as a result of this concern (the virtuous agent will seek out sincere and solid friendships, will have a secure sense of self-worth, will be less likely to suffer from anxiety or depression, etc.), and there is a strong possibility that the virtuous agent will thus be able to settle into a virtuous circle where the positive emotions and moods he or she experiences will themselves make it more likely that other pleasant emotional states will come about. Finally, Kauppinen discusses some of the implications of this approach from the point of view of well-being, contrasting it with the view defended by Rossi and Tappolet.

If the emotional-state theory proposes that we conceive of happiness as a disposition to experience positive moods and emotions, other sentimentalist approaches have characterized happiness, in a more minimalist way, as a *sui generis* emotion. Lepine first examines and discusses these approaches, before defending a characterization of happiness in terms of mood. According to him, happiness is neither an emotion nor a disposition to experience certain emotions and moods, but rather a positive mood that is an occurrent and discrete state. He thus argues that happiness is nothing other than a positive mood. To this end, he characterizes moods as prospective attitudes, whose purpose would be to appraise the more-or-less propitious character of situations with respect to the things we value. He then argues that moods have a prudential value when they are correct, and that they can contribute to our well-being when this condition is met.

Deonna and Teroni, for their part, ask not whether happiness can be understood as an emotion, but rather to what extent emotions are likely to contribute to the happiness of individuals. Since emotions all have a hedonic component that can be positive or negative, so that they are more or less pleasant or unpleasant to feel, it is indeed natural to think that they must contribute in some way to our happiness. Deonna and Teroni's claim is that emotions contribute to our happiness insofar as they constitute specific forms of engagement with the world: they are evaluative attitudes that consist mainly of feelings of preparation for action. As such, they are ways of taking pleasure or displeasure that are phenomenally translated into "types of engagement" with the objects of our emotions. But this approach raises other issues, which Deonna and Teroni go on to clarify—notably, the question of what emotions, as states of pleasure or displeasure, have in common, and the question of whether the tendencies to act that are specific to emotions are sufficient to contribute hedonically to our happiness.

In a more general way, Broi is interested in ethical hedonism, where the only thing that is finally good is pleasure. He offers an analysis of the constraints bearing on this theory based on recent research on pleasure and argues that only one of the current theories of pleasure is compatible with ethical hedonism. In

particular, he distinguishes between internalist theories (which equate pleasure with a quality of our experience) and externalist theories (which equate pleasure with an attitude that we adopt towards a type of experience). According to internalist theories, pleasure would have a final value because of its own phenomenal character, whereas externalist theories, conversely, would have it that pleasure derives its final value from the attitudes we have towards an experience (for instance because we desire it for its own sake). This second approach amounts to saying that pleasure alone would have no final value, which is clearly problematic for hedonism. After reviewing the reasons why internalist theories have generally been set aside, Broi presents some hybrid hedonist theories that emphasize both pleasure and our desire for pleasure: the final value of pleasure, according to these approaches, would be constituted by both the pleasure and our attitude toward it. In a similar vein, representationalist theories argue that pleasure derives its value from the fact that we represent it as good. In both cases, pleasure would nevertheless derive its final value from something other than itself—namely, an attitude of the subject. According to Broi, ethical hedonism is then in a bad position with respect to current theories of pleasure.

In his contribution, Stéphane Lemaire asks what kind of pro-attitude a subjectivist theory of well-being should defend. According to subjectivist approaches, indeed, well-being depends on certain subjective properties such as our desires or our preferences. But this raises the question of which attitude in particular a subjectivist theory should focus on. In order to answer this question, Lemaire reviews the different desiderata that a subjectivist theory should satisfy. These desiderata are that of extensional adequacy (the pro-attitude we consider relevant to well-being should not prevent us from recognizing that a thing or a situation could contribute to a person's well-being or ill-being), that of invariability (well-being should always refer to the same property when considering human beings, be they children or adults), and that of existence (the pro-attitude we refer to should actually exist and not be merely postulated). Lemaire then examines different kinds of theories that make desire the relevant pro-attitude, showing that they are all exposed to considerable difficulties from the point of view of the first two desiderata. He then presents an alternative hypothesis according to which the relevant pro-attitude would be a *sui generis* attitude of valuation which, he sets out to show, satisfies precisely all the desiderata weighing on subjectivist theories of well-being.

Finally, Julien Claparède-Petitpierre's contribution takes a more historical interest in the way in which well-being has been studied in the social sciences and asks how the question of well-being has been structured with regard to the analysis of social normativity. In particular, he identifies two analyses of this normativity, which he considers to be complementary. According to the first, this normativity would be "moral," and well-being would depend on the relationship between an individual's character and the moral requirements with which that individual is confronted. According to the second, this normativity would be "structural," and well-being would depend on the affective relations that the individual maintains with an environment that he or she perceives as more-or-less familiar.

The eight contributions gathered in this issue thus approach the concepts of happiness and well-being from their affective constituents. While the first four papers revolve around the concept of happiness in terms of emotional condition, the following four discuss more specifically the way in which emotions, pleasures, or valuations are likely to contribute to happiness and well-being. Undoubtedly, the reader will find many echoes from one text to another, and thus we hope that this issue will contribute to enriching the discussion of the relationships among affective states, happiness, and well-being.<sup>2</sup>



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> However, see De Brigard (2010), who suggests that our responses to Nozick's thought experiment are primarily influenced by the status quo bias.
- <sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Julien Deonna and Stéphane Lemaire for their precious help and remarks on this introduction. I also warmly thank *The Ethics Forum* for editing this issue and in particular Jean-Philippe Royer, Guillaume Soucy, and Éliot Litalien. Finally, I would also like to thank Magalie Schor, with whom I had started to prepare this issue, but who unfortunately could not continue this project.

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