

The Pursuit of Unhappiness

The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being

DANIEL M. HAYBRON

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Preface

We cannot think clearly about a plant or animal until we have a name for it.

E. O. Wilson¹

White people think they can learn everything right away, by reading it out of a book and asking questions at everyone. But it doesn't work that way, you got to *experience* it and *live* it to learn it . . . Stop asking questions. You ask too many fucking questions. Because when you're ready to know, it'll be shown to you. Maybe by the end of this trip, you'll know just a little, tiny bit . . . Yeah, but then maybe you won't want to write a book anymore, because it's impossible to write down those kinds of things . . . And people won't understand anyway, because they didn't *experience* it.

Lewis Atcitty, a Navajo²

There are many good reasons not to write a book on happiness. Not least of these is the inherently paradoxical nature of the enterprise. On the one hand, serious inquiry, particularly philosophical argument, demands clarity of expression; we need to know exactly what is being said so that we can assess the merits of our claims and the arguments for them. Philosophers like to wade in clear streams, not murky swamps. On the other hand, happiness is a *paradigm* of unclarity, the Mother of All Swamps. Even if you can get past the endless verbal squabbling that has tended to cripple discussion of the subject—or is it subjects?—you will still find yourself dealing with some of the most rich, complex, nebulous, diaphanous, fluid, and evanescent phenomena known to humankind. Not even poets are up to the task. To a great extent, as Mr. Atcitty observed, you just have to be there.

These points may seem to counsel silence or despair, but to my mind they simply make the project more interesting. You can't exactly make the intangible tangible, but you can make it a little less mysterious, and a little less elusive. When a biologist puts a pin through a frog so she can study it, she ends up with something less than a frog. A lot of information has been lost. For starters, it no longer *does* anything. Much has been lost in the process, but she may yet learn something of value about the animal from the ex-frog that now lies on her table. I think that systematic investigation into happiness can similarly teach us a good deal about the matter, even if much remains beyond description. The challenge lies in bringing a measure of intelligibility if not clarity even to matters that once seemed hopelessly inscrutable. I believe this can be done, to a surprising extent.

Consider what follows the pithed version of happiness: mere shadows playing on the cave wall, perhaps, but a big improvement over sitting in the dark. Or so I hope.

This is a theoretical work. But it is a work in *ethical* theory, and it is no defect in such an effort if it has, as well, some practical import. Think of your fondest childhood memories, or of the things that, to your mind, most make life worth living. What, on your deathbed, do you expect most to regret leaving behind? I suspect that much of your answer will consist of intangibles: things not easily pinned down and named, much less described, and still less measured and quantified. In the progressive era we moderns inhabit, this presents us with a problem: we are busily changing, more like remaking, the world to suit our designs. As a general rule, we do not undertake ambitious construction projects and other major improvements for the sake of an ineffable. . . *je ne sais quoi*. It is hard to build things for purposes you can't name; harder still to get other people to do it with you; and well nigh impossible to get other people to pay for it. By and large, progress and development are driven by tangibles. And if you have a problem with some proposed improvement, you will not likely get far unless you can cite tangible, preferably quantifiable, values in your support. "It just doesn't feel right" tends not to cut it when you are trying to get people to change their plans.

Carried out in these terms, progress can be very expensive. The problem is made apparent in *Hatteras Blues*, Tom Carlson's recent account of development in the traditional island fishing community of Hatteras Village. Economic progress was, at the time of his visits there, moving so fast that soon "an entire way of life would disappear, a commercial system of values based on the sea and a system of community values as old as the Mayflower Compact."³ Utterly typical of the process, repeated countless times elsewhere, was that "much of what was being lost was intangible—a manner of being, a way of living day-to-day—and what was tangibly being lost was being lost so quickly that it almost seemed a trick of the eye. The W. H. Gaskins house, circa 1860—the oldest house in the village, here today, then, overnight, gone. Bulldozed for someone's septic system." To what end? To make way for garish developments lined with wildly incongruous palm trees and "huge, twenty room McMansions" placed in precarious locations along one of the most storm-swept beaches on the Atlantic seaboard. (In many cases built, apparently, according to the "bigger fool" theory: made not to be used, but to be sold to a bigger fool in a real estate version of hot potato.) The locals detest many of the changes, yet are too independent to organize effectively, an otherwise admirable quality that some fear will be what "gets this village erased." (Though they themselves were substantially complicit.) A developer opines, "F_____em! If I want to build a miniature golf course and have fireworks and giant clowns with flames shooting out their asses, I will!"⁴

There is nothing intangible about giant clowns: their value has a fairly precise measure, in dollars. People want them, and are willing to pay for them, knowing

pretty well what they will get in return: a predictable dose of amusement, just like the one they got at the last putt-putt golf course. Against such concrete benefits, how do you defend the “feel” of a place, or the inexpressible gratifications of a “manner of being”? (And how many dollars is it worth? Can you seriously answer that question while retaining any capacity to appreciate the values you’re talking about?) Particularly when such intangibles are so completely lost on those with no familiarity or affection for the place. I suppose plastic clowns might have a certain *je ne sais quoi* about them, too, just as an old island home built from shipwreck timbers several generations back by your ancestors has its own magic. Maybe. But that isn’t why they get built. So instead of a *place*, with a vital, textured life of its own, you just get a bunch of stuff, steam-shoveled in to entertain transient visitors until the next storm washes it away. Variations of the story recur in other domains, including our personal lives. Indeed it is, it seems to me, the story of our age.

This is not a tract of social critique. But I will not be displeased if the discussion contributes something to the appreciation, and hopefully the preservation, of the manifold intangibles that make life worth living.

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3

What Do We Want from a Theory of Happiness?

Or how to make a mongrel concept hunt¹

Happiness serves hardly any other purpose than to make unhappiness possible.

Marcel Proust

1. THE LIMITS OF CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Settling questions about the nature of happiness probably strikes more than a few philosophers as an exercise in futility. Indeed, there may be no question philosophers enjoy hearing *less* than “What do you mean by ‘happiness?’” Even once we get past the linguistic hurdles discussed in Chapter 2, we still lack any plausible way of telling a good theory of happiness from a bad one. As someone helpfully put it to me: how are we supposed to play this game?²

Traditionally we play the game like this: prefer whichever conception best matches the ordinary concept, or the meaning of the ordinary language term. This is, more or less, the method of conceptual analysis, and it has not proven wildly successful in this realm.³ The trouble is that the ordinary concept of happiness appears to be neither well defined nor univocal. Indeed, there may be no “the” ordinary concept, but perhaps several, even many. Thus people’s intuitions vary widely, even regarding the psychological sense of ‘happiness’: one person’s intuitions may favor identifying happiness with life satisfaction; while someone else’s may lean toward a hedonistic account. Still others may feel the pull of both views, or perhaps their intuitions favor some other theory. How do we choose?

Restricting ourselves to the psychological sense of ‘happiness’ does little to resolve the initial worry. Even here intuitions clash, or are unclear. It is quite plausible that the relevant uses of ‘happiness’ refer sometimes to this state of mind, sometimes to that, and often don’t refer unequivocally to any particular state. It is plausible, in short, that there is more than one psychological state within the extension of ‘happiness’, as used in the long-term psychological “sense.”⁴

This state of affairs is unfortunate. If the notion is indeed as confused as it seems to be, shouldn't we give up on theorizing about happiness and admit that there *is no* saying what, exactly, happiness is? I think such worries are unfounded, and rest on a mistaken assumption that theorizing about happiness can only be about elucidating the folk notion. If that notion is confused, we must remain silent. I want to suggest that we ought not to choose a theory of happiness solely on intuitive grounds: we should consider what's at stake in choosing one theory over another. Are there principled grounds for preferring one theory over others? I shall argue that there are. The idea will be, not simply to describe an ill-mannered folk concept, nor to cast it aside in favor of something else, but to *reconstruct* the folk notion, if necessary dividing it into multiple concepts, with the aim of yielding concepts that will do the work the folk concept should have done in the first place. I will call the approach *reconstructive analysis*.

The situation is analogous to that facing theorists of consciousness. As Ned Block helpfully put it, the lay concept of consciousness is something of a "mongrel concept," a confused mess that is neither clearly univocal nor sharply ambiguous.⁵ One response to this situation would be to cease inquiries into the nature of consciousness, declaring the subject a hopeless muddle. That was not the response of Block, nor of countless other investigators who have made consciousness among the most conspicuously "hot" topics in the academy in recent years. And for good reason: figuring out how to fit consciousness into a naturalistic worldview is among the great intellectual mysteries of our time. Solving the acute form of the mind-body problem that it presents could have far-reaching consequences for the way we think about the world and ourselves. To see the problem, you need only be capable of noticing the vast difference between, say, the experience of smelling a rose and the disgusting lump of fatty gray tissue that apparently gives rise to or has that experience. It doesn't much matter what your concepts are like, or whether they are confused: the difficulty is plain to virtually anyone who has both used and looked at a brain, and fussing about conceptual untidiness won't make it go away. If your concepts don't help you deal with the problem, you don't ignore the problem; you fix your concepts. This is exactly what Block does, for instance arguing that within the extension of ordinary consciousness talk lies at least two different types of phenomena: what he calls access consciousness (roughly, "awareness") and phenomenal consciousness (roughly, "what it's like" to smell a rose, etc.). Much research on "consciousness," according to Block, really tells us only about access, whereas the truly deep puzzles relate to phenomenality, which that research does not even address. In short, Block notes that we can distinguish different things within the extension of the term in which we have different interests, and introduces new variants of the concept of consciousness corresponding to them. Whether Block is correct here or not, his strategy illustrates how we can do research profitably about subjects involving confused concepts like consciousness—or, I will argue, happiness.

Just as it would be foolish to cease inquiry into consciousness simply because it involves a mongrel concept, so too would it be unwise to dismiss work on happiness because the concept is, itself, a mongrel.

2. HOW NOT TO BUILD A THEORY OF HAPPINESS, CONTINUED

2.1. Pure normative adequacy

The traditional approach to theories of happiness, conceptual analysis, has already been laid aside. Hedonistic Utilitarians may have implicitly offered a different sort of methodology: happiness is whatever psychological state occupies a certain role in the Utilitarian moral theory—namely the role of utility. Put this way, it is natural that we should conceive of happiness in a hedonistic manner: as equivalent to a subject's balance of pleasure over displeasure. If any psychological state could possibly fill the role of utility, then pleasure is a reasonable candidate. Here, then, is one principled method for deciding on a theory of happiness. It also makes manifest the relevance of happiness for ethics.

This notion does indeed concern the psychological, and not well-being, sense of 'happiness': well-being is not built into the *meaning* of the term, but rather used as a criterion for ranking competing accounts. It is possible that hedonistic Utilitarians have not used 'happiness' in the psychological sense. Suppose, for instance, that Mill were persuaded that radical deception, such as that of an experience machine user, is incompatible with well-being (recall the "George" test in the previous chapter). If he then rejected happiness as the measure of utility, then we could conclude that he indeed used 'happiness' in the psychological sense. If he simply revised his conception of happiness to include states of the world as well as states of mind, then we would know that he was talking about the "well-being" notion. I suspect that some hedonistic Utilitarians such as Bentham were indeed concerned with happiness in the psychological sense, but I will not defend this claim here. Those (if any) who *were* talking about happiness in this sense may not have used principled grounds like the one I suggested to arrive at their views. But let's assume that some Utilitarians have indeed relied on such grounds.

The general idea behind this approach is to prefer whichever notion best fills the appropriate role in moral theory. Call this the *pure normative adequacy* method.⁶ This does not seem a promising way to choose a theory of happiness—not because hedonistic Utilitarianism is false, but because the notion of happiness is not a theoretical concept at all. It is not simply up for grabs for moral theorists to use as they please. HAPPINESS is first and foremost a folk psychological concept employed by ordinary people trying to satisfy their own practical interests. Treating it as a purely technical notion risks leaving us with a conception of happiness that no one

would recognize as such. We are of course free to use words however we wish. But ‘happiness’ is one of the central terms in our practical vocabulary. Co-opting it for theoretical purposes is liable to sow considerable confusion unless the theoretical notion turns out, coincidentally, to fit closely with the folk notion. Moreover, it leaves completely unanswered the question of what *happiness*—whatever ‘happiness’ really refers to—is. Inquiry into happiness ought to be an autonomous line of research. It should not be held hostage to the needs of moral theory.

2.2. Scientific naturalism

A second approach—*scientific naturalism*—might seem more promising, and it is certainly fashionable these days: happiness is whatever scientific discovery reveals it to be. That is, we ought to defer to our best scientific theories of happiness to determine what happiness is. Happiness is a naturalistic phenomenon, and we would be foolish to deny that empirical discoveries about human psychology could teach us something about its nature. But scientific naturalism won’t work for happiness: the pretheoretical notion is too ill-defined and covers too much psychological ground for empirical research alone to settle the question of what happiness is. We cannot yet identify any single thing whose essence empirical researchers might hope to discover. Take just two of the candidate theories before us: the hedonistic and life satisfaction views. Pleasures and global life attitudes are awfully different things. What kind of empirical study—other than a survey of folk intuitions—could *possibly* tell us which account is correct? One might as well try performing an experiment to determine whether water is H₂O or a kind of bicycle. We need at least a vague notion of what aspect of our psychology we are talking about before scientific inquiry can reveal its nature.

Scientific naturalism faces another, more serious problem: the concept of happiness is, we saw, a folk notion; ‘happiness’ is not a technical term for theorists to use as they please. Empirical researchers are no more entitled to co-opt it for their parochial purposes than moral theorists are. And it is quite possible that, left to their own devices, empirical researchers would arrive at a conception of happiness that is not well suited for dealing with the practical concerns of laypersons. Consider the interest that psychologists have in explaining why the human mind works the way it does. One way of satisfying this interest would be to identify types of mental states from an evolutionary perspective, according to their phylogenetic histories. Thus we might identify happiness with a certain class of human mental states along with their homologues in other species (homologues are features derived from some common ancestor).⁷ The concept of happiness would thus fail to apply to any creatures without homologous states, however structurally similar their psychological make-up might be. So long as we never encounter such creatures, this may not pose a practical difficulty. But the fact that this is even a possibility suggests that something has gone wrong. From the practical standpoint of ordinary people, and from the standpoint of

prudential psychology, the fact that two states are, or are not, homologous is irrelevant. Pain stinks whatever its evolutionary origins. Laypersons don't much care how the mind got the way it is. They care how the mind *is*, specifically in respects that make a difference to their lives.

3. RECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS

Are we reduced to no more principled a method than that of analyzing the folk notion of happiness? No: though the folk notion is not up for grabs, it does not appear to refer unequivocally to any particular psychological category, as I noted earlier. Rather, the folk concept appears to refer variously to different things, often conflating different psychological categories. In ordinary discourse this may pose little difficulty, since we rely on *many* cues to discern what our interlocutors are getting at, including linguistic context, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and so on. Successful communication generally does not require that our terms be precisely defined; ordinary linguistic practice probably tends not to be friendly to philosophical analysis. As a result of such shortcuts in folk psychology there will likely be more than one psychological state we can get away with calling happiness, and intuitions are bound to differ as to which is most credible. The same difficulties will beset empirical studies of lay intuitions, sometimes called *empirical conceptual analysis*.⁸ Such investigations can reveal some of the contours of folk concepts and correct for sampling biases inherent in armchair intuition pumping, and I have conducted a couple myself (Chapters 1 and 7). But your results can only be as good as the concepts you are studying, so getting scientific with conceptual analysis is not going to solve the problem.

But we can still ask which of the states within the extension of the unreformed term are most *important*. What conception of happiness would best perform the work we use the notion to do? The question "What is happiness?" becomes "How is happiness best understood given our interests in the matter?" Should more than one conception prove more or less equally satisfactory, we may wish to distinguish further concepts. But there may well be—and I believe there is—a core psychological kind⁹ that clearly outstrips the alternatives both in importance and in its fit with the folk notion. Call the concept denoting this kind, if there is one, the *philosophically primary* notion of happiness.¹⁰ This will almost certainly deviate from the folk notion, but only to a point. The aim is to find a concept that does what the folk concept should have done in the first place.

This approach constitutes a kind of analysis, with close ties to ordinary concepts. Its purpose, however, is not to explicate but to reconstruct: reworking rough-and-ready folk concepts to get something better suited to thinking clearly about the matters that concern us. Call it *reconstructive analysis*. It resembles the familiar technique of "reforming analysis," which allows some tweaking, or "paraphrasing," of ordinary concepts to make them more coherent and useful.¹¹

But it is less wedded to the ordinary concepts, assuming at the outset that they are likely to need rehabilitation. Pragmatic questions about our interests in a concept thus come in at the ground floor and serve, not just for fine-tuning, but as a primary driver of the inquiry.

Again, the method itself is not particularly new; one can arguably find variations on the theme, either implicitly or explicitly, in recent work by Ned Block and other philosophers.¹² Such an approach could be particularly useful in some areas of intractable dispute, where theorists divide sharply into different camps, as perhaps in debates over the nature of knowledge or practical rationality—debates that have struck some as, at times, tedious marches into the swamp. Often, in such cases, the dispute may chiefly reflect a multiplicity of interests served by the ordinary concept—interests that might be better served by a suite of two or more concepts, as Block contends is the case regarding consciousness.

Some may wonder why we ought to bother with any kind of analysis: who cares what our folk concepts are like? There are two answers to this question. First, *we* care. All of us, being among the folk, employ folk concepts all the time, and most of our questions are framed in terms of them. If you want to know what it is to be happy, then you want to know the nature of something denoted by a folk concept, HAPPINESS. As your understanding of the subject matter proceeds, you may eventually decide to supplement or even supplant this concept with new ones. But first you need some vague grip on what *happiness* could be. By and large, folk concepts are the starting point of inquiry; they provide at least the initial vehicles for thinking about the things we care about.

Second, we are usually right to care about our folk concepts. Not just because we don't have much choice, but because those concepts typically refer to things of significance for us. That's why we employ them. For the most part, folk concepts gain currency and persist because they denote matters of broad and lasting concern. They have been vetted in the crucible of many people's experience, and we use them because, in some sense, they work for us. One reason they work for us is that human beings are extraordinarily discerning intuitive distinction-makers; on a continual basis, we instinctively and implicitly respond to a vast array of important distinctions, most of which we cannot even begin to make explicit. Consider just how richly any normal person is attuned to the countless non-verbal cues offered by her conversational partners. Think of how often one person will sense something wrong or inappropriate with another's behavior or demeanor without being able to say just what it is. And as any ethics instructor knows, people's sensitivity to values far outstrips their ability to articulate them. A good caregiver, for instance, may be utterly lousy at explaining more than a few of the manifold considerations that continuously guide his treatment of the person in his care. But his finely-tuned responsiveness to those considerations is absolutely critical to his being a good caregiver. And such a task as caregiving,

which centers on knowing instinctively what really matters, is the sort of thing that human beings are really good at.

Sitting in the philosopher's chair making up theories about what matters, on the other hand, is something we're really *not* good at. In fact we're pathetic at it. (One does not need to teach philosophy and referee journal articles for long to figure that out.) Those who trust theoretical intuitions more than the practical instincts we display in everyday living will not, most likely, be much persuaded. But when it comes to marking the distinctions that really matter in human life, some of us would sooner put our money on intuitive lay practice, and the folk concepts it employs, than on the untethered a priori guesses of cloistered academics.

Our job, then, is to determine what our interests are relating to the folk concept of happiness, and then see which of the possible referents of the term best answers to those interests. The next section lays out the data to be accommodated.

4. DATA POINTS

4.1. The paradigm cases and statements

First, let's get a sense of what the possible referents of the term could be. Consider some paradigmatic cases of happiness and unhappiness:

- *Happiness*: being in high spirits, exuberant, buoyant, joyful, exhilarated, elated, carefree, contented, at peace, at ease, feeling confident and self-assured, feeling "in the zone," being in an expansive mood, delighted with one's life, or blessed with a sense of fulfillment or well-being.
- *Unhappiness*: being depressed, melancholy, despondent, anxious, "stressed out," seething with rage, overwhelmed by fear, worried sick, heartbroken, grief-stricken, lonely, empty, low, burdened with shame, bored, feeling insecure or worthless, feeling spiritually reduced, pressed-upon or "compressed," or deeply dissatisfied with life.

These are, I take it, more or less familiar ways of being happy or unhappy. Or, if some of them are not sufficient in themselves, they are plausibly *constitutive* of happiness or unhappiness: one's happiness or unhappiness is augmented or diminished by virtue of being in these states. The reader is free to add other examples to the list, but I take it to be uncontroversial that all or most of these cases involve happiness or unhappiness. A satisfactory theory of happiness should account for what is going on in these cases.

We can also identify some "paradigm statements": typical statements involving 'happiness' in the long-term psychological sense. The truth value of these statements is irrelevant; the point is to illustrate our interests in happiness by showing the sorts of contexts in which "happiness" talk occurs. Ideally, a theory of happiness will make sense of our use of the language in such contexts, comporting reasonably

well with the intuitive meaning and significance of such uses. (At least relative to ordinary conceptions of what is significant.) For instance, the claim, “Most people are happy” seems very significant: if true, it apparently conveys an important fact. If your theory of happiness completely undercuts this appearance, that’s at least *prima facie* a problem. For then (among other things) claims about whether people are happy will turn out to be deeply misleading, seeming to have practical implications that they utterly lack. I will suggest in Chapter 5 that life satisfaction accounts of happiness have something like this result, so that when investigators publish papers about life satisfaction studies under the guise of “happiness,” this often has the effect of (unintentionally) inflating the practical significance of their research. Such problems need not be fatal to a theory of happiness—perhaps happiness is a lot less important than people think—but if we can get an otherwise plausible theory that does not make ordinary claims about happiness misleading or uninformative, we should prefer it. The paradigm statements include:

1. Most people are happy.
2. Higher income tends to yield surprisingly small increases in happiness.
3. People in the United States tend to be happier than those in China.
4. Most of all, I want my children to be happy and healthy.
5. You should do whatever will make you happiest.
6. The only time she was truly happy was in her twenties.
7. How is Ernesto? Not very well; he’s pretty unhappy.
8. Shelly seems terribly unhappy these days; in fact I think she’s depressed.
9. Robert moved back to California, as he was so unhappy living in Boston.

4.2. Practical interests

What are our interests in happiness? Proust notwithstanding, at least the concept has its uses: there are at least four broad functions that the notion performs in ordinary practice. To begin with, we often appeal to considerations of happiness when *deliberating* about important decisions. Someone trying to decide on an occupation will very often ask which option would prove best with respect to happiness: will I be happier as a teacher or a lawyer? Indeed, people often take the impact of their choices on their own, or others’, happiness to be the most important factor in their decisions (at least where the decision is significant—people rarely think about happiness when deciding what to order for dinner). Policymakers likewise may consider the impact of proposed state actions on the happiness of their constituencies.

Second, we advert to happiness in *evaluating* or assessing our own or others’ conditions, typically to find out or report on how well someone is doing. Thus concerned parents inquire as to whether their children are happy or unhappy. And often the first thing we wish to learn about our friends after a long separation is whether or not they are happy. Interestingly, a credible report of happiness or

unhappiness is often if not typically taken to be sufficient grounds for concluding that someone is, or is not, doing well on the whole.

In fact happiness appears in many contexts to serve as a proxy for well-being. On learning that a friend is happy, you may well infer, quite reasonably, that she is doing well. If you find her to be unhappy, you might just as reasonably conclude she is doing poorly. And when deliberating about important life decisions, the judgment that one option will leave you happier normally suffices to settle the question of which best serves your interests. Note that these inferences are defeasible—we are not relying on the “well-being” sense of ‘happiness’ here: if you find that your friend’s husband regards her with utter contempt, and that she would be devastated were she to learn this, you might well decide she’s actually quite unfortunate—though happy all the same. This, at least, is how we tend to think about happiness: in ordinary practical reasoning we treat it as so closely aligned with well-being that, for the most part, we can use it as a stand-in for well-being.¹³ One reason for doing so is that the notion of well-being is highly abstract and formal, whereas happiness is a more concrete, substantive good, and may thus be easier to assess and discuss. Moreover, assessments of happiness do not involve tendentious value judgments, and so are less subject to controversy.

Many times we appear to be concerned with happiness even when we do not explicitly refer to it as such. To say that one is depressed is simply a way of saying that one is particularly unhappy in a certain way. Indeed, it may well be that *most* talk about happiness does not use words like ‘happy’. (I had contemplated the matters discussed in this volume for many years before it occurred to me that I was thinking about happiness.) This makes sense: if being depressed is one way of being unhappy, then we should expect some reports of unhappiness to employ the more informative language of depression. More broadly, the fact that there are many ways of being happy or unhappy indicates that reports concerning happiness will explicitly employ the vocabulary of happiness only when we lack sufficient information to apply more specific terminology, or where we are aggregating the happiness of multiple individuals, each happy or unhappy in different ways. Queries about happiness should tend to rely more on the more general terms, because in such cases we typically don’t know in what manner someone will be happy or unhappy. Our interest in happiness appears to far outstrip our use of its terminology.

The third function of the concept of happiness is to aid us in *prediction*. Happiness appears to have deep and far-reaching effects on our psychology and behavior, and this partly accounts for our profound interest in the matter. One’s being happy or unhappy should thus license a wide range of predictions. If, for instance, we discover that our friends are deeply unhappy, we can predict that they will be less pleasant and useful companions than were they happy. Such predictions appear to carry forward well into the future, reflecting the fact that happiness has a certain inertia. People who are happy or unhappy tend to stay that way for some time.

Unsurprisingly, happiness also has uses in *explanation*. For instance, that someone is unhappy may explain why he keeps trying to effect major changes in his life—trying out new religions, for example. We can also explain patterns in individuals' emotions and behavior, or particular emotions and behaviors, by reference to facts about happiness or unhappiness. Sometimes the best explanation of a person's inordinate joy over a small gift is that he is happy; of someone's present bad mood, that she is unhappy these days. Puzzled over a friend's inexplicably nasty remark, a person may find some relief in the discovery that the comment reflects no personal animosity, just the friend's general unhappiness.

The notion of happiness performs all of these functions. This is why we care about it. A good theory of happiness ought to respect this fact.

5. CRITERIA OF ADEQUACY

5.1. Overview

At this point it would be natural to draw up particular criteria of adequacy based on these interests, and I have done so in earlier work.¹⁴ But in the context of the present volume it seems more helpful to move directly to a critical examination of the various theories, letting the specific requirements emerge as the argument demands. This will help move things along, and preconceived lists of requirements tend to be drawn up with malice aforethought anyway.

Instead I will mention two quite general desiderata, common to any reconstructive analysis, and say a few things about how they might apply in the case of happiness. These are:

1. Descriptive adequacy
2. Practical utility

5.2. Descriptive adequacy

I borrow the notion of descriptive adequacy from L. W. Sumner;¹⁵ we might also call it “intuitive plausibility.” The idea is that a conception of happiness should, at a minimum, be recognizable as such. It should concern something we can at least get away with calling happiness without butchering the language. Ideally, a theory will provide a close fit with our considered intuitions about happiness—at least to the extent that these are relatively uniform—and generate few or no serious counterexamples. More broadly, it should, as Sumner would put it, comport with our experience of happiness. It should “ring true.” This does not mean that it has to conform to commonsense platitudes about the matter, or agree with the snap judgments of most laypersons. What seems plausible at first glance may no longer seem so on reflection, and it is our considered

intuitions, particularly the strongest and most robust ones, that carry the most weight. It is possible, for instance, that commonsense platitudes about happiness could tend to reflect a hedonistic lay theory of happiness, even where people's *reflective* judgments would tend to converge on a life satisfaction account. The hedonistic platitudes might not hold up under even slight reflection, in which case a hedonistic account may not be descriptively adequate.¹⁶

The descriptive adequacy requirement is flexible, but only to a point. A theory that flouts too many strong intuitions about happiness risks changing the subject. At a certain point we cease to be talking about anything recognizable as happiness at all. We therefore cease to have a theory of happiness, but have instead a theory of something else. We may indeed wish to change the subject and talk about something else when all is said and done, but first we need to know what *happiness* could be. I have already argued that there probably is no single well-defined concept behind ordinary usage of 'happiness' in its psychological sense(s). But from this it hardly follows that the notion of happiness is free for the taking. The ordinary notion of happiness is not all chaos, and I believe that a sustained examination of the different theories of happiness will reveal far more order than we might have expected.

5.3. Practical utility

Call it "utility" for short. This is just the idea that we should prefer a conception of happiness that vindicates our profound interest in the matter, that best enables us to satisfy our practical, and perhaps theoretical, purposes relating to happiness. Given the status of HAPPINESS as a folk psychological concept, the practical purposes of laypersons take precedence. But theoretical purposes might also count to a lesser extent.

With happiness, foremost among our practical concerns is its evident *prudential value*. Happiness appears to be immensely important for well-being, indeed to be a central aspect of it, and people tend to regard it that way. As we saw earlier, we frequently treat it as a proxy for well-being. This is not to say that being happy must be necessary for well-being, nor that it must be sufficient. Perhaps it is, perhaps not. But happiness appears to be extremely important, and reliably so: being happy seems, with few or no exceptions, to be a pleasant or otherwise prudentially desirable condition. Happiness looks to be far more desirable prudentially than unhappiness. And how happy one is appears invariably to make a big difference for one's welfare. Similarly, differences in happiness seem typically to be matched by comparable differences in well-being. Exceptions, if there are any, appear to be unusual and explicable in ways that do not vitiate the importance we attach to happiness (e.g., limited to atypical circumstances or to people with strange tastes or values). In general, for people who are normally situated, there looks to be no realistic prospect of

being lastingly happy yet not being significantly better off for it. Conversely, being lastingly unhappy yet none the worse for it seems not to be a realistic possibility.

This, at least, seems to be how people conventionally regard happiness's value. Other things being equal, we should prefer a theory of happiness that preserves such appearances over one that does not. Such a requirement may seem to undercut the status of HAPPINESS as a non-evaluative, descriptive concept, blurring the distinction between the well-being and psychological senses of 'happiness'. It does not. Compare the notion of pleasure, which is generally considered to be a descriptive concept. It is a problem with a theory of pleasure if it has the result of making it utterly mysterious why anyone should think pleasure important. A theory that has this result, unless accompanied by a very compelling story about why the appearances are mistaken, will likely strike us as having badly missed its target. A good theory of pleasure should, if at all possible, make sense of the appearance that pleasure has a certain kind of value. This is not because PLEASURE is an evaluative concept, but because such a theory is liable to seem neither intuitively plausible nor able to address our practical concerns in the matter.

A tricky question involves the extent to which happiness is supposed to track what *actually* matters for well-being, versus merely what people conventionally *think* important for well-being. The question is how far theories of happiness should be influenced by our theories of well-being. Since the goal is to make sense of people's typical interests in happiness, preserving as far as possible the intuitive significance of the paradigm cases and statements, it will matter to some extent what our view of well-being is like. At the same time, we should not hold theories of happiness hostage to just any old theory of well-being. Perhaps you incline toward a radically revisionary account of well-being, such as a Stoic view on which happiness turns out to have zero or even negative value, no matter how we conceive it. In such a case the prudential value requirement will be impossible to satisfy. For on such a view of well-being, our ordinary practical interests may be deeply misguided. What then? Given again that our goal is to *make sense* of people's typical interests in happiness, preserving as far as possible the intuitive significance of the paradigm cases and statements, we can still think about which account of happiness makes our ordinary interests in the matter seem as intelligible and reasonable as possible. For instance, a Stoic could argue against a life satisfaction theory by claiming that it fails to respect the apparent significance of happiness. For even if (say) a hedonistic account also fails to make happiness something that matters centrally for well-being, it may at least do a better job of preserving that *appearance*. For perhaps the putative value of life satisfaction vanishes given the merest reflection, whereas the seeming importance of pleasure dissipates only under the sort of extensive, rigorous scrutiny needed to appreciate the force of the Stoic position.

5.4. Summing up

On the approach sketched here, the task of giving a theory of happiness amounts to answering the following question:

What kind of psychological state is both plausibly identified with happiness (in its long-term psychological sense) and answers to people's practical interests in happiness?

I noted earlier that there is likely to be more than one thing we can get away with calling happiness. What then? In such a case we will look to whichever account best satisfies the desiderata. If we can plausibly do so, we should simply use 'happiness' to denote the referent of the winning account. If not, then we might distinguish further senses of 'happiness'. But the philosophically primary notion will be the one denoted by the winning account, if there is one.

6. INTUITION AND METAPHOR IN EMPIRICALLY INFORMED ETHICS

The fundamental outlook of the present volume is intended to be thoroughly naturalistic, representing a view of philosophy as more or less continuous with the sciences. The nature of things is taken to be fundamentally an empirical question, and values are conceived in a broadly Humean fashion, as somehow a product of human sensibilities. I will not argue for these assumptions, and most of the discussion will not presuppose their truth; but they do inform the approach. It may seem curious, then, that my arguments frequently trade in "intuition pumps," which empirically-minded philosophers have tended to eschew; and, moreover, that they sometimes rely on oblique, not to say metaphorical, language rather than the crisp, sharply defined terminology preferred in both scientific inquiry and philosophy in the anglophone tradition.

Let me explain, starting with the question of language. The problem arises mainly from the fact that we will be discussing the phenomenology of well-being, along with aspects of well-being that we know about chiefly through their phenomenology. These are, notoriously, difficult matters to talk about. Indeed, they are usually taken to be *paradigms* of the inexpressible, more resistant to articulation perhaps than anything else. The phenomenology of well-being is enormously rich, to put it mildly, leaving even poets at a loss to convey anything more than a hint of it. Part of the problem is that—as will become clearer in the following chapters—the phenomena are often too complex or subtle for the person experiencing them even to apprehend, much less verbalize. But we are handicapped as well by the inherently "lossy" character of linguistic communication: human experience contains far too much information for efficient communication to convey any more than a tiny fraction of it. The

process of verbal articulation distills the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of lived experience down to the common currency of shared ideas, using as little of that currency as possible.¹⁷ Most of the information is, of necessity, lost in the transformation. Scientific language is more lossy still, since it trades only in the very narrow coinage of ideas that can be precisely defined, quantified, and measured. For our purposes all of this means trouble, since any attempt to describe the phenomenology of happiness in precise terms will either be extremely fragmentary or extremely long and unwieldy. More importantly, the common currency in this realm, at least in contemporary English, consists of a pathetically stunted vocabulary of terms that typically lack anything like a precise definition.

As a result, it is probably impossible to talk intelligently about the psychology of well-being without resorting, at times, to a more literary mode of discourse that employs picturesque language and metaphor. The idea is to exploit the connotative power of language to direct the reader’s attention to phenomena that otherwise we could not talk about at all—the “elaborate form of ostension” I mentioned earlier. This method has drawbacks, since metaphor does not conduce to clarity of thought, much less scientific assessment, and some readers competent in the language may fail to get the connotations and see what we are talking about, in which case we are left at something of an impasse. But the approach can put us on the road to a more exact understanding of matters that otherwise might not get treated at all, helping us to notice and discuss them so that we can study them more carefully and systematically.

The use of intuition pumps will be more familiar to philosophical readers. It is not unproblematical, not least because of sampling bias worries: as noted earlier, the readers whose intuitions are being pumped are not exactly a representative slice of humanity, and even when philosophers’ intuitions converge, we cannot be certain that other people, particularly in non-Western cultures, will share them.¹⁸ This is a serious concern, but I will assume here that it is not fatal to the enterprise, letting the arguments to follow speak for themselves. This is partly because human sensibilities seem to me to share enough in common to sustain the practice, partly because I have no idea how to proceed otherwise, and partly for reasons to be sketched momentarily. Still, we will have to bear this limitation of our methodology in mind, asking ourselves whether our intuitions are liable to be widely shared. Better still, when we can, to ask other people, as the experimental philosophy movement maintains.

Intuitional evidence can be defensible partly because the relevant *facts* may connect with, indeed depend on, human sensibilities in ways that at least make it intelligible how our intuitions could be relevant. Some of the facts concern our concepts, and the facts about how we are willing to apply a given term can plausibly tell us something about the nature of the concept it expresses. Similarly, many believe that values depend on, or are otherwise intimately connected with, our sensibilities. If so then again, appeals to intuition may well be relevant. A

second point, made earlier, is that we are good intuitive distinction-makers in many realms, particularly when thinking about particular cases as opposed to theoretical claims.

Finally, the present volume reflects a view of ethical inquiry as crucially first-personal: its charge is at least partly to articulate a view of the good life that will strike a reasonable person as, on reflection, an attractive one to lead.¹⁹ This is roughly the approach often thought to characterize Hellenistic ethical theory, except that it is “eudaimonistic” only in method—emphasizing the first-personal concerns of individuals trying to lead good lives—and not in substance: it does not, that is, take an ethical theory to be a theory of the narrower notion of *well-being* or eudaimonia. It is, in effect, a kind of methodological eudaimonism. And on this sort of approach it will be important for many claims about value—at least the values that matter for a good life—to have some intuitive plausibility: an ethical theory is something we have to be able to live with. And an ethical theory that commits us to views we find repulsive, even on reflection, is going to have problems in this regard. (It is possible, of course, to defend an ethical theory one finds intuitively repugnant—perhaps the truth could be like that. But the major ethics journals are not likely to be graced anytime soon by articles with titles like “A Repugnant Ethical Theory Defended.”) So intuitive considerations will be a legitimate source of evidence, at least on this sort of approach. Lest a eudaimonistic methodology seem to clash with the idea of philosophy as roughly continuous with science, it should be noted that such an approach is neither non-naturalistic nor indifferent to empirical results. Setting aside the truism that an attractive view of the good life for a human being should comport with the observed facts about human nature, we could look to empirical research for independent support of our reflective views. If, for instance, values are dependent on human sensibility, then we might learn about them either by employing our sensibilities—for example, philosophical reflection—or by putting those sensibilities under the microscope. If neuropsychological research revealed that human beings are robustly wired for deontological values, for instance, then this could provide a degree of support for the idea that some deontological moral theory is *true*, namely by suggesting that only such theories are liable to fit with human sensibilities, to seem intuitively plausible to us.

7. WHAT LIES AHEAD

In the next four chapters I will apply the approach developed here to the main accounts of happiness. Chapter 4 will argue against hedonistic theories mainly on grounds of descriptive adequacy: roughly, happiness is not plausibly identified with pleasure, and the intuitions seeming to favor a hedonistic approach actually point toward an emotional state theory. Chapter 5 contends that life satisfaction theories, while somewhat more promising in terms of descriptive adequacy,

cannot make sense of the intuitive significance of happiness. Happiness, on such a view, would be much less important, and important for different reasons, than we ordinarily take it to be. Chapters 6 and 7 argue that an emotional state theory satisfies both the descriptively adequacy and utility requirements. (Chapter 8, which places happiness thus conceived at the center of an account of well-being, will offer further support for this contention.) Happiness is most profitably conceived along the lines of an emotional state view.