
Book Review

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Can We be Happier? Evidence and Ethics
by: Richard Layard and George Ward
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“So the basic proposal of this book is that we should each of us, in all our choices, aim to produce the greatest happiness that we can – and especially the least misery”. writes Professor Lord Richard Layard, with the assistance of George Ward, on page 2 of *Can we be happier? Evidence and Ethics* (2021 Pelican Books). This proposal encapsulates a secular ethics that Richard Layard believes should be foundational in the organisation of society. By the least misery, he is thinking about the worst off in society and the distribution of happiness more generally. His ethics differ little from Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism, but as the subtitle indicates, his views are informed by evidence.

The readers of the *International Journal of Happiness and Development* are undoubtedly aware of much of the happiness evidence, but a couple of examples from the book bear mentioning. (And by happiness, I follow Richard Layard’s use of the term here, referring to evaluative subjective well-being.) The best predictor of adult happiness is adolescent mental health, and in adults, mental health has a larger impact on happiness than poverty and physical health (in developed countries). Yet, societies are organised to promote growth and spend much more on physical than mental health. To partially address this issue, Richard Layard, informed by the evidence, enlisted the help of David M. Clark and successfully argued the case for greater mental healthcare access in UK.

I have to admit I was predisposed to this book. I read Richard Layard’s *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* before starting my PhD. As you can imagine, I liked it – a little over a decade later, I make a living studying happiness. I am pleased with this new book as well. For one reason, Richard Layard has gratifyingly gone past much of the economics of happiness insights in which I am aware. The focus of Chapter 3 is on mind training, which may arise through cognitive behavioural therapy and/or mindfulness practice. I believe a change in society’s preferences is necessary to supplant or even supplement GDP as a measure of progress, and mind training may assist in achieving this end.

But is happiness sufficient to organise society? To address social justice issues, Richard Layard indicates we should spend extra attention on reducing misery (p.32). This is not enough. People are more concerned with their day-to-day lives than concerns pertaining to social equity and international relations (Cantril, 1965) and they tend to

mispredict what makes them happy (Odermatt and Stutzer, 2019). People care for the future (Bartolini and Sarracino, 2018), but I am not convinced this sufficiently affects behaviour. Myopic and self-serving behaviour is rampant – that is why governments set up pension funds for retirement and tax gasoline to reduce pollution.

Should societies be in the business of maximising and redistributing happiness as Richard Layard argues? Perhaps we should maximise opportunities as in Amartya Sen's capability approach? There is a major gap between outcomes, such as happiness, and opportunities, due to luck and no small part, individual behaviour. The *pursuit* of happiness, not happiness itself, is considered to be an unalienable right in the United States (at least). Individuals can also misreport their happiness to strategically affect government decision making. Clearly, maximising happiness has its challenges. Nonetheless, happiness measures do offer significant advantages over alternative outcomes, in part because they are holistic, summarising any and all factors that individuals value into a single indicator. If Richard Layard wants to convincingly argue that his happiness principles should be used to organise society, then the book should include a more complete discussion of the limitations and benefits of happiness, including a comparison with alternative social indicators.

What would Richard Layard's society look like? Would it be characterised by bread and circuses or soma-dependency as in Aldous Huxley's famous dystopia *Brave New World*? Similarly, John Stuart Mill asks, is it better to be a happy fool or unhappy Socrates? Do we need a certain amount of misery or striving to motivate artistic expression, innovation, or personal development? These are not real challenges to Richard Layard's argument in today's world, but were his vision successful, what sort of unintended consequences might arise?

Rather than focus on happiness alone, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) uses a dashboard of indicators, to which Richard Layard (and Richard Easterlin) argue is insufficient. To this, Richard Layard reminds us that the social indicators movement has had little success in nearly 50 years (p.37). Dashboards may also be subject to strategic reporting by the media and politicians. Alternatively, Christopher Barrington-Leigh has proposed a system to bridge the gap between happiness and long-term policy objectives, which is to maximise happiness subject to democratically-determined objectives (constraints) pertaining to things like social justice and the environment.

There is much more to say – I took notes and shared fresh references with colleagues – but there is little space to add much here. Thus, I confine myself to a couple more points. As with any popular audience book, this one focuses on breadth rather than depth and omits sometimes important limitations. You might call the book's assertions and goals heroic, but I suggest readers use their own common sense and focus on what works for them. For one, virtually all social scientists convey insights based on averages, but I have yet to meet an average individual. In any case, the book is enjoyable to read. Richard Layard structured it to be easy to skim and reference, including conclusions in each chapter. The bulk of the book discusses what various groups of society can do, ranging from 'each of us' to scientists. Not surprisingly, the chapter on recommendations for economists is the longest in the book, which I will be rereading. What is missing, however, is a synthesis of recommendations across groups describing a holistic set of actions.

Lastly, in making difficult decisions, Richard Layard briefly recalls John Rawls's veil of ignorance. If placed at random in a hypothetical society – with no control over your

characteristics or circumstances – how would you want that society to be organised? This book, while incomplete, as any book necessarily must be, will nonetheless inform your answer.

Disclaimer

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