

Prof. Ruut Veenhoven

RM: As we are both aware, there has been a booming interest in happiness in the West that has become particularly pronounced over the past few years. The academic literature is focusing more and more on happiness, particularly in the field of positive psychology and this interest is mirrored in more popular forms too as our bookshops are filled with titles relating to happiness, these ranging from philosophical and historical texts to self-help manuals. Happiness seems also to be entering increasingly into the policy debate as governments, states and cities expand their traditional measures of success to include assessments of happiness and wellbeing. I wonder if we could start by addressing why this might be. Do you have any reflections on why happiness has suddenly become a topic of such interest?

RV: Yes, basically I think it is a by-product of a multiple-choice society. When there is nothing to choose in life, there is no need to wonder if you are happy or not. Once you are able to choose, you wonder which way of life will make you most happy. So, at the individual level not only are we more able to choose but we can see that some choices make people quite happy. If some people score 8 on happiness scale while you score 6, then something appears to be wrong and so, people then start looking for information. Yet the strange thing is that as yet, there is little professional guidance for finding happiness. This is why there are so many self-help books and so many happiness quacks around. There is a big market for happiness advice which probably will be served by professionalised positive psychology but as yet the advice is pretty poor. So, that is at the individual level.

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At the organisational level, there is also an increasing demand for happiness. Of course, organisations make money in the first place but they are places where people spend large parts of their lives and typically happy workers work better than unhappy workers - especially in the creative jobs which have become more prevalent nowadays. So, this raises an interest in organisations on how to raise happiness levels. There is also a rising interest in organisations like schools and care homes, especially care homes where a significant outcome is happiness and where the voice of consumers is getting stronger. They do not just want what the professionals say is good but want increasing happiness also. This is already happening in the medical field where there is a growing interest in the so-called health-related quality of life. A doctor can say that you will live longer if you take all of these pills, they might make you live for one more year, but will you be happy? There is a considerable market opening in such institutions. And, lastly, at the national level more politicians are asking what they should be doing. For many politicians, politics is about reducing misery and we have been quite successful at that. In the Netherlands for example, most serious misery and injustice has disappeared. So, the question is what next? One answer to the question is to look after Mother Earth which is the ecologist's answer. Another is to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

I do not think that the interest in happiness is a fad but rather a structural effect. The question of why it has cropped up so recently relates to the fact that the demand has been growing gradually and after many years of doubt and development, the research has matured and now people can see that it works and they want applications.

RM: There are a number of layers in what you have just said, ranging from the individual to the nation-state. I wonder in looking at the individual level to begin with whether you think that part of the search for happiness which you mentioned in

relation to choice, indicates that in modern consumer society many people are confused as to what happiness might mean?

RV: They are not confused about what happiness might mean, it is commonly understood as enjoying life, but they are confused as to what makes them happy. I agree that in looking for a gratifying life one way is through the consumer system, but there is also the question of what philosophy of life suits you best. What philosophy and what meanings involved in that make you feel most comfortable. I do think that humans need a view on life and that we cannot live in society unless we have a picture of how things are put together. Yet I hardly see that one philosophy is better than another. One philosophy may fit a particular person better than the others but as far as I can see, people need answers but it does not particularly matter what type of answers. People can live well with answers that are incomplete.

In my theory, happiness is the result of need gratification. We are biological organisms that have in evolution developed in-wired needs and when these needs are gratified, we feel good. If we feel good most of the time, we say that we are happy. Now the question is whether we have an in-wired need for meaning. I do not know if people who do not have a philosophy of life would be less happy. In this context, I do not believe that we have an in-wired need for meaning or philosophy. I think that all humans are interested in it but that it is not a need. Why not? I think that needs are things that have a survival value. Philosophy and the answer to the question 'why are we here' is a by-product of the fact that we can think, but it is not a need and we can live without a final answer.

RM: That is very interesting and particularly in relation to needs. One of the things that I am interested in and particularly so in the context of Bhutanese endeavours, are attempts to find happiness that go beyond simple economic frameworks and the supposed needs that these encourage.

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Such frameworks raise the question of whether these are real needs or falsely created ones?

RV: I consider them wants. Needs are things that are biological while wants are imputed by society. If our wants fit our needs then we have a good society but if society creates wants that do not really correspond to needs, we have a poor one.

RM: Indeed and I wonder if this is part of the confusion that surrounds the search for happiness for individuals as we try and optimise good feelings at the personal level. Many of us live in highly commercialised cultures where media in particular constantly attempts to create new felt needs for the individual and I wonder whether in allowing our systems to become so dominated by an economic framework, we have not confused ourselves and come to spend a great deal of time pursuing false lifestyles that do not have a significant hedonic pay-off.

RV: That is a very important question. To a certain extent we may be deluded as business does link goods to needs and particularly to status needs. But as a species, we do have status needs, ones that we have in common with all group animals and while we do not have an innate need to be the top ape, we do have a need not to be the bottom ape. Business tries to exploit these needs-I think they are over-doing that and so we are buying expensive goods for some false gain. In that sense I agree but I am happy that there are strong counter-forces in alternative cultures that protect us against too much powerful advertising.

RM: It is true that a lot of advertising seems to relate to status needs. If you have the latest model car you are somehow superior to the person who has last year's model and so on. I think those dynamics are fairly apparent but I am wondering as we move towards an increasing focus on happiness whether there is not a tendency in that to re-

create a similar problem - in the sense that if I find myself to be 6 on a ten-point happiness scale and find out that the average is 7.5, does not that set up a similar process of competitive status-seeking. Would not everybody want to be happier than the average as a basic mark of personal success?

RV: Yes to some extent that is true but happiness is a mark of success. Happiness is a biological signal of good thriving. There is indeed a danger that in a society where everybody is happy, the ones who are not get even more depressed. This may be one of the factors in the so-called depression 'epidemic'. If you are not happy then you are better living in a society where everyone is depressed than in a society where you are the only sufferer and your own suffering stands out. That is the situation just now as a happier culture increases the obviousness of some peoples' suffering.

RM: Do you think that happiness is the most important indicator of a successful life?

RV: For yourself, yes. In my scheme of the four qualities of life you have the chances for a good life, the outcomes of life, the quality of the environment and the quality in yourself. The chance for a good life embodied in the environment is the liveability of the environment. This is what politicians are concerned about, sociologists, ecologists and so on. The chances for a good life embodied in yourself represent your life-ability and that is the business of professionals who try to improve the individual – doctors, educators, psychologists etc. If we look at the outcomes for life then you could say that a good life is a life that is good for the environment. I think that this is the utility of your life and is of interest to moral specialists who focus on your good deeds which is not the same thing as your enjoyment of life. And finally there are the outcomes for yourself which is satisfaction with life as a whole.

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So, if you ask if happiness is the final criterion of a good life, I would say it is the most important outcome for the person as an individual – how happily people live is the best indicator of how well the organism thrives. But that is not the same as your utility. So, we can thrive very well but fail in other dimensions. We can have a happy life but one that is not very useful - you can enjoy yourself but ruin the earth.

RM: Do you think that there is enough balance in people's concerns over doing well in these different realms at the moment? It seems to me that in Westernised culture, there is a great deal of emphasis on individual outcomes like the happiness of the individual but significantly less on the collective outcomes, particularly in terms of the individual's utility in creating happiness for others and a broader social good.

RV: Well, yes this is part of the individualisation of society. In modern societies, we feel less a part of any particular group and we focus more on our selves and the happiness of our own lives. But at the same time, because we are all dependent on the whole, individualisation has to go together with universalism. Now we are more interested in the world and humanity as a whole. That is typically the pattern you see in modern societies.

RM: Do you mean to say that the modern form of individualism and the happiness that an individual can experience is associated in some way with a broader, more universalised moral concern?

RV: At least in the sense that modern individuals both want to be happy and are concerned with the world as a whole, but this concern is not linked to our primary needs.

RM: Do you think that there ultimately needs to be a stronger connection between these two domains – that an individual

should seek their happiness in ways that are socially constructive and not damaging to the larger collective?

RV: That would be nice, but it is not pre-programmed by Mother Nature. If we want to do that we need to construct it culturally.

RM: Yes I agree. It is interesting that you mention that because one of the things that underlies the Bhutanese conception of happiness is the fact that it is informed by Buddhism as a cultural system. Central to this is a vision of happiness that sees it as moving from a highly personalised form outwards to a form in which happiness is gained through contributing to the happiness of others. In the Buddhist framework, happiness is seen as progressing from dukkha which is a highly personalised and unstable form towards a deeper, more stable and collaborative form - sukkha where personal thriving becomes a by-product of one's active attempts to improve the happiness of others.

RV: I would say in my terms that this is all about your perceived meaning. It is about your experienced utility and not your real utility. It is only how useful you think you are. But I come back to my first point that I do not think your usefulness to others is a primary source of happiness. It is something that many people would like and you can say that happy people are more open to the world - that is a fact. Unhappy people tend to be self-centred, defensive and more closed to the world. Happy people feel psychologically safer and so they get more involved. They get more informed about universal problems and they participate more in movements to improve the world but I would not call that a source of happiness. I would say they are doing good things certainly but in my strict definition, happiness is about the subjective enjoyment of one's own life.

RM: That is a point that becomes particularly germane at the moment with the somewhat parlous state of the world's

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environment for one thing and I know that there is a good deal of public concern which may lead some people towards grabbing at happiness as a valuable outcome in the belief that it would be better for us collectively than simply focussing on economic expansion. A great deal of the underpinning of such hope lies in the feeling that happiness does necessarily involve us in considering others' happiness on a more equal basis to our own. If we think about that in the context of the correlates of happiness, I wonder if I could ask you to briefly outline what else is known in the empirical literature about the other psychological states that are significantly correlated with happiness and which might validate that hopefulness.

RV: Yes. There is a lot of research now if you want to know what the correlates of happiness are. Longitudinal and experimental studies typically show that if people are happy, they tend to be more active, they tend to be more open, they tend to be more creative. They are also more daring and take more risks and are more in the world. As a result they develop more resources within themselves and develop more friendships and social networks. So, in this sense, happiness works out well. At the national levels, we can see several similar outcomes. We know that happy countries are more democratic – you could conclude this one way and say that democracy makes people happy or the other way which is also true, that happy people vote more and engage more with the political process. They are also more tolerant which tends to make happy societies more free. That means for example, a greater acceptance of religious minorities and gay people.

You can also reason in a similar way about the relations between national wealth and happiness. Typically, we say that wealth generates happiness but you can also say that happy, active people engage more effectively in work and even continue when they have sufficient incomes. One of my theories is that life is becoming more like sports in modern societies where people find forms of work that produce

challenge and meaning. This helps create wealth, so money is a consequence of the fact that people are happy, active and working.

RM: The relationship between economics and happiness has been addressed in some depth of late and I would be right in saying, would I not, that even though there is a relationship both at the individual and the collective level, it is far from being a perfect relationship. I am wondering how you feel about what a number of people have been talking about recently which is that economic wealth and material satisfactions are useful in terms of creating happiness up to a certain level but that after individuals and countries have got most of their basic material needs taken care of, other non-material needs become more important as a source of increasing happiness. The quality of intimate social relationships is particularly spoken of in this context.

RV: Well the levelling off is most clear at the individual level and we see in rich countries evidence that if you are pretty rich then it makes very little difference to become very, very rich. At the national level it is not so clear. We know that there is a strong relationship between income per head and happiness in nations but we do not know why. Is it because of the material goods and services that we can buy, or is it a counter-fact, maybe the fact that in the current economy we have more division of labour and the creation of more niches where more people find a happy fit? Or is it in the side-effect of the growing interdependence that modernisation tends to emphasise? It is also possible that it is not so much the cars and the washing machines that make us happy but the fact that as a function of economic organisation, we can afford better housing, better schooling and better health care. It is impossible to disentangle these things and test them empirically.

RM: Given the enormous complexity of these variables – the effects of democracy or good health care and so on, it may be

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very difficult to tease them apart in a causal sense, but I get the impression that it is going to become increasingly important to address some of those issues and particularly our dependence on economic expansion as a route to happiness. The major reason for that is the pressure that is building across a range of basic resources in a limited biological system. We have for example mid-range predictions that we may have 9.5 billion people by the year 2050 – a huge increase in pressure on the resources we have. We currently have spikes in food prices, in fuel prices, in the cost of credit and a number of critical resources are coming under greater pressure. I wonder then what Western empirical studies of happiness have to contribute to our managing that situation as we move into the future, particularly in terms of moving us towards more sustainable outcomes where we might seek our happiness in less destructive ways.

RV: Well, I think that the application in the Happy Planet Index is a very sensible one because it shows which societies succeed in creating happiness without squandering the earth. So, it shows us the extent to which this is possible. For the next versions of the Happy Planet Index we will have available new data that comes from the Gallup World Poll so we can have a good look at which societies are the most happiness efficient.

RM: That in a sense brings the personal and the social together, doesn't it, in terms of the need to balance those concerns because as a measure of efficiency, the Happy Planet Index basically shows which nations are highly inefficient in terms of producing happiness gains. Many modern societies seem to use masses of resources for little, if any, gains in the collective level of happiness. I wonder how that can be negotiated without raising issues of ethics around happiness itself. When I look at the tables of happy nations, I see at the top many of the most resource intensive nations and I wonder from the perspective of the next generation, how much of that happiness can be seen as being legitimate. Is

this happiness actually being created in responsible ways, ways that look to the bigger picture and the longer term and exercise some self-restraint in response? I do not mean by this that perhaps people should be searching for less happiness but perhaps for a more responsible way of achieving that happiness.

RV: I think that ethically utilitarianism can solve this because what is moral is what creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number - the next generation included. Now, of course, there are real constraints on how far we can estimate the preferences of the next generations but we can rest assured that if we use all the oil it will be bad for our children. If we consider the needs of the next couple of generations, happily there is a good, ethical underpinning for controls over energy and resource use.

RM: Do you think that along with that some form of education or facilitation is necessary if significant numbers of people are to begin finding happiness in less destructive ways?

RV: Yes, and adverts are a good example. The material lifestyle is dominant in advertising and there should be counter-forces to show that there are other ways to find happiness that are available as well.

RM: Do you think it would also be wise from a happiness perspective to redistribute some of our wealth towards those who are the least happy and particularly the very poorest because after all, one thousand Euros has only so much potential to increase the happiness of someone already rich in a rich country, but huge potential to increase happiness for people in poor communities. Do you think that there is an underpinning in the utilitarian perspective that would suggest this would be a worthwhile thing to do – both from an ethical perspective and from a happiness perspective?

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RV: Certainly. If you follow utilitarian morality the answer is yes. But there are also perspectives that would say if you give money, you only create dependence, or if you give money, populations will multiply too much. And there are also several reality constraints. Still I do think that when people are really in need, we should help them. Generally that is accepted but it is not so generally practiced. Development support is, of course, linked to national policies. So, our morality is not quite as good as we would like it to be.

RM: It is interesting when we look at this in terms of utility because this is the ethical model that also underpins modern economics....

RV: But wait, modern economics involves a utilitarian theory of action but not utilitarian morality. I think that the utilitarian theory of motivation – that we only act in our self-interest—is wrong. Utilitarian theory as an ethical theory means that we should give priority to what brings happiness for the greatest number of people.

RM: Yet the way that happiness is measured in an empirical sense is highly self-referencing, isn't it? In the typical happiness survey the respondent is asked a question along the lines of "All things considered, how happy are you with your life at the moment?" This seems to bring a focus on the self and the self's outcomes alone and I wonder whether this has a knock-on effect in removing the focus from the broader good that utilitarianism would in theory encourage us to adopt. Do you think that by constructing an approach to happiness that encourages us to self-refer and only to self-refer, that we run a danger of diminishing the ethical focus we should have on others and their happiness?

RV: I do not think so. I think that if you broadened the concept to include groups you would run the risk that people would be used by these groups. What is typical of collectivist societies is that it is the group that becomes most important

and individual happiness comes second to that. In these circumstances, people may not develop a very strong sense of individuality or personalised input. So, I think that if we are to make this world a better place, we should depart from underdevelopment. Individualists are not interested only in their clan but in universal values. An individualist conception of happiness is how much I love my life and on that basis, individualists are able to imagine that there are other people who can be recognised as real persons, and that they can be more or less happy. I think that we should have a clear understanding otherwise we cannot really communicate. So, we should keep a difference between the questions of how happy we are, how well our society is doing and how much we are involved in our society. These are different things that we need to keep conceptually apart.

RM: I take it that a good part of what you are just saying has to do with freedom, insofar as the individual's happiness as you speak of it, is a happiness that freely chooses to identify with others in a universal sense as opposed to a collectivist system in which you have a false commitment to others that is effectively forced upon people instead of being more freely adopted.

RV: Yes, that is right.

RM: I am wondering as we talk about collectives and how we come to identify them and see them as equal to ourselves how much the fundamental nature of the nation state becomes a problem as we look at the global situation at the moment. As you know we rank nations in terms of relative amounts of happiness and no doubt some can come to view this as a competitive thing – our nation has slipped from number 3 to 5, how can we rise above others, etc. Involved in that is a constant tendency to always look ahead at the pack and not attend to those who are less happy. I wonder then how much notions of Gross National Happiness, the collective happiness of single nation, are constructive in aiding us coming together

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as a responsible global society who inclusively think of the happiness of the least advanced and not only the most advanced. Does the emphasis on national happiness tend to constrain or facilitate the search for a more extensive human happiness?

RV: It can work in one of two ways. One way is to see that there is always a leader, which at the moment is Denmark - followed very closely by Switzerland as measured in happy life years. They are happier than we are in Holland so they must be doing something better. Maybe, what has been successful in Denmark might be successful in the Netherlands. So, I think comparisons can work in this way. But I also think that if you look at the bottom, at a country like Zimbabwe, you find significantly fewer happy life years and we can begin to understand the differences by looking at what is missing, maybe schooling, health and identify what might help. People are used to pictures of starving children, but even in the poorest countries there is increasing attention to quality of life. In Tanzania, you can read about it in the newspapers for example, along with questions of what makes a good society. In a place like Zimbabwe, which is a failed state, there is nothing we can do about happiness levels. If the problem were hunger or an epidemic or a natural disaster we could do something about it but in this case we cannot.

RM: In the teaching I do, whenever we look at issues that are problematic in the world, when we look at hunger for example and realise that there are several dozen nations with around a third of children malnourished, people often show a good deal of resistance in terms of acknowledging it. But given you are in a classroom situation and there is academic control over certain outcomes that are of value to them, you can get people to address those issues. But I know that in broader society for a significant sector, the reaction to such issues is often one of avoidance. In part, this is because it makes us unhappy to recognise the misery that others exist in. So, I wonder how much of our contemporary happiness is a

function of systematically avoiding some of the grand inequalities and problems we are currently facing.

RV: I am not sure that it affects our happiness very much. It is like we are talking about with the meaning of life where some of these thinking things do not really impact us very much. My response would be that I don't think people buy happiness by denial, they may avoid some discomfort but I don't think that acknowledgement will really deprive them of happiness.

RM: When I look at the types of inefficiencies involved in producing happiness, I feel that perhaps we should be a little less happy with the way the world is at the moment in order to feel the need to change it.

RV: But you can be happy with your own life while also acknowledging that life is not perfect. I think we can look at, say the young radicals of the 1960s - many people saw them as being depressed, having Freudian problems and so forth but investigations of their mental health showed they were basically happy but open to the problems of the world. So, these things can apparently go together. On a bigger scale you see it in contemporary society where many people are happy but feel that things in general are not going so well.

RM: Yes indeed. Do you think there is enough being done to flesh out these dimensions of happiness – say to differentiate between the individual's satisfaction with their own life and their levels of happiness about where the world is going or how the environment is doing?

RV: We can look at these as separate pieces of information. How well your life is going is how well you feel. That is not the case with satisfaction with income because income satisfaction is typically based on social comparison. How do we feel about the happiness of society at large? -well the further others are from our lives the more we depends on

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mediated information. Typically we are informed about the state of the world by the media, by politicians through the media or by social science. Here bad news tends to be good news and good news is no news. So, we have a great deal of information on what is wrong in society. This may be good in the sense that we become very problem focused and so, there is constant reform and change. But it may also mean that though we are improving as society, people continue to think of themselves as bad.

People know how happy they are as they can infer this from their own feelings, but they don't know how happy you are or how happy anybody else is. So it starts to be based on hearsay.

RM: In terms of politicians and their responsibilities, one of the critical aspects of GNH as you know is good governance. What do you think the most important things that politicians could do in terms of specific policies if they genuinely wanted to increase the happiness of nations?

RV: I think it is a very difficult task. The change to modernisation has been problematic in most societies including our own. So you could say that is almost impossible to develop without problems. I hope that in Bhutan, they do it gradually. Essentially I see the mantra of Gross National Happiness as a good way to avoid debt. Bhutan can change but it does not have to be too much. In the end, I believe that people live better in modern societies than in agrarian societies like Bhutan-especially where health outcomes are concerned. During our evolution we spent 95% of our time as hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherer societies produce about thirty happy life years but in agrarian societies people live longer and are healthier. And in industrial societies there are not only more life years, but also more happy life years. So, Bhutan is still the type of society that is not at its happiest but moving towards a more modern society. In one or two generations, it will have all the fruits of modern society.

RM: And no doubt many of its frustrations. In concluding this, I wonder if I could ask you whether you see the present focus on happiness, as opposed to simple economic growth, as a significant step forward in our evolution or progress.

RV: Yes, at least for our species. I do not know what your feelings are about other organisms, but when I take into account the next generation of humans, an increasing attention to happiness is a positive thing.