



Life, Liberty, and the Treadmill

By David Ramsay Steele

Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. New York: Random House, 2003.

Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

Raymond Angelo Belliotti, *Happiness Is Overrated*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

I can remember the day I learned to ride a bike. I must have been about eight. In those days, at least in that part of England, there were no such things as training wheels and the smallest bicycles had twenty-four-inch wheels. I just kept pushing, wobbling, and gliding along, and suddenly, I could do it!

The sun came out from behind a cloud and the entire world shone with warm and radiant delight. Every day for the next few weeks, I spent hours just cycling up and down or round and round in circles. Could there be anything to beat this?

Six months later I was still pleased I could ride a bike, and I still got some direct fulfillment out of this activity, but I would not have dreamed of riding around just for the sheer pleasure of it—not for more than a couple of minutes, anyhow. Cycling had become about ninety-eight percent instrumental, a way to get from one place to another, and

only about two percent intrinsically gratifying.

This well-known phenomenon, called “adaptation,” is key to the thinking of psychologists who maintain that our level of happiness is a “set point” to which we always tend to return, largely irrespective of our circumstances. Typically, we look forward to some consummation, and when we achieve it, we’re pleased. From that moment on, the glow of gratification dims like dying embers. It’s essential to being human that the joy resulting from the attainment of any goal starts to fade as soon as it begins.

Most people believe that if their real income were to be suddenly doubled, they would feel a lot happier. And so they would, for the first week or two. After that, the happiness would have perceptibly diminished, and six months or a year later, they would be only slightly happier than before their financial improvement.

And it works in reverse. People who go blind or deaf, lose their limbs, or become paralyzed are usually acutely miserable for a month or two, after which the gloom begins to evaporate. A year later, they are approximately as happy as they were before they were afflicted. Research indicates that people with extreme physical disabilities are, on average, slightly happier than the general population.

We were made by millions of years of natural selection of genes. From a gene’s point of view, the happiness of the organism which temporarily houses the gene is not an end in itself. The gene ‘wants’ its host organism to reproduce,

which entails surviving for at least a while, the longer the better if repeated reproduction is possible.

It's advantageous for pleasure to be associated with successful action, and pleasure often tends to promote happiness. But pleasure too intense and too prolonged might be detrimental. If we now have something we have wanted, and we know we can keep it, what would be the point of perpetual euphoria? It could distract us from the immediate tasks of survival and reproduction. Continual misery would be pointlessly distracting too. It's entirely authentic, as well as poignant, that the slave-labor-camp inmate protagonist at the end of the harrowing *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, reflects that, all in all, this has been a pretty good day.

Is Progress Pointless?

All this is straightforward, and not even controversial, but it does raise an interesting issue with political implications. Liberals, and especially that subspecies of liberals known as libertarians, tend to accept as a premiss that *it's good for people to be able to get what they want*. If asked why, we are apt to say, with the framers of the United States Constitution, that only then can people pursue happiness. This can easily lead to the reasoning: *it's good for people to be able to get what they want, because if they get what they want, they will be happier than if they don't*.

But what if having more of what we want does not ultimately add to our happiness? What if the pursuit of happiness is a "hedonic treadmill," as some psychologists have contended? In recent years a lot of research has gone into finding out how happy people actually are and what makes them happy or unhappy. Some of the conclusions of this research suggest that increasing real

incomes—increasing ability to get what we want—does not make us very much happier, once we have passed a certain minimum level of comfort. What, then, is the point of further industrial and technological progress?

This question has been raised in a number of recent writings, most influentially in Lane's book, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*.¹ Easterbrook's work is a more popular treatment of the same issues. Both Lane and Easterbrook start from the finding that Americans in the 1990s were no more happy, and perhaps even a bit less happy, than they were in the 1950s, although real incomes had way more than doubled in that period. Lane refers to the "paradox of apparently growing unhappiness in the midst of increasing plenty" (Lane, p. 4), a theme echoed in Easterbrook's more popular work. Contrast this with the 1930s complaint of 'poverty in the midst of plenty'. It's hard to uncover real old-fashioned poverty in twenty-first-century America, but it's easy to find any amount of dissatisfaction.

Ascertaining how happy people are is mainly a question of asking them, and it may be doubted whether this is always perfectly reliable. However, the results of numerous questionnaires, painstakingly designed and scrupulously interpreted, exhibit a consistency, a stability, and a clear pattern which suggest that people's happiness self-ratings are generally quite accurate.² Various attempts have been made to check the results (for instance by comparing individuals' self-ratings with

¹ Robert E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

² Ed Diener and Eunkook M. Suh, eds., *Culture and Subjective Well-Being* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 5–7.

the ratings of those individuals by people who know them) and they look quite solid. I'm convinced that the data emerging from these studies do indeed measure happiness (or SWB, subjective well-being, as it's known in the trade).

If these studies of SWB are at all accurate, then there has been little, if any, gain in happiness in advanced industrial countries of the West over the past half-century. In the United States, people are no happier than they were in the 1950s. To be more precise, the percentage reporting themselves as just "happy" is close to identical in the 1990s and the 1950s, while the percentage in the "very happy" category has fallen slightly, and the percentage classified as "depressed" has increased.

The Specter of Futility

Easterbrook starts out with impressive boldness and clarity. He makes two assertions: 1. that in almost every measurable respect, life for nearly everyone in the western world has been getting better at a spectacular rate, and 2. that people's happiness or satisfaction with their lives has stayed about the same or slightly diminished. Both of these claims are well documented by an accumulation of interesting and often surprising facts, which Easterbrook presents skillfully and entertainingly.

Easterbrook poses his "paradox" bravely, but as his argument proceeds, its thrust falters. Just over halfway through the book, Easterbrook switches to throwing out a number of conjectures about influences which might account for the loss of happiness, along with his policy solutions. He voices the usual leftist gripes about consumer capitalism, though the relation of these to the findings of SWB research may be tenuous. He is furious at greedy CEOs, and favors raising the minimum wage, imposing universal health insurance, and increasing foreign aid. These chapters are still well-written and they contain nuggets of fascinating information, but they do not

resolve or even seriously confront the ominous "paradox" he has laid out at the beginning.

Easterbrook, like Lane, makes the most of the startling juxtaposition of declining happiness and increasing affluence, and doesn't want to spoil a good story by drawing too much attention to considerations which might blur the stark drama of this incongruous outcome. Neither author gives the reader even an outline of the basic facts from which a few items have been plucked for close attention.

Lane actually volunteers that he does not place any reliance on the declining SWB trend, and wouldn't be surprised to see it reversed.³ This admission contrasts strangely with the strident rhetoric of *decline* and *loss* in Lane's book. Granted, the fact that the amount of happiness has been roughly the same and has not increased, while incomes have made spectacular gains, is notable enough to be well worth discussing. But if we take *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* and substitute some word like 'conservation' or 'stability' for 'loss', it would not have the requisite quality of "man bites dog." The same applies to Easterbrook's subtitle, *How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. "How Life Gets Better While People Feel about the Same" would be more defensible, and still quite intriguing, though less of a shock.

³ "My argument does not depend on the evidence of growing unhappiness in the postwar period (which may be a mere blip in a long-term curve)" (Lane, p. 5). The rhetoric of "growing unhappiness and depression" is heavy throughout his book, but if his argument really does not depend on this, it must depend on the mere fact that there is some remaining unhappiness in "market democracies," even though this is less than in any other kind of social order.

Most People Are Happy!

By far the biggest and most imposing fact to emerge from the empirical studies of SWB is that a substantial majority of people in advanced capitalist cultures are happy.⁴ In Easterbrook's and Lane's books, and a number of other writings, there is so much emphasis on the disquieting fact that the amount of happiness has not increased, and may even have slightly declined, that one is apt to lose sight of the mundane fact that *over eighty percent of people in advanced industrial countries rate themselves as more happy than unhappy.*⁵

This is worth emphasizing because it is so frequently denied. Down the centuries, innumerable sages have opined that most people were not happy. In his 1930 classic, *The Conquest of Happiness*, Bertrand Russell asserted that very few people were happy, a fact he inferred from the expressions on the faces of people in the street.⁶ From all that we know now, it seems inescapable that the majority of the readers of that

⁴ A good source for recent findings in this area is Diener and Suh, which I draw upon freely in the text. Useful background for some of the psychological and methodological issues is Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Norbert Schwartz, eds., *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

⁵ Eighty-five percent of people in the U.S. are above the neutral mid-point between unhappiness and happiness (Ed Diener and C. Diener, "Most People Are Happy," *Psychological Science* 7 [1996]), and the corresponding number for several European countries is higher.

⁶ Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: Liveright, 1930), p. 13.

book were happier than its author, at least in the 1930s. (In his nineties, convinced that the world was overwhelmingly likely to be destroyed in a thermonuclear conflagration, Russell became extremely happy, illustrating both adaptation to a set point regardless of perceived circumstances and the common pattern of individuals growing steadily more serene with age.)

Thomas Szasz has famously defined happiness as "An imaginary condition, formerly attributed by the living to the dead, now usually attributed by adults to children and by children to adults."⁷ Most readers take this as an amusing overstatement of a truism. There prevails a strong tradition for intellectuals to believe that ordinary people are incapable of happiness, or at least of 'true' happiness, as well as being wretched and not even truly alive.⁸

Facts about Happiness

Another downplayed fact is that *people in rich countries are, on average, much happier than people in poor countries.*⁹ How many readers of Lane or Easterbrook come away with a clear grasp of the fact that "market democracies" are way more conducive to happiness than any other known form of society?

Surely it is in the light of these huge general findings—that the great majority of people are happy and that people in developed countries are happier than

⁷ *The Untamed Tongue* (Chicago: Open Court, 1990), p. 139, though this *bon mot* had appeared in print earlier.

⁸ See John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 2002).

⁹ Diener and Oishi, in Diener and Suh, pp. 198–201.

people in less developed countries—that we ought to look at the extremely interesting possibility that aggregate happiness in the United States may have declined slightly.

Here are some other assorted facts to emerge from the SWB research.

Older people have higher SWB than younger people,¹⁰ a fact all the more significant because it is an aggregate outcome which presumably has to include gains in SWB more than enough to compensate for some cases of acute misery caused by terminal disease. Men are almost exactly as happy as women, though women experience more extremes of happiness and misery (one of the exceptional cases where women go to extremes more than men do). American blacks are just about as happy as American whites.

Consistently cohabiting married people of either sex are happier than the divorced, the separated, or the never-married. Analysis of the data suggests that the causality runs in both directions: being married makes you more happy and being happy makes you get and stay married. Churchgoers are slightly happier than non-churchgoers. Ethnic diversity within a country is not associated with higher or lower happiness.

The happiest populations in the world are the people in Scandinavia, Netherlands, and Switzerland, though the United States and most other wealthy countries are not very far behind. >From all that we know, it seems a reasonable surmise that the present populations of Scandinavia, Netherlands, and Switzerland are very close to being, and may actually be, the happiest sizeable populations that have ever existed in human history, and not very distant from the maximum aggregate happiness attainable in any large population, absent some future biological or other revolutionary breakthrough.

¹⁰ According to some studies, older people are slightly less “happy” but more “satisfied with life.” SWB usually averages different entities like this. I skip over these distinctions here.

Both within and between countries, high-income people are happier than low-income people, though the advantage becomes very slight above a quite modest level of income. Although “more money” is definitely associated with high SWB, individuals preoccupied with money-making tend to be less happy than those who seek fulfillment in other ways. Gregarious, extraverted types are happier than loners.

There are wide variations in SWB among different populations, independent of income. Some very poor tribal cultures, such as the Maasai of East Africa, are not far below the affluent world in SWB, while within that affluent world there are very sizeable differences between countries. The populations of Japan, Italy, and France are distinctly less happy than their level of income would predict. People in the Irish Republic have been consistently happier than people in Germany, which until recently had twice Ireland’s real income per head. (Rapid growth in Ireland and slow growth in Germany have been closing the gap in incomes.) Adjusting for income, Hispanic people are the happiest broad segment of world population, while Asians are the least happy.

Within countries, very low-income people are on average decidedly less happy than people of modest income or above, but high-income people are not tremendously happier than middling-income people. The very rich are indeed happier than the average for the population, but only by a small margin. A common prejudice among intellectuals is that people generally want higher incomes primarily because this will improve their status relative to other people. While many writers are so convinced of this theory that they often assert it in blithe disregard of the facts, the SWB research does not afford the theory much comfort. For instance, poor people in rich countries are decidedly

happier than poor people in poor countries. In fact, living in a rich or poor country has a stronger effect on your SWB than being rich or poor yourself. “Inequality” does not reduce happiness (Diener and Oishi, in Diener and Suh, pp. 205–07).¹¹ Detailed studies show that, for example, people of moderate income are equally happy whether they live in predominantly poor or predominantly affluent areas.

A view compatible with the data is that if you’re poor, more income will enable you to become appreciably happier, but once a quite modest level of income has been achieved, further increases will bring very little greater happiness. (Money does buy happiness, but for most people in advanced industrial cultures, it takes a lot of money to buy a tiny increment of happiness.) This general result could be explained in a number of different ways. For instance, it could be that all the components of real income begin to plateau, as regards conduciveness to happiness, once a modest income level has been reached. Or it could be that one or two key components of income do all the heavy lifting with respect to happiness, and once consumption of these goods has reached a certain point, any further income increments go to goods which don’t add to long-run happiness. As with so many puzzles in this area, empirical work may soon provide a definitive answer.

Liberty Promotes Happiness

It used to be thought that people in “individualist” cultures are happier than people in “collectivist” cultures, but one major study has failed to confirm this

¹¹ The data actually show that there is more happiness with greater inequality. Diener and Oishi decide to abstain from any causal inference on this point.

and it is now in doubt, though most SWB theorists still seem to hold to it. Individualism and collectivism in this context do not relate to the system of industrial ownership or administration. They are terms employed by sociologists and social psychologists to distinguish cultures which value individual self-realization from those which lay more emphasis on group solidarity. Thus, Japan and South Korea are classed as collectivist cultures.

At any rate, people in individualist countries, contrary to the folklore of intellectuals, don’t appear to be any less happy than people in collectivist countries (though it could reasonably be contended that people in collectivist cultures would be more inhibited about highlighting their own feelings, and would therefore tend to have a downward bias in rating their own happiness).

Freedom generates happiness. Veenhoven classified three kinds of freedom: economic, political, and private. He found that all are correlated with happiness, but economic freedom much more so than political or private freedom. Veenhoven candidly remarks: “This is a pleasant surprise for the right-wing free market lobby but a disappointment for liberals like me” (Veenhoven, in Diener and Suh, p. 276). Economic freedom does not merely contribute to happiness by raising incomes; controlling for income, economic freedom still clearly promotes SWB, a fact which seems to puzzle Veenhoven. To most people economic freedom is the very substance of their lives as creative, purposive beings. Compared to the option of living and working where you please, at whatever occupation you wish, doing what you choose to do without permission from anyone on high, the liberty to vote in elections or to pass out leaflets on the street is, for the great majority of folks, rather a minor consideration, especially in poor countries.

As Veenhoven suggests, the strong positive association between freedom, especially “economic” freedom, and happiness will very likely turn out to be even stronger, because his results are heavily affected by the temporary situation in post-Communist countries, which possess some freshly-won freedoms but are currently undergoing a historically brief, acutely painful industrial transition.

Veenhoven’s results refute the familiar conservative contention that freedom reduces human well-being by atomizing individuals, by inducing anomie, by imposing a crushing burden of responsibilities, by removing the security of fixed status, or by offering a vertiginous variety of choices. The findings also refute the related view that people cannot benefit from freedom until they have been sufficiently prepared. Rich or poor, ready or not, people feel better if they are more free. They do not suffer by being cut loose from traditional folkways or from the kindly direction of their betters, or if they do, they somehow find more than adequate consolations for these losses.

Some popular legends have become casualties of the SWB research. The “midlife crisis” is a myth: on average, emotional crises get steadily fewer and less severe as people grow older, and there is no blip at midlife. Neither is there any such thing as an “empty nest syndrome”: middle-aged people whose children have moved out are in fact happier than those whose children stick around.

Happiness and Economic Growth

The fact that joy of attainment always fades suggests that happiness may be pursued by keeping a succession of new attainments coming, just as the fact that

every note sounded on a piano declines in volume very rapidly from its inception does not prevent a piano piece maintaining a high, or even an increasing, level of volume. This would mean that at any time some attainments were close to their maximum in terms of contributing to subjective well-being.

That line of thought might suggest that the rate of growth of income may be more relevant than the current amount of income. Some such notion may have influenced the great proponent of economic growth, Adam Smith, who evidently held that higher incomes do not make people happier, but that fast-growing incomes do. Before reading any of the recent research I would have bet on this Smithian view, but the facts now appear to be exactly contrary: there is a high correlation between absolute level of real income and happiness, and no significant correlation between rate of economic growth and happiness (Diener and Oishi, in Diener and Suh, p. 203).

All the same, I still feel that something like this ought to be true. Perhaps, for instance, people in countries with positive GDP growth are happier than those in countries with zero growth, who are in turn happier than those experiencing negative growth. Few countries have experienced zero or negative growth over the last few decades and SWB research has not made a special effort to focus on these places, so there is presumably insufficient data to test this. But thanks to the valiant efforts of helpful souls like Hugo Chavez, we will not run out of examples of countries with falling incomes, and perhaps this theory can be tested before long.

In Defense of Progress

What are the implications of SWB research for those who favor progress, and in particular for libertarians? I

believe that the liberal, progressive, and libertarian commitment to advancing technology and indefinitely expanding material prosperity can be defended against the new attack based on the SWB findings.

My defense is in two parts. First, I claim that these findings, properly understood, are less disturbing for advocates of progress than the popularizers of SWB research have reported. Second, I point out that happiness, though important, isn't everything, and I maintain that modern, high-income, capitalist cultures score higher on most of the other salient values than do traditional or pre-industrial cultures.

We should separate two theses: 1. that for comparatively high-income people the level of happiness has remained approximately the same while real incomes have expanded enormously, and 2. that there has been a slight, long-term decline in happiness in the more affluent countries. While the first of these now seems to be strongly indicated by the data, the second looks dubious.

Most of the evidence for the decline in happiness over the past half-century comes from the rising incidence of "depression". This invites the obvious response that what fifty years ago was called being down in the mouth is now called "depression," "depressive disorder," "unipolar depression," or, forsooth, "clinical depression." Easterbrook dismisses such objections as follows (p. 165):

though the rising rate of Western depression may relate to some extent to better diagnosis and the loss of taboo associated with this topic . . . a tenfold increase in two generations is far too great to be an artifact of improved diagnosis alone.

This is the reader's first introduction to the statistic of a "tenfold increase" in depression (no source is cited for the

factor of ten). Easterbrook later discloses (p. 181) that "tenfold" is the upper limit of a range of controversial estimates, the lower limit being twofold (or, as he puts it, "on the order of two- or threefold"). Twofold still sounds like a lot, but the likelihood that an increase is due to "better diagnosis" (meaning greater readiness to apply the label "depressed") has little to do with the size of the increase as a multiple of the starting point and much to do with the size of the increase as a proportion of the total population. This, of course, is small.

It's often claimed that twenty-five percent of Americans undergo an experience of depression at least once in their lives, and that six or seven percent have experienced depression at least once in the past year. These numbers can't easily be compared with the statistics for SWB, which tend to focus on how people are feeling at one point in time or how they feel on average over a period of time. We typically don't ask people whether they have been blissfully happy at least once in their lives or at any time during the past year. And someone who currently feels fine but at one time felt sad and fell into the clutches of the mental health profession may now be classified as depressed and "managing" his depression.

Where such small shifts in numbers are at issue, it's remarkable that so little attention is paid to two great demographic trends: aging of the population and immigration. How many of those labelled "depressed" are over eighty?¹²

Millions of people from the less developed countries have come to the United States recently, and have

¹² Both average overall life satisfaction and the small percentage of "depressed" increase with age.

prodigiously amplified both their real incomes and their SWB. Still, they are genetically and culturally products of countries with much lower levels of SWB than the United States (all the data point to a major genetic component in the determination of SWB). These folks might well be immensely happier than they would have been in Guatemala or Cambodia, and still embody a decline in United States SWB. Improvement could thus possibly masquerade as deterioration.

Another element usually undiscussed in this connection is the enormous growth in the ingestion of mood-modifying substances like Prozac. At first blush, we might suppose that this collective swilling of antidepressants and tranquilizers must be counteracting a powerful tendency for misery to increase. I am more inclined to the view that these drugs, on average and in the long run, do not increase happiness, or more precisely, that substituting these newfangled concoctions for the tried and trusted intake of good old alcohol, good old tobacco, good old cocaine, and good old opiates does not increase happiness. The bigoted “Just Say No” zealots of our day strive to replace drugs which give people enjoyment with drugs which deaden people’s sensibilities, and regrettably they have had some success.

I discount the suggestion that there’s an inherent tendency for happiness to decline in industrially advanced countries. But I think it has to be admitted that the level of happiness in these countries is either roughly stationary or climbing very, very slowly. This does raise the question of whether further increases in incomes can be defended as additions to human wellbeing.

It won’t be a practical issue for at least another couple of centuries. There are still hundreds of millions of people in the

world who are desperately poor, and whose SWB will be greatly augmented by raising their incomes. It’s not a feasible option to increase the incomes of the poor while holding the incomes of the well-off at a constant level: hold down the rich and you ineluctably hold down the poor. It’s not possible to have economic growth in the less developed countries while halting it in the more developed.

Since modern, affluent, high-tech lifestyles are demonstrably highly conducive to human happiness, to oppose further gains in material prosperity from free trade and globalization is objectively to favor the perpetuation of wretched misery for hundreds of millions of poor people. Extrapolating from the SWB data, the conversion of the entire Third World to first-world standards will generate an enormous gain in happiness.

At a more general level, it’s fallacious to conclude that because increases in already high incomes yield only very slight benefits for SWB, therefore only those very slight gains would be lost if we froze incomes at some arbitrarily high level (supposing this were feasible). Humans are plan-pursuing entities who achieve fulfillment from striving to improve their condition. What happiness they have now is an attribute of this broad purposive framework. If this framework were to be destroyed, there could be a major reduction in happiness. That this might be so is corroborated by Veenhoven’s demonstration that economic freedom confers happiness independently of its income-raising role. On this argument, then, the very existence of free-market capitalism would in itself add substantially to long-term happiness, and it’s just an inseparable concomitant that free-market capitalism indefinitely increases median real income, which does not add very much to long-term happiness for the already well off. In short, even if *having*

more of what we want does not add greatly to our happiness, *being able to pursue* more of what we want may still add greatly to our happiness.

What certainly has to be acknowledged is that it is false to suppose that every increase in GDP represents an actual gain in the joyfulness of daily experience, or that in some future high-income world every quotidian moment will be lived in a perpetual state of bliss. But I do not know of anyone who has ever held this view.¹³ Probably those who came closest to it were Marxists around 1890.

Happiness Isn't Everything

The second part of my defense is to point out that happiness, though important, isn't everything. As many have insisted, happiness is not the *summum bonum* (all-important good). Other values are vital in setting our requirements for a good social order.

Easterbrook repeatedly states that it is "far better" to have high incomes even if these are not matched by high SWB. He even says that it's better to have high rates of depression than to have a world so poor that people are so caught up with survival they have no time to become depressed (Easterbrook, p. 165). I agree, and I applaud him for saying it, but he does not make explicit the values which may legitimately compete with happiness.

If you could convince me that a return to a world of recurring plagues and famines, children without shoes, their ribs poking out because of malnutrition, most of them dead before the age of ten,

¹³ "Utility" in economic theory is not happiness. It is an abstract concept defined as want-satisfaction. This is not unconnected with happiness but shouldn't be identified with it.

and the average woman requiring to give birth about nine times to maintain a stable population, would somehow leave people no less happy than today, I would still feel that you had not made a case for returning to that pre-industrial world. Dignity, charity, intelligence, and exploration of new opportunities are values which, though of course most often conducive to happiness, are in principle independent of happiness and may occasionally clash with it. The realization of these values is far more in evidence in today's Europe and America than in medieval Europe, medieval Islam, or the Third World.

Although happiness is extremely valuable, it is not the only thing of value, nor can it measure the value of every other thing. The arguments here are as familiar as they are sound. A cheap and infallibly happiness-inducing drug, added to the water supply, would not make us lose all interest in justice or human betterment. Most people would not choose to undergo a kind of brain damage which would make them simultaneously a lot happier and a lot more stupid. "Ignorance is bliss" can be uttered with many shades of emotional tone, but never admiringly. As Nozick's argument from the "experience machine" brings out,¹⁴ most people do not want a happy life in a state of comprehensive delusion. A survey has found that less than one percent of people would choose to be plugged in to an experience machine.

Possibly neither "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" nor "The Bucket Rider" could have been written by a happy person—at any rate they weren't—yet the creative lives of John Keats and Franz Kafka are enviably worthy. It can even plausibly be argued that a certain modicum of

¹⁴ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42–43.

suffering is essential to the best possible life, though I would add that one can get too much of a good thing, and I have it on the best authority that my suffering quota has been filled.

Happiness: The Final Frontier

How much further can we go in raising SWB in affluent modern cultures? My view is that people do have a set point which is most often on the happy side of neutral, but which varies individually, and which is largely but not entirely genetic. Once certain sources of acute misery are removed, which they generally are by industrial development, the set point rules. Thus, although I see abundant opportunities for augmenting happiness, I don't see the scope for anything which could again repeat the staggering achievement of free-market capitalism in raising SWB to its present high levels.

Modern society is a marketplace for lifestyles, religions, psychotherapies, and interpersonal arrangements. There's a continual process of discovery by trial and error, which may lead over a long period of time to an approach to the optimum in these areas, yielding some gains in happiness.

In the area of religion, I see much hope in replacing the Abrahamic creeds (which, in one of their recent manifestations, can make millions of people think it inspiring to watch a movie of a man being tortured to death for a couple of hours) with a new synthesis of Buddhism and other religions of enlightenment.¹⁵ The Abrahamic religions, aside from being composed mainly of untruths about nonexistent entities, are not well-suited

to a culture of real abundance, security, and glorious opportunities.

In psychotherapy, which I expect to eventually become one with religion, all psychodynamic doctrines, derived from Freud, which seek to terrify people by imagining a world of inscrutable unconscious forces, are rapidly being replaced by an effective cognitive-behavioral approach of the sort pioneered by Albert Ellis, which effectively teaches people how to reduce their sources of unhappiness.

It's unclear whether the general tone of the culture or the reigning ideology can have much effect on people's happiness, but if it can, there is certainly room for improvement here. To take one simple example, the modernist movement in the arts, and its various offshoots and successors, have driven a wedge between music, fiction, drama, and pictorial representation as readily appreciated by the mass of the population and as sanctified by the approval of intellectual elites. This wedge was not always there, and will not always be there. It's largely a matter of intellectual fashion. But as long as the wedge is there, opportunities to develop great works of art with a popular audience tend to be closed off, and a potential avenue to the enrichment of the lives of the majority of people is not explored.

Ultimately, drugs may be helpful for some, not because of the questionable notion that "depression" is an "illness," which can be "treated" by "medication," but rather because of the fact well known to Fitzgerald's Khayam and to countless others down the ages, that taking drugs can make you feel better. If you belong to the one, or five, or ten percent of the population genetically most prone to melancholy, maybe some drug or other will help you to be happier.

¹⁵ See the remarks by Andrew Rawlinson in his *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), pp. 33–36.

Surfeit of Options

Barry Schwartz is an avowed enemy of the free market (one of his earlier books is subtitled *How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life*). But most of *The Paradox of Choice* is advice about making the best decisions within a free market. To the extent that people take his advice and find that it works, his anti-market complaints lose some of their force.

He thinks that we are overwhelmed by too many choices. But he accepts that how many choices confront us is itself a result of our choices. It's easy, for example, to adapt our shopping habits so that the number of purchase decisions is greatly reduced. It would even be feasible to join a club, like a book or record club but concerned with all kinds of consumer goods, so that we had to make almost no further choices at all—we would simply accept the groceries and other provisions selected for us each week by the club. Perhaps this is why some people join cults with apparently absurd dietary and other restrictions, because in this way they reduce the need to consider too many options.

Schwartz begins the book with an anecdote about his visit to The Gap in search of a pair of jeans. The salesperson asked:

Do you want them slim fit, easy fit, relaxed fit, baggy, or extra baggy? . . . Do you want them stonewashed, acid-washed, or distressed? Do you want them button-fly or zipper-fly? Do you want them faded or regular?

I didn't expect the Spanish Inquisition! What a burden to drop onto the shoulders of a mere college professor! Buying the jeans, he says, became "a daylong project." The jeans he ended up with "turned out just fine." But, reports Schwartz, "it was a complex decision in

which I was forced to invest time, energy, and no small amount of self-doubt, anxiety, and dread." Forced? He could have just left and gone to Penney's.

People can choose to make fewer choices. Schwartz gestures a few times in the direction of the brainwashed zombie theory, the victim of consumer capitalism who cannot choose to make fewer choices because he's addicted to consuming. But it wouldn't do to elaborate that theory, as it would undercut eighty percent of Schwartz's book, which gives you advice on how to choose to make fewer choices.

Much of this advice is quite sound. There's plenty of experimental evidence that most people typically make wrong-headed decisions. For instance, they erroneously count sunk costs. Schwartz gives many of these examples, some of which have no bearing on overabundance of choices. There's certainly scope for educating people in fallacies of practical decision-making, but this aspect would be more helpful if detached from his preaching about the baleful influence of too many choices.

Another anecdote refers (pp. 18–20) to a study in which either twenty-four or six varieties of jam were displayed. Schwartz says that thirty percent of people who visited the display of six varieties bought jam, while only three percent bought jam from the display of twenty-four. Problems of this kind tend to solve themselves: sellers of jam have an incentive to display the smaller range. Managers of stores as a matter of course do limit the number of varieties of all goods they offer for sale.

Schwartz is perturbed (p. 9) that his local supermarket carries 285 varieties of cookies, but evidently if all 285 keep taking up shelf space, all 285 are selling. Anyone upset by the spectacle of 285

types of cookie can go to a corner or specialty store where the range is far more limited. Costco or Sam's Club attracts people prepared to buy in bigger quantities at bargain prices, from a more limited range. What many people do, of course (p. 19), is to settle on a cookie they like, and then always look for just that one, tuning out the other 284. Atkins dieters tune out all 285. Taking this further, you can request the supermarket to send you the same list of groceries every week, and give no more thought to choices. Some busy yuppies use services like Peapod in this way.

Schwartz's advice is to adopt a "satisficing" rather than a "maximizing" strategy. Settle for what's good enough without looking for the very best. Most people do this anyway, instinctively adjusting their searches among goods to take account of the opportunity cost of their own time (satisficing is only a special case of maximizing). Some others, mainly women, seem to derive intense gratification from the actual activity of researching what's available. Who, aside from the Taliban, would want to deny them this indulgence?

If some people find the multiplicity of options irksome, the benefit they derive from having that many options may more than compensate them for the irksomeness. Therefore, it's possible for people to dislike the situation of having so many choices and still be net gainers from the availability of those choices, a possibility Schwartz never mentions. He thus confounds some specific loss from more choices with net loss from more choices, and wrongly supposes that by making a case for the prevalence of the former, he automatically makes a case for the prevalence of the latter.

For those stressed-out shoppers who really do find choosing oppressive, much of Schwartz's advice may prove helpful,

and the free market will then work even better. Thank you, Barry Schwartz!

Happiness in Its Place

Raymond Belliotti evidently started out to write a work with the challenging title, *Happiness Is Overrated*, and when he was well into it, suddenly realized that his crucial argument is misconceived. Instead of scrapping that book or turning it into a different kind of book, he went ahead and published the thing.

The problem becomes clear when we ask: Just who has overrated happiness? It turns out that there are two broad ways of defining "happiness", the way it is defined in ordinary English, as subjective contentment or good feeling, an enduring pleasant state of mind, and the way it is defined by some philosophers, as encompassing much more than that, perhaps a *merited*, or *worthy*, or *virtuous* pleasant mental state.

As Belliotti must have realized late in his composition of the book (see Belliotti, p. 93), those philosophers who have defined the word "happiness" in the normal vernacular manner have generally stated that happiness is not the *summum bonum*, but that other values are independently important, and may trump happiness. And those philosophers who have proclaimed happiness as the *summum bonum* have generally proposed an expanded definition of the word "happiness."

Consequently, Belliotti cannot name anyone around today who really overrates happiness, in the sense he specifies. A possible historical exception is Bentham, but on this point Bentham has no following. Belliotti's own views, while often correct, are equally often much more commonplace than he supposes them to be. In an effort to come up with a real "target" for his "thesis," he finally identifies "those who

formally define happiness as a relatively enduring, positive state of mind and who take happiness to be (at least) a great good” (p. 94). This is indeed a popular position—I adhere to it myself—but I cannot find any arguments in Belliotti’s book directed against it. The most he seems able to claim is that happiness is “not always a personal good,” which presumably means that there are some situations where happiness is not a relevant value.

While he does not advance happiness as the *summum bonum*, Belliotti does recommend an expanded definition of “happiness.” His attempt to argue for an expanded definition is bedevilled by the problem that he apparently does not understand that the meanings of words are conventional, and therefore writes as though there is a correct meaning of “happiness”, independent of actual usage or of usefulness in argument. So he sets out on a wild goose chase to discover the true meaning of happiness or what happiness really is. He maintains, for example, that defining ‘happiness’ in the normal way ignores or slights values other than subjective contentment. This is like saying that we had better define a car’s “maximum speed” to include its comfortable seats or fuel economy, and if we don’t, we are ignoring or slighting these other desirable attributes.

Belliotti provides a readable survey of philosophers’ views on happiness and finding meaning in life, but sheds little new light on these topics.

This review article first appeared in *Liberty*, February 2005, and is reprinted by permission.