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Choice/Freedom and Happiness/Well-Being in a time of ecological limits

Hestenes, Mathew

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Abstract

This Research Report analyzes happiness/well-being as a normative conception and as an empirical phenomenon. This report explores happiness specifically in relation to the 21st century ecological crisis of overconsumption and overproduction. The report interrogates divergent conceptions/theories of happiness (whether normative or empirical) both in trying to understand the causes of ecological problems and in seeking a potential solution in resolving these problems. The report critiques all the major normative theories of happiness/well-being (hedonism, life satisfaction and desire/preference satisfaction). It argues that each normative theory carries structural limitations in analyzing 21st century problems and in potentially resolving them. The report then interrogates empirical-natural/physical theories of happiness/well-being. Whilst these theories are empirical many authors utilize their foundations to construct normative theories. The report argues that, overall, the emotional state theory is the most helpful in addressing happiness and development in a context of ecological crisis. The emotional state theory is essentially a hybrid normative/empirical theory, as happiness is encompassed in a person's emotional condition understood according to empirical models (emotions/affects, moods/mood dispositions and central affective states) and in the normative idea of self-fulfillment).

After the philosophical-psychological analysis of happiness/well-being this report analyzes/critiques and illustrates the complexities of choice/freedom's relationship to happiness/well-being. This report is particularly interested in choice/freedom's relationship to happiness/well-being because of the linkage of both concepts to the economic system. This report argues that the economic system at its core is a choice/freedom phenomenon. Economies are made up of individual micro choice actors and macro choice architects. The micro choice actors are individuals involved in the micro production and consumption of resources. This reports analysis of happiness/well-being particularly relates to the macro choice environment. The macro choice architects are national/global economic policy organizations/departments/officials who structure the micro choice environment in divergent ways utilizing divergent economic models/theories, such as gross domestic product (GDP) or human development/capabilities. These models create divergent environments that provide divergent choices/freedoms to attain divergent bundles of resources. Some structured environments have narrower choice/freedom sets; these require less consumption and production to achieve. Other structured environments have significantly wider choice/freedom sets, requiring mass consumption and production. Utilizing 21st century notions of ecological limits/boundaries this report argues that significantly wider choice sets are ecologically harmful and models asserting that choice/freedom sets should be continually expanded are not realizable under 21st century conditions. Furthermore this report critiques the over-emphasis on choice/freedom as a constituent of happiness/well-being. This report critical illustrates that wider choice/freedom sets do not provide choice actors with increasingly greater happiness/well-being. In fact psychological research illustrates that wider

choice/freedom sets place many burdens onto individual choice actors' cognitive system.

Finally this report utilizes two case studies, Denmark and Bhutan to analyze the relationship between happiness/well-being and choice/freedom under 21st century conditions. The reason this report selected Denmark and Bhutan is based on their vital contributions to happiness research. Since 1972 Bhutan is renown for utilizing Gross National Happiness (GNH) as their indicator for economic progress over GDP.[1] This move radically challenged conventional economic growth models. Since 2011 Denmark is regularly ranked number one in international happiness reports, particularly the UN published World Happiness Report (WHR).[2] A deep divergence in happiness is noted in these reports between Bhutan and Denmark. For example in 2016 the WHR ranks Denmark 1st whilst Bhutan is ranked 84th.[3] In Bhutan, the report notes the over-restriction of choice freedom in favor of a culturalist conception of happiness/well-being. Instead of being free to choose which values appeal to them, the Bhutanese are rather coerced into a state endorsed value system. This report argues that this drastically affects their ability to achieve happiness/well-being. In contrast to Bhutan, Denmark does not restrict choice sets in such a demanding fashion. Instead individuals are largely free to choose a philosophy of life (pluralism) and how they spend their time. This report argues that Denmark's environment provides wide enough choice/freedom sets for individuals to achieve happiness/well-being, whilst not being so wide that the negativities associated with increased choice arise. Ecologically Denmark is also concerned in resolving the 21st century ecological crisis. Thus Denmark-Bhutan is a nice comparison as both countries are talked about in regards to happiness/well-being and ecological considerations, whilst each structures the choice/freedom-happiness/wellbeing relationship in a different way. This provides an interesting discussion that will be explored in this report.

[1] NDP Steering Committee and Secretariat, Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm: Report of the Kingdom of Bhutan, (2013): 1-2.
[2] John Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffrey Sachs, World Happiness Report 2016 Volume 1 (United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2016): 19.
[3] Helliwell, Layard and Sachs, World Happiness Report 2016 Volume 1: 20-21.