

An Interview with Philosopher Daniel M. Haybron

Daniel M. Haybron is Professor of Philosophy at Saint Louis University, United States of America. He received his PhD at Rutgers University. His research focuses mainly on the psychology of well-being and its connections with issues in ethical and political thought. He has published numerous articles in these areas and has two publications on the subject of happiness – ‘Happiness – A Very Short Introduction’ (Oxford University Press series, 2013) and ‘The Pursuit of Happiness : The Elusive Psychology of Well Being’ (Oxford University Press, 2008). In this interview carried out with American philosopher Daniel M. Haybron exclusively for readers of SHARE magazine, Ian Rizzo explores the philosophy of happiness.



In your biographical note, it is mentioned that an aspect of your research focuses on the philosophy of psychology. Philosophy and psychology are two different disciplines. What is the affinity, if there is any, between the two?

The sciences are more or less continuous with philosophy, so it can be hard to tell the difference between science and philosophy. Especially when you're looking at the really theoretical aspects of a science, for instance debates among biologists about how to define a species, which is partly a conceptual question.

When it comes to psychology, there are massive philosophical issues to sort out. You can't pick up a brain and pull out little "mind" parts that you can isolate and study, like an experience of love. So it's hard even to conceptualize what you're trying to study. I got started reading psychological work on happiness. But how do we know if what they're measuring is really happiness as we know it? Are they measuring the things that really matter? These are very much philosophical questions.

Your research also deals with ethics. Do you have any particular leaning towards any branch of ethics? – What is your rationale on the study of ethics?

I don't have much in the way of philosophical allegiances, and my outlook mostly gelled early on before I'd read any philosophy. (I was a weird kid, and my parents, an artist and a physicist, were very philosophical, so that much of my work is trying to bring out ideas I picked up from them.) But in practice, my views are pretty mongrel, a mix of Kant, Aristotle, and especially Hume and Mill.

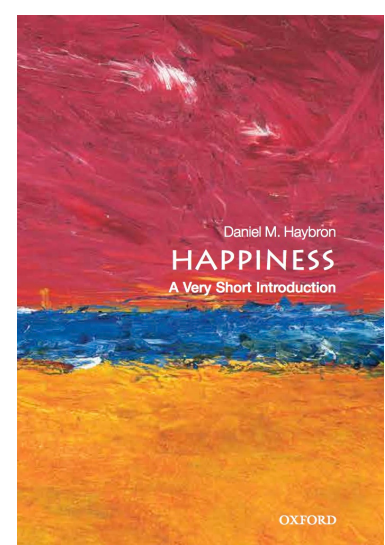
In terms of method, I tend to approach ethics roughly with the outlook of a scientist. Yet I think there are objective goods like beauty and excellence, even though it's all ultimately just a projection of the human mind. I don't know how to look at Notre Dame burning and not mourn a tremendous loss to the world, and not simply on account of consumers not getting what they want. We're just wired that way.

As for *why* I do ethics, in my case, the reason is that it's fundamental to dealing with our problems as a species. Many of our ideas about how to live are terribly unwise, and I think our survival as a species, or at least a civilization, depends on getting a better grip on what matters in life. The traditional moralities more or less died a few centuries ago, and we still haven't figured out what to replace them with.

In your publication, 'Happiness – A Very Short Introduction' (published by Oxford University Press), you refer both to happiness as a state of mind (feelings) and life satisfaction (a judgement about one's life). In your view where should the focus be to lead a good life?

There's no single right way to define 'happiness'. But I think people's everyday concerns with happiness are best explained if we regard happiness as a matter of one's emotional life — emotional well-being. So happiness is roughly the opposite of anxiety and depression. 'Happiness' can have a frivolous ring, but it isn't frivolous at all, any more than mental health is. Our emotional conditions aren't just fleeting feelings; they pervade the psyche and profoundly shape how we confront the world. Happiness, in my view, lies at the centre of human flourishing, and unhappiness signals a poor fit between the person and her life: it doesn't suit her nature. It isn't all that matters in life, but it's pretty high on the list.

Happiness
by Daniel M. Haybron



Now life satisfaction is a mental state that expresses your sense of how your life is going by your standards. This is basically an opinion, and not too hard to change — just visit a hospital and think how lucky you are. So the attitude itself isn't terribly important. But what it's about matters a great deal: we value things other than just being happy, like being good parents, and life satisfaction measures can give us information about that. It's just that life satisfaction isn't important in the way happiness seems to be.

Can happiness and well-being be compatible with the human condition – a universal condition, so it seems that fuels in many human beings, greed, envy, pride, an unsatisfied craving for unlimited wants and self-aggrandisement?

Absolutely, but it's very difficult to pull off unless we build societies that tamp down the Hobbesian aspects of our nature that you're referring to. Hobbes thought we needed Leviathan to keep them in check, but brute force isn't a stable solution. Much more effective is an environment that makes people *want* not to be that way, like a culture that fosters cooperation, empathy and respect. For example, places like Denmark have social norms that discourage status-seeking and acquisitiveness, and limit inequalities so people can form some sense of solidarity and aren't so easily caught up in positional "arms races."

Also, there's mounting evidence that the Hobbesian picture is parochial and very incomplete because human nature not only has those dark aspects, but also a strong prosocial orientation. By and large, human beings want to help others, to love and be loved, and so on.

It's parochial because the "human condition" looks quite different in many societies, especially in certain less affluent areas where social ties are very strong, and people tend to look out for each other.

It's easy for those of us who have "careers" — what an ugly word— to forget that not everyone is trying to climb ladders, and in some places that's considered repugnant.

You aptly mention in your book that while money can be a source of happiness , it does not contribute to additional happiness above a certain point. Yet our economies are based on the maximisation of possible income. In the light of this assumption how can our economies be redirected to provide the optimal happiness to every person?

There's a debate about whether happiness stops increasing above a certain income or even goes down at some certain point, but there's no question you get diminishing returns. But it's very hard to make simple claims about the money-happiness relationship because it depends on our choices and money doesn't travel alone. Richer people might have more rewarding jobs, but also work longer hours and so forth, and that sort of thinking probably has more to do with the income-happiness relationship than how much stuff you can buy.

A further challenge is that stress is probably the aspect of happiness most affected by income but it's also the part that's hardest to measure. But I think there's a general consensus that money's impact on well-being is modest enough above a certain point that it tends not to be a very important goal beyond whatever you need to live comfortably.

That said, what you're asking is one of the key questions we're facing, and I don't know the answer, partly because economies, like ecosystems, are not trivial to manage. In terms of issues to focus on, reducing inequality and increasing access to rewarding work are fairly obvious targets.

It will also be important to make economies more resilient in the face of stressors like climate change and mass migration. Part of this is empowering people to meet needs at a local level. A strong sense of community helps, because then you can rely on neighbours rather than having to buy everything.

This can also help with an even bigger issue: reducing the cost, financially and ecologically, of happiness. To a great extent, we decide collectively and individually how important to make money for happiness. Where I live, the monetary side of happiness is quite steep and nearly half of households don't make enough to pay the bills even for basic things. If you want to live simply it'll be hard to get decent healthcare or schools for your kids because we've chosen to couple those things strongly to income.

At the same time, our ecological footprint is massive from having little choice but to consume resources at something like 50-100 times the historical average. We need to figure out how to enjoy the best fruits of modern living without undermining so many other things we care about, like relationships, peace of mind, and the environment.

"Development" is a curious word, as if everyone should want to live like an American or German. I'd suggest a developed economy is one that works for the people who live in it without too many costs to others, and there might be lots of different models for that. I'm not sure any of the rich countries are developed in that sense.



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You cite many sources of happiness in your book. I was struck by one of your references to the connection with the natural world as a potential source of happiness. Given that humanity at present is showing a lack of commitment towards climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity and other environmental issues, how will this have an impact on the general level happiness of humanity?

We're very adaptable and natural beauty is abundant, so the environment can take quite a beating and still be a great source of happiness. I'm well aware that the flora and fauna outside my window here in St. Louis are badly compromised compared to the past, but they're still beautiful. So I take heart in the thought that there will still be much for future generations to enjoy, even if much is lost. If the environment degrades too much even for that, then happiness will be the least of our worries.

Practically speaking, though, we have work to do to restore our connections with the natural world. There's no substitute for having active engagement with nature as a regular part of one's routine, so that for instance you become intimately familiar with the rhythms and denizens of some patch of land or sea, which was my experience for much of my youth. But we can at least improve opportunities for connecting with nature in our communities and promote a culture of appreciating the natural world.

It would help a great deal if we learned to slow down and give ourselves space to unwind. The enjoyment of nature may be the first casualty of our cult of busyness. Just the fact that many people find it boring is a telling sign of how many of us are basically broken human beings, unable to relax and enjoy life. Which includes, sometimes, just doing nothing.

The country, society and the culture you are born into also have a significant impact on one's mood propensity to happiness. Happiness can also be influenced by genetic make-up and the circumstances of life. Do you think humans have free will to change their emotional condition towards happiness and well-being?

Certainly, but it's harder than most self-help books would have you believe, and I think the idea that "happiness is a choice" is very damaging because it puts the blame for unhappiness on the individual. If your way of life is nuts because you can barely juggle a tedious job and your family responsibilities, and the kids are having trouble, then it isn't helpful to be told to just turn that frown upside-down.

There are things you can do, like change your lifestyle to something that better suits your nature. Move, change occupations, exercise, etc. I think people tend to underestimate their options for changing how they live but still, there aren't always great options. The other approach is to change how you respond to things, meditation and other forms of mind training for instance, and this generally takes time and effort. So there's lots we can do but no simple and easy solution, and no single approach that's best for everyone.

But I'm more interested in the social side of the picture than these kinds of personal efforts. There are places where people are pretty happy without having

to work at it, and I'd like us to build a society like that - where people don't need self-help books, because the culture and way of life make sense for human beings. Our happiness industry is a bit like zookeepers scratching their heads over why the pandas don't mate and trying various tricks to make it work, when maybe the problem is that pandas don't especially like living in zoos.

I believe that the past four years, under the Trump Administration and his persistent refusal to concede defeat of the 2020 election (at the time of writing) exposed the deep divide in American politics. Further to that, are the incidents occurring in the USA induced perhaps by the gun ownership rights and culture. Not to forget to mention also the fatal deaths of many Black Americans perpetrated by armed police forces. Do you think that your country which enshrines the right for everyone to pursue happiness can be a model of happiness to other countries? What can it learn from others?

Every culture has something others can learn from, and the US is no exception. There is a powerful streak of optimism in our culture, and a can-do spirit that fosters a sense of personal agency and unleashes a lot of creative energy. There is also an openness and friendliness to Americans, as well as an aversion to social hierarchies. To a great extent I think all of these qualities are admirable and good for us. They're part of what I love about the country - blue state and red state, and I'm a bit of both.



But yes, we do have a few problems. We've taken individualism too far, and can't seem to come to grips with the fact that we no longer live on the frontier. Even in better times we were letting millions of our own go without decent prospects for a good life, and burning through the planet's resources like trust-fund kids on a bender. In the current reality, our ethic of self-reliance and personal responsibility has gotten so distorted that it's devolved into rank irresponsibility toward others and a monstrously inflated sense of entitlement and grievance. Folks even feel entitled to construct individual realities, for heaven's sake. But we're not always entitled to our own opinions. On many questions there are well-established facts and it is irresponsible to ignore them.

So we've taken individualism to cartoonish extremes, leaving us lonely, divided, angry and sick. A mature sense of civic and social responsibility isn't alien to the culture — we pulled together and made the sacrifices asked of us in WWII—but it seems to have gone on holiday, and we need to get it back. Today's inauguration has made me more hopeful, but we'll see if people really want to change.

Looking toward other cultures, indigenous and small-scale societies offer a window into very different ways of living and being, and it is good to remember that even hunter-gatherer societies can provide everything people need to be happy. Surely we can figure it out too.

Seeing which countries responded well to the pandemic is a decent indicator of how to get the nuts and bolts of civilization right. Education, universal healthcare and other forms of social insurance are pretty obvious ways to promote happiness.

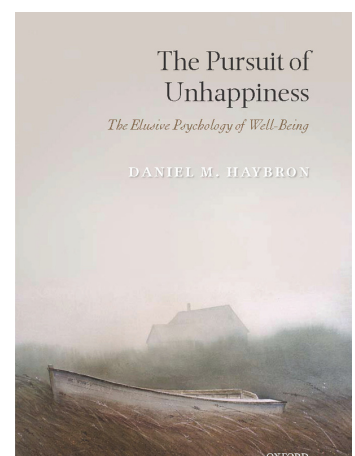
Beyond the nuts and bolts, we could learn a lot from countries where the culture fosters a keen appreciation of beauty and craftsmanship, for instance Southern Europe. And “enjoyer” cultures, like Latin America, stress warm relationships and the enjoyment of life, which we “strivers” north of the border could use a lot more of. Boy, we could use more of that.

In your book, you mention the importance of relationships to happiness and you imply that strong communal ties provide much more happiness than cultures that promote individualism. Does it worry you that the onset of technology can be a means of destruction to communal ties and a contribution to higher levels of individualism? How can communal ties be rebuilt in the Liberal West?

I used to work in the tech industry and love gadgets, but obviously we need to figure out a better way to live with them. The more convenient and entertaining it becomes to be alone, the higher the costs of bothering to interact with others, which is frequently awkward and rarely the most convenient option. Tech does make some kinds of connection easier, but I don't even know how to argue with somebody who thinks that texting and speechifying at each other on Twitter are some kind of substitute for a face-to-face conversation.

One reason I harp on about things like beauty and excellence is that once you recognize that something out there matters beyond people getting whatever they happen to want, you're not so likely to think it's a good idea to just do whatever you feel like. You become less a consumer, more an appreciator, who sees the world as something that makes claims on you, and isn't just there to satisfy your whims. You need to look up from your device and pay attention to the people, to the beauty, around you, because it isn't just about you. It shouldn't be perfectly normal to see a room full of individuals face-down in their phones amusing themselves, together but alone.

The Pursuit of Unhappiness
by Daniel M. Haybron





Another key aspect of happiness for humans are sex, love and long-term relationship with a soul mate. Do you think that monogamy is the best path towards happiness in providing the optimum balance of these three conflicting elements?

I suspect it is, at least for most people. But it would be good if our other relationships were strong enough that a life partner didn't have to play such an overwhelming role in one's life, and also so that more people could be involved in helping raise the kids, and so on. Where I live, it's a pain in the neck to get together with other people, so you'd better like doing everything with your partner. That also puts more of a premium on finding a "soulmate," which is a wonderful thing if you can get it—and I've been very lucky on that count — but not so easy.

In your view, what government policies should be primarily pursued to guarantee a minimum standard of happiness and well-being to every citizen?

I don't think people are owed happiness. But I do think it's a matter of common decency for a society of means to ensure that everyone has access to healthcare, education, and the other requisites of a good life. On the frontier you didn't let your neighbours starve or refuse to lend a hand when they needed it, and neither should we. Economic policies that reduce inequality and unemployment are also important. I'm not sure what we owe the global poor, except more than we're doing for them now.

More directly focused on happiness, a few things that come to mind are better urban planning so that our communities are both more sustainable and actually feel like communities, as well as changing schools to better equip students to flourish in their lives. Also, shorter work hours to address the time poverty most of us are living with.

In a world where our lives are becoming ruled and governed by algorithms, social media, virtual environments and artificial intelligence, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future state of happiness for humanity?

Maybe what you could call a sardonic optimist. I think it's important to be hopeful and look forward to the best. But we can't kid ourselves about the scale of the challenges we're facing, which take a dark sense of humour to confront without giving yourself a bellyache. So far, we've not made a good showing in terms of our ability to wisely harness technology, so yes that could cause all manner of mischief.

But at this point just about the only problem I'm really concerned with is the survival of civilization because of climate change. I think we'll figure out a way through this bottleneck, and we'd better, because it'll make all our other worries moot. It's hard enough already to keep the economy from going off the rails; how do we maintain a decent standard of living if we're dealing with disappearing coastlines, farmland turning to dust, and wars over resources? And it takes around 10 million years for the planet to recover from the kind of mass extinction we're heading toward, which would be some legacy. So guns, virtual realities, racism, whatever, it's all small potatoes if we don't get a grip on this one.

This is one of the main reasons I study happiness: it may not seem very important if mere survival is in the balance, but a large part of our problem has to do with the way we've been pursuing happiness, and generally our ideas about what makes for a good life. Without more sensible ideas about the lives we want to lead, it's going to be hard to solve these problems.