



“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled”. Intercultural conceptions of happiness and wellbeing

Science and Ethics of Happiness and Wellbeing



The Science and Ethics for Happiness and Well-being initiative convened a meeting to discuss conceptions of happiness, well-being, and righteousness across cultures and religious and philosophical traditions on February 24-25, 2022 at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in Vatican City. Taking Matthew 5:6 as a starting point, a number of experts joined the SEH core group to discuss philosophical and religious conceptions of happiness and justice across cultures. The group considered evidence from the social sciences with particular emphasis on cultural variation; the relationship between justice, happiness, and well-being; the challenges and opportunities of multiculturalism; and the implications of cultural diversity for the science and ethics of well-being.

A major stream of the Western philosophical and theological tradition (represented by Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas) assumes that partnership based on truth, love, freedom and justice is possible amongst all humankind. The Church's position is that all humans thirst for justice and righteousness. On this view, justice is necessary for flourishing. True happiness and flourishing depend on justice for all. But injustices abound: there are wars, massive inequalities of wealth and resources, ethnic hatreds, government corruption, and widespread violation of human rights. There are selfish people and nation states that hoard wealth and are largely concerned only with their own pleasure and happiness. But any credible theory of happiness and well-being needs to give a central place to the demands of justice, i.e. self-happiness cannot exist without a

relationship with another, which consists in giving them their dues.

Convergent and divergent conceptions of well-being across cultures

We next examined cultural variation in conceptions of happiness and well-being. One important pole of our group discussion focused on the meaningful similarities and differences in conceptions of happiness and well-being across cultures and philosophical and religious traditions, and how measurements of well-being ought to take these convergences and divergences into account. Another pole of the discussion emphasized that politics, especially international politics involving global challenges of peace and sustainable development, requires that we try to identify an *overlapping consensus* on the constituents of well-being across the world's societies and cultures. Our group tentatively agreed that such a consensus should feature both economic, social, and political conditions for good lives, wherever they are lived and by whoever lives them, in addition to the constituents of particular psychological states or emotions. Part of our group agreed that justice demands prioritizing the enhancement of the objective conditions of the good life, be they economic, social, political, or environmental, and only secondarily leads us to attend to subjective experiences of happiness and positive emotion per se.

Participants noted that we may have good reason to reexamine generalizations about happiness across cultures and traditions for the following reasons. First, the Western philosophical lineage and the Abrahamic religions open to transcendence are part of a large global family of well-developed theories of true happiness; the Western heritage cannot simply be assumed to encompass global philosophical thinking about happiness and well-being. Second, many empirical findings and generalizations in modern psychology about the causes, constituents, and effects of happiness are based on data collected in North America, Oceania, and Western Europe, and thus overrepresent Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic populations (in Joseph Henrich's acronym, WEIRD). This is reflected in popular measures of well-being and distress used in research and clinical settings. Third, significant research, presented by some of the attendees, demonstrates specific ways in which conceptions of happiness vary across cultures. Our group strongly endorsed a globalization of the scientific research and collaboration on topics of culture, happiness and well-being.

Participants with expertise in cultural psychology provided evidence for variations in cultural conceptions of well-being that began with diverging models of the self in relation to society. There are cultures, most often those in North American and Western Europe, that foster relatively independent models of selfhood, which define people by their internal traits, preferences, and beliefs; prioritize personal over group needs when the two conflict; and encourage people to express themselves and exert influence or control over others and their environments. Other cultures, common in much of the world, foster more interdependent models of selfhood, which define people in terms of their relationships, roles, and responsibilities; prioritize group over personal needs when the two conflict; and encourage people to adjust themselves to fit in with

others and their environments. One could say that justice demands that we recognize and attend to the variation in concepts of self-hood across cultures, reasons of intellectual integrity being primary. Instrumentally, however, cultural sensitivity can help both policy makers and scientists to craft more impactful and equitable interventions and projects.

With the independent model, individuals are viewed as relatively unique, self-determining, and equal to others. The most commonly used international assessments generally find that independent models of selfhood are associated with higher well-being. Other cultures foster an interdependent model of selfhood which emphasizes the fundamental interconnectedness of people to their families, ingroups of various types and sometimes nations. Individuals are often viewed as relational, similar to others, immersed in place, tradition and history, and ranked in hierarchies. Relatedly, gender equality and LGB rights tend to be lower in more interdependent cultures. With an independent model of the self, pursuing one's goals and values matters most. With an interdependent model of the self, relationships with ingroup members and the obligations of roles one inhabits tend to matter more to happiness and well-being than do subjective psychological states. Therefore, cultures that vary in their reliance on independent or interdependent models of selfhood vary in their appraisal of the constituents of happiness and well-being (even in their appraisal of how pleasurable everyday positive events are).

With an independent model of the self, well-being constitutes a type of personal project, whereas with an interdependent model of the self, well-being is more about meeting consensually held standards and fulfilling one's duties, hence well-being is more of a shared project. Some cultures prioritize group happiness ("We are happy"), a construct that is meaningfully distinct from individual life satisfaction. As an example, people are more likely than those in the West to agree with the item "I cannot be happy if those around me are not happy."

Events may be appraised differently across cultures depending on whether they foster valued social relationships or foster the individual self. Moreover, the specific states that people primarily associate with happiness or well-being vary with these models of self. For instance, for the Western independent models of self, happiness primarily involves excitement, enthusiasm, and passion, states that are associated with influence and control. In contrast, for the East Asian interdependent self, happiness primarily involves calm, peacefulness and serenity, states that facilitate attention to others. These differences in the emphasis placed on excitement vs. calm shape diverse personal and interpersonal behaviors, including what people do for leisure, what products they consume, and even with whom they share resources. Furthermore, many cultures, individualistic and collectivist, judge objectives other than happiness (in either the individual or communal sense) as matters of the utmost importance. These include religious traditions, ethics, rights, justice, and sustainable development.

Presentations were given on conceptions of well-being that are not dominant in the Western cultures. The Navajo word *Hózhó* simultaneously refers to beauty, harmony, happiness,

blessedness, well-being, order, and sustainability. It is expressed concretely across various aesthetical, spiritual, and physical domains, including ritual life. Happiness, then, in the Navajo tradition, extends well beyond a single psychological state.

Buddhist conceptions of happiness and well-being depend on the emptying of the self. The aim of human life is to mitigate suffering, which requires making the ego right-sized, less dominating, less desirous of its own satisfactions. Happiness in the emotional state sense is a fleeting end, one of the many impermanent things to which one ought not become attached, though Buddhist texts also emphasize the importance of calmness.

In the Confucian tradition, happiness as a psychological state is not the ultimate good. Rather, it is a byproduct of one's realizing one's ethical duties with regards to proper social relations, governance, and ritual care. The Confucian conception of self is interdependent. Self-fulfillment can only be realized in relation to others, especially parents and other family. It is unlike individualist models of the self that prize self-determination or the voluntarist realization of preferences as the ultimate good.

In sum, these presentations emphasized the importance of considering the values, goals, and priorities of different cultures, religions, and philosophical traditions when defining happiness.

The demands of justice

As noted earlier, justice was an essential element of our discussion. Participants pointed out that today, apparently, there is no necessary connection between the simple, fleeting psychological state of happiness and the demands of justice. In most religions and philosophies, happiness is connected to justice, love, and/or mercy. It is not hedonic or the emotional state of the self, described as "feeling happy" or "feeling good." Indeed, in the Christian theological tradition, there is no self that can be disconnected from relationships of love with God and with one's neighbor. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, for example, suggests that "the self is a relation which, in relating to itself, recognizes the fundament (the power) that constituted it, namely God." In other words, we cannot be ourselves outside of authentic relationships with God and other people.

In his teachings in Sermon on the Mount, Jesus connects the pursuit of justice and mercy to happiness and divine blessedness. Understood as happiness, divine blessedness has more to do with fulfilling the demands of love towards God and one's neighbor, and consequently of righteousness (giving another his or her dues in terms of love, justice, etc.) than it does with hedonistic pleasure or positive feelings. In the Catholic tradition, this sense of happiness cannot be entirely perfected on earth, but as Jesus taught, we advance it when we fight against injustice and embody love, compassion, and fraternity. Indeed, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." Therefore, just as Pythagoras said that the *sophos*

(learned man) should be called a “lover of knowledge” (*philos sophos*) because they always have more yet to learn, followers of Christ should be called “lovers of justice” because they are summoned to be righteous and seek justice where injustice yet abounds. As the prophet Micah asks, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Various speakers pointed out that many great moral leaders in history such as Mother Teresa, Óscar Romero, Nelson Mandela, or Martin Luther King, Jr. did not lead “happy” lives in simple hedonic terms, though they are often perceived as having achieved the deepest kind of meaning and fulfillment in their mission for moral justice.

Our group almost unanimously agreed that deep notions of human well-being or flourishing (*true happiness*) require the virtue of justice, that is, something that grounds human flourishing and well-being in the realizing of one’s duties towards others and realizing the common good. We could say that justice, generally construed, was seen to be a necessary condition of well-being/flourishing, or what we might call *true happiness*, though pathways towards justice might produce unpleasant, uncomfortable, even painful effects and experiences for some.

Justice therefore featured as a key concern for most participants, though it took different forms for different participants and cultures. Some participants raised questions of justice regarding the unequal distribution of life satisfaction scores between and within nations. One participant endorsed the utilitarian calculus that justice consists of the maximization of happiness for the greatest number; another that justice entails meeting the basic needs of the poor and the marginalized as measures of universal human dignity, at the expense, if necessary, of the wealth and income of the rich and powerful. In connection with the latter point, one participant cited the Catholic doctrine of the Universal Destination of Goods, and its expression in Pope Francis’s recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020): “All this brings out the positive meaning of the right to property: I care for and cultivate something that I possess, in such a way that it can contribute to the good of all.” Under certain conditions, these two outlooks lead to similar policy prescriptions, and thus to a practical overlapping consensus.

Indeed, participants largely agreed that the best place to begin work on improving well-being involves identifying and combatting the prevailing injustices of our current day. Following Plato’s method, we might better understand the requirements of justice by examining major present-day injustices: World hunger and thirst, the health care crisis, education gaps, climate change and environmental degradation, the unequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, corporate lobbying which distorts fair trade, and a “piecemeal World War 3” (Pope Francis). The Russian invasion of Ukraine began in the morning of the first day of our meeting, and the juxtaposition of the violence of war with our nuanced discussion of well-being across cultures did not go unnoticed. But as we note before, cross-cultural sensitivity, dialogue, encounter and the theological dimension of the self, which demands love and justice, might go a long way towards

the de-escalation and prevention of this “inhuman, fratricidal and sacrilegious” (Pope Francis) war, born out of hate, and therefore our dialogue remained timely and important.

It was suggested that education, training, and mentoring should be implemented and tools should be used to promote deeper happiness through, for instance, mind-training, meditation, prayer, and other approaches. Some participants raised concerns that such programs would only reinscribe agendas of paternalism and imperialism, deflecting attention from the inequalities and injustices that require structural change. Others argued that such practices for cultivating well-being would be of great use for those calling for or working towards structural change.

Implications for the study of well-being and applications for multiculturalism

Though participants disagreed over the extent to which self-reported life satisfaction scores reliably reflect the same well-being construct across cultures, our group agreed that happiness and well-being measures are useful tools. In general, common mechanisms support some forms of positive affect across species and cultures, although cultural variation in the appraisal and expression of emotions is also observed. Some would want to limit studies of happiness and well-being to intra-national studies due to cultural differences between countries, whereas others would want to limit such comparisons to specific cultures within countries due to the prevalence of diversity and multi-cultures within a single nation or society. It was argued that cross-national comparisons of happiness and well-being are achievable, as long as we ask people about their specific ideals and values. This may have added benefits because asking people to reflect on their values may bring them one step closer toward achieving them: Teaching people about the diversity of ideals (and the basic point that true happiness cannot be achieved without justice) may broaden their own views of happiness and well-being, and understanding differences and similarities in ideals may curb unconscious biases, resulting in a more equitable and just world.

There emerged a general consensus that it would be helpful to have multiple tools and methodologies for measuring well-being. Life-satisfaction models that dominate Western academic surveys, for instance, depend on individualist models of the self that are not representative of interdependent cultural contexts. Therefore, other self-reporting tools such as the Interdependent Happiness Scale and survey could be used to appraise levels of happiness and well-being that correspond more closely to interdependent cultural conceptions of selfhood and flourishing. Additional measures should be studied in African and Southwest Asian countries, to assess the reliability of the individual and interdependent happiness measures in these contexts. It would also be important to find a way to measure happiness that originates from what could be referred to as the theological self, which is the contribution proposed by religions (Abrahamic religions especially) as justice, based on love for God and for one’s neighbor.

One participant suggested the development of surveys that ask respondents about the kinds and numbers of opportunities for and obstacles to meaningful engagement across one’s valued social

roles or in one's *ground projects*. "What are your long-term aspirations? (Check all that apply);" "What are the main impediments to your pursuit of these aspirations? (Check all that apply);" etc. Questions like these would aim to reflect the diversity of ideals and values held by people across and within cultures.

With more measurement tools come more opportunities to examine the assumptions and limits of varying methodologies. That there exists cross-cultural variation in conceptions of well-being means that we should explicitly examine the assumptions and limits of different measuring tools, and develop complementary methodologies based on different assumptions.

Participants agreed that the diversity of conceptions of happiness and well-being lead to certain challenges for multicultural societies. For instance, if there are cultural differences in how people feel emotions, then miscommunications may arise when individuals with different cultural backgrounds express and exhibit emotions that are at cross-purposes or are simply misunderstood. (This may be why nations with larger immigrant populations exhibit stronger displays of positive emotion that facilitate clear communication.) This is especially true for individuals introduced suddenly into new cultures, such as immigrants or refugees. Even though studies have shown how these individuals adapt over time to conceptions of and levels of happiness present in the new culture, there still may be enduring differences that can result in unintentional bias. One suggestion was to create or enhance institutions to provide spaces for people of different cultures (for example, majority and minority peoples) to meet, develop, and relationships, a central theme of Pope Francis's powerful encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*.

Conclusion

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are examples of a global overlapping consensus about matters of fundamental importance. Universal rights and sustainable development are widely thought to be basic conditions for human well-being and justice. Neither universal rights nor sustainable development alone are guaranteed to produce happiness, but they are the conditions for happiness. They can serve reasonably as basic requirements in the 21st century for human flourishing, since they are the prerequisite of every cultural, philosophical, and theological approach to happiness, well-being and equity.

We strongly endorse and emphasize the importance of the suggestions made by Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti* (2020): Human beings are creatures endowed with an incorruptible soul, rationality, freedom, dignity and sociability. Therefore, cross-cultural dialogue and encounter are critical for depolarizing ideological conflicts, eliminating the scourges of racism and sexism, and preventing and deescalating violent conflicts. Schools, civil society organizations, and religious institutions across all faiths can and must deploy their resources to promote justice and sustainable development that is inclusive of cross-cultural conceptions of well-being.

