

# Sergej Milanovic:

## What everyone needs to know about happiness research

### RESUMÉ

Det overordnede tema for denne artikel er en filosofisk evaluering af lykkeforskningens mest dominerende tilgang til lykke, nemlig livstilfredsstillelseteorien. I praksis udføres evalueringen ved en behandling af Christian Bjørnskovs bidrag om lykke til den populære danske serie for videnskabelig formidling *Tænkepauser*, hvori han indtager netop en sådan teoretisk position. Jeg konkluderer at der er både metodologiske og filosofisk-konceptuelle problemer ved tilgangen til lykke som livstilfredsstillelse, hvis fordele som en empirisk videnskab må måles og vejes i henhold til disse problemer. Endelig fremlægger jeg også hvordan en mulig revision af positionen kunne se ud uden at skulle ofre dens videnskabelige integritet.

### ABSTRACT

The overall theme of this article is a philosophical evaluation of happiness research and its most dominant approach to happiness, life satisfaction theory. In practice, the evaluation is carried out in a review of Christian Bjørnskov's pocketbook on happiness in the Danish series for popular science *Tænkepauser*, wherein he embraces exactly such a position. I conclude that there are both methodological and philosophical-conceptual problems with the approach to happiness as life satisfaction. Finally, I also present a possible revision of what the position could look like without sacrificing its scientific integrity.

### EMNEORD

Lykkeforskning, livstilfredsstillelseteorien, Derek Parfit, eudaimonia

### KEYWORDS

Happiness research, life satisfaction theory, Derek Parfit, eudaimonia

## Introduction

The question of happiness is among the most decisive issues for our way of living. How we answer this question will reflect how we live our lives. It is, therefore, of crucial importance that we are able to reason critically about any attempts to answer this question.

One such attempt is so-called happiness research. A growing academic industry, it has achieved influence both in the theoretical world of academia as well as the practical sphere of socio-political decision-making. Most importantly, however, it is influencing the public. In 2014, for instance, the popular series for disseminating scientific research in Denmark, *Tænkepauser*, published a pocketbook on happiness written by a happiness researcher solely from the point of view of this field. This book is now available in various shops around the country. In it, the author, Christian Bjørnskov, sets out to present what science can teach us about happiness (Bjørnskov 2014, 9). And that is no small thing – for, according to the book description, Bjørnskov has discovered what happiness is. The book provides us with plentiful of correlations between empirical measurements of happiness and other variables such as wealth, love, etc., enabling its author to assess what makes us happy and refute some common myths (*ibid.*, 23).

What the author does not tell us, however, is that the conceptual framework of his book has been an object of immense critique not only from philosophers but other happiness researchers as well. For the layman for whom such resources are scarcely available and probably too time-consuming to read, just identifying the definition of happiness invoked in the book may seem like a difficult task – especially because the author nowhere makes the definition explicit. There is, therefore, a need for a review of the book in which Bjørnskov's approach is clarified and evaluated philosophically and in a language understandable to everyone. I regard this paper as such a review. Its object is to highlight some objections against the approach of the pocketbook in order to conclude in plain and simple terms what the layman reader ought to be aware of about the book and happiness research in general.

First, I shall clarify the conceptual approach of the book and its definition of happiness, which, as I said, is not a straightforward task. Next, I shall raise some standard objections against the approach and discuss how it could be

defended. As a part of this, I shall also propose some constructive future directions.

### **Happiness according to happiness research**

Most of Bjørnskov's book is an exposition of empirical correlations between happiness measurements and different variables without revealing which particular measurements and theoretical approaches are in question. This can serve as a rhetorical tool to make the approach sound more intuitive and conventional while, in fact, that is anything but the case. Consequently, we find the author claiming that happiness research has no definition of happiness at all and that it merely measures whatever people put into the term (*ibid.*, 17). However, well aware that this is not the case (for good reasons), Bjørnskov is forced to reveal that the surveys he is considering, such as the ones conducted by the Eurobarometer, are based on an approach to happiness as "the satisfaction with one's life as a whole" (*ibid.*). This means that, in practice, the respondents are posed the question "how satisfied are you with your life as a whole" and are given a scale with which to rate their evaluations.<sup>1</sup> The resulting figure represents that particular respondent's level of happiness or, more precisely, his or her "subjective well-being" (*ibid.*, 12).

The life satisfaction theory of happiness, which Bjørnskov embraces, is the dominant approach in happiness research at present (Vittersø 2013, 230); and, in this sense, Bjørnskov's presentation is, indeed, conventional. Sometimes, the life satisfaction theory is combined with a hedonist account by taking into consideration the balance between positive and negative affects (Diener & Pavot 2013), but Bjørnskov is very keen to exclude any hedonic component in his definition. This is because, as he claims, happiness researchers are interested in the happiness we feel over a long period of time and between the affective ups and downs in our everyday lives – or, in other words, our long-term happiness (Bjørnskov 2014, 12). To give a practical example, a drug addict might very well feel plenty of positive affects in the moment, but this does not mean he is satisfied with his life as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the OECD's guidelines to happiness measurements, the most common scale for measuring life satisfaction is the so-called "satisfaction with life scale" (OECD, 2013, p. 167).

In life satisfaction theory, therefore, this aspect of wholeness is known as the “global” (Haybron 2011, 8) or “comprehensive” (Crisp 2008, 14) approach to satisfaction vis-à-vis the satisfaction with specific domains in life such as career, family, etc. This approach to life satisfaction has the advantage that it is easier to justify on intuitive grounds why being satisfied with one’s life is more important than being satisfied with particular domains within that life.

Philosophically speaking, however, the life satisfaction theory and the hedonic theory, which Bjørnskov rejects, are not that different. Both belong to a group of so-called subjectivist theories of happiness. This means that they ground happiness in the individual’s subjective experience and state of mind. For Bjørnskov, this state is life satisfaction; whereas, for the hedonist, it is positive affects. In both cases, however, only *I* can say whether I am happy or not. The difference between hedonism and life satisfaction lies merely in *which* experience counts as contributing to happiness. In contrast to both of them, objectivist theories of happiness, such as Aristotle’s, assert that happiness is independent of whether we experience it as such. Happiness is not something we feel, it is something we are. Cultivating certain virtues or acquiring God’s blessing count as happiness independent of whether we experience them as such or no (although this should not exclude the experience of joy and satisfaction). In the following, I shall deal with some of the common objections made against life satisfaction theory and apply them to Bjørnskov’s book. A short summary is given in the conclusion.

### **A philosophical evaluation of life satisfaction theory**

Although criticism of life satisfaction theory is quite recent, there have been a number of substantial objections made against this type of theory in previous philosophical literature. Some question the possibility of measuring satisfaction with life as a whole (methodological objections) while others turn against the very definition of happiness as life satisfaction (philosophical objections). The one I will begin with here is a version of a classical philosophical critique made by Derek Parfit (1984, 494–99). In other words, what I am asking is whether a life satisfaction theory of happiness holds as a theory of happiness.

Parfit’s critique is concerned with the relationship between evaluating one’s satisfaction with life and being sufficiently informed about the factual

circumstances of that life. A respondent may very well decide that he or she is highly satisfied with his or her life while being falsely informed about its actual circumstances. Consequently, a respondent may feel satisfied because she is convinced that she is married to a good husband and living a healthy family life; whereas, in reality, that is anything but true. Take, for instance, the case of Barbara Kuklinski. Her husband, Richard Kuklinski (also known as the Iceman), lived a double life as a contract killer, claiming to have killed over 100 people while he lived a normal family life with Barbara and their children for almost 40 years. He brought home immense material wealth from his second life, ensuring that his family lived without material shortage. Barbara would most probably have scored a high number on a happiness measurement during this period of her life. But is this really a happy life?

At this point, it is important to highlight that, by “really”, we do not mean that Barbara’s delusion is objectionable on a moral basis and that she is not “really” happy because to be deluded is morally bad. This would easily be trumped by Bjørnskov with the argument that, as an empirical science, happiness research cannot conclude whether living in delusion is good or bad, morally speaking, but only assert whether people actually feel or do not feel satisfaction. It is a classical assertion within the philosophy of science that moral beliefs cannot be verified empirically. There is no material object out there that proves being deluded is absolutely bad. Unlike a plant, which we can see is green, moral observations are always grounded in some normative assumptions. It is also due to this background that the subjectivist theories of happiness are preferable in a scientific context because they refer the least to a moral fabric (Moore 2013, 22). Instead of claiming an objective account of happiness, we merely ask the respondent how he or she feels – satisfied or dissatisfied. It is, therefore, also necessary to know that happiness research cannot take into account whether the way people live their lives is morally justifiable. A subject might be a rapist and a war criminal and still be perfectly satisfied with his life.

Although this is an obvious issue for happiness research, it is not the line of argument I wish to follow here. Rather, I wish to show that, even if we accept this scientific premise and stay at the level of subjective experience, “delusion” still poses a serious issue to happiness research. This is so for the following reason: had Barbara been better informed about her life, it would have affected her subjective experience of life satisfaction significantly. Likewise, as soon as

she is exposed to the factual circumstances of her life, it will affect her life satisfaction significantly. So “delusion” remains an issue to be dealt with even at the level of subjective experience due to its tacit threat. Life satisfaction theory remains dubious.

The problem becomes even more urgent for happiness research when one takes into consideration that, in principle, there is nothing to prevent this from being the case with a whole population. The Japanese government spread propaganda during the Second World War that it was winning the war against the Allies, which might have been a factor in causing more satisfaction among its inhabitants. Had they known the truth, they would have been less satisfied.

According to the above objection, information about one’s circumstances is casually related with one’s experience of life satisfaction. Now, one can either feel too much life satisfaction compared to the factual circumstances – as, for instance, Barbara did -- or the opposite might also be true; one can be too little satisfied due to false information. I can, for instance, be dissatisfied with my life because I *falsely* believe my husband is a contract killer; whereas, in reality, he is even more honest than the average. In short, what the argument serves to show is that information has an effect on life satisfaction. Life satisfaction theory, therefore, seems to be an inadequate theory of happiness. We are looking for what some happiness researchers call “authentic” happiness, i.e., happiness that is well informed and grounded in reality (Seligman 2011, 11). Nevertheless, inauthentic happiness is exactly what (in principle) might just be the case with those populations we call “the happiest in the world”.

There is a particular reply available to the happiness researcher that is not available to life satisfaction theorists in general. For this reason, it is not considered by Parfit and only rarely brought up in philosophical discussions.<sup>2</sup> The happiness researcher might counter-argue that, despite its many philosophical deficiencies, we still need a scientific way to measure happiness, and the life satisfaction approach outruns all its rivals in terms of scientific integrity. There are two claims in this argument, which are in need of justification: (1) that we “still need a scientific way to measure happiness” and (2) that “the life satisfaction approach *outruns* all its rivals in terms of scientific

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<sup>2</sup> One place it is brought up, however, is Kappel 1996, pp. 76–96.

integrity". Since they are by no means given as true, it would be profitable to conduct a thorough inquiry into both of these claims.

(1) The incentives to measure happiness empirically are actually quite plentiful. It could, for instance, help institutions decide which subjects are most in need of medical or economic resources by comparing their subjective well-being. Furthermore, happiness measurements have already proven successful in providing unprecedented indicators in socio-political decision-making. Most strikingly, it has been demonstrated that levels of happiness are uncorrelated with GDP (OECD 2013, 37). For instance, it was perceived in retrospect that, although both Egypt and Tunisia experienced economic growth in the years leading up to the Arab Spring of 2011, both countries showed a significant decline in measurements on happiness (*ibid.*). This provides decision-makers with alternative indicators of well-being. Nevertheless, it does not mean that happiness measurements can call themselves measurements of happiness unconditionally. If we can prove that happiness measurements simply do not measure what they promise but something else, then it would be a misuse of the term "happiness".

And, as a matter of fact, such objections have been made both theoretically and empirically. Some researchers (Vittersø 2013, 233) question the very possibility of measuring life satisfaction. They ask whether respondents are really capable of providing an evaluation of their life satisfaction in a questionnaire. Given both the mind's limited capacity for information processing and our dynamic aspirations in life, it is most unlikely that respondents can articulate a finite set of personal goals in a survey and then evaluate which of them have been realized in order to give a final numerical evaluation of his or her satisfaction (*ibid.*, 234). This problem is even more urgent when one takes into consideration that empirical observations of survey responses showed that it only took respondents a couple of seconds to answer questions about life satisfaction, which is hardly sufficient to evaluate one's life as a whole (*ibid.*). Instead, studies indicate that life satisfaction reports have an inclination to be influenced by many more intuitive factors such as moods caused by the weather (Haybron 2011, 11).

The difference between life satisfaction theory and hedonism to which Bjørnskov implicitly bore witness is claimed to be that, whereas the hedonic approach measures "affects", life satisfaction measures cognitive evaluations

of life. On the basis of objections such as those raised above, this very distinction, which is crucial in Bjørnskov's book, has been questioned (Haybron 2011, 31; Crisp 2008, 15). Are people simply not giving an affective expression of how they feel about their lives this morning? Apart from being a methodological problem, it also questions the importance of life satisfaction if people cannot even provide a proper evaluation of it (*ibid.*, 11).

Although Bjørnskov does not bring up these objections, he seems to have counter-arguments against them. He argues that the respondents' free understanding and approach to what constitutes their satisfaction is a factor in favor of happiness research. He says that the benefit of such open questions is that they allow the respondent to judge according to what he or she regards as satisfying in her life instead of imposing the view of the researcher (Bjørnskov 2014, 17). His argument could also be reframed in the following way: if, in one context, the subject desires to have children in order to be content with her life but, in another, it is to be wealthy, then instead of choosing which desire is the best and correct one, happiness research allows the individual to judge according to his/her own standards. This is preferable in terms of scientific ideals because it minimizes the intervention of the researcher (*cf.* above).

There are two problems with this argument. First of all, it cannot ensure that, although the respondent is free to evaluate her life according to his/her own standards, he or she will actually have such a fixed set of standards at all. This was exactly what the above objection disputed. The objection was not concerned with whether respondents responded according to some norm of the researcher but, rather, whether the respondent even has a fixed set of relevant standards at hand and, if so, whether he or she will respond according to them or some other intuition.

The second problem with the counter-argument, following from the first, is that it cannot defend the strict distinction between short-term affects and long-term cognitive evaluations. If the respondent can respond freely according to some other intuition, then the survey runs the danger of measuring what Bjørnskov called "short-term happiness", which thereby contradicts Bjørnskov's claim that happiness research is a study of "long-term happiness". To sum up the objection, a reader of this book should be aware of the difference between what its author claims in theory to be the (ideal) case about happiness measurements



and what it actually measures in practice. Bjørnskov definitely needs to respond to this inconsistency.

(2) Be that as it may, the debates over the methodological issues in happiness research are ongoing and too recent to pass a final judgment on. If (and I repeat *if*) we accept that the life satisfaction approach to happiness research does measure what it claims to do, then we might move over to the other premise in Bjørnskov's possible counter-argument, namely, that life satisfaction theory is the best possible option in terms of scientific integrity. This necessitates a comparison with rival theories. Since I have already indicated the advantages of life satisfaction over that of hedonism with which I basically agree, I shall, instead, turn to a third option, which has received less attention in happiness research, namely, the so-called eudaimonic theory of happiness.

The eudaimonic approach defines happiness as the state of "using and developing the best in oneself, in accordance with one's true self and one's deeper principles" (Huta 2013, 201). Unlike life satisfaction (and hedonism), this theory highlights virtue over comfort. Although it is a position that has been defended since the ancient Greeks (and in multiple religious traditions), it has only recently begun to be integrated into empirical happiness research. The most successful account hitherto is the "psychological well-being scale" devised by Ryff and Keyes in 1995. This questionnaire for measuring happiness is much more complex than the ones used by life satisfaction theorists and includes components on personal growth, purpose in life, autonomy, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance (Ryff & Keyes 1995, appendix). In particular, the scale has achieved empirical reliability by being correlated to variables such as lower mental illness, successful aging and physical health, and it has been associated with a left frontal brain activation (Huta 2013, 204), which, as Bjørnskov also recognizes, is the current biological definition of happiness (Bjørnskov 2014, 12).

At the outset, I wish to argue that, philosophically speaking, the psychological well-being scale is better equipped to accommodate the objections made above against life satisfaction because it is grounded in aspects of life that are more reliable and less prone to delusion, namely, inner personality traits. This is so because, by focusing on inner personality traits, the psychological well-being scale becomes less dependent on outer material circumstances of life. Consequently, the problem of limited information about those circumstances

becomes less of a problem. Moreover, a person who scores high on this scale, for instance, would (hypothetically speaking) be less affected if she found out that her husband was a contract killer because her happiness is grounded in inner personality traits. Of course, her inner personality traits could be grounded in the material conditions of her life, but this would still be a better option than the life satisfaction approach. Moreover, there are some inner traits that ensure that the subject is directly equipped to face radical life changes. The personal growth component, for instance, which establishes that the subject values constant self-discovery (Ryff & Keyes 1995, appendix), ensures that the subject is ready for the disclosure of unknown circumstances in her life.

Nevertheless, if the position is firmer than that of life satisfaction from a philosophical point of view, it might not be so from the stance of empirical science. And this, in the end, is the point of view from which happiness research wants us to evaluate things. From this point of view, the eudaimonic approach can be criticized for being too speculative and value-laden to count as a scientific theory. This is due to the difficulty in finding empirical verification that its multitude of components really constitute happiness. The correlation with left frontal brain activity is a good attempt, but the same thing has been demonstrated in relationship to life satisfaction (Bjørnskov 2014, 12). And the correlations with mental and physical health beg the question of how to verify the qualification of these variables as happiness.

This is not to say that life satisfaction scales are completely intuitively compelling accounts of happiness – which, as we have seen, they are not, but the point is only that it is more intuitively plausible than the eudaimonic account. To demonstrate the difference, the best example of how value-laden the scale of psychological well-being can be is, perhaps, the “positive relationship with others” component. This component says that the subject cares about the welfare of others (Ryff & Keyes 1995, appendix). This, however, is by no means an intuitive understanding of happiness (at least, not compared to life satisfaction) and implies a large moral intervention on the definition of happiness by the researcher’s own convictions.

It is actually exactly due to this critique that the eudaimonic approach has experienced such poor reception in happiness research (Huta 2013, 208). Life satisfaction simply seems like a more value-neutral definition than eudaimonia. And, as Bjørnskov says (Bjørnskov 2014, 17), the strength of

happiness research has to be its value-neutrality in terms of understanding happiness. Although it is conventional, there is a serious problem with this line of reasoning if we take into consideration the critique of life satisfaction theory from earlier. If we agree that life satisfaction is highly exposed to the problem of misinformed, illusionary, inauthentic happiness, then it might be wise to sacrifice the empirical verification advantage in favor of a eudaimonic approach. The psychological well-being scale did, after all, manage to meet these objections.

But one does not have to eliminate the life satisfaction theory entirely in favor of a eudaimonic account to accommodate the objections made in this paper. Although it has not been attempted, to my knowledge, a less radical revision of Bjørnskov's account would be to incorporate some of the principles of eudaimonia into a firmer life satisfaction theory. For instance, one of the lessons learned by the eudaimonic account is that life satisfaction based on inner qualities rather than outer material conditions is less prone to delusion and, therefore, a more valuable indicator of happiness. So, all one would have to do is to construct a life satisfaction scale that takes this into account. This, I believe, designates a realistic future direction for happiness research in the light of my inquiry but surpasses, of course, the intention of this paper. For now, it suffices to say that, if money brings about more life satisfaction, as Bjørnskov claims it does (*ibid.*, 23), then that type of life satisfaction is a very dangerous type of happiness.

## **Conclusion**

What ought any reader of *Tænkepauser's* pocketbook on happiness be aware of? A number of theoretical problems with its definition of happiness have been proposed. I believe they can be summed up in three main points:

First of all and most generally, Bjørnskov understands happiness as a subjective experience of being satisfied with one's life as a whole. This means that his approach takes into consideration neither whether one's happiness is morally justifiable nor whether it is misinformed and deluded. Second, it is not even sure whether happiness research, in practice, is actually measuring what it claims, namely, life satisfaction. Much research, including empirical studies, questions the very possibility of measuring life satisfaction. Rather, what many

respondents, in reality, appear to be expressing is an intuitive short-term mood affected by such trivial factors as the weather.

Finally, if we agree that happiness research is actually measuring that to which it alludes, then it might not even be the best possible option for measuring happiness empirically. I have tried to show how Bjørnskov's theory could accommodate some of its problems by being revised and incorporating principles found in the eudaimonic approach to happiness. However, despite my directions for revision, it is doubtful *whether happiness measurements can become worthy of the name*. Although I have argued that there are good reasons for pursuing an empirical study of well-being or, more precisely, life satisfaction, we ought nevertheless to take into consideration whether it is possible to study happiness empirically in any philosophically adequate way at all. Happiness simply cannot be studied in the same way as material objects.

In any case, from now on whenever we hear that it is scientifically proven that this or that country is the happiest in the world, it should immediately sound alarm bells for us. Awakening this alarm has been the task of philosophy ever since it was conceived. Of course, it appeals to our intellectual pride (and our wallet) to be able to say that we can measure happiness empirically just as it is nice to say that we know exactly when and how the Earth was conceived, but it has always been the task of the philosophical mind to love truth more than pride (and money) and confess openly that all we know is that we do not know – no matter how humiliating it is (and how much it may cost us in research funds).

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