Saving Happiness from Politics

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In today’s academy, the pursuit of happiness is very much in vogue. Among economists, political scientists, psychologists, and epidemiologists, there is a growing movement to put the exploration of happiness, or “subjective well-being,” front and center. Reams of new research, a string of recent books, and a hyperactive conference circuit have turned happiness into arguably the hottest topic in contemporary social science.

The goals of this movement are by no means purely academic. Some of its towering figures advocate nothing less than a radical happiness agenda for the politics of the developed world. Richard Layard—an economist at the London School of Economics, a leading figure in the “happiness studies” movement, and the author of Happiness: Lessons from a New Science—argues that “we need a revolution in government. Happiness should become the goal of policy, and the progress of national happiness should be measured and analyzed.” Bruno Frey—another leading figure in the movement, and the author of Happiness: A Revolution in Economics—argues that his own field of economics should be thoroughly transformed into “happynomics.” The dismal science, he writes, “is—or should be—about personal happiness.” The first comprehensive monograph on how happiness studies should become a guide for politics, The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being, was published last year by Derek Bok, a former president of Harvard University.

And politicians are paying attention. In recent years, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Australia, and China have elevated national well-being or happiness to the status of official government policy,
drawing on the academic happiness revolution to define their goals and metrics. The 27 nations of the European Union officially plan to move “beyond GDP,” complementing their official measures of economic output with measures of well-being drawn from the happiness literature. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development—the leading policy-research organization of the developed world, run jointly by 34 nations—has launched a “Better Life Initiative,” which aims to compare well-being across its member countries. In the United States, the National Science Foundation is funding an effort to develop an official happiness measure. And this summer, President Obama named Alan Krueger—a Princeton economist and yet another prominent figure in the happiness-studies movement—to serve as chair of the White House Council of Economic Advisers.

At first glance, there is much to recommend this renewed focus on happiness. It could add a qualitative dimension to our familiar quantitative measures of human development—measures that include economic growth, income, employment, poverty, and education scores. In economics, happiness studies could be part of a useful evolution toward a broader understanding of human action, allowing the field to move beyond its narrow view of human beings as merely self-interested, rational, utility-maximizing agents.

But upon closer examination, the particular means and ends of happiness studies raise serious concerns. The field appears first and foremost to be driven by a desire to downplay the importance of economic growth in enabling individual and societal well-being. In place of growth, it proposes a vague idea of “happiness” that cannot be sufficiently defined or measured to serve as a reliable policy instrument. The field also suffers from deeply flawed moral presumptions, appearing to implicitly accept a thoroughly hedonistic understanding of happiness.

Taken as a whole, the discipline of happiness studies appears to be motivated less by a new understanding of human well-being than by a desire to rationalize and update the policies of the social-democratic welfare state. While advocating a state of well-being, the happiness movement—at least as applied to politics—produces little more than a new defense of the old entitlement state.

By identifying the flaws in the economic, philosophical, and moral assumptions that underpin this growing field, we can better understand the flaws in its goals and policy recommendations. More important, we can
see our way toward public policies that truly facilitate, rather than pre-
determine and politically manipulate, the genuine pursuit of happiness.

THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS

Happiness scholars argue that their field arose in response to a peculiar paradox of the post-war West. Throughout the developed world, people have gotten richer and richer — average living standards have more than doubled since 1950 — but, as measured by opinion polls and social-scientific surveys, people on average are no happier, or are at best only marginally happier. Since more wealth apparently does not generate more measurable happiness, policymakers cannot simply treat economic growth as a proxy for well-being and should instead adopt policies designed specifically to foment and support happiness.

The assertion that more wealth does not produce more happiness is commonly known as the “Easterlin Paradox.” In a series of statistical analyses starting in the early 1970s, economist Richard Easterlin noted a striking anomaly: On one hand, within a given country at a given moment in time, wealthier people on average were clearly happier than poorer people. On the other hand, there appeared over time to be very little, if any, relationship between increases in income and happiness levels. This is said to suggest that human beings, once their basic needs are met, adapt to rising prosperity and therefore do not remain durably happier because of it. Real happiness must therefore be found elsewhere. If happiness is our goal, economic growth should no longer be the primary aim of government policy in the developed world.

This is the happiness mantra in its undiluted form. But does it hold up to scrutiny?

The first hint that the happiness agenda may rest on flimsy foundations emerges when one examines the basic assumption upon which the entire enterprise rests: that happiness can be objectively, empirically measured. The apostles of the happiness agenda are eager to stress the scientific nature of their endeavors; happiness is labeled a “new science” rooted in empirical observation. It is claimed we now know, at long last, what really makes people happy. But any unbiased observer who encounters happiness studies for the first time cannot help being struck by how crude and unsophisticated they actually are.

Almost all the available happiness research to date is based on surveys that ask individuals how happy or how satisfied they are with their lives.
The World Values Survey, which is the basis for much of the happiness research, asks, “Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy; quite happy; not very happy; not at all happy?” At another point, it asks: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?” The Gallup World Poll employs an analogy in which interviewees are asked to imagine a ladder with each rung representing a successively better life. Respondents then report the “step” on the ladder that best corresponds to their lives. Academic surveys typically involve general questions probing happiness or life satisfaction. Some samples: “Taken all together how would you say that things are these days?” “Do you think of yourself as very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?” “Have you lost much sleep over worry?” “Have you been able to concentrate on things?” “Have you felt you are playing a useful part in things?” “Have you felt capable of making decisions about things?” “Have you felt constantly under strain?” “Have you felt you could not overcome your difficulties?” “Have you been able to enjoy your normal day-to-day activities?” “Have you been able to face up to your problems?” “Have you been feeling unhappy and depressed?” “Have you been losing confidence in yourself?” “Have you been thinking of yourself as a worthless person?” “Have you been feeling reasonably happy all things considered?”

Such lines of questioning remind one more of the shrink’s sofa than of meticulous data mining. Nevertheless, they are invoked to “scientifically” diagnose the state of the human condition and to promote a policy agenda.

Further problems arise from the fact that responses to such questions are inherently subjective and relative. Feelings of personal well-being are influenced by infinite personal and cultural biases. Every individual faces life’s predicaments differently: Our biological and neurological makeups differ; education and cultural norms vary; societal attitudes and expectations are wide-ranging. All of these influences affect the way different people judge similar situations using their unique happiness scales. Moreover, the standards of judgment people use when reporting their levels of happiness are contextual and malleable. For instance, as Michael Hagerty of the University of California, Davis, has shown, when people are asked to report how well they are doing relative to their own past and to their parents’, self-reported levels of happiness rise dramatically.

Even more important, happiness surveys are collections of snapshot impressions, asking respondents to commit their immediate feelings to
paper. But people are susceptible to moment-to-moment fluctuations in mood, so the timing of surveys matters a great deal yet—and yet it is not generally taken into account. Even more important, meaning and value in life generally emerge only over time, and can be judged only in retrospect. This fundamental facet of human wisdom, however, is left out of the equation entirely. Available happiness estimates are about instant and real-time sensations, not about sustained contentment.

This is a crucial point, for two reasons: First, the in-the-moment approach of such surveys steers subsequent happiness policy toward short-term satisfaction, raising the question of whether this is truly the kind of happiness our society should seek to foster. Second, it allows those who champion happiness policies over growth policies to ignore the very same fact that brought them to question economic growth in the first place: our human tendency to adapt to circumstances over time. While they raise doubts about the appeal of wealth because of its supposed inability to improve happiness in the long run, they have no problems evaluating happiness as an instantaneous and real-time phenomenon.

In fact, while happiness surveys record one-off snapshots at different intervals, other research convincingly demonstrates that momentary circumstances and events often have surprisingly little impact when happiness is instead measured over time. For example, numerous studies have found that people with severe chronic health conditions report happiness levels that are close to those reported by healthy persons; the happiness levels of the ill respondents are also much better than healthy people believe their moods would be if they suffered from those conditions. By and large, researchers have found, happiness levels appear remarkably impervious to changes in external conditions; subjective happiness is influenced far more by internal factors such as genetic disposition and temperament.

Furthermore, the whole mechanism of grading happiness in relation to wealth—the key statistic fueling the entire happiness agenda—suffers from a severe methodological flaw: While income continues to rise over time, no respondent in these polls can keep on increasing his personal happiness level beyond “very happy.” Thus, after a certain point, increased wealth appears not to result in greater happiness. This “evidence” that more wealth does not bring more lasting happiness is simply the inevitable result of the very statistical mechanism that is supposed to measure and report it.
Another defect in the happiness campaign stems from the Achilles heel of all statistical inquiries: the distinction between correlation and causation. It is not enough to fathom the connection (or lack thereof) between wealth and happiness. For any judgment to be scientifically admissible, one must also establish the causes of the observed relationship. Almost the entire collection of happiness surveys fails on this account alone; researchers are simply unable to link recorded sentiments to a comprehensive set of sources of happiness or distress. There are, to be sure, some recognized categories of correlation linking happiness to money, work, health, family, community, and friends. But beyond these broad generalizations, many possible factors that influence subjective well-being still await exploration.

Obviously, happiness surveys are not entirely random; they cannot be discarded as wholly irrelevant. Some studies have also tried to verify assessments of subjective happiness, and have found statistically relevant degrees of reliability. But even this work to rationalize the irrational remains sketchy and superficial. Happiness research essentially relies on rudimentary surveys because it has nothing better: People are reckoned to be the best available judges of their own happiness. While this makes some sense, it can hardly be called a “scientific” basis for a broad policy agenda to orchestrate collective happiness. Quite the contrary: If evidence of vague ephemeral feelings of happiness is to be used as the basis for public policy, then why question the much more reliable and verifiable evidence that people desire prosperity and material goods? Why question people’s consumer decisions, but accept their assessments of happiness?

Happiness and Growth

While flawed methodology and false claims to empiricism may be the most basic problems with the happiness movement, they are not the most pernicious. Of greater concern is the movement’s hostility to people’s very clearly demonstrated desire for wealth — and the resulting view that we should de-emphasize economic growth — which have the potential to lead to truly disastrous economic policy.

The key issue here is Richard Easterlin’s argument that, over time, increasing growth and prosperity yield little (if any) additional happiness. The validity of Easterlin’s paradox itself is by no means certain: More recent statistical work — ably analyzed, for instance, by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers of the University of Pennsylvania in 2008 — has
demonstrated a clear relationship between per-capita income and average happiness levels, with no sign that the correlation weakens over time or as income levels increase. The Easterlin Paradox may actually not exist at all; at the very least, the jury is still out.

Even if Easterlin’s paradox turns out to be valid, moreover, its actual findings are quite limited in scope and implications. It applies only to longitudinal effects: Tracing the happiness of a population sample in prosperous nations over a long period of time shows that life satisfaction tends to change very little with the rise and fall of people’s incomes as they progress through their lives and careers. Among different people in the same society, higher average levels of happiness at a given moment (even if we accept the definition of happiness used in such studies) correspond to higher levels of wealth. International surveys also show differences in average happiness among nations to be closely correlated with differences in average per-capita income in those nations. Wealthier countries thus clearly have happier populations than poorer ones. This in itself should be sufficient to keep prosperity and economic growth high on the list of policy priorities.

Furthermore, the Easterlin Paradox relies on aggregate happiness data for entire populations. It does not track the evolution of happiness across sub-groups within those populations. When this is done, historically disadvantaged groups (such as African-Americans in the United States) have, over time, come to manifest substantially improved happiness levels. There can be little doubt that such improvement is closely connected to increased opportunities for both educational and economic advancement, neither of which would have existed but for an undercurrent of economic growth and the wealth it generated. As long as there are societal needs — and as long as there are people on the lower rungs of the ladder yearning to move up — growth and wealth will continue to be crucial both for raising living standards and for increasing happiness.

The main problem, however, is less the supposed paradox than what happiness apostles want to do with it. Easterlin’s work does not suggest that economic growth is not supportive of happiness. It suggests only that, over time, people adapt their expectations to their growing wealth, so that sustained economic growth does not result in similarly sustained improvements in happiness. That does not imply, however, that diminished economic growth would leave happiness untouched. And this point is the
crux of the debate: not whether more economic growth and prosperity durably produce more happiness, but whether abiding a decrease in economic growth and prosperity would not reduce people’s happiness. The key issue, in other words, is not whether the public overall is no happier than it was half a century ago, but whether the public would be willing to return to the living standards of that epoch—with fewer cars, no color TVs, no computers, internet, or cell phones—and be equally happy.

No studies have demonstrated that implausible premise, of course. All the available evidence certainly points in the opposite direction. Joblessness, lack of economic or educational opportunities, eroding health care, poor pensions—these are the tokens of economic stagnation, and they most certainly undermine happiness instead of promoting it. Easterlin himself is keen to point out that unemployment, more than almost any other factor, consistently undermines happiness.

The fundamental premise upon which the happiness revival rests therefore does not justify the policy agenda that its advocates draw from it. That material aspirations escalate with economic growth—thereby reducing and eventually leveling happiness effects—simply does not imply that reducing or freezing growth would in fact generate more happiness. Moreover, the statistical intricacies of the effects of greater prosperity on happiness tend to blind us to some very plain truths. Studies that do not rate personal happiness in real time—i.e., do not ask people how they are feeling at that moment—but instead ask respondents what they require for overall happiness and life satisfaction all deliver similar results: Family relationships, community, friends, money, work, and health are universally valued as sources of happiness.

Few among us would expect the government to provide us with satisfying marital lives or communities of friends. That leaves money and work, both of which directly depend on economic growth, while public health and health care depend heavily on the proceeds of growth. Economic growth is thus the common underlying facilitator of all the major happiness factors that reasonably fall within the ambit of government policy. The happiness mantra that prioritizes happiness over growth fails on its own terms. Happiness advocates who want to promote happiness instead of growth should therefore be careful what they wish for: They will get less growth and less happiness at the same time.

Any attempt to disconnect happiness from growth also has uncomfortable ethical implications. A government that prioritizes happiness
over growth is a government that is ready to accept a lower standard of living for its citizens. And our ability to adapt to economic conditions works both ways: We can adjust to misery as well as to wealth. During the recent economic crisis, for instance, Americans’ assessments of their personal well-being nosedived after the 2008 Wall Street meltdown. By mid-2009, however, those assessments had recovered to stable (and slowly rising) levels, despite increasing joblessness and diminishing wealth. As Princeton’s Angus Deaton showed in a study published this fall, the arrival of Valentine’s Day had more of an effect on the well-being of Americans as measured by happiness surveys than did a doubling of unemployment.

When a society fails to offer economic opportunity and jobs, people derive more happiness from non-economic factors. Are we ready, then, to ignore the plight of the unemployed because their happiness levels adjust to their hardships? And are those who question the value of economic growth ready to impose the happiness framework of poor countries upon rich ones? Making happiness the overriding aim of public policy would bring us to accept, and even to justify, hardship and decline. This could hardly be called responsible public policy or moral improvement.

This is the implicit (and often explicit) aim of the happiness scholars: to drive us to value non-material goods over wealth. But this goal is based on a simplistic and paternalistic understanding of how human beings think about their own contentment. After all, if ever-increasing wealth yields only uncertain rewards of happiness, why do so many of us try so hard to achieve it?

The truth is that increasing wealth may bring a degree of satisfaction that is difficult, if not impossible, to measure by polling personal happiness. Many of us undoubtedly strive for wealth because it enables us to achieve other goals — for ourselves, our families, and our communities — that the happiness surveys simply do not register. A focus on happiness over growth would thus curtail our ability to use material prosperity for non-material goals, thereby limiting our freedom to achieve contentment. By relying on a simplistic understanding of happiness, the happiness advocates would narrow and flatten our actual pursuit of it. This makes for a clear moral case against the bland promotion of happiness over growth — but it is just the beginning of the happiness movement’s moral travails.
In the Western philosophical tradition, there are, as a general matter, two types of happiness. The first is so-called *eudaimonic* well-being (from the Greek *daimon*, meaning true spirit), which harks back to Aristotle and his conviction that true happiness is found by leading a virtuous life. In this understanding of happiness, the realization of our human potential is the ultimate goal. The second type is the happiness that Aristotle found vulgar: *hedonic* well-being, derived from mere personal pleasure and contentment of the moment. This sort of happiness is traditionally associated with Jeremy Bentham and his strictly utilitarian approach to life.

What kind of happiness is the academic happiness movement after? One of the movement’s leading lights, Richard Layard, puts it this way: “By happiness I mean feeling good — enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained. By unhappiness I mean feeling bad and wishing things to be different.” University of Illinois psychologist Ed Diener, who has been called the dean of American happiness scholars, describes a happy person as one who “experiences life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experiences unpleasant emotions such as sadness or anger.” This approach is profoundly hedonistic. The happiness surveys, with their focus on personal sentiment and instant sensations, are equally biased toward hedonism. They are the 21st-century equivalents of the “hedonometers” envisioned by Bentham’s 19th-century utilitarian heirs as the scientific measure of human contentment.

If hedonic pleasures are to constitute the bedrock of public policy, we risk committing our societies to a course of instant and often superficial gratification instead of real fulfillment. If hedonic contentment is to be its goal, then the burgeoning happiness revolution will end up promoting the very materialism and consumerism its proponents so often associate with the “growth addiction” they seek to break. After all, relaxing, shopping, watching TV, socializing, and having sex are activities that typically generate a high level of hedonic happiness. Household work, professional work, and commuting to work are associated with low average levels of happiness. Are we then to promote an empty lifestyle of transient pleasures?

Whatever the orientation, one thing is clear: No happiness policy can be pursued without a prior normative, moral choice about the type of
happiness our society wants to promote. Are we to promote hedonistic contentment, notwithstanding its short-term and fleeting nature, or do we instead seek a more eudaimonic happiness over the longer term—even if that requires short-term sacrifices, and even temporary unhappiness? This need for a moral foundation requires profound contemplation, which the happiness literature has thus far largely avoided. The claim that happiness is self-evidently good, and is therefore by definition the proper guide for both private decisions and public policies, withers without such a prior understanding of what sort of happiness we actually mean. And as all evidence suggests that the happiness agenda has in mind the hedonic sort, we would do well to apply John Stuart Mill’s famous aphorism on 19th-century utilitarianism to its present-day re-incarnation: “Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

The inescapable ethical dimension of the happiness debate goes well beyond the scope of individual human development. What matters for individuals affects society at large. Irrespective of whether we favor hedonic or eudaimonic happiness as the standard for personal well-being, we should consider its potential aggregate effect on mankind. Should we douse society with comfortable pleasure? Or should we recognize that many a shared human triumph was born from personal adversity and effort? Do we not risk undermining human progress by seeking to provide everyone with shallow, individualized happiness? Few among us would favor deliberately organizing hardship for the sake of promoting greatness, of course. But we should not forget that the success story of Western innovation is rooted in a culture of hard work, personal sacrifice, and delayed gratification. An agenda obsessed with hedonic pleasure is a strategy for decline. No wonder its champions want us to drop economic growth as a metric of policy success.

Beyond societal progress, there is the question of societal cohesion. Turning individual happiness into a policy goal implies a radically individualistic policy orientation. It may counteract a narrow-minded obsession with individual interest, but only to replace it with a focus on individual pleasure. In both cases the prism remains the individual and the policy remains extremely individualistic. Community interests are nowhere to be seen. Our current happiness extollers again echo the worldview of their 19th-century utilitarian predecessors: Jeremy Bentham famously stated that “the community is a fictitious body” and that the interest of the community is merely “the sum of the interests of the several
members who compose it.” This atomistic approach to society is the philosophical prerequisite for the utilitarian agenda of hedonic happiness promotion; one cannot posit individual happiness as the ultimate aim without accepting the individual as the ultimate yardstick.

This view amounts to little more than societal nihilism. Any society, in the end, rests upon a moral order—whether articulated or unspoken—that balances freedom and coercion, and settles the relationship between personal impulses and community requirements. Our social contract contrasts self-interest with the public interest. Consequently, we inevitably have to limit the promotion of individual happiness to what is accepted by society as proper and desirable. Here again, the happiness program necessitates a normative and moral inquiry in which its enthusiasts fail to participate.

The moral case for a deliberate happiness agenda is therefore far from straightforward. Any happiness policy—no matter how shaky or solid its statistical foundations, no matter how sound or foolish its economics—will face a difficult moral tradeoff ignored by the swelling chorus of happiness acolytes. And no matter how clever or balanced our construction of happiness may be, we cannot escape the fact that it will fail to capture a wide range of values and dimensions that people legitimately care about. If life is about much more than money, as most of us will readily admit, it is clearly also about much more than mere personal pleasure. Any hedonic happiness policy by definition succumbs to an egotistic, self-indulgent bias that ignores other fundamentals of the human condition—not only on the personal level, but also in the contexts of marriage, family, community, and society.

**POLITICIZING HAPPINESS**

Perhaps the best test of the happiness agenda is whether its aims could ever make for successful public policies. The answer, it seems, is no: To some extent, whatever it takes to achieve genuine personal happiness will always remain within individuals, not within the powers of politicians or public officials. There are simply too many personal, familial, genetic, cultural, and societal factors, and too many idiosyncrasies that will forever remain beyond the grasp of public policy and public servants, no matter how enlightened and determined they may be.

Since no policy can simply instill happiness directly into a person’s heart, the best a policymaker can do is try to produce conditions that
he understands to be conducive to happiness. To do so, he must select which instruments to use and which criteria to apply. Any happiness policy will have to limit its aims and standardize its methods: It might focus on income redistribution, manipulate the education system, provide housing, regulate advertising, invest in public transportation, mandate parental leave, recalibrate working conditions, or offer accessible health care to all (to name some of the policy solutions proposed in the happiness literature).

The bottom line, however, is always the same: The pursuit of happiness by policy boils down to having zealous politicians regulate the rest of us into their versions of happiness, based upon some idealistic researcher’s understanding of what happiness means and some benign technocrat’s interpretation of it. No happiness program can avoid a “one-size-fits-all” view of happiness for a population of immense diversity; by seeking to promote happiness, we end up prescribing it.

Moreover, in designing policy to promote happiness, policymakers must implicitly distinguish good happiness from bad happiness. It is not just happiness as such that is politically defined, but also the morality of happiness. The happiness movement may well be in denial about this imperative, as we have seen, but policymakers do not have the same luxury. Government will enter the business of promoting what it considers healthy happiness, and of helping its citizens distinguish between superficial pleasures and real happiness. This gets the happiness agenda into hot philosophical waters: A system of government rooted in respect for individual liberty cannot justifiably interfere with its members’ liberty by legislating morality unless doing so serves a sufficiently important and legitimate social objective. The political promotion of hedonic pleasure therefore infringes uncomfortably upon a constitutional tradition of liberty.

Do we really expect politicians and bureaucrats to be better placed to make decisions for our own good than we are? Do we really want government to frame our state of happiness, or do we want the state to allow and enable us to strive for personal happiness on our own? It is no accident that, at its fringes, the happiness movement hosts a small batch of radical thinkers who want to trade the open economy for a form of planned economic development, using well-being as a new veil to shroud some very old collectivist ambitions. And it is no accident that, at its core, the movement yields policy recipes that
have the familiar imprint of state-provided and state-controlled entitlements.

In the extreme variety, the politics of happiness has a troubling and uncomfortable totalitarian odor. In the moderate variety, it merely opens a new front in the case for the welfare state, paving the way to what could be called “hedonic welfarism.” In both cases, the right to freely pursue one’s own happiness is partly replaced by the duty to accept what politicians and officials determine to be happiness. And once that shift has occurred, there is no stopping the continued slide.

At the point of policy action, happiness scholarship thus morphs into a haphazard collection of well-intended programs amounting to an updated welfare state. This is a profound irony: A movement inspired by individualistic happiness ends up advancing collectivist public policy. We are promised a wholesale policy revolution but instead receive another round of an already overburdened welfare state. Indeed, some of the policies advocated by the happiness activists are already realities in many of today’s European welfare states.

The trouble is that the welfare state does not easily produce the happiness these activists are after. A great deal of evidence suggests that nations with larger welfare states do not have citizens with higher levels of subjective well-being, that rising income inequality has coincided with declining “happiness inequality,” and that the effect of inequality on the poor’s happiness depends much more on a society’s cultural attitude toward inequality than on inequality per se. Though income and economic growth may not always be powerful predictors of personal happiness, personal liberty and control over one’s life certainly are. Around the world, there is a strong correlation between individual freedom and individual happiness. A great deal of research (ably summarized in 2008, for instance, by Ronald Inglehart, Roberto Foa, Christopher Peterson, and Christian Welzel) shows that economic freedom, political freedom, perceived societal tolerance, autonomy, and self-determination are all decisively correlated to personal happiness. In other words, happiness starts with the freedom to determine one’s own happiness—precisely the freedom the happiness movement would inevitably erode.

Here again, the happiness agenda fails on its own terms. By putting happiness before economic growth, it reduces for entire populations the possibility of self-realization that rising living standards so powerfully
enable. By promoting hedonic happiness as the ultimate goal, it restricts our ability to choose other ultimate ends instead. And by promoting happiness through interventionist entitlements, it risks reducing the autonomy and self-determination that support happiness.

**A REAL HAPPINESS AGENDA**

The pursuit of happiness is a natural and essential part of the human experience, as philosophers have always recognized. The individual happiness of citizens can clearly benefit society as well. There is obviously a strong case for counting happiness among the goals of public policy, and for avoiding an understanding of happiness that is too narrowly economic and materialistic.

But this is not what today's academic (and increasingly political) happiness movement is about. A dedicated corps of very visible champions and enthusiasts is instead advocating a profoundly utilitarian path—defending the greatest hedonic happiness of mankind as the ultimate common good, and arguing for its promotion as the overarching goal of public policy. This opens the way for a deliberate politicization of happiness that points to interventionist policies and an endlessly expanding hedonic welfare state.

Valuing personal happiness should not be allowed to serve as an alibi for a new wave of egalitarian social engineering. Of course government can and must play an important part in the promotion of happiness for its citizens. But that does not require us to re-invent the wheel or revolutionize our economic models. We can begin with some straightforward truths.

First, economic growth and happiness are clearly allies, not enemies. Happiness cannot replace growth as a goal of policy; it depends on growth for the many material and immaterial goods we need and value. No country, however developed, can be frozen in a state of permanent prosperity. Policies that seek to enable the pursuit of happiness should therefore seek to promote, complement, and improve growth, not to neglect or suffocate it.

Second, all available research shows that lasting happiness depends primarily on personal temperament, marriage, social relationships, employment, perceived health, religion, and the quality of government. The state can contribute to some of these, and can help to sustain an environment friendly to others, but it cannot directly provide any of
them except the last. To best promote happiness, therefore, government should get its own house in order, allowing its citizens to have confidence in rulers and rules alike. And it should pursue a thriving economy capable of providing employment opportunities. It can consider various means of helping people obtain health care, or of supporting family life, thriving communities, and the freedom of religion. But it cannot do any of this by imposing a narrow and constricting vision of happiness upon the public.

Beyond a level of basic material needs, personal happiness is and will always be significantly personal and subjective. Attempting to provide it collectively through an assortment of entitlements is bound to fail. There is a thin line between facilitating the individual pursuit of happiness and prescribing it for all of us. That line marks the difference between a free society that maximizes the opportunity for prosperity and the chance of happiness and a compulsive system that reduces the possibility of both. We should therefore treat the happiness revival — in the academy, in politics, and elsewhere — with appropriate skepticism and concern.