

CRITICAL REMARKS ON SHORTCUTS TO HAPPINESS: THE RELEVANCE OF EFFORT AND PAIN

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ABSTRACT

This paper discloses and questions two assumptions on happiness that are implied by medical and technological proposals for mood enhancement. The first assumption holds that happiness consists of the indiscriminate maximization of positive and minimization of negative emotions. Second, mood enhancement implies the belief that an effortless enhancement of positive emotions will increase happiness. These assumptions are questioned by investigating the validity of the common sense slogan 'No pain, no gain'. Support for this claim is found in literature on adversity and happiness, effort and happiness, and in evolutionary psychology. From these research domains it is shown that adversity, pain, bother or effort should not always be regarded as negative experiences to be avoided in the pursuit for happiness. In some cases they can contribute to a person's quality of life. By questioning the indiscriminate and effortless enhancement of positive emotions and avoidance of negative ones, this perspective suggests a different view on happiness than the one generally assumed by proponents of mood enhancement.

1. Introduction

Techniques for mood enhancement are not a recent invention. In prehistoric times people already performed mood altering activities or used mood altering substances. Around 30.000 years ago our direct ancestors, the Cro-Magnon people, established different practices such as hypnogogic dreaming, deep trance and hallucinations to provide altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams, 2002). People then had already discovered that these peak emotional experiences could be aroused by fasting, rhythmic movement, repetitive sound or the ingestions of

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hallucinogenic plants. Based on archaeological evidence it is assumed that the use of psychoactive substances dates back at least 10.000 years and historical data give evidence of the cultural use of drugs over the past 5000 years (Merlin, 2003). Rooted in a variety of cultural traditions, these methods for mood enhancement were obtained by trial and error. More recently however, medical and technological evolutions have introduced new mood enhancing techniques. Medical interventions such as taking pills or implanting electrodes into the brain can induce enhanced levels of positive mood. Because they result from scientific research, these new techniques for mood enhancement are much more precise, faster and involve a higher level of human control compared to previously existing techniques. Their greater effectiveness offers new opportunities, but also involves new problems. If these techniques offer the possibility of effectively and verifiably increasing the human level of positive emotions, some ethical issues must be considered. Is mood enhancement desirable for all individuals and for society? Are there any drawbacks? Should all positive emotions indiscriminately be enhanced or are there certain restrictions? And is this artificial increase of positive emotions an efficient road to authentic long-lasting happiness?

In this paper these questions will not be addressed directly. Before they are dealt with, it is useful to examine the specific assumptions on happiness that are implied by medical and technological proposals for mood enhancement. This paper departs from the following assumptions. First, proponents of mood enhancement implicitly assume that happiness is the maximization of positive emotions and the minimization of negative emotions. This interpretation of happiness, which is often called utilitarian or hedonic², is dominant in the current research tradition on happiness. Second, mood enhancement also implies the belief that an effortless and indiscriminate enhancement of positive emotions will increase happiness.

Some questions can be raised about this view on happiness. First, it is important to be vigilant in relation to an indiscriminate enhancement of positive emotions. Should all positive emotions be increased, and all negative emotions be avoided? Second, it should be questioned if the effortless enhancement of positive emotions is an efficient way to reach

² Hedonism here refers to ‘activities undertaken for the sake of either attaining some pleasure or avoiding something unpleasant’ (Vitterso, 2003: 142).

authentic and lasting happiness. Related to these two first questions, a third one is about the role of effort and pain in this pursuit of happiness. Mood enhancing techniques are based on the belief in an effortless enhancement of positive emotions. This effortless and stressless route to the pursuit for happiness can be questioned. Should stress, bother, effort and pain always be avoided when pursuing a higher level of positive mood?

In this paper we will address these three questions by examining one specific common sense argument that is often formulated against mood enhancement. Many people have the intuition that it is impossible to successfully reach something without some pain or effort. This can apply to the affective level as well as to the cognitive or behavioural level. Applied to happiness, this implies that happiness cannot be reached without some effort or the experience of some degree of pain. Attempts to make progress while avoiding discomfort are believed to fail or not to last. Moreover, these attempts are believed to be illegitimate or cheating. This common sense intuition is often summarized in the slogan ‘No pain, no gain’. Throughout this paper we will investigate the validity of this belief. We will do this by discussing evidence from different research fields on the relationship between happiness and pain on the one hand, and happiness and effort on the other hand. This evidence will show that adversity, pain, bother or effort should not always be regarded as negative experiences to be avoided. On the contrary, they can play a constitutive role in our lives. This perspective assumes a different view on happiness than the one generally assumed by proponents of mood enhancement.

2. ‘No pain, no gain’

The idea that success or gain is impossible without some effort or pain is very old. It goes at least back to Antiquity. Epicurus believed that sometimes we must reject pleasure and accept pain to secure a greater and longer lasting pleasure. In the Middle Ages the idea was incorporated by the Christian perspective on happiness. Only after a lifelong period of devotion, suffering and good work could one be rewarded with eternal happiness in the hereafter (McMahon, 2005). A few centuries later the ‘no pain, no gain’ slogan was particularly popular

in the Protestant work ethic. This work ethic emphasized the necessity of constant and hard work to reach personal salvation. In this context the argument was clearly morally loaded. It was believed that people had to earn happiness or success through hard work.

But the slogan has also been used in secular contexts. More recently the expression has been adopted in a variety of sports and fitness activities. 'No pain, no gain' is used as an exercise motto in the bodybuilding community. It expresses the idea that solid large muscles are the result of hard training and suffering sore muscles, implying that those who avoid pain will never reach a professional level as bodybuilders. Ironically, however, a lot of steroids are used in this community. 'No pain, no gain' has become an American modern mini-narrative of everyone who understands that the road to achievement runs only through hardship. This idea is also implied in the modern ideal of female beauty. High heels, depilation and dieting exemplify the belief that a woman has to suffer to be beautiful. Against that, medical interventions such as plastic surgery or stomach surgery are often believed to be ineffective because of the use of a shortcut.

In general the slogan 'No pain, no gain' refers to the failure of all attempts to make progress in some personal goal without experiencing some discomfort. In many people's intuition these attempts are believed to be illegitimate or cheating. Moreover they are believed to fail or not to last because of the use of a shortcut. This belief can be used as an argument against enhancement. In sports for instance, it can be stated that doping removes part of the suffering that contributes to the athletes' satisfaction of the result. It can be substantiated that removing this suffering interferes with the results of the performance. A similar argument can be used against medical mood enhancement. It can be questioned if the artificial increase of positive emotions can result in authentic and long-lasting experiences of happiness. The 'no pain, no gain'-argument against mood enhancement definitely denies this. An effective result can only be achieved through hard work and the endurance of some pain. In what follows we will investigate whether this very old and strong intuition can be verified by scientific research. We will do so by having a look at three different strands of research. First, literature on the relation between adversity and happiness will be consulted. Second, we will use literature on the relation between effort

and happiness, and finally we will have a look at evolutionary psychology.

3. Adversity and happiness

According to Jonathan Haidt (2006:136) “people need adversity, setbacks, and perhaps even trauma to reach the highest levels of strength, fulfilment, and personal development”. However, this strong claim cannot be true all the time. Research shows that stressors are generally bad for people because they contribute to depression, anxiety disorders, and heart disease. Nonetheless, under some conditions, adversity and severe stress can be beneficial. These benefits – summarized as ‘posttraumatic growth’ (Haidt, 2006: 138) – can be threefold. First, rising to a challenge can reveal your hidden abilities, and seeing these abilities changes your self-concept. After experiencing traumas, people often realize they are stronger than they thought they were which can give them confidence to face future challenges. The trauma makes them more inoculated against future stress. They recover more quickly in part because they know they can cope. Religious leaders have often pointed to exactly this benefit of suffering. A second benefit is that adversity is a filter that exposes true friendships, and distinguishes them from fair-weather friendships. Moreover, adversity also strengthens relationships. Third, traumas can change your values and perspective on what matters in life. In the face of adversity people often realize that life is a gift they have been taking for granted, and that people matter more than money. Trauma changes priorities and philosophies towards the present and toward other people (Haidt, 2006: 138-40).

Of course these positive outcomes of adversity do not occur all the time and for every person. There will be noticeable differences between optimists and pessimists. A second condition that matters is what people do after a stressful or traumatic experience. Research shows that people who talked with their friends or with a support group were largely spared the damaging effects of trauma. Also writing about the trauma proved helpful because of the process of making sense of the situation. Being able to create a meaningful story about one’s experiences has been shown to be beneficial (Haidt, 2006:146-8).

Thus far, there is little evidence to prove the adversity hypothesis. But Haidt (2006) explains this lack of verification by the restrictive focus

of most studies. Researchers who found no personality changes after adversity mainly focussed on basic traits such as the Big Five. But personality has more than one level. Besides basic traits that involve people's automatic reactions to various situations, there are two other important levels of personality. Level two involves characteristic adaptations such as personal goals, defence, coping mechanisms, values, beliefs and life-stage concerns. At this second level of personality it becomes clear why adversity might be necessary for optimal human development (Haidt, 2006: 144). When dealing with adversity many people change their goals. It knocks them off the treadmill and opens them up to other perspectives. In this way adversity may allow people to reconsider their life goals, and choose goals that contribute more to their happiness in the long run (Haidt, 2006: 144). For instance, striving for achievement and wealth makes people less happy than aiming at more socially oriented goals (Emmons, 1999; Emmons, 2003; Kasser, 2002). Haidt believes that the need for adversity is even more obvious at the third level of personality (Haidt, 2006: 144). This level consists of the narrative dimension of the self that results from interpreting your own behaviour. To write a good story one needs interesting material which might be provided by experiences of adversity. Haidt (2006: 146-9) concludes that adversity might enable one to make radical changes that constitute coherence between the three levels of one's personality. The benefits of stress are thus related to sense making and coherence of the three personality levels.

Does all this verify the adversity hypothesis? Haidt (2006: 141) claims there is enough support for a weak version of the hypothesis, which holds that adversity *can* lead to growth, strength, joy and self-improvement by posttraumatic growth. The strong version of the hypothesis is more doubtful. This holds that people *must* endure adversity to grow, and the highest levels of growth and development are only open to those who have faced and overcome great adversity. This amounts to the slogan 'No pain no gain'. Haidt (2006:149-51) believes this strong claim might only be true under certain conditions. Young children are particularly vulnerable to adversity, while people in their late teens or early twenties can benefit from it. Adversity can make this second group stronger and happier than without it. Another restriction concerns a person's social networks. People who weathered crises while embedded within strong social groups and networks fare much better

because social networks reduce suffering and provide meaning and purpose. And a final restriction refers to the degree of stress one is exposed to. In conclusion, the strong version of the adversity hypothesis is only true if adversity strikes in young adulthood, to people with sufficient social and psychological resources to be able to rise challenges and find benefits, and to the right degree (not as severe as to cause posttraumatic stress disorder).

4. Effort and happiness

Other evidence that seemingly negative experiences might contribute to a person's flourishing or happiness can be found in the flow model. This model demonstrates that experiences that require effort and skill can contribute considerably to the general quality of a person's life.

The concept of flow was introduced by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) to describe a specific experience of fluid and involved performance in which the actor is immersed in the activity. Flow can occur in virtually any activity as long as some conditions are met. Flow occurs when a person's skill matches the demands of the task at hand. This balance of skill and challenge is used to operationalize flow and to distinguish it from other subjective states such as boredom, relaxation, apathy, worry, anxiety, arousal and control (Massimini and Carli, 1998). Another condition for flow is that the activity should have clear goals and provide quick and unambiguous feedback. One must know what needs to be done and how well one is doing. When these conditions are present, a subjective state is reported in which the person is completely involved in the activity. The attention is fully invested in the task at hand. This focus of attention leads to a merging of action and awareness. A person in flow has no awareness of himself outside of the activity. He is completely involved with and immersed in the activity. There is no attention left to monitor stimuli that are not relevant for the activity. He forgets time, fatigue, worries and even himself. During flow, self-consciousness is temporarily lost. Despite this loss of reflection on the self, the activity is performed in a very efficient way and the person has a subjective feeling that the outcomes of the activity are under his control. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998a)

In spite of the effort and discomfort that is faced, flow experiences can bring along positive outcomes in the short run as well as in the long run. At the momentary level, it is often remarked that flow experiences cause a great inner clarity or ordered consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998a). This internal harmony makes these experiences very enjoyable. This, however, does not imply that flow involves an experience of happiness. Because of the absorption in the activity, flow experiences do not involve the evaluative stance of self-reported happiness.

Flow activities are not necessarily evaluated in retrospect as good, even if they were felt as intensely positive as long as they lasted. In other words, the evaluation perspective and the flow perspective are concerned with essential but non-overlapping aspects of a good life. (Vitterso, 2003: 142)

The relation between flow and happiness is thus not self-evident. People are not necessarily happy while experiencing flow. Research confirmed that so-called autotelic individuals (individuals who easily experience flow) report having more concentration, enjoyment and self-esteem than non-autotelic individuals. But no difference in self-reported happiness was found between these two groups (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, 1998b). Nevertheless, Csikszentmihalyi characterizes flow as enjoyable experiences in which “the quality of experience improves noticeably.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998a: 32). Enjoyment is an important dimension of flow that is derived from complexification of the self (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi & Delle Fave, 1998: 73).

Research has shown that flow not only improves the momentary life quality, but also contributes to the general life quality in the longer run (Massimini and Carli, 1998; Lefevre, 1998; Wells, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi, 1998b). People frequently experiencing flow report being happier, more cheerful, friendly, strong, concentrated and sociable (Massimini and Carli, 1998). This carry-over effect of flow not only induces more positive emotions, but also influences other psychological processes. These people also turned out to be more motivated, creative and satisfied (Massimini and Carli, 1998; Lefevre, 1998).

The flow model clearly demonstrates that facing challenges and using skills to cope with them can in the long run, bring about more positive emotions. From this perspective stress is not regarded as a negative experience that should always be avoided. “Stress is simply and essentially stimulation. Genuine leisure –flow, that is - is not possible

without it.” (Michell, 1998: 57) Effort, bother and a certain amount of stress thus play an important role in the pursuit for happiness. This can also be illustrated by the fact that too large a reduction of effort and discomfort can decrease happiness and life satisfaction. Economist Tibor Scitovsky points this out in his work *The Joyless Economy* (1992).

Scitovsky (1992) criticises the western focus on luxury life styles by pointing at some detrimental effects on our general satisfaction with life.³ He claims that a strong focus on luxury and comfort undermines more traditional sources of pleasure because it induces a reduction of the effort and sometimes also the skills necessary to enjoy these sources. In modern times a lot of affluent people struggle with feelings of emptiness, boredom and even depression. Scitovsky (1992) ascribes these feelings to the lack of effortful activities in a luxury life style. For instance, the daily use of a car may take away the pleasure that arises when cycling to work. Ironically many people compensate for this lack of movement by going to a fitness club. Another example is the broad range of entertainment offered by contemporary mass media. These offer the public fast and easy ways to fill in their leisure time. One doesn't have to read a book or go to a stage play to be offered an entertaining story. Moreover the frequent choice for instant ways of entertainment may take away or under-develop the skill of consuming and enjoying more complex forms of entertainment. Scitovsky's criticism thus warns us for the side-effects of too fast and easy ways to happiness. It questions the efficiency of shortcuts to happiness.

5. Evolution and happiness

A third strand of literature that can offer support for the 'no pain no gain' argument is evolutionary psychology. From an evolutionary perspective, it is evident why effort and happiness are related. Our ancestors needed physical exertion and effort to secure their food supply. In our modern life conditions, however, a lot has changed. In developed countries there

³ Scitovsky's critical stance towards affluence links with the finding that above a certain level of affluence more wealth does not equate with more happiness (Easterlin 1974; Easterlin, 2002). This view was questioned by Veenhoven (2002) and Heylighen & Bernheim (2000) who advocated a more positive view on the effects of affluence on life satisfaction and quality of life.

is an abundance of food. And technological innovations have dramatically reduced the demand for physical exertion. Therefore we seek physical exertion in other resources. (Bostrom & Sandberg, 2007)

Evolutionary psychology also shows why not all seemingly negative emotions should be avoided or eliminated, and why not all positive emotions should be dramatically increased. Negative emotions can be beneficial in certain situations. Pain or fever, for instance, can be useful responses when something is wrong. Their aversiveness is the very product of selection. This also applies to positive emotions. Many people consider positive emotions as normal and other states as abnormal. But this is a pre-Darwinian view. We are not designed for happiness, nor for unhappiness. Natural selection has no goals, it just mindlessly shapes mechanisms that maximize fitness. Our capacities for positive and negative emotions are means to this end, but they are no ends in themselves. (Buss, 2000; Nesse, 2005) From this perspective it can be questioned if the increase of positive emotions is something that should and can be promoted. According to Randolphe Nesse it is not. “If positive affect is strongly heritable and improves function, and presumably reproduction, then why did natural selection not long ago shape a higher average level of positive affect?” (Nesse, 2005: 20) Therefore Nesse (2005) believes that an excessively direct pursuit of happiness is likely to lead to frustration and unhappiness.

6. Different perspectives on happiness

Proponents of mood enhancement believe that an effortless enhancement of positive emotions will increase happiness. This involves a view on happiness that can be called neo-Benthamian or hedonic. Hedonic happiness is the maximization of pleasurable experiences and the minimization of unpleasurable ones. But as we just showed, this perspective is too simplistic. Not all negative experiences should be avoided. And related to this, it is clear that not all fast and easy ways to maximizing positive emotions are desirable.

Nevertheless the vast majority of researchers sticks to this hedonic definition of happiness. In empirical research, happiness is generally defined as the predominance of positive over negative emotions, and a general satisfaction with one’s life (Argyle, 1991; Diener, 2000). But

other perspectives on happiness exist in philosophical as well as in empirical tradition. These other perspectives are called eudaimonic (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In this tradition happiness is not associated with the predominance of positive emotions but with personal development of one's potential or skills. This view goes back to Aristotle, who believed that a happy life lies in the use of the highest human function. This implied that happiness consists of the intellectual activity of contemplation. Aristotle believed this true happiness was the result of hard training and perseverance. Some contemporary researchers still work in this eudaimonic tradition. Instead of focussing on positive emotions, they investigate functions such as competence, autonomy, self-acceptance, positive relations and sense-making (Ryff, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2002; Vitterso, 2003). These authors believe that the fulfilment of these psychological needs is essential for a person's psychological growth, integrity and vitality (Ryff, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This fulfilment is believed to contribute to happiness in a broad sense, including hedonic and eudaimonic happiness.

7. Discussion

In the history of philosophy as well as in empirical research we find different approaches to happiness. Supporting medical mood enhancement fits within the hedonic tradition. But departing from the eudaimonic tradition we can find some counter-arguments for these fast and easy ways of achieving happier lives. Especially the significant relation between suffering and happiness on the one hand, and effort and happiness on the other, question these routes to happiness. We can thus conclude that there are reasons to be critical towards the view on happiness that is implied by mood enhancement. A happy life is not simply one in which pleasure outweighs pain. We illustrated that adversity, pain, discomfort, bother or effort should not always be regarded as negative experiences to be avoided in the pursuit for happiness. In some cases they can contribute a to person's quality of life. Further research will be necessary on the specific circumstances under which seemingly negative experiences might have positive outcomes. The relation between happiness and experiences of stress and effort has yet to be investigated thoroughly. Further research might shed more light

on the differences between effortful and stressful roads to happiness compared to effortless and stressless ones. Just as not all negative emotions are to be avoided, it is also clear that not all positive emotions should be increased. Maximizing positive emotions is not always desirable. On this matter, too, further research will be necessary to assess different types of mood enhancement and their efficiency in inducing long-lasting effects.

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