

## Chapter 8

# What About a Happiness Pill?



**Abstract** Happiness pills provided by the government free of charge would have several positive, but also negative consequences. The procedural aspects of happiness are important and should not be neglected. Politicians may have an incentive to keep the population quiet by offering them happiness pills for free. But this may backfire if citizens are then induced to engage more strongly in political activities against the wishes of politicians. It is illusory to expect that happiness pills are able to raise people's well-being over an extended period of time.

### Happiness Pills Exist

Today, many people consume drugs quite similar to what could be called "happiness pills". These are not only individuals for whom doctors have prescribed pills to overcome depression and other psychological illnesses. A considerable number of people routinely take pills to raise their happiness level. Prozac is the best-known product, but many other pills produce similar effects. "Brain doping" is widely practised; the substances consumed are related to amphetamines, which raise the concentration of dopamine in the brain. A considerable number of people consume illegal drugs. And for a long time, a substantial share of the population in all countries has sought to push up their well-being by consuming alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee. According to this broad definition, only a small proportion of people do not consume any substances to raise their feeling of happiness. Huxley's *Brave New World* with its *soma* is not far away.

### A Thought Experiment

Assume that a happiness pill exists that has no negative effects on the health of the people consuming it, and that its use does not produce any psychological or physical addiction. Moreover, assume that the government distributes the happiness pill free

of charge. These conditions mirror an extreme situation and do not reflect today's reality. However, it may well be possible that pharmaceutical research will be able to provide such a pill in the future. This goal may be called "bio-happiness". It may also be possible that in the future some governments will offer the happiness pill to its population without cost.

Nevertheless, most people are likely to reject such an offer, for intuitive reasons. The results of several surveys suggest that a large proportion of the population would not consume a happiness pill, even if they were to receive it free of charge. For example, Australians were asked the following question: "If there was a legally available drug that could be bought over the counter, that made you feel happy, and did not have any side-effects, do you think there would be occasions when you would take it? Would you say: Yes, definitely; Yes, probably; No, probably not; No, definitely not; Don't know". This was the result of the survey: Three quarters of the respondents said they would not consume a legally available happiness pill.

## Positive Effects

Continuing with the thought experiment, consuming the happiness pill raises its consumers' subjective hedonic feelings of happiness. Empirical happiness research indicates that the happier people are, the more successful they are at work, the more friendly is their behaviour towards others, and the more optimistic they are. Moreover, they are in better health and live longer.

The positive mood produced by the happiness pill also corrects the genetic inequality regarding the possibility to experience happiness. As Chap. 3 pointed out, the extent to which individuals can experience happiness depends quite strongly on the genetic endowment they inherited from their ancestors. Between fifty and eighty per cent of the happiness feeling has been attributed to this "genetic lottery", so it is of substantial importance when considering differences in happiness between individuals.

In addition to the direct effects of the happiness pill on its consumers, it is also necessary to look at its consequences for people who do not take it:

- Happiness is contagious. Happy people also make other people happier;
- A higher level of happiness supports friendship, loyalty, pro-social behaviour, and solidarity.

These two effects of the happiness pill also improve the situation of people who do not take it. They constitute a classic positive external effect. It can thus be argued that the distribution of happiness pills to potential consumers should be subsidized because it also raises the well-being of other people.

## Negative Effects

The consumption of happiness pills may also have noxious consequences on other people. The most important of these is the negative effect on work motivation. The incentive to work diminishes or even disappears completely because happiness is solely produced by the consumption of the pill. Its consumers no longer perceive any need to work. Engaging in work only occurs for intrinsic reasons: because someone likes to work or because a social norm has been internalized. Reliance solely on these motivations cannot be sustainable from an economic perspective. People taking the happiness pill need nourishment and accommodation and would like to enjoy the many other positive aspects of modern life. It would be pure fluke if the existing intrinsic motivation and social norms led to exactly the supply of goods and services people desired. Some of these goods and services will be provided by the consumers of happiness pills who are intrinsically motivated. This may well be the case, for instance, with respect to the arts and culture. In contrast, it is unlikely that essential goods and services such as the construction of houses and the cleaning of streets and toilets will be supplied in the amounts required.

It follows that the happiness pill undermines an economy in which people depend on goods and services whose production requires hard work and effort. This observation constitutes an important counterargument against a general distribution of happiness pills to the population.

## Substitutes and Complements

A supply of happiness pills free of charge reduces the demand for illegal drugs such as cocaine and heroin. As they are quite costly and risky to obtain, and moreover affect the health of their consumers negatively, it might be expected that their demand disappears almost completely. This constitutes a positive external effect, because illegal drug production and distribution are major causes of crime. As a result, the cost of police and prisons is drastically reduced, and people feel more secure.

However, today's experience with drug use suggests that a considerable share of consumers will exhibit a strong inclination to take the happiness pill in addition to illegal drugs. As such additional consumption still takes place under illegal conditions, it is dangerous and involves crime. If this is the case, the free supply of the happiness pill may well reduce aggregate happiness, because the addiction to drugs persists.

As the thought experiment so far has not been put into reality, it is open whether the introduction of freely available happiness pills actually would promote a substitutive or complementary effect. For reasons of caution, it is important to take the complementary effect seriously.

## Procedural Benefits

Evaluating whether the happiness level of the consumers of happiness pills really rises also requires consideration of another important aspect. Individuals not only value the level of income or the number of good friends they have. They are not solely hedonistically oriented. They also put great value on the process by which happiness is attained. People are happier if they attain a goal by their own effort rather than if it just happens to them. An example is the effort expended to reach the peak of a difficult mountain. When reaching the top, the climbers are satisfied and happy. The higher the effort needed, the happier they are. Consuming a happiness pill does not provide any procedural utility and therefore leads to lower satisfaction. In the extreme, the well-being of an individual may even fall.

## The Paradox of Happiness

Happiness cannot be consciously sought but is a side-product of a life that involves meaningful activities and human relationships. Nobody can just decide to be happy; it is ridiculous to believe that. If someone tries to attain happiness in this way, it disappears. This phenomenon is well known and was emphasized long ago by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. According to this paradox, it is impossible to reach happiness with the help of a pill in the long run, because such consumption is unrelated to a good and meaningful life.

For similar reasons, it is impossible to maintain a high happiness level over an extended period of time. Happiness can only be appreciated when this condition can be compared to less happy situations.

The search for happiness through consuming pills is basically mistaken.

## Selfish Governments

The concept of a happiness pill is based on the assumption that governments are both able and willing to pursue and raise people's happiness. Our thought experiment assumes that the government can indeed provide a happiness pill without harming the health of the people consuming it. The crucial question therefore is whether governments have the intention to pursue such a policy.

Theoretical and empirical research in modern political economy has come to the clear conclusion that this is not the case. The politicians in power are interested in pursuing quite different goals: they want to act in their own interests. As individuals, politicians also value income and the recognition by others. At the same time, they belong to a specific group of people for whom exerting power over others is particularly important. What matters is how these goals are connected to the welfare

of the population. Only in an ideal democracy with a strong and continuous competition between parties are politicians obliged to carefully observe the wishes of the voters. These conditions rarely occur. In fact, today's world is still characterized by dictatorships and authoritarian governments whose political leaders do not follow the preferences of the population.

It could be argued that politicians have an incentive to keep the population quiet by offering them happiness pills at no charge. This view assumes that happy people would interfere less—or not at all—in politics than if they were less happy. In this case, politicians distributing the happiness pill would indeed have the opportunity to act freely according to their own wishes. Such a situation corresponds to Huxley's soma in his novel *Brave New World*. This soothing drug turns its consumers into totally passive human beings.

Research into happiness suggests that the contrary is true. Happier people tend to be more active and enterprising. Consuming happiness pills might even induce citizens to engage more strongly in political activities, which may be incompatible with the goals of politicians. People in government risk losing their uniquely powerful positions. This view has a long history. Ever since democracy was instituted in Athens and other classical Greek city-states, it has been argued that when the citizens are happy and little constrained by material concerns, they engage in politics. If this is indeed the case, politicians have little incentive to provide the population with happiness pills free of charge.

## What Can Be Said?

This chapter does not claim that a happiness pill exists which has no noxious effects on consumers' health. However, it can well be imagined that a pill with these properties may become available in the future. To some extent, we already observe an extensive use of substances that are supposed to raise their consumers' subjectively experienced happiness.

There would be some remarkable positive consequences of freely available happiness pills. The consumers would be nicer, act in a more pro-social manner, enjoy better health, and live longer as the genetic lottery responsible for a considerable proportion of happiness is changed in their favour. People would be able to turn to superior cultural and political goals. But there would be grievous negative consequences of providing happiness pills; in particular it would not be possible to maintain an economy providing the goods and services people need and want to consume. Most importantly, the procedural aspect of happiness is totally neglected. Only what is achieved by some measure of one's own effort and devotion contributes to long-run well-being.

Considering these positive and negative aspects of providing a happiness pill leads to the conclusion that it is illusory to expect that such a policy is able to raise the people's well-being in a sustainable way.

## Literature

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