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SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND KAHNEMAN'S 'OBJECTIVE HAPPINESS'

ABSTRACT. This paper is an attempt to clarify the relation between, on the one hand, the construct of 'objective happiness' recently proposed by Daniel Kahneman and, on the other hand, the principal focus of happiness studies, namely subjective well-being (SWB). I have two aims. The first, a critical one, is to give a theoretical explanation for why 'objective happiness' cannot be a general measure of SWB. Kahneman's methodology precludes incorporation of relevant pieces of information that can become available to the subject only retrospectively. The second aim, a constructive one, is to clarify the exact connection between 'objective happiness' and the wider notion of SWB. Unlike Kahneman, who treats the notion as a useful first approximation, I propose that its applicability should be thought of as context-dependent: under some conditions it could be the right measure of SWB but what these conditions are involves both psychological and ethical considerations.

KEY WORDS: experience sampling, global retrospective judgments, Kahneman's 'objective happiness', subjective well-being

INTRODUCTION[1]

Daniel Kahneman has recently proposed a new construct and a method for measuring it (Kahneman, 1999, 2000; Kahneman et al., 2004). The construct is 'objective happiness' and the measure is a temporal integral of moment-based happiness reports.

This paper is an attempt to clarify the relation between the construct of 'objective happiness' and the principal focus of happiness studies – subjective well-being (hereafter SWB). I have two aims. The first, a critical one, is to give a theoretical explanation for why a measure of 'objective happiness' cannot be a satisfactory general measure of SWB. Kahneman's methodology precludes incorporation of relevant pieces of information that can become available to the subject only retrospectively. In precluding this possibility, the approach

violates the main assumption of the subjective approach – that when judging happiness, the authority of how to weigh different aspects of our lives and experiences belongs to the subject.

The second aim, a constructive one, is to clarify the status of 'objective happiness' in relation to the wider notion of SWB. The fact that 'objective happiness' may fail to capture SWB in general does not mean that it cannot be useful for more specific purposes. Kahneman himself makes a number of underexplained and potentially inconsistent qualifications of the construct, but he remains unclear about how exactly it should be treated. I argue that 'objective happiness' should not be treated as a "first approximation" (one of Kahneman's proposals) for happiness or well-being. Rather its applicability is context-dependent: under some conditions 'objective happiness' could be the right measure of SWB, but what these conditions are is a complex matter that involves both scientific and ethical considerations.

HOW AND WHAT TO MEASURE

Subjective well-being, perhaps the central concept within the subjective tradition, is a broad notion thought to encompass general satisfaction with one's life, positive feelings and the absence of negative feelings (Diener and Lucas, 1999). The first component is a cognitive judgment about how one's life is going, while the second two are thought to comprise happiness at the level of experience. SWB carries the name subjective because, unlike the eudaimonic approach which specifies in advance the human potentials which we all have to realize, the subjective approach allows individuals to judge how their lives are going according to what they themselves find important for happiness.

It is crucial that happiness at the level of experience is taken to be only one component of SWB, to be supplemented with an active reflective endorsement sometimes called life satisfaction. SWB is thus taken to encompass happiness both as experience and as an attitude.

What is the proper method of measuring SWB? A major concern in addressing this measurement issue is to find a reliable indicator of the mental states associated with happiness

and life satisfaction and then develop a reliable way to measure changes in them. It is hoped that eventually this indicator will be found at some physiological level of analysis, however, in the meantime psychology of happiness uses a more traditional method – asking subjects what they think through questionnaires and interviews. For example, the most prominent questionnaire, Satisfaction with Life Scale, asks subjects to evaluate their life-satisfaction globally with Lickert-scale items such as "In most ways my life is close to ideal", "So far I have gotten the important things I want in my life", etc. (Diener et al., 1985). Similarly, positive and negative affect, or happiness, is typically measured by asking people the recent frequency of different emotions from "nervousness" and "worthlessness" to "cheerfulness" and "extreme happiness".

Recently measures of SWB based on self-reports about global life satisfaction and affect have come under fire from several sources. Two sets of research results seem to urge researchers to abandon or severely restrict their reliance on measures that involve subjects' retrospective judgments. First, research in social cognition indicates that judgments of overall life satisfaction are not simple reports of the inner state that researchers take to be relevant to well-being. Rather they are constructions drawn on the spot on the basis of currently available information and circumstances, and thus they are highly unstable and sensitive to changes in the context of inquiry. Schwarz and Strack (1999) summarize the findings: Reports of SWB given by subjects in various experimental settings vary with the order of the questions asked, weather at the time of inquiry, various features to which a questioner might draw the subject's attention, and other elements in the context of the interview. Moreover, the same aspect (one's marriage, or one's professional achievement, or a tragic incident, or even a sunny day) can affect the report both negatively and positively depending on how the questions are set up. Strikingly, mood appears to be a more important determinant of life satisfaction reports than judgments of specific domains of life such as work, marriage, etc (Schwarz and Strack, 1999). In this light, one major challenge is to understand in general how people aggregate information to produce such judgments, so that certain adjustments could be

incorporated into them on the basis of this knowledge. But this is a tall order, as the patterns of information aggregation may be different from person to person (Stone et al., 1999).

Second, retrospective judgments of positive and negative affect are also, it is claimed, prone to being inaccurate. Take, for instance, evaluation of the intensity of pain during a colonoscopy studied by Redelmeier and Kahneman (1996). If during the procedure patients are prompted to report the intensity of pain on a given scale every one minute, then it is possible to represent the profile of each colonoscopy on a graph with the *x*-axis showing the duration and the *y*-axis the intensity of pain. The average of pain intensity multiplied by duration would give us an approximate score of the overall patient's affect. Another score could be obtained by asking a patient immediately after the end of the procedure to rank its pain intensity on the same scale. We may not expect an exact correspondence between the two, but we would expect that the duration of a colonoscopy is relevant to the score it is assigned. Thus a longer colonoscopy of approximately the same intensity of pain as a shorter one, should generally score higher on painfulness. The striking result reported by Redelmeier and Kahneman is that the duration of the procedure has little effect on the patient's memory of it. Thus it is possible to create a situation in which a longer and an overall more painful colonoscopy (as assessed through minute by minute analysis) is actually retrospectively reported as better than a shorter and a less painful one. Other studies also show that the duration of an experience is often ignored when its degree of pleasantness is evaluated (Fredrickson and Kahneman, 1993).

These two sets of results suggest that retrospective reports of both life satisfaction and the affective aspects of experiences are not uncontroversial. For example, having reviewed the findings on how judgments of global SWB get constructed Schwarz and Strack conclude that "there is little to be learned from self-reports of global well-being" (p. 80). In relation to remembrance of affective states, Kahneman similarly argues that "retrospective evaluations of experiences are likely to provide erroneous estimates of the "true" total utility of past

experiences'' (1999, p. 20) and, more strongly, that people ''do not generally know how happy they are'' (1999, p. 21).

MAKING DO WITHOUT RETROSPECTION

If memory-based measures are so fallible how should psychology of happiness react? The solution often advocated is to develop a method that allows researchers to bypass global retrospective judgments altogether and thus get to the ''real'' SWB. The main sources of inspiration have been the experience sampling methods (ESM) or ecological momentary assessment (EMA). These methods involve repeated assessments (for example, brief questionnaires, blood pressure measurements, or saliva tests) often randomly distributed throughout the day or activity, which the subjects have to complete on the spot in their natural environments (Stone and Shiffman, 1999).

Daniel Kahneman's is one attempt to apply experience sampling in happiness research. His proposal is to define the notion of 'objective happiness' the measure of which is a temporal integral of *instant utility*. The latter is a subjective evaluation of a particular moment on the Good/Bad dimension. Kahneman thinks of instant utility as the strength of disposition to continue or interrupt the current experience. Instant utility is obtained by prompting a person (via a palmtop computer that beeps at regular or random intervals) while she is undergoing a particular experience (laughing at a joke, solving a math problem, going through a medical procedure, etc.) to report the intensity of positive and negative emotions connected with the current moment, for example, on a scale from 0 to 10.

A temporal integral of instant utility is approximately the *product of average instant utility and duration* and it is logically justified to consider it a measure of *total utility* provided that the following assumptions hold:

(a) Instant ratings must contain *all* the relevant information required.
(b) The scale has a ''stable and distinctive'' zero-point, roughly equivalent to ''neither good nor bad'' attitude.

(c) The measurement of deviations from zero is ordinal rather than cardinal.

If these conditions hold, and Kahneman argues that they generally do, then the total utility can then be thought to refer to 'objective happiness'.

It is objective because it does not rely on retrospection and instead computes total happiness without violating the effects of duration, as our own memory does. On the other hand, it is not objective in two senses. First, the objective conditions of one's life or the society in which one lives are not taken into account. Second, it still relies on the reports individuals make of their own state rather than on some non-subject-dependent method of measuring those states.

Two more assumptions are made in turning the logical possibility of measuring objective happiness into an actual scientific procedure. The first one is that a conscious or unconscious evaluation along the Good/Bad axis is always going on, or in Kahneman's words that the brain "continuously constructs an affective or hedonic commentary on the current state of affairs" (1999, p. 7). Kahneman believes that this assumption is reasonably justified by recent research in psychology and neuroscience. The second assumption is that this evaluation can be summarized by one Good/Bad value at a time. There are surely many dimensions to the goodness and badness of an experience: running a marathon or reading a tragedy are striking examples of this. Still there is some evidence that our brain computes a summary value which aggregates the values along different dimensions of experience, which for Kahneman is enough to justify 'objective happiness' as a first approximation.

First approximation to SWB is indeed how Kahneman appears to view 'objective happiness'. Moreover, he regards it as a good enough first approximation to replace traditional measures of SWB for purposes of policy evaluation and even to ground a national index of well-being (Kahneman et al., 2004). But more on that later.

Of all the interesting features of Kahneman's proposal I shall focus on only one – the attempt to bypass retrospective judgments while still hoping to supply an adequate measure of

subjective well-being. Assumption (a), which takes instant ratings to contain *all* the relevant information, will thus be the focus of my analysis. When and why does it fail? Does it matter?

WHY RETROSPECTION IS IMPORTANT

I seek to show that retrospection plays an irreplaceable role in the evaluation of subjective well-being, and does so by providing an opportunity to incorporate relevant information into the judgments of overall happiness and life satisfaction. Thus no general methodology for measuring SWB should preclude the exercise of retrospective evaluation.

What is the relationship between SWB and retrospection? Let us put this relationship in terms of the *dependence* of the former upon the latter. There is already one definite sense in which Kahneman's notion of 'objective happiness' *depends* upon retrospective evaluations of one's experiences and life. Remembering experiences can cause pleasure and it can cause pain. By virtue of this capacity retrospection affects the total utility by pushing the averages up or down, and hence in this sense Kahneman's proposal incorporates the intuition that our happiness depends on how we remember ourselves.

However, I have in mind a stronger sense of dependence. Assessing happiness moment by moment leaves no place for both cognitive and moral ex post evaluation of our own inner states. Such retrospective re-evaluations can reveal valuable facts about our subjective well-being. Thus 'objective happiness' and SWB can come apart such that agents may rationally choose to deviate from scores of 'objective happiness' in judging their SWB.

Consider an example. Immediately upon learning about a failure of a rival to achieve some goal, I may find myself extremely elated. Alternatively, a rival may reach a triumph in her endeavors and my first reaction may be vague sadness. However, looking back at these moments after the fact I disavow my own initial reactions. I feel ashamed. I also realize if back then I had been asked to judge my happiness I would not

have passed a good judgment because I wasn't in the right reflective state. I may decide that the first event was not really happiness and the second not really unhappiness, since at the time of the experience I had not made a fair effort at evaluating it. I recognize that I may have vaguely felt pleasure or pain, but do not think that I was then respectively happy or unhappy. The moment by moment hedonic reports from that period do not correspond to my retrospective judgments of happiness with that period and for a good reason.

The decision to revise is in part a moral one, motivated by a value not to be spiteful, a commitment to kindness and graciousness in thought as well as behavior. Being satisfied with oneself morally can, if we decide to judge so, be taken to be necessary for being happy or satisfied with one's life as a whole. Another motivation is a belief that judgment of happiness is a serious cognitive exercise, which has to be done with proper reflection. When the palmtop computer beeps asking me to rate the pleasantness of this moment, I may simply not be able to do it accurately without a proper introspective effort.

Why should we have this option to change the first estimates of our own well-being? Note that this example does not imply that the actual affective quality of the past experience is retrospectively re-evaluated. The fact that I was pleased or pained, if indeed it is a fact, cannot be changed.[2] What can be changed is SWB, in particular, its judgmental component. Students of happiness in philosophy have long recognized that actively appraising and endorsing one's well-being is a necessary condition of happiness (Sumner, 1996, p. 140–149). It could simply be in our nature to reflect and to judge our lives (Tiberius, p. 5).

One way to judge our lives is by assigning values to experiences on the basis of commitments we may find important. Thus a person who values family above gardening may want to adjust the weight of the experiences with his family to reflect this fact. He may feel these experiences should count for more than the gardening experiences even if their duration and hedonic records are identical.

The examples of moral re-evaluation of one's happiness are intuitively familiar, perhaps more so for some of us than for others. Indeed we might have one of three reactions: some wish

to revise their happiness estimates, some don't, and some are not sure. Even if it may be difficult to argue that active endorsement and moral approval of one's life is necessary for well-being, it is surely uncontroversial to require that one ought to have an option to pass and update such a judgment. Without such an option it is hard to justify the subjective approach to the study of happiness, since the claim that each person is the best judge of her own well-being is widely used as the main reason to prefer the subjective to the objective approach.

Note the nature of dependence of happiness on retrospection in the examples of moral re-evaluation of well-being. On Kahneman's sense of dependence, retrospective evaluations are just one more factor contributing to the overall happiness. Depending on the intensity of pleasure or pain these memories bring they can significantly alter the averages of 'objective happiness', or have very little effect. Following this sense of dependence (noted earlier) Kahneman would probably interpret our examples as follows: pleasure at a rival's failure could in the light of a moral re-evaluation bring the subject quite a bit of shame, which incidentally itself causes displeasure at oneself which would inevitably register on the hedonic reports dragging the average objective happiness down. Thus, against my contention, the claim would be that moral evaluation can enter into Kahneman's measure of happiness after all.

However, this may not be enough. In the example of excitement at a rival's failure retrospective judgment can *overrule* previous judgments of happiness or life satisfaction. The miserable failure of my rival may have been a source of a great many laughs, ego strokes and sheer elation for me. But if later in the light of quiet reflection or a conversation with a more virtuous friend I decide that my reaction did not reflect my true state or was absolutely the wrong one to have (and being satisfied with myself is constitutive of my happiness) then *all* the previous pleasures connected with this incident could be erased from my record of subjective well-being. They may not constitute happiness or count as satisfying no matter how fun it felt at a time.

Even if previous judgments of happiness are not overruled entirely, the evaluator may decide to weigh certain experiences on the basis of values she endorses as constitutive of her SWB,

and these weights can be different from those assigned by the averaging procedure. A mountaineer reminiscing about a long and grueling climbing expedition may decide upon reflection that was as good as life gets, thus trumping whatever the hedonic record of that expedition indicated. This decision may have little to do with the trip's pleasantness or unpleasantness and everything to do with the mountaineer's love of mountains.

Moreover, Kahneman's hypothetical response is unsatisfactory insofar as it attempts to re-interpret moral evaluation in hedonic terms. But this masks the real issue at hand. Moral evaluation has to be taken on its own terms if the evaluator so decides. It is not just that I am unhappy *now* because I feel ashamed and this feeling is unpleasant, but rather that I was unhappy *then*: it was wrong to feel thrilled at my rival's failure *then*, and had I been more morally intelligent and took the time to reflect I would not have seemed as pleased as I did.

Of course, sometimes we may decide that some bit of naughty joy at a rival's failure was quite innocent and the moral reasons against it may not overrule that pleasure entirely. But the point still stands. Retrospection may be motivated by two reasons. First, we may not always have enough information, cognitive skills or courage to form an accurate judgment of happiness on the spot and thus may need more time to figure out exactly how we felt at the time. A subject's own evaluation of his well-being may endorse the privileged status of such reflection, in which case who is any outsider to gainsay that? Second, if, apart from good mood, happiness and life satisfaction is also constituted by a striving to live up to the values that one endorses, then these values could present reasons strong enough to declare some experiences previously thought to be happy unhappy (and vice versa).

Note that in the thought experiment described above, part of the reason for the revision of the early judgment of happiness was that the judgment was not made under proper reflective conditions (e.g., I was too intoxicated with the feeling of revenge).[3] What if such a reason is absent? If the judgment was made under appropriate reflective conditions, should one have the option to change it?

Let us consider an example borrowed from Sumner (1996, p. 157). A woman lives in a happy but ignorant bliss with a partner who uses her to serve his own selfish ends and is very good at concealing it. Some time later she finds out his true motivations and is hurt to realize that her happiness was a delusion. If asked at that point whether that was a happy period in her life or whether she was then doing well, what should she say? Intuitions once again are split. Depending on the criteria one uses to make these judgments and the weights one assigns to the different elements that enter into the overall consideration the verdict could go either way. She can decide that she was happy but not doing well, or that she was both happy and doing well or that she was neither happy nor doing well. These decisions are not just a whim. They can be justified depending on how the woman evaluates the new information. She may be able to swallow the thought of calling herself happy and satisfied with that period in her life and move on, or she may feel the need to re-think it altogether.[4] It is not outlandish to revise one's estimate of past well-being in the light of information that only becomes available later. One could refuse to make the update for one's own case, but why deny this opportunity across the board?

OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

Two objections need to be dealt with at this point.

The first one questions whether Kahneman's notion is even intended to cover the cases I discuss. Perhaps, 'objective happiness' is not supposed to measure anything more than just the affective or experiential component of happiness, in which case claiming that it does not also capture the attitudinal component would be somewhat otiose.

However, it is by no means obvious that Kahneman and some of his commentators treat 'objective happiness' as having a narrow applicability only to the affective component of SWB. Kahneman does not explicitly assert (to the best of my knowledge) that 'objective happiness' is meant to encompass both the affective and the life satisfaction components of SWB, and in

general is vague about what exactly the concept is supposed to replace. When attempting to qualify the notion he says that it measures ''good mood and enjoyment of life'' (2000, p. 683), which can be interpreted to imply that the affective component is his focus. However, there is also evidence that he treats 'objective happiness' and the methodology that goes with it as a replacement for life-satisfaction questionnaires. This is particularly clear when he asserts boldly that ''the goal of policy should be to increase measures of objective well-being, not measures of satisfaction or subjective happiness'' (1999, p. 15). So Kahneman himself is unclear about whether what he is measuring is just good mood or life-satisfaction or both.

Neither are some of Kahneman's commentators any clearer. For example, having concluded that self-reports of global SWB are unreliable, Schwarz and Strack (1999) speculate on what should be the alternative method. Kahneman's total utility is referred to as the obvious replacement, implying that it is just a different way of measuring the same thing, i.e., SWB (p. 80).

Of course, other commentators are more precise. Scollon et al. (2003) in their discussion of experience sampling treat Kahneman's moment-based approach as best suited for studying the affective component of SWB (p. 27). Their reason, apart from the many practical problems with ESM such as reactivity and self-selection of subjects, is that global reports of the cognitive component do not show such high inconsistency with the momentary reports as do those of the affective component.

However, even if Kahneman's 'objective happiness' and the methodology that goes with it is in no danger of being mistaken for SWB as a whole, a critical discussion such as envisaged here is valuable. It is important to understand the reasons why the moment-based hedonic evaluation *cannot* be thought to measure SWB. Contrary to Scollon et al. (2003), I claim that some of these reasons are theoretical, rather than merely practical. So even if the practical problems of ESM were overcome we still, for the reasons given above, should not abandon global retrospective reports.

The second objection is that in challenging Kahneman's method I introduce objective criteria into the analysis of SWB and thus no longer follow a genuinely subjective approach. For

example, my discussion of Sumner's case of the woman in ignorant bliss presupposes that being treated with respect should be a precondition of happiness. Since that is an objective criterion the example is irrelevant for those who are interested in subjective well-being.

However, this is not a viable objection. First of all, it is not objective factors that are being introduced into the evaluation. When our heroine specifies that being treated with respect is a factor in her evaluation of subjective well-being, this does not mean that she is required to be correct about whether she is being treated fairly in order to pass the judgment. Rather she is required to make the judgment in the light of the information she has available and with due reflection. Part of this *could* be information that becomes available only after the fact. I emphasize "could" because, although we do not want to require that life satisfaction judgments are regularly revised in the light of new facts, we still want to leave it as an option. Of course, one could specify that only presently available information is admissible and this would disqualify the update the previously cheated girlfriend may want to make to her SWB. However, this would be an arbitrary decision, especially in the context of an approach that privileges the individual's own judgment.

To see why, let us consider an example where retrospective re-evaluation of SWB has higher stakes. In a way, it is only a small matter how the woman in the example above judges her life with the cruel partner, but many other judgments of SWB are passed with the practical purpose of implementing changes in policy areas related to SWB. Consider a person who thus far has been both normatively and hedonically satisfied with her well-being, but who then learns that in effect her opportunities for, say, education have been drastically fewer than they are for other women in this society of similar background. The secret was kept well from her through the ingenuity of her family, neighbors and community. She had led a pleasant life and approved of it morally, but she did not know that her life was made significantly more disadvantaged than life of other women around her and for an apparently arbitrary reason. Given her belief that a person should not be denied opportunity for an arbitrary reason, especially when this opportunity is provided to

the majority and would cost little in extra resources, she now judges that her subjective well-being needs to be adjusted to reflect this information.

Once again, a moment by moment approach is unable adequately to accommodate such a re-evaluation. The outrage and anger this woman feels once the crucial piece of information comes in will probably affect the overall average of her 'objective happiness'. However, this method will not respect the judgment that her life has not been as happy as she thought it was *while* she thought it was.

Indeed to add some policy relevance the example could be modified to include a group of women whose upbringing was designed to persuade them that education is unnecessary or even harmful. They took care to reflect upon their lives, but did not find anything wrong with this at the time. This, of course, makes the example more realistic and in fact quite familiar. Indeed it is exactly this sort of example that persuades some philosophers to look for an objective theory of well-being, such as the capability approach (Sen and Nussbaum, 1993). Another response is to claim that the judgment of life satisfaction made by these women is not authentic, i.e., they would change their mind if given a proper opportunity.[5] However, if one wanted to stick with a subjective approach and did not want to set up excessively demanding constraints on deliberation,[6] it seems that allowing a retrospective revision of SWB is the least one can do to give these women the opportunity to make their evaluations of their lives as accurate as they now wish. This is because SWB is not generally studied just to satisfy academic curiosity about how these judgments are constructed, but also for practical reasons of bringing about policies that improve SWB.

What about the biases of memory and judgment that are typically presented as a reason to doubt the validity of retrospective reports of well-being? Obviously, if there is much empirical evidence pointing to the unreliability of self-reports then this fact has to be taken seriously when developing a measure of happiness. We now have evidence that these reports can sometimes be volatile to slight changes of context, arbitrary and plain counterintuitive.[7] The moment-based approach that promises to average out all these variations is taken by many

psychologists to be the obvious solution. But does it have to be? If both the criticisms of global self-reports and my defense of retrospection are correct, then there exists a trade-off between accuracy at the level of experience and reflective accuracy. To resolve this trade-off, we need to try to create circumstances when people's attention can be focused in just the right ways (or approximately so) to minimize the effects of cognitive and memory biases.[8] Given that retrospection is irreplaceable for incorporating relevant information into judgments of SWB, one could hope that psychologists first try to develop a method that, to the extent that it is possible, accommodates this fact. At the very least, an outright rejection of retrospection as an epistemic source seems akin to throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Where does all of this leave Kahneman's 'objective happiness'? I hope to have shown that by virtue of its rejection of retrospection this approach cannot be a generally adequate measure of subjective well-being. This is because it precludes retrospective re-evaluation in the uncontroversial case where a judgment of happiness was made with no proper reflection and not taking one's values and commitments into account. In the case where the judgment is made under adequate reflective conditions, the method arbitrarily precludes incorporation of relevant new information even though the subject might wish to incorporate it. In more general terms, the averaging method imposes equal weights on all aspects of person's experiences, while still hoping to claim the benefits of the subjective approach – yet these two goals are in obvious tension just when the subject does not endorse such an equal weighting.

Naturally, questions can be raised about the examples presented above. If no moral evaluation of SWB can ever be thought final, could some evaluations at least be more authoritative than others? What would it mean to be informed enough to judge one's happiness?[9] Note, however, that once we engage in such a discussion we are on normative as well as empirical ground. As an empirical scientist, Kahneman does not explicitly engage in moral argument. Yet, as Hume famously observed long ago any normative conclusion necessarily requires at least some explicitly normative premise. Aware of the possible objections, Kahneman

qualifies the status of the notion of 'objective happiness' in various ways. He refers to it variously as "a first approximation" (1999, p. 7), a "necessary element of a theory of human well-being" (2000, p. 683) and sometimes as a "significant constituent" (2000, p. 691) of the concept of well-being. In the remainder of the paper, I shall try to clarify more precisely and consistently the status of 'objective happiness' in relation to SWB.

WHEN IS 'OBJECTIVE HAPPINESS' RELEVANT?

'Objective happiness' is an impressive name. Not only does it suggest that what it refers to is the supreme goal of human existence but also, as the addition of 'objective' indicates, that it refers to the real thing. One could thus wonder whether a measure of merely good mood and possibly life enjoyment deserves such a loaded name. This is one possible reaction to Kahneman's project. However, a more constructive one would be to analyze the role this construct might be expected to play within the larger project of studying human well-being. Since Kahneman is prepared to qualify the status of 'objective happiness', does he do it well and how ought it to be qualified?

Let us start with Kahneman's own attempts to characterize the status of the notion. He seems sensitive to the fact that the first assumption of his method, namely that instant utility reports contain all the information relevant for integration, is easily violated:

> The diversity of Good and Bad states is intimidating, and the task of constructing a ratio scale measure of instant utility that can be applied to all these states is formidably difficult and perhaps intractable. However, the study of objective happiness can be pursued usefully with much weaker measurements of instant utility. As discussed later, it is not particularly difficult to distinguish good, bad, and neutral moments, and distinguishing a few categories of intensity among good and bad states is probably no harder. And as a first approximation, it makes sense to call Helen "objectively happy" if she spent most of her time in March engaged in activities that she would rather have continued than stopped, little time in situations she wished to escape, and very important because life is short not too much time in a neutral state in which she would not care either way. This is the essence of the approach proposed here (1999, p. 7).

It is later in the same piece that Kahneman asserts that "the goal of policy should be to increase measures of objective well-being, not measures of satisfaction or subjective happiness" (1999, p. 15).

But in a volume jointly edited with Amos Tversky entitled *Choices, Values and Frames*, Kahneman takes a somewhat more modest line:

> Defining happiness by the temporal distribution of experienced affect appears very narrow, and so it is. The concept of objective happiness is not intended to stand on its own and is proposed only as a necessary element of a theory of human well-being... [G]ood mood and enjoyment of life are not incompatible with other psychological criteria of well-being that have been proposed... Clearly, a life that is meaningful, satisfying, and cheerful should rank higher on the scale of well-being than a life that is equally meaningful and satisfying but is sad and tense. Objective happiness is only one constituent of the quality of human life, but it is a significant one (p. 683).

Yet another statement appears in the same article later:

> Maximizing the time spent on the right side of the affect grid [the Good side] is not the most significant value in life, ... However, the proposition that the right side of the grid is a more desirable place to be is not particularly controversial... Indeed, there may be more differences among cultures and systems of thought about the optimal position on the arousal dimension, ... Objective happiness is a common element of many conceptions of well-being. Furthermore, when it comes to comparisons of groups, such as Californians and others, or to assessments of the value of public goods such as health insurance or tree-lined streets, experienced utility and objective happiness may be the correct measure of welfare (p. 691).

There are many different ideas at work here, but no clear and consistent interpretation of the role that 'objective happiness' is supposed to play. I shall try to disentangle the issue starting from the first quotation. Here the claim is that 'objective happiness' is good enough as a "first approximation" to the notion of well-being even if it does not fully cover it. By the first approximation Kahneman seems to mean a construct useful enough for many albeit not all purposes. Although it is hard to judge what exactly the author has in mind here, the claim is rather strong. It assumes that whatever true well-being is, 'objective happiness' is its necessary and core component, and a

measure obtained through Kahneman's method is a fair approximation of the true measure.

In the same paragraph, Kahneman gives us two reasons for thinking of 'objective happiness' as a good enough approximation. The first reason is the ease with which a hedonic evaluation of experience is given. People seem to understand easily what they are expected to rate when the palmtop computer beeps. If they have no trouble understanding and answering the question, aren't we justified in thinking that we have uncovered a real property of their experience? In reply, first it is not clear whether this ease obtains for complex emotional situations such as thinking about one's marriage as well as it does for simpler ones such as enduring colonoscopy. And second, even if it does we still need an argument that this property is a fair approximation of what people mean by happiness. Kahneman's second reason is supposed to provide such an argument.

It is intuitively appealing, he argues, to call someone objectively happy if in some period of time she has spent most of it in activities she would rather continue than stop. First of all, intuitive appeal seems at the very most only the beginning of the argument when the matter at stake is as important and complex as human happiness. But more than that, this is a misleading claim, for subjects in Kahneman's experiments are not asked whether they are happy or whether they would like their current experience to continue, or whether they approve of their life as it currently is. Rather they are asked to rate the intensity of positive or negative emotions at this particular instant. Kahneman elsewhere points out that "[i]nstant utility is best understood as the strength of the disposition to continue or to interrupt the current experience" (1999, p. 4). This may be his understanding, but it is by no means obvious that being asked to rate pleasantness and being asked whether one wishes to escape or continue a given experience is the same thing. (To use a clichéd example, one may rate the high induced by a drug pleasant, but nevertheless wish to escape the situation.) In this light, Kahneman's contention that policy should be evaluated on the basis of 'objective happiness' rather than life satisfaction is particularly dubious.

One more possibility in support of Kahneman's claim to provide a useful first approximation is worth mentioning. Moral and other evaluation may simply be included in people's responses to questions about instant utilities. That is, it is possible that our reports of whether a certain experience is a happy one are already appropriately adjusted in the light of normative considerations. Of course, this is an empirical claim. Whether or not real-time normative evaluation of our hedonic experience takes place needs to be studied, not assumed. It seems unlikely that a satisfactory level of real-time evaluation that would justify Kahneman's approach as a general proposal can be established. It is intuitively familiar how long it can take to understand whether a particular experience was a genuinely happy one or not. Even if some real-time normative evaluation takes place, we would also want to give people a chance to change their mind about it.

Can a more viable interpretation of the role of 'objective happiness' be found in the last two quotes? Here Kahneman adopts a markedly more modest view of his approach. It is no longer thought of as identifying a feasible approximation of subjective well-being but rather only a "component" or a "constituent" of it. Let us adopt this language of components and try to see what this could mean.

We have already discussed the possibility that scoring reasonably highly on a measure of 'objective happiness' cannot be considered a necessary component of well-being. How could it be necessary, if the hedonic score can be overruled by, say, considerations derived from moral values or standards of deliberation that the person might endorse? Kahneman is also wrong to claim that 'objective happiness' is always compatible with criteria such as meaningfulness and maintenance of personal goals. It may or may not be depending on how a subject decides to weight different components of her SWB.[10]

In cases where pleasant feeling is not incompatible with other considerations, 'objective happiness' can be thought of as a *contributing factor*, neither necessary nor sufficient, but able to exert influence on the overall judgment of well-being. Take for instance, Kahneman's example of two equally meaningful and satisfying lives that differ on their hedonic scores. Here,

'objective happiness' can be a consideration invoked after all other more important factors are taken into account. This seems right but does not amount to any strong claim about the status of the construct.

What could be a potentially stronger and, importantly, justifiable claim regarding the role of 'objective happiness' in SWB appears in the quote from page 683. There Kahneman suggests that 'objective happiness' is a ''necessary element of a theory of human well-being''. However, he does not explain what this means and, in his discussion in *The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, suggests an interpretation that is in clear tension with this view. I conclude the discussion by exploring the implications of this interpretation.

The claim that 'objective happiness' is an element of a theory explicitly positions Kahneman's construct in the realm of the *theory* of well-being. And this means that its role in practical problems of measurement of actual subjective well-being must be mediated by the *applicability* of various elements of this theory to real-world situations under investigation. Thus if our theory indicates that in some particular context in which we seek to measure subjective well-being (say the administration of painful medical procedures such as colonoscopies), the hedonic component is the only significant feature of SWB, then 'objective happiness' is the correct measure to use.[11] A possible justification for such a judgment is the intuition that other ethical concerns such as fairness or autonomy should not interfere with the more important goal of eliminating the unnecessary pain from the procedure of colonoscopy.

In another situation, such as, for example, the judicial and penal system, our theory may suggest that what matters is not the participants' hedonic state but fairness. In this case, 'objective happiness' is not the right measure. With respect to some other situation (for instance, whether more social workers are needed to support disabled people) the theory might indicate that the hedonic component is significant though not the overriding factor. Dignity, autonomy and life satisfaction also matter. In this case, we should probably work to incorporate 'objective happiness' as one part of a broader overall measure.

For example, a record of total utility could be discussed with the subjects during a structured interview, and the investigator could invite the subjects to review the record retrospectively taking, say, their moral or other aspirations into account and if necessary updating the record.

This perspective highlights the fact that 'objective happiness' can have better or worse applicability depending on the context of inquiry. The implication is that it makes no sense to treat it as a useful first approximation or a significant component in general. It can only be so relative to a certain context of inquiry. What are the contexts in which 'objective happiness' is a good measure of SWB? The question is partly a moral one because it requires a judgment as to what SWB amounts to in different life circumstances. Therefore to argue that 'objective happiness' is highly applicable in any one case always necessarily requires at least some moral as well as scientific justification. Who is to make this judgment? Presumably an approach that privileges subjective evaluation of happiness should give the subject of investigation a say in this decision. If she so wishes, a subject is always free to decide that 'objective happiness' is indeed all that matters for her in every context of life!

If, for practical reasons, subjects are not consulted, at the very least psychologists should be explicit to themselves and to consumers of their research that the judgment of what measure to use is not just scientific but also a moral one. To the extent that it is, psychologists may want to involve professional ethicists in their decision, or openly engage in an ethical argument regarding what conceptions of well-being should be used for what purposes. It certainly takes a controversial moral stance on Kahneman's part to decide on behalf of us, his subjects, that 'objective happiness' is a generally fair approximation of well-being. Indeed, one may suspect that the uncomplicated favorable cases like colonoscopies are actually rather rare.

Subjective well-being is a curious object of science. First, unlike most scientific objects it is closely bound up with our own visions of ourselves and thus cannot be studied without taking seriously the intuitions of the subjects about what happiness and well-being is. This means that the empirical problems

arising in this research, such as the low reliability of self-reports, cannot be solved without attending to ethical concerns. Commitment to measuring *subjective* well-being means that the subject may have to be given a say over the measurement procedure the scientist uses.

Second, given that the verdicts of psychologists concerning our happiness may influence policy-makers, it is especially important to be clear about the exact respective roles here of scientific and ethical considerations. 'Objective happiness' cannot on its own be claimed to have any policy relevance without the addition of detailed moral argument, not just casual intuition. This does not mean that 'objective happiness' might not often be highly pertinent. It merely means that we cannot ever know this from the science alone.

NOTES

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[2] I thank the referees for urging this point.

[3] See Tiberius for an articulation of what should count as proper reflective conditions. Tiberius, V. "How's It Going? Judgments of Overall Life-Satisfaction and Philosophical Theories of Well-Being" manuscript.

[4] Sumner himself argues that while she could not revise her past happiness (which for him equals life satisfaction) she could revise her past well-being (or happiness judged under authoritative conditions), but it is not clear why these *have* to be treated differently, or why a subjective approach must preclude such a revision (pp. 156–161).

[5] Such, to the best of my understanding, would be Sumner's response.

[6] If philosophers hope that their theories of well-being be relevant to empirical psychology, the constraints on deliberation should not be so high as to make them unimplementable in actual research.

[7] However, there is also evidence of stability of these reports (Scollon et al., 2003).

[8] See Tiberius for an attempt to construct a perspective from which judgments of life satisfaction are authoritative. Tiberius, V. "How's It Going?

Judgments of Overall Life-Satisfaction and Philosophical Theories of Well-Being'' manuscript.

[9] One could also raise more practical concerns with incorporating retrospection into SWB reports. How long should the subject be given to change her mind?

[10] In Slavic cultures, for example, meaningfulness is quite often incompatible with 'objective happiness'. Instead, meaningfulness of life is commonly identified in literature and popular culture with the ability of suffering to ennoble the soul. See Anna Wierzbicka's discussion of the cultural and linguistic obstacles to applying Kahneman's method cross-culturally (Wierzbicka, 2004).

[11] Although this fact might make 'objective happiness' a morally correct methodology to use, there are also practical considerations. As Kahneman points out global retrospective evaluations are more effective for predicting whether patients will come back for further colonoscopies.

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