

Preface



Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in the world, yet these children seem to have no problem finding happiness—perhaps because they have each other. The difficult part, however, is to retain happiness throughout life. (Photo: B. Grinde)

Happiness is a somewhat vague term. In the existing literature, most of it based on philosophy and the social sciences, it is possible to distinguish between two broad ways of applying the word. One is to use happiness as a value term for how life ought to be; i.e. somewhat synonymous with well-being, flourishing or quality of life. The other focuses on happiness as a particular emotional quality; i.e. pleasure as opposed to sorrow or pain. This split appears to date back to the early Greek

literature, where they distinguished between eudaemonia (contentment and meaning) and hedonia (sensual pleasures).

I shall argue that the biological perspective on happiness unites the two alternatives in that it describes a common denominator for sensual pleasures, contentment, well being and flourishing. Although hedonia and eudaemonia are quite different as to how they are experienced, the affect part of both apparently has a shared evolutionary background, and is cared for by overlapping neural circuits.

The biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky once wrote, ‘Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution’. More recently, the psychologist Henry Plotkin has suggested that in psychology nothing makes complete sense except in the light of evolution. The biological perspective has the power of creating an all-embracing platform for understanding human life, and thereby allowing for a unification of different approaches aimed at describing various topics—including the question of happiness.

In my mind, the purpose of science is to create the best possible model of reality. The aim of this book is to offer the best portrayal of what happiness is about, taking into consideration all the current evidence. Brain research is, however, a difficult subject; thus some of the details I add to my model are tentative. Even if it should be the best portrayal possible at the moment, which I am sure there are those who will dispute, it is unlikely to be so in 10 or 20 years.

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