Abstract: What are the norms governing the pursuit of happiness? Presumably not just anything goes. But are the rules any more interesting than platitudes like “do what works, as long as you don’t hurt anyone”? Such questions have become especially salient in light of the development of positive psychology. Yet so far these matters have received relatively little attention, most of it from skeptics who doubt that the pursuit of happiness is an important, or even legitimate, enterprise. This paper examines the normative issues in this realm, arguing that the pursuit of happiness is indeed a legitimate and important endeavor, contra recent criticisms by Aristotelian and other skeptics. Yet it is also subject to strong, nonobvious normative constraints that extend well beyond those typically posited by commonsense and consequentialist thought.

1. Introduction

One might think there is no “proper” to the pursuit of happiness, at least not in any interesting sense. Handle your responsibilities and don’t hurt anyone, but beyond such undemanding platitudes, do whatever works. I want to suggest that the rules of the game are rather more interesting than this large strain of commonsense would have it. In particular, I will argue that the pursuit of happiness is subject to strong, nonobvious constraints that go well beyond those posited by standard forms of utilitarianism, among other modern ethical outlooks. Yet contrary to various critics, notably those inspired by Aristotle and other ancient eudaimonists, the pursuit of happiness is a perfectly legitimate and indeed important enterprise. These questions are particularly salient in light of the recent rise of positive psychology, which offers a variety of techniques for happiness-promotion. The renewed attention to matters of happiness is a welcome development, but it also calls for a better understanding of the normative dimensions of the enterprise.

Immediately the question arises what is meant by ‘happiness’, particularly since, on one understanding of the term, the pursuit of happiness would not be an especially controversial endeavor. Eudaimonistic philosophers, for instance, take all of ethics to be founded on the pursuit of “happiness,” understood as eudaimonia. In this sense of the term, ‘happiness’ is an expression for a kind of value, prudential value, or more commonly, well-being or flourishing. (I will usually use ‘well-being’ for this value.) It concerns the sort of life that benefits a person, and is not fundamentally a psychological kind—even if some commentators, like welfare hedonists, believe

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1 Penultimate draft; forthcoming in Res Philosophica. For helpful feedback on earlier versions of this material, I wish to thank Anna Alexandrova, Felicia Huppert, Richard Stevens, an anonymous referee for this journal, and audiences at Cambridge University, Georgetown University, Truman State University, and the Ethical and Social Scientific Perspectives on Well-being at California State University, Long Beach.

2 Strictly, I mean the “ground-level” constraints given by the basic principles of utilitarianism. I will suggest later that utilitarians and other consequentialists could, at least in principle, accommodate the claims defended in this paper as indirect means of promoting good consequences.
that mental states are all that ultimately benefit us. In fact the expression ‘the pursuit of happiness’ probably tends to evoke this prudential reading.

Here, however, I use ‘happiness’ not in its well-being sense, but as a psychological term, roughly akin to terms like ‘depression’, ‘tranquility’ or ‘satisfaction’. In this sense, which arguably dominates in contemporary discussions, ‘happiness’ is simply a term for some sort of (typically lasting) psychological condition, such as life satisfaction, emotional well-being, a positive balance of pleasure over unpleasure, or subjective well-being. The main philosophical theories of happiness in this sense are life satisfaction theories, emotional state theories, and hedonism.3 I will not discriminate among these views here, and will use ‘happiness’ generically, as a blanket term for the range of psychological phenomena that are commonly taken to constitute happiness. It seems to me that all these types of states, being valenced as “positive” or “negative,” can fruitfully be viewed as in some sense evaluative mental states (EMSs): they function, at least in part, as evaluations of the individual’s circumstances or condition. Happiness in the present sense, then, is a positive EMS, and the pursuit of happiness, as it concerns us here, is the pursuit of positive EMSs, or certain sorts of EMSs. Henceforth ‘happiness’ will take this broad meaning.

I grant that happiness does not suffice for well-being, for the usual reasons (experience machines, etc.). Yet it is plainly a matter of great importance: all reasonable parties can agree that it is generally much better to have some peace of mind and lead an enjoyable, fulfilling life than to be anxious, depressed, and otherwise suffering. On any sane view of well-being, the psychological quality of our lives is going to be important. Parents are probably not wrong in wishing strongly that their children be happy and healthy. Prima facie, then, happiness might seem to be an important object of pursuit, as it is commonly taken to be.

Yet even this homely thought has not gone unchallenged, and questions about the proper pursuit of happiness have drawn considerable interest in recent years. Much attention has been paid to what we can do to make ourselves happier, but much less thought has gone into the question of what we should do to make ourselves happier. Often the tenor of discussion is, “if it makes you happy and doesn’t hurt anyone, do it.” Whatever pushes you up the happiness scales is fine, so long as you stay within the broad bounds of morality.

Criticisms of this work take two basic forms. One involves doubts about whether happiness is sensibly the object of pursuit at all: it is, for example, properly a by-product of a life well-lived, not something we aim at directly. Other critiques may allow that happiness can reasonably be pursued, but object to the thin normative framework that many people apply to it, such as the minimal norms described above. In essence, the worry is that positive psychology and many other approaches to the pursuit of happiness are normatively primitive.

It is helpful in this connection to compare positive psychology to the various ancient ethical traditions, such as the Epicureans, Stoics, Aristotelians, or Buddhists. All of these schools offered advice that was believed generally to promote the individual’s happiness. Yet this advice was grounded in a broad ethical framework that made clear the place of happiness in a good life. Sometimes, as with Epicureans and Buddhists, happiness itself was the goal; others, as with Aristotelians and Stoics, it was at best part of the goal, or simply a by-product of achieving it. In no case was happiness simply posited as a goal to be pursued by whatever means were deemed most efficient.4 One needs first to understand how it fits in the overall project of living well. And this is not something that scientific observation or experiment can answer for us. Indeed it may be

3 See, e.g., Sumner 1996, Haybron 2008b, and Feldman 2010. For a review, with further discussion of the distinctions in play here, see Haybron 2011a.
fair to say that positive psychology is, in an important sense, ethically rudderless. This is, perhaps, a necessary consequence of its being a science: it can describe, but such advice as it can offer, as a science, can only be instrumental: to achieve x, do y. Many researchers are careful to observe this limitation, but even due caution on their part will not eliminate the worries many have about the uses to which their studies are put.

A further concern is that, by hiving off questions about the effective pursuit of happiness and assigning those to one group of specialists, while leaving questions about the appropriate pursuit of happiness to another group of specialists—or more likely, leaving those questions entirely unexamined—we risk leaving ourselves ethically rudderless to a degree, seeking better lives without any coherent sense of what matters. Realistically, we cannot discuss issues of effectiveness without raising the question of appropriateness, so the normative dimensions of happiness-seeking demand the attention of philosophers and psychologists alike.

Be that as it may, it is at least reasonable to wonder whether popular views about the pursuit of happiness are warranted. In what follows I will consider a variety of objections. My aim is not to rebut particular authors, but rather to discuss the most interesting and plausible of the concerns that have been, or might be, raised. While none of the objections yield a general case against the methods of positive psychology or the pursuit of happiness, several of them do point to genuine constraints on happiness-seeking. Broadly speaking, these fall under two headings: an aretaic constraint according to which virtue places various nonobvious demands on the pursuit of happiness, and a fittingness constraint that enjoins us to pursue happiness only insofar as that state is fitting—including, I will suggest, authentic. While I will reject some of the claims made by eudaimonistic philosophers such as Annas and Nussbaum, the broad normative framework from which I argue should largely be congenial to them, and to many non-eudaimonists as well. I will not discuss one objection sometimes mentioned, namely that we are on a “hedonic treadmill” and adapt so thoroughly to changes that pursuing happiness is futile. Besides being obviously false on its face, this claim has been decisively rebutted in the literature (Headey 2007, Lucas 2007, Helliwell, Layard et al. 2012).

While the rise of positive psychology gives the issues discussed here some immediacy, and offers a convenient target for exploring them, I am not primarily concerned to criticize or defend positive psychology, or any other approach to happiness-promotion. In fact some of the methods discussed below, like laughter yoga, arose independently of positive psychology. And while I will discuss a few interventions at some length, my interest in them is largely theoretical, using them to illuminate some of the norms that need generally to be considered in deliberations about happiness-promotion. Accordingly, I will not for the most part try to reach overall verdicts about the appropriateness of the interventions discussed here.

2. Five objections to the pursuit of happiness

2.1. It is self-defeating: the paradox of hedonism

It is commonly objected that happiness can only be secured by not pursuing it: in essence, the pursuit of happiness is self-defeating. This is the so-called “paradox of hedonism” discussed by Sidgwick, Mill and many others. One can arrive at this conclusion by various routes, one of the more common being that what makes us happy is doing things that are independently worthwhile, and doing them for that reason rather than simply to be happy. Doing things purely to make ourselves happy, by contrast, gives us nothing to be happy about. Alternatively, thinking about happiness spoils the fun, so to speak, distracting our attention from the things that make us
happy. Or, we simply aren’t good at pursuing happiness, and will fare better if we focus on other ends.

There is of course some truth to such observations, but it is hard to frame the paradox of hedonism in a way that is both interesting and plausible. If the idea is simply that we won’t be very happy if we obsess over the happiness payoff of every decision we make, the claim is a platitude; no one would deny it. The single-minded, obsessive pursuit of happiness is a non-starter.

If, on the other hand, the claim is taken literally, as the view that we best advance happiness by not aiming at it at all, then it is preposterous. You are choosing, let us suppose, between two equally worthy occupations. You have good reason to believe that one will make you miserable, while the other will be enjoyable and fulfilling. Should you not take this information into account? How could it not be relevant? This is not a particularly stylized or fantastical example: it seems rather a paradigmatic case of pursuing happiness. In practice, people aiming at happiness probably tend not to start by imagining some desired mental state and then initiating a wide-ranging search for options that they think will most likely yield that result. More likely, they are simply confronted with certain options, or find themselves with powerful desires for things, and then weigh the happiness and other implications of the options before them. While there may be situations where our best bet is to set aside the happiness information, say because the temptations to misuse it are great, it is difficult to fathom the rationale for a blanket policy of this sort: always ignore the happiness information. When deciding on an occupation, when figuring out whether to marry a certain person, when deliberating about how to pass one’s leisure time, and doubtless in many other contexts, it would seem an odd strategy for living to set aside questions of happiness.

It might be objected that the temptations for misuse are indeed great: when choosing an occupation, for instance, we may tend to focus on the happiness benefits of money, ignoring the more potent happiness benefits of doing something meaningful. Better simply to go for meaning. But of course some meaningful, estimable, or otherwise worthy options will pay greater happiness dividends than others, and some will be resoundingly negative in that regard. Moreover, we will often have some notion of those effects. However error-prone we may be in the happiness-seeking business—and far be it from me to deny that we make lots of mistakes—we are not complete imbeciles, and there would be little point counseling us about anything if we were. Having tried one’s hand at teaching kindergarteners and loathed every minute of it, one could be forgiven for adopting an avoidant stance toward such work, seeking instead some vocation that offers at least a chance of happiness. It bears remarking as well that, if one is capable of appreciating the point that certain popular sources of happiness like money can distract attention from more important sources of happiness like meaning, then one may well be able to understand that things like meaning are more important sources of happiness than things like money. And then, pursue happiness accordingly.

What truth there is in the paradox of hedonism, then, lies somewhere in the very indefinite middle: if you focus too much on happiness, you’ll not likely be happy; don’t overdo it. This is useful, if unremarkable, advice. But it is far short of an indictment of the pursuit of happiness. We shouldn’t overeat either, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t eat.

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5 Haybron 2008b.
2.2. The priority of virtue

A quite different sort of objection takes happiness to be at best a peripheral concern, as the chief object of a good life is not to be happy but to live well—to have and exercise virtue, for example. What mainly matters is worthwhile or virtuous activity; happiness may come along as a by-product of this, or get some small weight in our deliberations. But apart perhaps from avoiding depression and other extremes of unhappiness, it is not an important consideration in deciding how to live. If happiness should be pursued at all, it should be in a highly subsidiary role to virtue and merit. Objections of this sort are best-known among eudaimonistic philosophers such as Nussbaum and Annas (Nussbaum 2004, 2008, Annas 2004, 2011).

Nussbaum presses strongly on such points in a recent paper, where she argues that well-being often entails considerable sacrifice in happiness (2008). (Both Nussbaum and Annas, note, dispute the psychological reading of ‘happiness’, preferring to use the term for well-being. I will pass by this terminological matter here.) She illustrates with the examples of Irish politician John Hume and novelist David Cornwell, better known as John le Carré. Both accomplished men, only the latter seemed happy, the former troubled greatly by the weight of dealing with the Irish political crisis. While Cornwell was happier, there may be more to admire in Hume. Perhaps he had a better life. The cases are meant to highlight the importance of virtue in a good life, and the distinctly lesser importance of being happy. Much the same point is made with Wordsworth’s “happy warrior,” “doomed to go in company with Pain,” as well as Viji Srinivasan, a women’s advocate in India who died prematurely as a result of her toils on behalf of others. I will focus here on the Hume/Cornwell contrast.

Let’s grant that Hume led an admirable, indeed good life, and that living well often involves struggle and sometimes great suffering. Taking all things into account, including all the values that matter in a life, let’s say that Hume had a good life: a choiceworthy life, a life worthy of affirmation. What does this tell us about the importance of happiness? What it does not tell us is the role of happiness in well-being. For these points are entirely compatible with any major theory of well-being. Even the crudest of Benthamites could agree, and indeed one of the more common complaints lodged against them is that they seem to demand too much sacrifice of us, perhaps requiring us all to be Humes and Srinivasans. The fact that they led admirable or even choiceworthy lives tells us little or nothing about how well they fared. Nor does it tell us whether Hume benefited from the political activities that left him so unhappy, or whether he flourished or thrived, or was better off, a luckier man, than Cornwell.

Some of us will find the answers to these latter questions pretty obvious: Hume, as described by Nussbaum, was not flourishing, and seems unlikely to have profited from shouldering the burdens of Ireland, at least as he is described by Nussbaum. Nor was he better off, more to be envied, than Cornwell. More to be admired, perhaps, but not envied. What is worth choosing, and more broadly what matters in life, is a different question from what benefits us or serves our interests. And showing that a life is admirable, or even choiceworthy, falls well short of showing that it benefits the individual, that the person is flourishing or even doing well. In short, the argument here conflates two questions: that of well-being, and that of the good life, where this notion is understood in its ordinary broad sense, as encompassing all that matters in a life. To get a

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6 It also bears remarking that the critiques of these authors focus on the pursuit of happiness as a psychological phenomenon, and need not be read as a fundamental critique of positive psychology per se, at least depending on how that field is understood. Indeed, Annas has coauthored a paper with a “eudaimonic” positive psychologist, Corey Keyes (Keyes and Annas 2009).

7 For further discussion, see Haybron 2013.
sense of what is meant by the good life here, think of the way we assess the lives of the recently departed: few would disagree that it matters both whether they acted well and whether their lives were filled with enjoyment or suffering in deciding whether they had good lives.

Now intuitions on these cases may differ. It is possible, for all I have argued, that Aristotelians and kindred philosophers are correct to maintain that well-being consists wholly or partly in virtue. My point is just that claims about admirability or choiceworthiness, or about good lives, do nothing to establish claims about well-being. Further argument is needed to show that choiceworthy lives such as Hume’s are also beneficial, being not just good lives but good for the individual. (Though I have suggested that Aristotelians face an uphill battle in making a convincing argument for the benefits of virtue among individuals like Hume and Srinivasan; by my lights, such cases seem like *counterexamples* to their view.)

Still, Nussbaum’s point about what I’ll call the priority of virtue seems quite apt: virtue trumps happiness in a good life, indeed by a long shot. It is more important to be good, and more broadly to act and otherwise live well, than to be happy. I would add that virtue also trumps well-being in a good life: it is more important to live well than to fare well, or do well. We can frame this as the *aretaic constraint* on the pursuit of happiness, and more broadly well-being: the pursuit of well-being must, at the very least, not be unvirtuous. Perhaps we should make the point more strongly, so that pursuing well-being must be consistent with virtue. But here I will make only the weaker claim. At the very least, then, the aretaic constraint rules out acting badly in the pursuit of our interests. This principle places substantial limits on the pursuit of happiness, but it is not particularly controversial: though views about what exactly virtue entails vary considerably, the aretaic constraint is arguably a feature of all the major ethical theories, and basically a point of common sense.

Importantly, no plausible form of the aretaic constraint would demand of us, or most of us at any rate, that we follow the lead of Hume or Srinivasan. For most of us—or at least those of us living in reasonably decent circumstances—virtue does not require that we lead lives of suffering or unhappiness. Indeed, one significant virtue just is pursuing happiness well—“knowing how to live” and getting the most out of life, for instance. It is plausible that, as Nussbaum suggests, most of us ought to do more for others and work harder to make the world a better place. And such efforts often entail some difficulty and pain. Granting as much, though, must they demand we be unhappy? Or even that we substantially compromise our own happiness, leading much less pleasant and satisfying lives? It is strange to think that caring appropriately for others, and for matters of justice, should typically condemn us to unhappiness. One might have thought the opposite: the best evidence is that caring and doing for others is a potent source of happiness (e.g., Lyubomirsky 2007). The suffering of others presumably doesn’t generally demand that we suffer, at least not as an ongoing proposition, however much it demands that we do something about it. Perhaps the best way to honor those less fortunate than ourselves is to be grateful for, and enjoy, the blessings we hold, while at the same time doing something to help those not so blessed. Matthieu Ricard, reputedly one of the happiest men around—by some (ridiculous) accounts the happiest person on the planet—devotes a considerable portion of his energies to addressing poverty in the Himalayas, and has established a major organization to that end, Karuna-Shechen. He certainly is not working to line his pockets; he doesn’t even have pockets. He’s a monk. Is he doing something wrong in being happy?
2.3. Happiness is often an inappropriate motive

The aretaic constraint has a few corollaries worth separate treatment. The first relates to another common objection to happiness-seeking: happiness, at least in many cases, is the wrong motive for action. Virtuous actions should be done for their own sake, for example, or for the sake of the worthy ends they further. Again, the idea of happiness as by-product arises: happiness comes, if at all, as a congenial accompaniment of activities done for other reasons.

The basic point here—that virtue depends on having fitting motives, and happiness is not always a fitting motive—seems plausible enough: call it the motivation constraint. And it has teeth. Among the interventions that have been recommended by various positive psychologists, for example, are exercises in forgiveness, acts of kindness, and expressing gratitude. It is questionable whether such actions can sensibly be done simply for the purpose of making oneself happier. Perhaps it is even impossible genuinely to forgive, be kind, or express gratitude if the sole motive in doing so is to become happier. (Have you really forgiven me if your reason for extending forgiveness was purely to make your self feel better—and not, say, that forgiveness was actually warranted?) At any rate, blankly self-interested actions of these sorts do not merit the kind of admiration that outwardly similar acts motivated by the appropriate sorts of reasons do: expressing gratitude because one actually has something to be grateful for, or being kind because the person’s situation calls for kindness. Such methods of happiness-promotion, being inappropriately motivated, rob the actions of much of their value. It need not be bad to act that way, and it may at least be a plus that the concerned parties end up happier. But it would be better if the individual’s motives were fitting.

In some cases the action may on the whole be unvirtuous. Suppose that you mislead someone about your motives in doing her a kindness, so that she would reasonably respond with indignation if she discovered you aided her only as a means to make yourself feel good. Even if both of you end up happier, you arguably act badly, failing to treat him with respect. To take a more charged example, it is possible that “gratitude night” exercises are sometimes open to similar objections. In these classroom interventions, individuals write a letter of gratitude for an important person in their lives, and then read it aloud to the individual in front of the class. Much depends on the details of these episodes, which can be highly moving and uplifting; apparently it is not uncommon for students to describe the event as one of the greatest nights of their lives. But there are at least grounds for concern in the fact that such a deeply personal revelation, ordinarily regarded as a very private matter, is done in front of an audience. As well, the recipient is not apprised of the nature of the proceedings in advance, giving him little choice in the matter. Even if he were informed, he would likely feel considerable pressure to set aside his own scruples about privacy or dignity and “go along” with what is, after all, a very effortful expression of thanks. But if, in addition, the reason for going through the whole exercise is purely to make the “thanker” happy, then the setup appears, not just to be empty, but exploitative, using the recipient as a vehicle for promoting the giver’s good feelings, and perhaps sacrificing the recipient’s sense of dignity—and possibly the actual dignity of all parties—for this end. It would not be surprising if some of the recipients of this exercise, while perhaps gladdened and moved by the expression of gratitude, also felt a bit like they’d been used. But again, a great deal hangs on the details, and perhaps these worries are ultimately unfounded, or outweighed by the benefits of the exercise; my purpose is not to critique a particular intervention, but to illustrate the risks.

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An interesting feature of this case is that it raises several kinds of aretaic concerns: besides questions about the agent’s motives, issues of consent, as well as privacy and dignity, are also in play. I will not discuss norms of dignity in any detail here, but those who are skeptical about such norms may wish to consider a “Jerry Springer night” intervention, where participants with an atrophied sense of shame are induced to humiliate themselves in public—doing things with animals, subjecting their private lives to mockery, or just pick the reality television show that most disturbs you for an example—in an exercise that ultimately leaves them happier. I am by no means suggesting that gratitude night exercises are on par with such public humiliation stunts. But if one has concerns about dignity in the latter cases, one should at least be open to the possibility that similar problems arise in other, seemingly innocent, contexts.

Returning to the question of motives: note that the objection has concerned doing these exercises with personal happiness as the sole motive. In most actual cases, that will not likely be a realistic assumption. It is hard for a decent person to go through the motions of forgiveness, kindness or gratitude without having any of the desires or feelings normally deemed fitting for such acts. Even so, the admirability of these actions seems diminished to the extent that they are instrumentally motivated. The fact that these exercises are frequently justified simply on grounds of personal benefit is worrisome as well: we are being encouraged to take an instrumental attitude toward matters that are not fittingly regarded that way. Indeed the approach may well be self-defeating, promoting a kind of self-absorption that can undermine happiness rather than increase it; whereas some important sources of happiness, like caring for others and engaging in activities that seem worthwhile to you, require a healthy outward focus, appreciating values other than your own welfare.  

It may be thought that I am relying on a broadly Aristotelian, Kantian or other nonconsequentialist account of virtue. Indeed my view is in that neighborhood, but consequentialists too can mostly acknowledge these points, in the usual manner: we will promote a happier, and overall better, world if we are motivated to do things for reasons other than personal happiness. A person who helps others entirely out of self-interest is less likely to leave the world a better place than someone who simply cares for others. So while, from a standard consequentialist perspective, the value of an act of kindness strictly lies in its effects and not its motives, we can still deem it unvirtuous in consequentialist terms: it reflects motives that tend not to yield positive results over the long haul, and hence should not be promoted.

None of these points militate for a wholesale abandonment of happiness as a motive. In many if not most situations, there is nothing untoward about prudential motivation, and often it will rightly be our sole motive. Nor do they rule out the use of positive psychology interventions like forgiveness, kindness and gratitude exercises: as eudaimonistic philosophers often point out, we can use self-interested reasoning in adopting policies without being moved by self-interest in carrying out those policies (e.g., Annas 1993, 2011). Perhaps you decide to become a kinder person, partly on the grounds that you will be happier if you do. If you genuinely succeed in this project, you will arguably come to take up the characteristic motivations of a kind person, for instance helping others simply because you care for them. In particular actions, personal happiness may be no part of your motive, even if happiness was part of the reason you chose to cultivate that outlook. Similarly, you might take up the habit of counting your blessings each night as a way to become happier, yet when doing the exercise you may be entirely focused on the fact that you have so much to be grateful for, with matters of happiness playing little or no role. Con-

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9 See, again, the various discussions of the “paradox of hedonism.” I discuss the importance of appreciation in Haybron 2013; see also Darwall 2002.
contrast this sort of case with someone who ties her performance of the actions quite directly to what she believes will make her happier: regularly calculating which sorts of altruism will most produce a happiness payoff, fine-tuning the exercise to maximize its happiness dividends. Ignoring the needier but less agreeable homeless person in favor of helping the pretty lady with her bags. “I came on a great exercise last night—volunteering in the soup kitchen! A much better rush than packing boxes at the food bank. Next I’ll try looking mendicants in the eye or even talking to them, which I hear feels really good.” I suspect this is not someone most of us would admire.

In short, some kinds of action cannot reasonably be done with happiness as a (proximate) motivation, and positive psychology recommendations need to be sensitive to this fact. But there may be no class of actions that cannot, at some level of remove, properly be motivated partly by reasons of happiness. And of course many everyday actions don’t call for non-self-interested motivation at all.

2.4. The inappropriateness of pursuing evaluations

In framing the various psychological states under the rubric of happiness as evaluative mental states, we draw attention to a peculiar feature of the pursuit of happiness: it seemingly amounts to the pursuit of positive evaluations. This can seem an odd thing to make a major life goal, akin to grade grubbing as a way of life. One might have thought we should aim for lives that merit positive evaluations, not the evaluations themselves. Particularly if we’re the ones handing out the grades.

Is this a weighty objection to making happiness a major life goal? If in fact we were merely pursuing happiness \textit{qua} positive evaluation, it may well be. But that is not the case, for two reasons. Most importantly, some EMSs, notably pleasure and suffering, don’t just matter as evaluations. They quite plausibly have, and are widely regarded as having, intrinsic value, for instance because of what they are like, as experiences. A crippling bout of nausea may serve as a negative evaluation of the state of your innards, but that information isn’t coming in the form of a telegram: it takes the form of a horrible experience that seems bad in itself, quite apart from any evaluative or informational role it plays. Not all theorists grant the intrinsic disvalue of suffering, or the intrinsic value of pleasure, but those that deny it, or at least something in the vicinity, have a notoriously hard row to hoe. I am happy to let them toil at it, whilst we explore more fruitful lines of inquiry. (One can grant, note, that some pleasures, like sadistic enjoyments, aren’t choiceworthy on the whole even if, \textit{qua} pleasure, they constitute an intrinsic benefit for the individual.) In other work I have argued that emotional well-being, at least of an authentic sort, has intrinsic prudential value as an aspect of self-fulfillment.\textsuperscript{10} I will not discuss that view further here, nor will I consider other reasons for thinking (some) EMSs have intrinsic value, as the hedonic claim suffices to make the point.

Second, EMSs may often be useful indicators of other values, conveying information that might otherwise be lost on us. Our emotions and moods, for instance, respond not just, or even mainly, to our explicit judgments about things, but reflect vast amounts of information about our circumstances that gets processed more or less automatically—far more information than our slow, information-poor conscious reasoning processes can manage.\textsuperscript{11} As well, there is good reason to believe that the ways of living that make us feel good also tend to be pretty good ways of living: helping others and engaging in meaningful activities, as noted above, good relationships,

\textsuperscript{10} Haybron 2008, 2008b.
\textsuperscript{11} Here I am drawing on the literature on automaticity and dual process psychology. See, e.g., Bargh and Chartrand 199, Haybron 2008, Kahneman 2011.
and exercising our capacities (see Rawls’ Aristotelian Principle). One reason for the historical popularity of welfare hedonism is almost certainly that its practical prescriptions tend not to diverge wildly from those of other major theories of well-being; think Epicurus, or Mill. Certainly, this sort of claim is commonly employed by hedonists defending their view (e.g., Crisp 2006). In light of these points, it is not implausible that our emotional natures have an intelligence of their own, and often alert us to values we would otherwise overlook. The fact that you find a given occupation deeply fulfilling, and that it makes you happy, may be a pretty good sign that it is in fact a worthwhile job. (Maybe this comes as a surprise to you, as you expected the business world to be meaningless and crass, when in fact many jobs are perfectly worthwhile and rewarding.) And the fact that you’ve been depressed since entering a romantic relationship, despite how much sense it makes when you think about it, is a sign that the relationship is not healthy after all, or is badly suited to your nature. So pursuing positive EMSs like emotional well-being can also be a way of pursuing other values, using happiness as a signal of how well your life measures up.

These points may not apply to all EMSs, however. Mere opinions or beliefs, for instance, would indeed seem a strange object of pursuit. Why should seeking favorable opinions about our lives be a major aim in life? One problem is that opinions don’t generally seem very important, save perhaps in matters of respect or esteem. Nor does it make obvious sense to aim for positive opinions as a guide to value, in the way we were discussing regarding emotions and moods. Your opinions just are your judgment of how things stand, so they can’t very well serve as correctives to your judgment.

Third, our judgments about our lives are too loosely connected to the quality of our lives, and too subject to whimsy, to be terribly important. Elsewhere I have discussed this concern at length in relation to life satisfaction attitudes, so I will describe the problem only in brief. As most compellingly understood, life satisfaction embodies one’s judgment about how well one’s life is going on the whole: is it satisfactory? But a summary judgment of this sort is bound to be substantially arbitrary, in part because there’s no nonarbitrary way to add up all the disparate things we care about in our lives, and partly because it involves judging whether one’s life is going well enough, and for most people there’s not likely to be any principled way to set the bar. (How good a life is good enough for you? What does the question even mean?) So even given that you have a good idea of the things you care about, and of how things are going with respect to each of them, it’s liable to be something of a coin toss how satisfied you should be. Accordingly, you have lots of latitude to adjust your verdict to suit your purposes: when things are hard, lowering the bar and counting your blessings more; and when things are good, raising the bar and focusing more on the shortcomings in your life. As a result, the pursuit of life satisfaction can be a remarkably easy endeavor: to become more satisfied, you don’t need to make your life better. You need only think of Tiny Tim, and there you go. This is probably why you don’t often hear people say things like, “I just want for my children to be satisfied.”

That said, even life satisfaction and related attitudes can be an important object of pursuit at the social level, because they can be useful indicators of significant values. Even if it doesn’t make sense to pursue life satisfaction as an individual, because you can simply will yourself into being satisfied, it may make sense for policymakers to aim at promoting life satisfaction in the population, as they cannot quite so easily game the results. On average, people reporting higher life satisfaction tend to do better on a broad range of well-being indicators, and it is plausible that

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12 For review, see Haybron 2013.
more satisfied people tend to be getting more of what they care about (with some important exceptions we can set aside here). Promoting life satisfaction, then, could be a significant policy goal, quite consistently with the concerns noted above.

2.5. Attitudes should be fitting, not positive

A related objection notes that life often calls for negative EMSs—we shouldn’t always be happy. So the pursuit of positive EMSs is a mistake: what really matters is fitting evaluations, not positive ones (cf. Nussbaum 2008). Indeed, perhaps many of us should be less happy given all the problems in the world. The idea that EMSs should be fitting, and that we should only be happy insofar as that is a fitting response to our lives, is quite plausible, and it has significant consequences for the pursuit of happiness. But as should be fairly apparent by this stage, it is by no means a general objection to the pursuit of happiness. When people set their sights on a life of happiness, they do not have in mind that they be happy come what may, as if they hope to be happy while burying the dog. Presumably they wish to be happy in a life in which happiness makes some sort of sense. The basic idea that happiness should be fitting, and that we should only be happy in a life in which happiness makes some sort of sense. The basic idea that happiness should be fitting is perfectly commonsensical, if largely unarticulated in ordinary practice. As fittingness is fundamentally a question about the value of happiness, rather than about its pursuit, and as I have already treated the matter elsewhere (Haybron forthcoming), I will be brief here, focusing on some of the more interesting points where it bears on practice. One practical issue of particular interest here, the use of chemical mood enhancers like recreational drugs and antidepressants, is discussed in the earlier paper, and gets some attention below.

Fittingness arguably involves at least two broad constraints: whether our EMSs are compatible with virtue—the aretaic constraint, again—and whether they are authentic—the authenticity constraint. On the aretaic side, EMSs can fail to embody virtuous or appropriate ways of responding to our lives. We can be happy when sadness or anger is demanded, for instance. Note that certain responses can be epistemically justified, yet still morally or ethically inappropriate: laughing at a child’s terrible yet heartfelt poem, for example. The authenticity constraint is more controversial, yet there are good reasons to endorse something like it (Sumner 1996, Haybron 2008a, b). As characterized by Sumner, authenticity has two aspects: authentic states must be reasonably well informed, and autonomous. In short, one’s happiness is authentic if it reflects a response that is genuinely yours, to a life that is genuinely yours. The authenticity constraint is not entirely independent of the aretaic constraint, as some forms of inauthenticity are unvirtuous, like self-deception. But some arguably are not, as when someone’s happiness depends on his being (blamelessly) unaware of his wife’s treachery. His happiness is not a fitting a response to his life, but this seems to have no bearing on his admirability; he is responding to his life as well as can be expected. While many accounts of well-being do not include an authenticity constraint, at least explicitly, something like it seems necessary to account for a range of intuitions about cases like repressed artists working as accountants, or gay persons trying to lead heterosexual lifestyles, as well as examples of manipulated happiness achieved through brainwashing, lobotomies, personality-scrambling brain interventions, or extreme drugs like the Brave New World’s soma. In such cases it seems intuitive to many of us that the individuals’ happiness isn’t authen-

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14 This point is sometimes extended to challenge the very idea of a distinction between “positive” and “negative” affect, the worry being that this language suggests positive is always better, which is plainly false. The issue seems to me purely verbal and not very interesting, so I won’t pursue it here. With a few interesting exceptions, there is pretty obviously a natural and important distinction to be made along these lines, and an obvious sense in which sadness (say) is a negative emotion even if sometimes called for.
tic: the expression of their personality is frustrated, and their happiness, fulfilled desires, and other ostensibly good outcomes don’t really reflect who they are. (On the sort of view I favor, a variant of the view sketched by Mill in his discussion of individuality, in On Liberty, we should say that these individuals aren’t really attaining self-fulfillment.) It is possible to deny the force of such intuitions, of course, but theories that do so will be running up against a large swath of commonsense thinking about well-being.

3. Fleshing out the constraints

3.1. Positive thinking

To illustrate how these constraints play out in practice, consider the case of positive thinking techniques, often recommend in the positive psychology and self-help literature: being more optimistic, focusing attention on the positives, and so forth. Is this advice problematic? It certainly can be. One should not, for example, simply be positive: one ought only to be as positive as the situation warrants. As we’ve already seen, some circumstances call for negative emotions, and sunny optimism may not be a fitting response to a genuinely bleak or perilous situation. Pro tanto, we ought only to be as positive as the evidence warrants. The mere fact that a certain belief would make you happier does not justify you in holding it.

Similarly, one may encounter advice not to “think too much,” where the idea sometimes seems to be that one shouldn’t think very much at all, or should generally avoid thinking about the big issues and distract oneself with shopping and other minutiae. (Such counsel usually emanates from popular self-help tracts; I’m not aware of it in the positive psychology literature.) It is certainly possible to overthink things or ruminate in an unhealthy way. But how much you ought to think about things is not simply a matter of what will make you happy. Living well often means challenging comfortable assumptions, confronting unpleasant truths, and wrestling with difficult problems. Getting it right isn’t always pleasant.

The point here isn’t just that you won’t be very happy in the long run if you don’t accept a degree of short-term pain. It is also that virtue itself demands a willingness to think through difficult and painful issues, as the situation demands it. We tend not to admire those who uncritically and mindlessly go with the flow, conforming unquestioningly with the crowd. Nor those who refuse to deal with unpleasant realities, like a grave illness or destructive behavior in the family. And it is a moral failing for citizens to bury their noses in trivial matters while thinking not at all about the larger issues confronting their society and the world, leaving the rest of us at the mercy of their ill-informed votes and the whims of oil tycoons, arms merchants, and others with a stronger proclivity for engaging with public matters.

In thinking too little or being overly positive, we both act badly and risk undermining the authenticity and otherwise the fittingness of our happiness, which may come to depend on not having a firm grip on our situation. Yet these considerations hardly rule out all or even most efforts to promote happiness through such methods. For we enjoy a great deal of latitude in how we might reasonably respond to our lives; virtue takes many forms. In short, the norms governing the pursuit of happiness considerably underdetermine how we may reasonably act, and what attitudes we might reasonably have. Consider how ordinary it is to admire not only the restless

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15 “Pro tanto,” because some departures from strict epistemic rectitude might be warranted if, for example, a bit of unrealistic optimism greatly enhances one’s ability to achieve one’s goals.

16 For more on the benefits of a realistic outlook, see Badhwar 2008. See also Tiberius 2008.
striver, never satisfied, but also the unlucky yet indefatigable soul who manages to make the best of a hard situation, finding joy in the blessings she does possess. We can exploit this freedom to our advantage, adjusting our outlooks to suit the demands of our situation—helping us to be happier when that is desirable, or to be more critical and demanding when that makes sense.

And while many situations call for negative emotions, it is less clear that many lives require us to be unhappy. Most of us can reasonably choose, to a point, to focus more on the positives and less on the negatives; to interpret things more charitably or positively; or be more accepting of shortcomings in our lives. Because of this there is broad scope for positive psychology interventions along these lines to improve our lives, helping us to be quite reasonably happier, without compromising other values that matter. Ricard’s popular book on happiness, written from a Buddhist perspective, is a good example of the possibilities here, including finding legitimate grounds for happiness even in dire circumstances (Ricard 2006). There are interesting questions about whether there are circumstances where a disciplined Buddhist, but not a typical layperson, might reasonably be happy—presumably, what is reasonable for you to do depends on your personality, commitments, and internal resources. But it seems clear that bad circumstances need not make happiness unfitting; no hair-shirt is required.17

We have been discussing questions about how positive we can reasonably be; but it also matters greatly how one goes about it: on what is your positive attitude based? Two individuals can be equally optimistic, yet only one of them might be fittingly optimistic. Consider a pair of large-scale examples: many Latin American countries such as Mexico, on one hand, and the United States, on the other. Mexicans and Americans are both positive-thinking peoples by reputation, yet only Americans come in for withering ridicule about being cheerful idiots. No doubt this is partly a matter of prejudice, or a desire to pick on the powerful; people just like making fun of Americans. But neither does it seem entirely groundless, at least if popular stereotypes have any truth to them. To see the difference, compare two types of positivity, call them appreciative and blind positivity, respectively. The appreciative outlook essentially involves a receptivity to value, good and bad. In this case, one’s positivity is grounded in a tendency to focus more on the good things, while still being open to the bad things: when things are bad you don’t just look away; you acknowledge it and deal with it. Blind positivity, by contrast, yields happiness indifferently to the reasons for being happy or unhappy. You just focus on the positives, period, perhaps also making things out to be better than they are, not because they are genuinely good and call for appreciation, but simply because it feels better to do so. And you avoid rather than acknowledge the bad. A chipper young woman, for instance, was interviewed on television and reported that “I don’t watch the news, because it has sad things that make me upset.” Assuming she isn’t just doing a poor job of expressing frustration at the state of news broadcasting in the United States, this would be an example of blind positivity.

If the stereotypes are to be believed, then Americans may tend more toward blind positivity, while Mexican culture tends more to embody appreciative positivity. Americans think unhappy people are more likely to go to Hell; Mexicans have rancheras.18 Naturally we are trading in crude caricatures here, no doubt unfair to Americans, who certainly aren’t uniformly or entirely averse to dealing with negative information, nor incapable of genuine appreciation. But even if

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17 This point might seem to reinforce common doubts about the value of happiness, and indeed it does indicate one of the reasons for thinking happiness can’t be the only thing that matters. But a serious consideration of Ricard’s text makes plain that happiness in these cases is a tremendous benefit, by any reasonable standard. It is a far cry from consoling oneself with “small mercies,” as Sen famously put it.

18 Scollon and King 2004. Rancheras are a type of Mexican song often noted for their expressions of sadness.
false, the caricatures usefully illustrate an important contrast in approaches to positivity. We should cultivate appreciative forms of positivity, not blind positivity.

Blind positivity yields happiness indifferently to the reasons for being happy or unhappy, and so results in an interesting variety of inauthenticity. It very much resembles another phenomenon, which Harry Frankfurt famously dubbed “bullshit” (Frankfurt 2009). The idea is that the individual speaks, not with an aim to deceive, but indifferently to the truth of what she says. Similarly, perhaps we could most accurately characterize the happiness that results from blind positivity, and is thus indifferent to the reasons for being happy or not, as bullshit happiness.

3.2. Manufacturing happiness

Another interesting case concerns “laughter yoga” and related interventions where individuals gather to engage in laughter at, well, nothing. At least at the start, the laughter is merely simulated or forced, though evidently this normally develops rapidly into genuine laughter, probably due to both contagion and the absurdity of the situation. It seems curmudgeonly to criticize people gathering to laugh together, and perhaps there is nothing untoward about the practice. But it has not surprisingly met with some skepticism if not hostility, and it is worth considering whether there might be something to the doubts. The most obvious complaint is that forced laughter, simply to make oneself happier, is undignified (childish, etc.). While dignity is an important value, or so I’ve suggested, it is not clear how to make the objection generally compelling, applying even to individuals whose own standards are not at all offended by participating in the exercise. For some individuals—John Wayne, say—to engage in laughter yoga sessions would indeed be puzzling and disappointing, as it would seem to betray their own standards of dignity and integrity. But we need a reason for thinking it undignified, in a problematic way, for people generally. There may be one, but it is not immediately obvious what that would be. Indeed, sometimes what we call “undignified” behavior is commendable, as is often the case when adults play with children. Is forced laughter any different?

Perhaps the concern lies, not with being silly, but with the idea of making oneself happy without having any reason for it: happiness through forced laughter is a manipulated form of happiness. It reflects the manipulation, not an authentic response to the conditions of one’s life. Imagine making yourself happier by having a brain probe implanted that makes you feel happy whenever you press a button. Or, alternatively, that brings cheerfulness by inducing laughter at the press of a “giggle” button. Would you want such a device, supposing it not to be unsafe, painful or inconvenient? How would you feel if, say, your father had one implanted, and regularly induced inane laughter in himself? I suspect reactions to this scenario would tend more toward the “disappointed” and “ashamed” end of the spectrum than “proud” or “admiring.” Happiness is an evaluative response to one’s life, and it is arguably unfitting, beneath us, to induce such evaluations in ourselves without even attempting to ground them in some reality that might justify them. Similarly, it would seem unfitting to cheer oneself up by giving oneself baseless compliments—“I’m a genius!”—or deluding yourself, say by convincing yourself you are Napoleon each evening. It is one thing to focus more on the positives, quite another to engage in various forms of self-deception and self-manipulation just to make oneself feel good. Such tactics would not, at least, sit easily with an Aristotelian or Kantian view of virtue. It may indeed be that self-respect demands that we confront our lives as they are, and respond to them in fitting ways, as the situation warrants. Happiness must be earned, one might say, not simply induced.

It may be objected that we already accept certain forms of manipulation in the pursuit of happiness: caffeine, alcohol, antidepressants, and other drugs, for instance. So why not forced
laughter? The issues here are surprisingly complex, but there seem to be relevant disanalogies between the cases. With most if not all socially accepted drugs, the resulting happiness boost is not simply induced; it rather arises through a broad alteration of consciousness, so that one responds differently, yet not unfittingly, to one’s life. So the resulting mental states are still genuine responses to one’s life. As well, the drugs often work by removing obstacles to optimal functioning: with antidepressants, by ameliorating a disorder that may be distorting or suppressing the individual’s personality; in the case of caffeine, by reducing fatigue; and in the case of alcohol, by reducing inhibitions. In all these cases, the net effect might actually be to enhance authenticity (again, we are talking about socially accepted uses, not getting blind drunk). Importantly, alcohol is ordinarily used in social settings, and drinkers are generally keen to have their conversational partners join them, in part because the drink can help break down barriers and foster deeper communication. In none of them do you simply pop a pill or inject a fluid to manufacture a completely ungrounded state of euphoria, such as one might find in an opium den. So while there might be some reduction in authenticity through the use of any mind-altering substance, there can also be compensating gains in authenticity, and only some chemical enhancements amount to rank manipulation that severs the connection between one’s happiness and reality. And those, like heavy doses of heroin, are generally deemed problematic, arguably for the same reason that forced laughter might seem problematic.

Elsewhere I have noted that authenticity is only one factor in well-being, so it is possible that some degree of authenticity can reasonably be traded off for gains elsewhere, such as hedonic gains. Perhaps your happiness would be still more authentic if you literally knew everything about your parents, but your life is a lot more pleasant not knowing certain things, and that seems worth it. It is possible, then, that the inauthenticity of happiness manufactured through forced laughter is outweighed by the benefits of feeling good. But even if you would benefit from the exercise, it is another question whether you should do so. The familiar, benign cases of departure from perfect authenticity tend to involve modest biasing in the reality-response relationship: you choose the most optimistic, positive or self-serving interpretation of reality you can get away with, short of blatantly contradicting the evidence. Faced with a multitude of uncertainties, you avoid seeking out certain kinds of information and focus attention on others; you view yourself and your loved ones in the most favorable light you can reasonably manage; you cultivate a somewhat inflated picture of your prospects. But you don’t become downright delusional, forming attitudes with no regard for the evidence and embracing obvious falsehoods. Or, to take a very different sort of case, you have a drink to relax, or take a small dose of medication to ease your anxiety. Again, these chemical interventions bias your response to reality; but they do not determine it, and they do not sever the connection between reality and attitude, manufacturing happiness independently of the facts.

Forced laughter, by contrast, seems to go well beyond biasing, involving the mechanical production of evaluative responses that have no purchase in the conditions of your life. In this respect it seems more akin to laughter probes and self-delusion than our workaday positive illusions, and hence more problematic. On the other hand, it is surely relevant that most of the laughter generated in these sessions appears to be genuine: the forced laughter is only a catalyst, and it is doubtful the exercise would do much good if it were otherwise. Perhaps a better analogy would be the momentary use of a laughter probe to “jump-start” you into a good mood, or out of a bad one, where the resulting emotional state largely embodies your response to things as they are. It is not simply a manufactured mood, and would not persist if you did not actually have reason to remain in a good mood. In any event, it is not my purpose to render a verdict on the pro-
priety of laughter yoga here, but simply to shed light on some of the hazards of happiness-promotion by manipulative means. There are doubtless further considerations that must be weighed, and the practice may ultimately prove to be unobjectionable.

It is possible as well that, while forced laughter exercises would be unfitting for some individuals, they are perfectly fine in other cases. In India, where the phenomenon apparently originated, laughter yoga might actually be an appealingly subversive activity, particularly for women: a way of asserting the importance of personal gratification, saying “my happiness matters,” in a culture that may tend to discount it. In such cases the practice might actually be admirable on the whole, even if inadvisable for most Westerners, say, who already get ample encouragement to seek enjoyment. Also relevant are the individual’s own values and commitments. In particular, even if one rejects the earlier arguments about the importance of seeking only fitting forms of happiness, one should at least recognize that some individuals could reasonably maintain such ideals for themselves. And pretty plainly, some do (like, perhaps, John Wayne). In those cases, the person’s sense of dignity and self-respect, and perhaps also her actual dignity and self-respect, not to mention her integrity, can be undermined by practices like forced laughter, giggle buttons and the like. For those individuals it would indeed be inappropriate, perhaps even wrong, to engage in such practices. 19 This could be the case even if the same exercises were perfectly reasonable for other individuals, with different commitments.

This is a fairly crucial point: whatever the general status of laughter yoga as a means of happiness-promotion, it is almost certainly inappropriate for some individuals, whose values preclude acting that way while maintaining their integrity, self-respect, and dignity. And it does those individuals a disservice, effectively discounting their commitments, to say merely that laughter yoga isn’t a good “fit” for them, or that it won’t “work” for them. It’s not a question of effectiveness, or a matter of taste. It’s a question of personal integrity, and practitioners who desire to wade in these waters had best be aware of the stakes.

It is worth noting, in this connection, that laughter yoga and other interventions we have discussed can be, and sometimes are, used in coercive settings such as “team-building” and productivity-enhancing exercises by employers. Even if there is no gainsaying the individual who chooses to, say, attend weekly laughter yoga sessions, it seems a matter of some importance whether people have it imposed on them, and whether they might have reason to object to being expected to engage in it. (To this end, practitioners can avail themselves of advice on how to deal with recalcitrant individuals who are “so stuck in their head that they just [don’t] want to laugh.” 20 I’m not sure what this means, but it doesn’t sound good.) Employers might reasonably expect workers to engage in a wide range of self-improvement or team-building exercises; but it is far from clear that they can reasonably insist that employees partake in (forced) forced laughter sessions. For some reason—if only because it is an affront to the dignity of some individuals—the notion strikes some of us as grotesque. At the very least, it calls for further reflection.

4. A few points of methodology

Some readers, particularly researchers in the social sciences, may yet be skeptical about the reliance of the preceding arguments on notions like respect, dignity, integrity and authenticity, and on questions of motives rather than simply results. If people are happier, and no one is

19 On self-respect, see Hill 199, 1996. On integrity, see Williams 1973. Here I will not get into the distinctions and connections between integrity, self-respect, and dignity, though the notions are clearly related.

harmed, what’s to complain about? And why should we place any stock in obscure notions like dignity? The Benthamite perspective has a particularly strong grip in the sciences, which have little use for, and little notion of what to do with, claims that can’t be cashed out in quantitative terms. Be that as it may, the question of how to live, like the question of how to make art, is not mainly a matter of quantity, and empirical researchers would be well-advised to acknowledge the limitations of their methods in this domain. Let me suggest a few reasons for taking the foregoing arguments seriously, even if one is skeptical about the methods of philosophical ethics.

For starters, the “obscure” notions in question have a strong foothold in commonsense thinking: as a matter of fact, very many people care about things like dignity, respect, motives, and, if I am right, authenticity. If positive psychologists disregard such values, they risk offending the very people they wish to help. (I should like to add: and failing to treat them with respect, paternalistically dismissing their values in advising them about their lives. But this thought presupposes that we should treat people with respect.) And since such values underwrite much of the hostility that has—rightly or wrongly—faced positive psychology, the movement will likely be more successful if it takes them seriously.

Importantly, the Benthamite perspective is arguably compatible with the bulk of the points made in this paper. As I suggested earlier, it is entirely standard for utilitarians to observe that the world will be a happier place if we observe norms like respect, and concern ourselves with people’s motives, than if we limit ourselves to an austere diet of direct utility maximization. Indeed, if consequentialists generally did not avail themselves of this strategy, and simply cast away much of the fabric of everyday morality, it is unlikely that the view would be taken seriously among philosophers. As it is, consequentialism is a minority view among the experts in the field. Nonexperts in the social sciences would do well not to cherry-pick from the philosophical literature, and pay some mind to this fact: it is not actually obvious that consequentialism is true. The majority of expert opinion, indeed, points to a rather different conclusion.

Of course it is possible that the experts are generally benighted, but that is hard to judge without some competence in the field. That granted, it is not unreasonable to worry that moral philosophers concern themselves too little with the compatibility of their views with the naturalistic outlook of the sciences. But in fact many of us do approach ethics from a strongly naturalistic perspective, and it is entirely possible to defend all the norms discussed in this paper in what anyone should recognize as naturalistically respectable terms. Suppose, for instance, that value is, as many in the sciences believe, wholly a projection of the human mind: what the right values are, let’s say, depends on what human valuing is like. For instance, on what we would value given sufficient reflection (a supposition that would make sense of much philosophical practice: to determine what we would say on reflection, it can be helpful actually to reflect). Let suppose, further, that human valuing is in fact robustly and ineliminably deontological, trading liberally in notions of respect and dignity, with a strong concern for motives in morally evaluating actions. This would be some reason for thinking that consequentialism is false, and a deontological ethics is true. These are not wildly speculative assumptions, and it takes little imagination to guess why human beings might have evolved to have such values: yes it makes sense for people to care about the sorts of values even a kindergartener can appreciate, like pleasure and suffering; but so too might a social, language-using species like ours have a profound interest, not just in getting help when we are suffering, but also in being listened to, in having agreements honored, in having our wills taken seriously. In short, in being treated with respect.

Now I am not claiming that these suppositions are actually true, still less that I have given a satisfactory argument for them.

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21 Bourget and Chalmers 2013.
The point is just to sketch a plausible story about how the sorts of values discussed in this paper could be given a naturalistically respectable explanation. There need be nothing remotely occult about any of the claims made here.

5. Conclusion

We have seen that the pursuit of happiness is a perfectly legitimate enterprise, and it should be evident enough that it is fairly important as well. There is nothing fundamentally wrong, in this respect, with the positive psychology movement, and it may be that the great majority of its recommendations are quite reasonable from an ethical standpoint. At the same time, there are some strong constraints, not all of them widely recognized, on how we may fittingly go about it. In particular, methods for pursuing happiness must be compatible with virtue—the aretaic constraint—and the happiness we aim for should be fitting—including, arguably, authentic. Notably, the aretaic constraint extends far beyond the familiar dictum that we should not harm others, and generally should observe the rules of morality. Being morally decent is just one aspect of living well.

While my critical discussion has mainly targeted eudaimonistic critics of positive psychology, my disagreements with them are not, for the most part, particularly deep. I have mainly tried to show that the critics have overstated the problems with common methods for pursuing happiness. But these points need not be rejected by eudaimonists, at least of an Aristotelian variety. As well, my discussion of the aretaic constraint is largely compatible with, and clearly bears the influence of, an Aristotelian ethic. The chief point of departure between the present view and theirs is that my discussion does not posit an essential connection between well-being and virtue. But whether virtue benefits us or not, we ought to be virtuous anyway. In practice, our recommendations need be little different.

6. References


See, relatedly, Kristjánsson 2010.