

Book

In pursuit of happiness

In *The Making of the Modern World*, Roy Porter argues that in the British Enlightenment people stopped asking “How can I be saved?”—a question that over the previous century had brought little but mayhem—and asked instead “How can I be happy?” James Madison, who had been well schooled in Enlightenment thought at Princeton, wrote that government should show “fidelity to the object of government, which is the happiness of the people.”

Derek Bok agrees with Madison and believes that only now do we have the scientific evidence for government action. The explosion of happiness studies tells us what really makes people happy, and some of it is amenable to government action. Unlike Richard Layard, who has been pursuing a similar agenda in the UK, Bok does not believe that happiness is the only thing that matters, and is selective in his acceptance of the literature and its prescriptions. Much of the happiness literature supports what we have long known, that it is good to be healthy, to be married, and to have friends, and that it is bad to lose a spouse or a child, to be divorced or alone, to be in pain, or to be unemployed. Some of the findings are less obvious—and to some less welcome or even incredible—that children do little for parental happiness, that conservatives and the religious are happier than socialists and atheists, and that countries with extensive welfare states are no happier than those without. Even so, Bok makes some familiar arguments for extending the welfare state in the USA, although the support from the happiness evidence is often weak. Indeed, some writers on happiness have argued that a European-style welfare state would make Americans less happy.

The big issue for a “how can we be happy” government is what to do

about economic growth. Much of the happiness literature finds that, at least in rich countries, average happiness has not grown along with living standards. Two explanations are commonly advanced. One is that people do not care about their living standards, but only about how they are doing relative to others. The alternative, emphasised by Bok, is that better living standards

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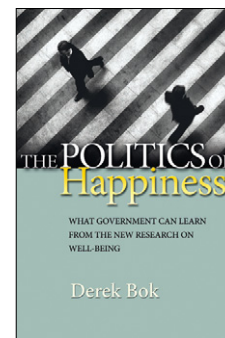
bring only temporary improvements in happiness. After a while, people are about as happy or unhappy as they always have been. People do not anticipate that this will happen, so are constantly demanding more, in the belief that more will make them happier, and are just as constantly disappointed. While everyone would be happier if economic growth were to come to a halt, people are locked into a mass delusion about the desirability of growth. “How can I be rich?” is not the right response to “How can I be happy?”

There are grounds for scepticism about this argument. That adaptation is completely unanticipated is barely credible; every one of us knows that the joys of newness will wear off along with the newness itself. Not understanding this is like not understanding that fire burns, possible for a child, but not for an adult who has experienced adaptation again and again. (Life changing disabilities, which are rarely experienced, are another matter.) In fact, people might just be right about growth and the happiness gurus wrong. People compare what they have with what their parents had, better life chances—when I was born in the UK, infant mortality was higher than it is in India now—lower morbidity, better housing, wider opportunities

in education, and the chance to travel and to communicate globally. They want their children to have even better chances and understand that it is the expansion of material circumstances that underpins those greater capabilities. (Bok is not impressed; he likens iPods and antidepressive drugs to the serenity drug soma in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.)

If people are right about growth, there must be something wrong with the happiness measures. Here is one possibility. Daniel Kahneman has emphasised the distinction between experiencing life and thinking about it. Happiness, in the sense of “are you happy now?” or “are you sad now?”, is an emotional experience that is quite different from evaluative happiness in the sense of “My life is about as good as I can imagine.” Where we have both types of measure, they are only weakly correlated. Experienced happiness is largely set by personality, and although it will temporarily respond to changing circumstances, it moves hardly at all with economic growth over a span of years. Life evaluation, by contrast, is related to material (and other life) achievements and we know that average national life evaluation is closely related to national income across countries. So happiness as life evaluation may also rise with economic growth. We don’t know for sure, because most of the evidence we have comes from hybrid questions that are part evaluative and part experiential. In the meantime, and until we understand this issue better, it is too soon to give up on economic growth, and to try to deny to our children and grandchildren the increase in opportunities that we ourselves have been fortunate enough to experience.

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The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being

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For an **interview with Derek Bok** see <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10988>