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Chapter 1

Setting the Scene

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the main themes presented in this book. Most books on happiness are concerned with answering, in their diverse ways, a basic question: *how should I live?* Such books assume, however, that the path to happiness lies entirely within one's control. Happiness is simply a matter of doing certain things and refraining from doing certain other things. This book, however, takes a different view. It is that happiness is not always within our control but, instead, prey to the attitudes and actions of others. Following Jean-Paul Sartre's aphorism, "hell is other people", the broad theme of this book is that "unhappiness is other people". In the language of economics, "other" people, through their attitudes and actions, create externalities – generally negative - which serve to make "us" unhappy. The instruments for creating such externalities are *intolerance* and feelings of *envy/superiority*. This book expands on this theme in respect of three areas: *religion*, *money*, and *prejudice*.

In publishers' catalogues, books on happiness represent a burgeoning genre. A quick search, in March 2023, of books on Amazon.co.uk with "Happiness" in the title revealed a list of 60,000 books, running to over 24 pages, on its website. Many of these are concerned with answering, in diverse ways, a basic question: *how should I live?* Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of their answers, many of these books take as their aspiration Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* – a positive and virtuous existence which people can, and should, strive to achieve (Oswald, 1962).

To take two examples. Dolan (2014) proposed the "pleasure-purpose" principle: to be truly happy you need to feel both pleasure and purpose. As Dolan (2014) might express it, writing this book in the morning is purposeful while playing tennis in the afternoon is pleasurable. So these activities, taken collectively, make for a purposeful and pleasurable (and, therefore, happy) day. But one without the other would render happiness incomplete. Another author, Csikszentmihalyi (2002), had a different take on how to achieve happiness. As he described it: "the best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (p. 3). These moments do not just happen, they must be made to happen and, according to Csikszentmihalyi (2002), the route to happiness lies in increasing one's capacity to create such moments.

Books on how to be happy assume that the path to happiness lies entirely within one's control. It is a matter of doing certain things and refraining from doing certain other things. This book, however, takes a different view. It is that happiness is not always within our control but, instead, prey to the attitudes and actions of others. One of the most famous lines in literature comes from Jean-Paul Sartre's play, *No Exit*: "hell is other people" (Sartre, 1947, p. 93). In an echo of this sentiment, the broad theme of this book is that "unhappiness is other people". In the language of economics, "other" people, through their attitudes and actions, create externalities – generally negative – which serve to make "us" unhappy. The instruments for creating such externalities are *intolerance* and feelings of *envy/superiority*. This book expands on this theme in respect of three areas: *religion*, *money*, and *prejudice*.

It is fair to say the existing (un)happiness literature, particularly in economics, does not take many of these externalities into account. Instead, the focus is, firstly, on identifying the factors,

internal to oneself, that contribute to personal happiness and, secondly, on measuring the relative strength of their contribution. Thus happiness (or unhappiness) is caused, for example, by the state of *one's* health, *one's* income, *one's* marital status, whether *one* has friends, the extent to which *one* is religious. The relative strength of these factors is measured by a statistical estimation of a “happiness equation” based on the degree to which a person’s happiness is correlated with the values of these “happiness-determining” factors. The important point is that in making these calculations, “other people” – their dispositions, attitudes, actions – do not feature in the calculus of happiness. In other words, there are no “externalities” operating to affect happiness outcomes. By contrast, an analysis of these externalities lies at the heart of this book. The next two chapters lay the groundwork, while the following three chapters each tackle one of the book’s main themes.

Reworking the “Happiness Equation”

Against this background, chapter 2 offers a reworking of this analysis using data from the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS covers more than 250,000 respondents, drawn from 90 countries. It is a widely accessible database which asks respondents about their level of happiness: “Taking all things together, would you say that you are (i) very happy; (ii) quite happy; (iii) not very happy; (iv) not at all happy?”. Answers to this question are then allied to a wealth of information that the WVS also elicits about the respondents: *inter alia* their demographics (gender, age, marital status, number of children); their circumstances (economic and social status; income; education; state of health); the importance they attach to religion, family, and friends; their autonomy in terms of the freedom of choice they enjoy; their lived environment in terms of the quality of their neighbourhoods; and their socio-political environment in terms of the countries in which they reside.

Using these data, the Survey identifies the most important “happiness-determining” factors used in “happiness equations”, discusses the rationale for their use, and uses the WVS data to estimate the strength of these factors in affecting the probability of being happy. So, for example, the analysis makes statements such as: the average probabilities of men and women being happy are, respectively, X and Y per cent and that, furthermore, X is (or is not) significantly smaller than Y . An innovation of the analysis is that it calculates “pure” effects – in other words, the difference between X and Y is due

entirely to differences in gender and is not confounded by the intervention of any other variables. A similar statement applies to every other variable used in the statistical analysis.

This is achieved by using the method of recycled proportions which is described in some detail in chapter 2. But by way of precis, two hypothetical scenarios are constructed: in the first scenario it is assumed that *all* the persons in the sample are men *ceteris paribus*; in the second scenario it is assumed that *all* the persons in the sample are women *ceteris paribus*. Thus, the *only* difference between the two scenarios is that of gender, with the values of the other variables held at their sample values, and therefore, the difference in the probability of being happy between the two scenarios can only be ascribed to gender.

Tranquilliser Usage and Self-Harm as Expressions of Unhappiness

One of the drawbacks of the statistical results presented in chapter 2 is that they rely solely on *self-reported* happiness. Researchers are aware that self-reported measures can be a distortion of the true state of affairs. For example, the need to maintain one's self-esteem and optimism might lead to a positive bias in self-reported levels of happiness. It would be useful to supplement the analysis of "happiness equations" using more objective measures of happiness. Unfortunately, data with a wide geographical spread, based on objective measures, are not available; such data that do exist pertain to specialised surveys.

Chapter 3 uses two such surveys. The first employs a survey for West Belfast (in Northern Ireland) which contains a question on tranquilliser usage by respondents ("never use", "moderate use", "regular use") as a proxy for happiness, and examines the probability of *tranquilliser usage* against several variables and, in particular, with respect to gender. The second uses data from The Queensland Injuries Surveillance Unit (QISU), which records details of injuries presenting at the Emergency Departments of participating hospitals in the Australian state of Queensland. These data record the cause of injuries, one of which is *self-harm* (SH). Using self-harm as a surrogate for unhappiness, chapter 3 examines the nature of injuries resulting from SH and compares them to injuries from external causes by asking: which people were most vulnerable to SH and was there a

gender or ethnic or employment status risk to SH? If so, what was the size of the risks emanating from these sources? Were SH injuries more (or less) severe than injuries from external forms of assault?

Religious Intolerance

Chapter 4 then turns to the first of the book's core themes, religion, and in particular addresses the issue of *religious intolerance* (with its concomitant, religious violence) and its effects on its victims. The first question raised by the preceding sentence is, what is meant by intolerance? To "tolerate" something is neither to approve of it nor to be indifferent towards it. As Leiter (2008, pp. 2–3) defines it: "for there to be a *practice* of toleration, one group must deem another group's beliefs or practices as 'wrong, mistaken, or undesirable' and yet 'put up' with these, nonetheless. This means that tolerance is not an issue when one group is simply indifferent to the other".

It might be, therefore, that I *approve* if my neighbours are of the same race as myself; I am *indifferent* if they are of a different race; but I *tolerate* the fact that they are of a different religious persuasion. As Zee (2016) points out, to express one's disapproval of views or actions that one finds offensive or distasteful is consistent with tolerance, provided one does not try to prevent such views being held or actions being taken: "under tolerance, it is perfectly possible to not interfere in behaviour, for example the veiling of women in Islam, yet have an outspoken negative opinion on it" (p. 37).

According to Carter and Ferretti (2013), tolerance has three components: (i) the "objection" component whereby one disapproves of something; (ii) the "power" component whereby one can interfere with the outcome of which one disapproves; (iii) the "acceptance" component which leads one to abstain from interfering. The important question is: why do people exercise tolerance by abstaining from interfering *even though they might have the power to do so?*

One reason for non-interference is "virtue signalling" as argued by Williams (1996). Another reason might be that the institutions of government and civil society establish legal and regulatory frameworks that impose consequences which deter interference in matters about which they take a negative view. So, for example, prior to the overtly pro-Hindu Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) coming to power in India in 2014, there was freedom to wear religious symbols, choose when and where to pray,

what to eat, and whom to marry. These freedoms were guaranteed under the constitution and anyone who objected to, or took action to prevent, such practices would, on grounds of “hurting the (relevant) community’s religious sentiments”, be restrained by the force of the law (Borooah, 2016, p. 9).

Tolerance, however, morphs into *intolerance* when members of the (usually majority) group, disapproving of another (usually minority) group’s actions, no longer abstain from their power to interfere but, instead, exercise such power to prevent the offending action from being taken. The question is how and why this mutation from tolerance to intolerance occurs. Bessone (2013) argued that this could occur when there was structural change in government and civil society such that legal and administrative norms, which earlier acted as a bulwark against the power to interfere, were sufficiently altered to allow interference to occur without any concomitant penalty.

In chapter 4, I discuss the case of religious violence whereby members of a majority religion victimise adherents of a minority religion. Of particular interest are what are termed “ethnic democracies” that is, countries with elected governments which are the product of ethnic nationalism and in which a democratically elected government appropriates the state and makes it a tool for advancing the interests of the majority ethnic group.¹ Up to 2014, India was not a part of this group but was instead an explicitly secular country.² With the election of the BJP government in India in 2014, and again in 2019, however, it is arguable that India, though remaining a secular state in constitutional terms, has converted to a *de facto* ethnic democracy.³

In both Israel and India, the minority group happens to be Muslims with second-class status: *de jure* in Israel and *de facto* in India. Indeed, the similarity between the anti-Muslim rhetoric in India and the anti-Arab rhetoric in Israel is striking. Both stem, rightly or wrongly, from the belief that Muslims in India and Israel are, firstly, potentially disloyal to the state; secondly, that some of their

¹ Where the majority ethnic group could be defined in terms of religion, race, language. In most cases – for example, Israel, Slovakia, Estonia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh – ethnic bias is built into the countries’ constitutions, so that they are *de jure* ethnic democracies.

² Following the 42nd Amendment of the Constitution of India, enacted in 1976, the Preamble to the Constitution asserted that India is a secular nation.

³ For an account of how India morphed from a secular to an ethnic democracy, see Jaffrelot (2019).

cultural practices disrespect the majority way of life; and thirdly, that their higher fertility rates pose a demographic threat to the majority group.⁴

Chapter 4 examines in some detail the nature of violence between Hindus and Muslims in India both before and after 2014. It points to the highly concentrated nature of this violence throughout India's post-independence period: 71 per cent of the 2,223 incidents which occurred in the period 1950–2006 were in just four states, which collectively accounted for less than one-third of India's population: Jammu and Kashmir, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh. Since 2014, the nature of Hindu–Muslim violence has changed with the earlier model of major incidents being replaced by a phenomenon which Pai and Kumar (2018) term “everyday communalism” (p. 3). By this they mean frequent occurrences of “micro-aggressions” against Muslims, arising out of petty everyday incidents, that weave communal hostility into the fabric of quotidian life and stoke the fire of anti-Muslim feeling.

Following from India's transition to an “ethnic democracy” has been a series of laws directed against Muslims. Prominent among these is a ban on the slaughter of cattle – the cow being sacred to Hindus but beef being eaten by Muslims. This ban has had two effects. First, it has provided the context for “cow-protection” vigilantes to attack Muslims on the pretext that they were eating/selling beef or transporting cattle. Second, by affecting India's beef export industry, and by depriving its tanning industry of its input of animal hides, it has damaged India's economy. Chapter 4 contains a detailed exposition of the set of Indian government policies which have disadvantaged and discomfited Muslims.

Income, Status, and Job Satisfaction

Chapter 5 turns to the issue of income and the question of whether having more money makes people happier. The answer is Yes and No! Yes, if one considers a point in time – at any one time, richer people profess themselves to be happier than those that are poorer. No, if one is considering movements over time – as economic growth causes a country's citizens to become richer over time,

⁴ See Margalit (2023) for an essay on Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's Minister for National Security since 2022, and the party he leads, *Otzma Yehudit* (Jewish Power).

their average level of happiness increases hardly at all. This paradox, whereby money increases happiness at a point in time but not over time, is known as the “Easterlin paradox”.⁵

This paradox can be explained by the fact that, *at a point in time*, higher income confers two benefits to individuals: consumption benefits (in the sense of being able to afford more, and better, goods and services) and status benefits (in the sense of enjoying superior status relative to one’s peers). The status effect would not, however, operate, *over time*: with a doubling of income in a country, say between 2012 and 2022, someone who was twice as rich as their peers in 2012 would continue to be so in 2022. Although the consumption effect would still apply, that could either be trivial or be nullified by other factors like having to work longer hours for the additional income.

A major problem with making the Easterlin paradox operational is knowing who to compare one’s income with. As Easterlin (1996) suggested, “happiness varies directly with one’s own income and inversely with the income of others” (p. 140). But the vexed question remains – who are these “others”? Are they all the country’s citizens? People in one’s district? One’s neighbours? Those with similar education? Of the same age? The big problem with “implementing Easterlin” is that answers to such questions cannot be definitive.

A further problem with making income comparisons is a lack of pay transparency. In many cases, people do not even know what their colleagues earn, much less the income of people in their reference group. For these reasons, chapter 5 proposes a novel form of analysis: comparison with one’s parents. Since the WVS asks respondents to compare their standard of living (SoL) with that of their parents (higher, the same, lower) when they were of a comparable age, chapter 5 is able to test – and, indeed, find support for – the hypothesis that a given level of income delivered *more* happiness to a respondent when their SoL *exceeded* that of their parents than when it was the *same* or *lower*. In the first case, respondents obtained consumption and status benefits from income; in the other two cases, they received only consumption benefits.

Another issue in the amount of happiness that one can extract from income concerns the circumstances in which people earn their income. Within the context of happiness, there is a

⁵ See Easterlin (1974, 1995, 1996, 2001); Easterlin and O’Connor (2020).

distinction between “context-free” and “context-specific” happiness. Context-free well-being covers feelings in *any* setting while context-specific well-being covers feelings within a *specific* setting. One such setting is the workplace. Given that paid employment is central to the lives of many individuals, and that many persons spend a substantial part of their lives in paid employment, an understanding of people’s feelings of well-being in the workplace or, equivalently, their levels of “job satisfaction”, is of paramount importance to public policy.⁶

Chapter 5 therefore examines the strength of a variety of factors in determining the intensity of job satisfaction in 33 countries. The empirical foundation for the study is provided by data for nearly 22,000 employed respondents, pertaining to the year 2000, obtained from the *1999–2002 Values Survey Integrated Data File*, described in Ingelhart *et al.* (2004). The most important determinants of job satisfaction were the characteristics of the job encapsulated in this chapter by two items: job security and job freedom. A lack of either dampened job satisfaction while their presence boosted it. Compared to East European countries, job satisfaction levels were considerably higher in West European countries and an important reason for this was that “bad” job conditions – low security, low freedom – amplified job dissatisfaction in Eastern Europe significantly more than they did in Western Europe: employed persons in Eastern Europe were significantly more likely to be very dissatisfied with low security and low freedom jobs than their counterparts in Western Europe.

Prejudice

Earlier in this chapter it was observed that tolerance could morph into intolerance and that the trigger for this change was often provided by external circumstances, including changes to public policy. Although most countries are signatories to several United Nations charters which repudiate discrimination and persecution and guarantee human rights, there can be little doubt that attitudes towards people who are “different” have, in many countries, remained unsympathetic. Chapter 6 examines hostility towards three groups in particular: *homosexuals*, *immigrants*, and *racially different*

⁶ As Hammersh (2001, p. 2) wrote: “only one measure, the satisfaction that workers derive from their jobs, might be viewed as reflecting how they react to the entire panoply of job characteristics... it can be viewed as a single metric that allows the worker to compare the current job to other labour market opportunities”.

people. A measure of the acceptability of members of these groups to the public is provided by answers to the “neighbourhood question” which the WVS asks of its respondents: “would you like to have persons from this group as your neighbour?”. A negative answer is interpreted as an indicator of prejudice against that group.

Chapter 6 begins by examining patterns of *homophobia*, *immigrant-phobia*, and *racism* in the world. It shows that in the period 1989–2020, the most *homophobic* regions were the Islamic group of countries, followed by African countries and East European countries in which, on average, 70.4 per cent, 67 per cent, and 63.3 per cent, respectively, were found to be homophobic. By contrast, the least homophobic region was the Western group of countries in which, on average over 1989–2020, only 17.7 per cent of people were homophobic.

The most *immigrant-phobic* regions were the Islamic and the Asian groups of countries (in which, on average over 1989–2020, 34.2 and 30.3 per cent respectively did not want immigrant neighbours) and the least immigrant-phobic regions were the Western and the Latin American groups of countries (in which, on average over 1989–2020, 9.7 and 9.9 per cent respectively did not want immigrant neighbours).

As with immigrant-phobia, the most *racist* regions were the Islamic and the Asian groups of countries (in which, on average over 1989–2020, 26.8 and 24.2 per cent respectively did not want neighbours of another race) and the least racist regions were the Western and the Latin American groups of countries (in which, on average over 1989–2020, 6.8 and 8.3 per cent respectively did not want racially different neighbours).

The chapter then proceeds to analyse the determinants of prejudice. An important conclusion of the study is that people who were themselves unhappy were significantly more likely to be prejudiced than those who were happy. In other words, an intolerance of “others” was symptomatic of an inner unrest. Another important conclusion was that education helped to ease prejudice: respondents’ levels of prejudice fell as their education levels rose. A third finding was that political orientation was important in determining prejudice – those who believed in the primacy of law and order were more likely to harbour prejudices than those who, for example, believed in the primacy of free speech.

The most important determinant of the strength of prejudice among the public was, however, public policy. It is easy to forget the great progress that has been made in attitudes towards sexual orientation in the Western world. In Britain, for example, before the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, male homosexuality had been illegal; one hundred years earlier it had been a capital offence. Changes in public policy eased these prejudices: The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 reduced the age of consent for homosexual sex from 21 to 18, and in 2001 it was lowered again to 16. The Civil Partnership Act 2004 gave same-sex couples the same rights and responsibilities as married heterosexual couples in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

On the other hand, the rise to electoral prominence, in several Western countries, of populist parties, with explicitly anti-foreigner agendas, has hardened attitudes towards people who are “different”, particularly when they are immigrants. This change came about for two reasons: a real rise in the volume of people entering Western European countries, accompanied by media debate about immigration. The result, as reported in chapter 6, has been a coarsening of attitudes towards immigrants – and, by extension, towards people of another race – between the first and the second decades of the 21st century.

In summary, this book is a study of ways in which happiness is dependent on how one is viewed and treated by other people. The words and deeds of others towards ourselves generate “externalities” which serve to sometimes enhance, but more often erode, our happiness. Lying at the heart of these externalities are two important qualities – *tolerance* and the *search for status*. Tolerance implies that even though people might disapprove of certain differences in others, they will not attempt, by word or deed, to interfere with these characteristics and behaviours. The search for status means that one is constantly evaluating one’s achievements against those of one’s peers. Caught between the Scylla of intolerance and the Charybdis of status, the ship of happiness is always in danger of capsizing.

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