

# From the Paleolithic to the Present: Three Revolutions in the Global History of Happiness

By Darrin M. McMahon, Dartmouth College

## Citation:

McMahon, D. M. (2018). From the Paleolithic to the present: Three revolutions in the global history of happiness. In E. Diener, S. Oishi, & L. Tay (Eds.), *Handbook of well-being*. Salt Lake City, UT: DEF Publishers. DOI:nobascholar.com

## Abstract:

This article examines three crucial turning points or “revolutions” in the world history of happiness from the Paleolithic to the present, focusing on the impact of the Agricultural Revolution that began c. 10,000 BCE, the “Axial Age” of the first millennium BCE, and the “Revolution in Human Expectations” of the long 18<sup>th</sup> century. The article contends that each of these revolutions initiated significant changes in humanity’s experience and understanding of happiness. And though we are still living in the shadow of the last of these three great revolutions, it may be that humanity stands on the cusp of another.

**Keywords:** happiness, history, Paleolithic, Axial Age, revolution in human expectations

---

The tools available to social scientists hoping to measure the happiness of the living are now many and varied. They range from the detailed scales and questionnaires that assess subjective well-being around the globe, to methods of experience sampling, to a variety of physical measures that capture the brain and body’s response to stimuli both internal and external. It is true, as Dan Gilbert has remarked, that the nature of subjective experience is such that there will never be a “happyometer,” a perfectly reliable instrument that allows us to measure another person’s well-being with complete and total certainty. But the alternatives to perfection are still pretty good. Gilbert invokes the wisdom of the builder. “Imperfect tools are a real pain, but they sure beat pounding nails with your teeth” (Gilbert, 2006).

From the perspective of a historian who would hope to measure the happiness of the dead, however, the prospect of broken teeth is real. Try asking a skeleton to meditate in an MRI machine and you will begin to see the problem. The dead, most often, are unresponsive. You can’t do experience sampling with a corpse. And though it may be that we are now bequeathing enough survey data to our descendants to enable future historians one day to ask questions of the departed that we currently ask the living—“Did you experience happiness during a lot of the day yesterday?” “On the whole, would you describe yourself as very happy, pretty happy, not so happy?”—for the time being such questions, when posed to people in the past, tend to fall on deaf ears.

Yet if historians’ questions, like their instruments, must necessarily differ to some extent from those of their social-scientific colleagues who work with subjects still among us, they needn’t throw up their hands in complete despair. A variety of methods and approaches are at their disposal to aid inquiries about happiness in the past. Historians might, for instance, follow the lead of the Marquis de Chastellux, who in the 18<sup>th</sup> century undertook to write the world’s very first history of happiness by means of proxy data. Lower levels of slavery, say, or war, or famine, Chastellux reasoned, ought to correspond to higher levels of what he called “public felicity.” By aggregating such data, Chastellux hoped to sketch the broad outlines of the history of social happiness (Chastellux, 1772). And although more recent historians have not, to my knowledge, attempted such an undertaking, they surely can. So too can they undertake conceptual histories of happiness, examining how different cultures have imagined and understood this complex phenomenon at different times (McMahon, 2006). There is a particular need to devote energy to this work in non-western and comparative settings. Finally, historians can draw on the tools developed by

their colleagues in the sub-discipline of the history of emotions, who ask how emotions are channeled and expressed under different affective or “emotional regimes” (Reddy, 2001; Stearns, 2012; McMahon, 2013). Although any one of these approaches might be pursued separately, this article draws on elements of each of them in order to sketch, in broad terms, three crucial turning points or “revolutions” in the long history of human happiness. Insight into the different ways that human beings have conceived, experienced, and defined happiness in the past, it is hoped, may be of service to those who think about happiness in the present, and pursue it in the future.

## The Deep History of Happiness

How happy were our earliest human ancestors? The question, of course, admits of no easy answer, and yet it is striking how many cultures of the world seem intent on attributing an original happiness to the very first human beings. Myths of a lost paradise or a vanished golden age are virtually universal in human culture, and their consistent accounts of teeming abundance and ease are striking. At the very least, such accounts can offer clues into how human fortunes have changed over time, to say nothing of men and women’s capacity to imagine circumstances better than their own.

For the men and women who first fashioned these myths may have been onto something. Archeologists and anthropologists today emphasize that early human existence was surprisingly prosperous—if not a paradise, then perhaps an “original affluent society,” to cite the well-known formulation of the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972). In this view, the hunter-gather bands that roamed the earth for much of the Paleolithic era prior to the advent of agriculture roughly 12,000 years ago enjoyed a number of comparative advantages that their later, myth-fashioning descendants did not. For one, what we now style the “paleo” diet—rich in protein and fibers and free of refined carbohydrates—was abundant, varied, and nutritious. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors, it seems, were relatively well-fed. Evidence from fossilized skeletons and dental remains, for example, suggests that early foragers were less likely to experience starvation or malnutrition than their farmer-peasant counterparts of later periods, and that they were, on the whole, of superior stature (Harari, 2015). Average life-expectancy, though brought down by a high incidence of infant-mortality, was, for those who survived the first years after childbirth, surprisingly high, upwards of sixty years, which compares favorably to most human societies up until the time of the industrial revolution. The absence of infectious diseases born of high-density populations and domesticated livestock, moreover, meant that the curse of large-scale epidemics was unknown. With only 5 to 8 million foragers inhabiting the earth on the eve of the Agricultural Revolution there were ample resources and room to move about, which meant that tensions both within and between bands could be diffused by simply moving on. An alternative to war was flight, and a strategy for dealing with excessive coercion was to leave the group and strike out on one’s own. As a number of scholars have concluded, this meant that early hunter-gatherers likely enjoyed a significant degree of freedom, and, in the absence of accumulation and private property, equality (Maryanski & Turner, 1992; Sanderson, 1995; Boehm, 2001; Veenhoven, 2005). Certainly their fortunes were superior in these respects to those of the vast majority of men and women born into the highly stratified and coercive societies that followed in the wake of the Agricultural Revolution, in which slavery was common and inequality the norm (Scheidel, 2017). Finally, foraging peoples had the luxury of time. Rough calculations suggest that the average “work week” of hunter-gatherers—measured in the hours necessary to ensure the supply of food and to perform essential tasks—was considerably less than that of modern workers, leaving ample opportunity for leisure, recreation, and social interaction in settings that were favorable to close interpersonal interaction (Sahlins, 1972; Harari, 2015).

Of course, it is important not to substitute our own myths for the myths of old, imagining the hunter-gatherer past as some sort of sylvan idyll before humanity’s corruption and fall. Modern observers, it is true, have not always avoided that temptation. But clearly life in the Paleolithic period was never a golden age. Even after our *Homo sapiens* ancestors rose, with the help of fire, tools, and teamwork to the top of the food chain within the last 100,000 years, they still were susceptible to attack by a variety of fierce predators—not least, other members of the genus *Homo*. The evidence of mass grave sites in the Paleolithic period—replete with shattered skulls and severed limbs—belies any easy assumption that our ancestors lived in uninterrupted peace and harmony. And however abundant their streams, forests, and savannahs, eking out an existence—above all in the long winters of the long ice age—was never an easy task. In the end, the life of foraging peoples in the Stone Age was, just as it has been for the great majority of those who came after, a struggle.

Still, when we compare this earlier period with the settled societies that began to spring up in the wake of the Agricultural Revolution, we can understand how later observers might have looked back with a certain elegy. For the broadly egalitarian existence of hunter-gatherers, with their relative freedom and

prosperity, gave way to societies of a very different sort, characterized by a far greater degree of hierarchy, inequality, and oppression, as well as the persistent threat of famine, war, and disease. The paths to these destinations, of course, varied considerably, and they frequently doubled-backed. Yet in their circuitous ways, they led across the threshold of what the scholar Walter Scheidel has called “the great disequalization,” the “transition to new modes of subsistence and new forms of social organization that eroded forager egalitarianism and replaced it with durable hierarchies and disparities” of income, wealth, and power (Scheidel, 2017). Agriculture was an important (though not the only) driver in this process, permitting accumulation and surplus, which could then be transmitted to one’s offspring, perpetuating status and power. Concentrated state power was another (Scott, 2017). Inequalities followed in turn, and were gradually rendered hereditary, setting humanity on a road to “monarchy, slavery, and empire,” and the incessant wars needed to create and defend these institutions (Flannery & Marcus, 2012).

To be sure, there were winners in this process. Those who were able to concentrate the surplus wealth generated by farming—most often in close concert with emergent states—did far better than their forager ancestors could ever have dreamed—so much so that this early elite has been styled the “original 1%” (Scheidel, 2017). But for the vast majority, lowly peasants and laborers now tied to the land and crowded in settled communities, the tradeoffs were extensive. Although agriculture meant a greater sum total of food (and so expanding populations), the end result was to keep more people alive in worse conditions than they had known before. Diets were increasingly less varied and nutritious, as the shift to agriculture favored carbohydrate-heavy foods such as rice, grains, corn, and potatoes that were high in calories but low in essential nutrients. The labor required to tend to them, moreover, was backbreaking and monotonous, and the reliance on a limited number of staples rendered populations susceptible to crop failure and famine. When combined with the parasites and epidemic diseases spread by domesticated livestock and communicated via concentrated populations, and the war, violence, raiding, and social conflict that attended territorial competition, the picture that emerges is far from pretty. On a range of indices from life-expectancy to stature many human beings around the world would not obtain the levels of their hunter-gatherer ancestors until after the industrial revolution, if then (Clark, 2007). It may be an exaggeration to say, with Jerrod Diamond, that the transition to agricultural societies was “the worst mistake in the history of the human race” (Diamond, 1987). But the point is well taken. At the very least it reminds us that history is not an inevitable march of progress. Some “advances” actually set us back. The first revolution in the history of human happiness, it seems likely—our exit from our hunter-gatherer past—was an unhappy one.

Why, then, did men and women leave? Hindsight, of course, is 20-20, and the first agriculturalists had no way of foreseeing the human future. Some were coerced, and others tempted into settlement, seeking security in greater numbers. But the broader answer is that evolution is not interested in the fate of individuals, but in the perpetuation of species. Agriculture, for all its drawbacks, enabled *Homo sapiens* to expand exponentially, even when the quality of individual lives suffered (Harari, 2015). From an evolutionary standpoint, greater population was a victory in itself.

It is true that an evolutionary account also suggests that human beings must be happy enough to want to reproduce and carry on. Darwin himself posited an adaptive role for happiness, observing that the “vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply,” and evolutionary psychologists have further developed that insight (Darwin, 1859; Buss, 2000; Grinde, 2002; Hill, DelPriore, & Major, 2013). If happiness as positive affect is often good for us, they reason, it was also good for our ancestors, who did us the favor of passing on their genes. Good feelings could serve as a carrot to induce adaptive behaviors and a reward for acts that contributed to our fitness, such as social bonding, the search for nourishing food, and sex. Then again, negative affect in the form of jealousy, anxiety, and fear, could serve as a powerful stick, ensuring that we never got too happy for our own good. The picture that emerges from such accounts is one of human beings inclined to adapt quickly to their pleasures, so that they will then set off in search of more. Restless creatures, we are rarely satisfied for long. And it may be that our long evolution in the conditions of the Stone Age has given us a reward system (and anxieties and fears) that are maladapted to the conditions of the modern world.

But if consideration of the early human past can provide material for speculation about our subsequent psychology, it may also help historians understand why so many cultures that developed in the aftermath of the Agricultural Revolution looked with longing to that time long ago, imagining an Arcadian golden age of plenty and ease in contrast to their own experiences of uncertainty and periodic privation. It is altogether telling that the earliest recorded words for “happiness” in virtually every human language are cognate with fortune or luck (McMahon, 2006; Oishi, Graham, Kesebirm, & Galinha, 2013). For cultures regularly subject to upheavals and twists of fate—from the descent of plague to the appearance of a marauding army to the onset of famine or the wrath of one’s betters—it was difficult to imagine happiness as something that could endure, still less as something that one could control. Happiness, rather, was in the hands of the gods,

meted out by fortune, or forged in the crucible of fate. And though the prosperous might better hedge against uncertainty than the poor, even they were not immune to the upheavals and sudden reversals that inevitably threatened us all. As ancient Chinese sages cautioned, misfortune (*huo*) was fortune's (*fu*) twin. That reflection figures in some of the earliest extant writings of China, and it was repeated down through the ages. As the Daoist philosopher Lao Tsu observed around 500 BCE: "Misfortune (*huo*) is that which beside fortune (*fu*) lies" (Keping, 2001). Artabanus of Persia, as interpreted by the Greek historian Herodotus in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, echoed this wisdom, but in even darker tones, voicing assumptions that were shared in many cultures.

Short as [the human life] is, there is not a man in the world, either here or elsewhere, who is happy enough not to wish – not once only but again and again – to be dead rather than alive. Troubles come, diseases afflict us, and this makes life, despite its brevity, seem all too long (Herodotus, 2003).

The reckoning was grim, reflecting a view of the world as at once hostile and unpredictable, in which suffering was the norm. It was a world governed by forces beyond our control. And in such a world, happiness must be elusive and fleeting. To conceive of it otherwise—as something that could endure in a world of change—would be to imagine a supreme, even superhuman, achievement, happiness as something divine.

## Happiness in the Wisdom Traditions of the Axial Age

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers published his *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1949), "The Origin and Goal of History." An audacious work, the book departed from what Jaspers characterized as an article of faith: that mankind has one single origin and goal. And it advanced the view that world history, as a consequence, possesses a coherent meaning, structure, and end. Few practicing historians are liable to share that view today. And yet scholars, particularly those of world religions, continue to draw on one of Jaspers's central themes: the formative influence of what he called the "Axial" age, through which ran the axis of history (Bellah & Joas, 2012). It was this period, Jaspers argued, spanning roughly the first millennium BCE, that witnessed the emergence of the world's great religious and wisdom traditions: from the Confucian and Daoist teachings of China to the doctrines of the Upanishads and the Buddha in India, to the Hebrew prophets in Palestine and the great philosophers of Classical Greece. And though other major traditions were to follow—most notably Christianity and Islam—they built on spiritual foundations already established. The Axial Age, Jaspers contended, bequeathed to humanity a store of spiritual values on which it has continued to draw. "Until today mankind has lived by what ... was thought and created in that period" (Jaspers, 2010).

Jaspers himself did not consider the subject of happiness or human flourishing directly. But students of religion who have addressed the impact of the Axial Age have. And in the opinion of one of them, the noted philosopher Charles Taylor, the "most fundamental novelty" of the Axial revolution was precisely its "revisionary stance toward the human good." "More or less radically," Taylor maintains, "all of [the Axial religions] call into question the received, seemingly unquestionable understandings of human flourishing" that had reigned previously (Taylor, 2012). The Axial religions, in short, reconceived and redefined human happiness.

Each did this, of course, in unique ways. But there were, nonetheless, striking commonalities. Most importantly, the wisdom traditions explicitly challenged purely worldly or mundane understandings of happiness as plenty, prosperity, pleasure, or power. Fantasies of freedom and abundance of the type that had likely drawn the imaginations of the poor and powerless since the advent of the Agricultural Revolution (and continued to do so long after) were not always rejected outright: milk and honey might still be seen on the horizon. And it is also true that the various Axial creeds adopted differing perspectives on the instrumental value of material prosperity—with some, Confucians say, or Aristotelians, arguing that a certain degree of wealth was a prerequisite to the pursuit of the higher aspirations of the good life, and others emphasizing the inherently corrupting nature of pleasure and affluence. In most cases, however, moderate worldly prosperity was seen, at best, as a means to higher ends, never as an end in itself. To pursue wealth for wealth's sake, all agreed, was to succumb to one of the many dangerous temptations that common understandings of happiness dangled before us, as if mere riches, power, or sensual satisfaction could fulfill us. Genuine happiness required something more—a connection to the transcendent, to God or the gods, to the Good or the True. It involved, as Taylor asserts, a "going beyond" ordinary human flourishing, however such flourishing might be conceived locally (long life, prosperity, freedom from disease, drought, natural catastrophe, etc. (Taylor, 2012). For the Axial traditions, human happiness must always entail something else.

The Daoist philosopher Zuhang Zi expressed this nicely in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE with the seemingly paradoxical assertion that “Perfect happiness is without happiness” (*zhi le wu le*), by which he meant that true happiness did not depend on those things that people in the world often considered to be valuable sources of (ordinary) happiness, such as easy living, good food, wealth, longevity, and the like (Keping, 2001). Indeed, those who devoted themselves solely to such worldly goods and pleasures were “upside down people,” whose priorities had been inverted (Ivanhoe, 2013). Genuine happiness required devotion to the Dao or Way, the true order and harmony of the universe that transcended the self. Similarly, in this respect, the master Kongzi, known as Confucius in the West, taught that living well went far beyond ordinary pleasures and comforts. Rather, it involved knowing how to find joy in the right things in the right ways. Kongzi emphasized the importance of good conduct to others and the value of family and friends, while praising behaviors, rituals, and rites that took us beyond ourselves, connecting us to the deeper structures and patterns of the universe. It was in this alignment, he believed—between the individual and the transcendent, between right conduct and right order—that true harmony, peace, and joy could be found.

In their common rejection of “ordinary” happiness, conceived largely in hedonic terms, Axial understandings of happiness were thus invariably “eudaimonic,” concerned less with good feeling and enjoyment for their own sake, than with living optimally, living well. The very term (eudaimonic), of course, emerged in the context of the Axial wisdom traditions of Classical Greece, employed by Socrates and Plato in explicit contrast both to good fortune (*eutychia*) and to sensual pleasure (Nussbaum, 1986). As described by their acolyte Aristotle, *eudaimonia* was the “highest good,” a characterization of a life lived fully in its entirety. Neither a fleeting feeling nor an ephemeral emotion, *eudaimonia* was the product of discipline, dedication, and craft. *Eudaimonia*, in short, required what Aristotle and the Greeks called *arête* (virtue).

Regardless of the word used to describe it, however, the insight that human flourishing demanded the development of human excellence—the cultivation of particular strengths of character and mind—was another common assumption of Axial understanding of happiness. Moses and the Buddha, Aristotle and Confucius, the author of the Upanishads and the Stoics were of one mind on the matter. To learn to live well required preparation, training, and perseverance, a discipline of the body and of the mind. We were not born into the world knowing how to live at the highest level of excellence. This was a skill to be acquired, practiced, and perfected. Living well was a way of life, and it was never easy.

The various traditions took different stances on the role played by the divine in this process. Was revelation necessary for enlightenment? Did human perfection require grace or the direct assistance of the gods? Or did we all, as the Buddhists maintained, have within us the full potential to live happy lives? Regardless of the individual positions taken on these and a range of related questions, none of the Axial traditions denied the importance of the human element in realizing human perfection. Happiness, in other words, did not just happen by chance. It was a product of our characters, of who we were and of who we chose to be. To live well was to make choices about how best to live, and about what kinds of virtues to cultivate in the service of a flourishing life.

Once again, the range of recommendations on these matters put forth by the various wisdom traditions was extensive. And though it may be that there are certain basic character strengths that are lauded universally across cultures, to enumerate them in any detail here would be to go beyond the scope of the present inquiry (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Haidt, 2006). Still, it is useful to call attention to a number of key virtues and insights extolled by the Axial traditions that have drawn commentary in the more recent scientific literature in relation to human flourishing. Virtually all of the wisdom traditions, for example, reinforce the virtues of gratitude and forgiveness, urging us to express thanks for what we have, and to treat with indulgence those who have done us wrong. Virtually all of the wisdom traditions, likewise, cultivate the virtues of optimism and hope, recommending that we make an effort to see the good in the world, to keep alive its possibility, and to trust that it is there, even (especially) when it is hard to see. Virtually all of the wisdom traditions, furthermore, cultivate the importance of friendship, fellowship, and loving kindness, extolling compassion, love, and human understanding as among the highest expressions of the soul. And so virtually all foster the insight that magnanimity and charity to others are not only good in their own right, but good for oneself, recommending the injunction later voiced by Jesus: Give and you shall receive. Finally, virtually all the wisdom traditions operate on the assumption that there are powerful forces at work in the human mind (and flesh) that militate against the cultivation of every one of these virtues (and others besides), meaning that to craft a flourishing life will inevitably be a challenge—a difficult one—a process of self-mastery that demands continual attention and training.

The upshot of these prescriptions for pursuing a flourishing life is that many—indeed most—will not be up to this challenge. The Buddha, who maintained that all human beings have the capacity for

happiness, acknowledged as much when he asserted that all life is suffering, misery, and pain. Most people, that is, live lives of ignorance, illusion, and craving. They could change this by seeking enlightenment, but alas most don't. The other Axial traditions tend to agree: those virtuosi who successfully devote themselves to cultivating genuine human flourishing are necessarily an elite. The happy, as Aristotle says, are the happy few.

Although the great Post-Axial faiths of Christianity and Islam developed their own variations on these themes—while accentuating the importance of the afterlife, where the inevitable sufferings of this world would be overcome—they did not depart essentially from the basic perspectives on human flourishing elaborated here. Many might be called, but few would be chosen. True happiness, whether of this life or the next, remained an extraordinary achievement.

And so humanity plodded on, taking its pleasures where it could, while accepting that happiness—both of the ordinary and extraordinary kind—was more the exception than the rule, the provenance of the lucky, the privileged, and the powerful, on the one hand, and the chosen, the enlightened, and the saved on the other. This is not to say that human beings were less happy (or more) in those times than their later descendants. In the absence of surveys and direct reports, that question, to repeat, can only be addressed by proxy. Chastellux, for his part, thought that his own age (the 18<sup>th</sup> century) was the happiest in the history of the world, and there are those among us today who would be inclined to say the same about our own day on the basis of other metrics (average life expectancy for one), building a case for progress over time (Veenhoven, 2005). Then again, we know that human adaptation is a powerful force, and in the absence of direct comparisons, it may be that people of previous times and economic fortunes were just as happy as we are now (Clark, 2007). Historians should devote more attention to the matter.

What we can say here, however, is that regardless of how men and women of the past may have felt, experientially, from day to day, their *expectations* about how they should feel were very different from our own. That was as true in China as it was in Africa or Europe. For until at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century, men and women across the globe lived in societies that regarded, with good reason, suffering and scarcity as the norm. In societies such as these, happiness might be a hope or a dream, an aspiration or an achievement, or a turn of the wheel of fortune. But it was seldom an expectation, and rarely, even for the most privileged, was it assumed. That would only begin to change—and with powerful consequences—with the dawning of the great revolution in human expectations of the long 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Revolution in Human Expectations

It is a striking fact that in 1800 the economic condition of the average human being in the world was no better than it had been in the Stone Age (Clark, 2007). Life expectancy was no better either, and average stature was actually worse. Despite impressive outliers—soaring cathedrals, great pyramids, palaces, and sprawling estates for the landed and wealthy—very little had changed in the economic history of the world.

But change was on the horizon, and indeed had already begun in Western Europe and its North American possessions, preparing the way for the tremendous economic takeoff of the Industrial Revolution and what historians now refer to as the “Great Divergence,” the unprecedented economic gap that began to open up between the West and the rest in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Pomeranz, 2000). To look at a graph of average income since 1800 is to watch fortunes soar.

What was the place of happiness in this development? Some economic historians answer that it was considerable (McCloskey, 2016). They point out, for example, that towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one can detect an important shift in Christian theological reflection, which began to speak less of deferring our happiness until the next life and more of making it here below. De-emphasizing sin and the fires of hell, Christians stressed instead God's benevolence and desire for our well-being during our earthly sojourn. Did not God want us to be happy? By mid-century, an erstwhile Calvinist like Benjamin Franklin was expressing amazement that Christians could reflect any other way. “'Tis surprising to me that men who call themselves Christians,” he observed, “should say that a God of infinite perfections would make anything our duty that has not a natural tendency to our happiness” (Franklin, 1960). Increasing numbers of his contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic were becoming convinced that the Creator would not. As the historian Roy Porter (2000) has aptly observed, the old question “How can I be saved?” was gradually giving way to the new question “How can I be happy here below?”

These changes in religious reflection, which increasingly sanctioned the pursuit of happiness on earth,

were accompanied by a new rhetoric and apology for pleasure put forth by thinkers associated with the Enlightenment (McMahon, 2006). Inspired by the thought and example of Isaac Newton, they drew the conclusion that the universe was not random and chaotic, but ordered and predictable, governed by rational principles that could be ascertained through human reason. And if human beings could know and understand the natural world, then they could certainly know and understand the human world, a world of their own making. Setting themselves that task, they labored not only to understand, but to improve. Surely it was no sin to seek greater comfort in life, and to work to better our condition? And why should it be taboo to enjoy our own bodies and the pleasures of the world? Were not human beings constructed so as to pursue pleasure and to flee pain? Pleasure was natural and nature intended us to be pleased. Human beings, in short, were meant to be happy.

Thus, a growing Enlightenment confidence that humans being could control their fate was accompanied by a frank apology for pleasure and happiness. The two, in fact, were increasingly spoken of as one and the same. When the great English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham recommended that the “greatest happiness of the greatest number” be the standard by which we judge, he understood this to mean the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain (Bentham, 1996). Pleasure was good, pain was bad. We should work to spread the one and mitigate the other. That belief, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was widespread (McMahon, 2006).

And so the Enlightenment apology for happiness worked to undermine both the perennial view that saw happiness as a function of fortune—something we cannot ultimately control—and the longstanding assumption common to Christianity and the wisdom traditions that happiness was a product of superior virtue or grace, a rare and special achievement in a world in which suffering was the norm (McMahon, 2004). “Does not everyone have a right to happiness according to his whims?”, asked one 18<sup>th</sup>-century observer in that bible of the Enlightenment, the French *Encyclopédie*. Judged by historical standards, the question was remarkable: a right to happiness?! And yet it was by no means an isolated claim, reflecting a growing belief that justice demanded the happiness of all. Since human beings were meant to be happy, it followed that when they were not, there must be a reason—injustice or false belief, oppression or individual failure. Governments, accordingly, should work to provide the conditions in which human beings could flourish. “The happiness of society is the first law of every government,” declared the American founding father James Wilson (2007). The French Jacobin constitution of 1793 imbedded the assumption in its very first article: “The goal of society,” it declared, “is common happiness.” Here was a creed for a new age.

It was also a creed for a new economy. For regardless of the precise role played by Enlightenment-era discussions of happiness in fostering the economic take off that ensued, clearly an apology for earthly happiness and material improvement was conducive to economic growth. And clearly economic growth—with a new culture of consumption proffering luxury items, comforts, and pleasures to expanding segments of the population—was conducive to the belief that suffering need not be an unyielding law of the universe. As the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French economist and administrator Anne Robert Turgot observed, in modern commercial society men and women “buy and sell happiness” in the form of discrete packets of pleasure. Modern economies, it seemed, lent themselves perfectly to happiness’s pursuit.

Whether they lent themselves to happiness’s attainment was another matter. That claim, of course, would be hotly contested in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with socialist and Marxist critics of capitalism, among others, charging that it did no such thing. But what united all parties in the dispute was the common assumption that happiness is, and ought to be, the human due. This was the novel consequence of the revolution in human expectations of the long 18<sup>th</sup> century. The dramatic economic growth that followed, however imperfectly distributed between countries and classes, only fed those expectations, spreading the demand for happiness ever wider. Already, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Scottish critic Thomas Carlyle could draw attention to this remarkable transformation, noting that “Every pitifulest whipster that walks within a skin has had his head filled with the notion that he is, shall be, or by all human and divine laws ought to be, ‘happy.’” Carlyle was a skeptic, a dissenter to the new creed of happiness as our “being’s end and aim ... not yet two centuries old in the world” (Carlyle, 1965). Yet he had put his finger on the way in which that creed had a tendency to crowd out other organizing principles of life, as well as to spread downward and outward to formerly marginalized segments of the population. Notwithstanding two world wars and the incalculable tragedies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has continued to do so, hastened since the 1960s, as the philosopher Pascal Bruckner has argued, by the expansion of personal credit and an ascendant individualism that has further licensed an ethic of personal fulfillment and non-delayed gratification. Happiness, today, Bruckner (2011) observes, constitutes “the only horizon of our modern democracies.” Meanwhile, globalization in the wake of decolonization, notwithstanding its other effects, has begun to

narrow the economic gap that opened up with the Great Divergence, exposing hundreds of millions more (above all in China, India, and the emerging Asian economies) to the prospect that happiness on this earth might be more than good fortune or a millenarian dream. The fact that today the United Nations, along with Gallup, the OECD, and other international organizations, collect data on happiness in every country of the world is a sign of this expansion, an indicator of the aspiration that all might be happy one day and that we should work to make it so. The overall significance of this expansion, however, in historical terms, and the “meaning” of the rise of a global conversation about happiness is not yet clear (McMahon, 2010).

## Conclusion

In this brief essay, I have examined three major developments in the history of human happiness, presenting the departure from our hunter-gatherer past at the time of the Agricultural Revolution, the emergence of the wisdom traditions of the “Axial Age” of the first millennium BCE, and the “Revolution in Human Expectations” of the long 18<sup>th</sup> century as crucial turning points in humanity’s experience and understanding of happiness. Judging by a number of indicators, there is reason to conclude that the first revolution was on balance detrimental to the happiness of the many, even as it provided new opportunities to the few. In hostile and unpredictable environments of relative scarcity and insecurity, suffering was regarded as the human norm, while happiness was represented as largely beyond our agency and control, a fortunate condition bestowed by the gods or luck, and seldom lasting or assured.

Yet this prevailing and perennial conception—common to virtually all early societies and kept alive in the folk cultures of many peoples to this day—was profoundly challenged by the great religious and philosophical traditions of the Axial Age. Taking up the problem of human suffering, they sought means to address it, asserting collectively that human beings do not live by bread alone. True happiness, they agreed, involved a “going beyond” conventional prosperity and the ordinary conditions of life in the pursuit of a higher happiness predicated on the cultivation of human virtue and excellence. Retaining the view that happiness was a rare exception and human suffering the norm, they nonetheless wrested human flourishing away from the clutches of fortune, making it in large measure the product of human will and action aligned with what were deemed the transcendent forces of the universe.

In a very general way, these were the basic orientations on human happiness that held sway in most parts of the world until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when a revolution in human expectations began to alter perspectives on the prospects for happiness in this life. Forthrightly hedonic in their equation of happiness and good feeling, these new perspectives presented happiness neither as a matter of chance nor as a reward for superior virtue. Happiness, rather, was treated as a natural endowment, whose pursuit and attainment would follow from the mitigation of pain and the removal of “unnatural” barriers, such as injustice and false belief, that stood in its way. Coinciding with the beginnings of a remarkable economic transformation that continues to this day, this revolution had the effect of gradually eroding the older, eudaimonic perspectives on happiness that had long equated human flourishing with virtue of character.

Needless to say, this revolution occurred only slowly and imperfectly. Yet the dominant ideological systems of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries helped to spread the prospect of happiness to ever wider segments of the world’s population, radiating outward from Europe and the New World, so that today more people than ever before are being raised in environments that inspire the pursuit of earthly happiness and encourage expectations that it will be found.

Whether or not such pursuits and expectations correspond to actual increases in levels of happiness is a matter of considerable debate within the contemporary social scientific community, which has pioneered efforts in the last several decades to measure happiness around the world, and to analyze its causes and correlates in relation to economic conditions and other variables. To a significant degree these efforts have drawn on, and contributed to, the new “science of happiness” pioneered by positive psychologists, who have also turned their attention of late to better understanding happiness’s foundations. Working together, they hope to help not only individuals, but governments and policymakers, shape better policies and prescriptions for the future.

From the perspective of the student of history, it is noteworthy that there have been significant overlaps between the “modern truths” of the new science of happiness and “ancient wisdom,” particularly the eudaimonic insights of the Axial traditions and their post-Axial successors (Haidt, 2006; McMahon, 2016). Research on gratitude, for example, or on charity and loving kindness, meditation and meaning, forgiveness and hope has demonstrated the benefits of these “virtues” in encouraging flourishing lives. Such research would suggest that those who spearheaded the revolution in human expectations initiated in the long 18<sup>th</sup> century may have been too quick to denigrate and displace the older insights of the Axial

traditions. Whether those insights can now be updated with the imprimatur of science and adapted to cultures that have largely accepted the hedonic and democratic consequences of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century revolution in human expectations remains to be seen. The history of happiness, and in particular the first great revolution examined here, cautions against any facile assumption that “progress” and happiness necessarily go hand and hand. But it also makes room for the possibility that they can advance together. For those hoping to use the knowledge about happiness being generated by researchers today to better guide the policies and prescriptions of tomorrow, aligning the two will be the great challenge, and historians have a role to play in this alignment by further clarifying the relationship between happiness and progress/historical change in the past. Should we succeed in our collective endeavors, we may hope, however modestly, to contribute to the beginnings of a new revolution in the happiness of the world.

## References

- Bellah, R.N., & Joas, H. (Eds.) (2012). *The axial age and its consequences*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Bentham, J. (1996). In J.H. Burns & H.L.A. Hart (Eds.), *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Boehm, C. (2001). *Hierarchy in the forest: the evolution of egalitarian behavior*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruckner (2011). *Perpetual euphoria: on the duty to be happy* (S. Rendall, Trans.). Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.
- Buss, D. M. (2000). The evolution of happiness. *American Psychologist*, 55, 15–23.
- Carlyle, T. (1965). *Past and present*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Chastellux, F. (1772). *De la félicité publique, ou considérations sur le sort des hommes dans les différentes époques de l'histoire*. Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey.
- Clark, G. (2007). *A farewell to alms: a brief economic history of the world*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Darwin, C. (1859). *The origin of species*. London: John Murray.
- Diamond, J. (1987). The worst mistake in the history of the human race. *Discover Magazine*, May 1987, 64–66.
- Flannery, K. and Marcus, J. (2012). *The creation of inequality: How our prehistoric ancestors set the stage for monarchy, slavery, and empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Franklin, B. (1960). *The papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 2 (January 1, 1735–December 31, 1744). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gilbert, D. (2006). *Stumbling on happiness*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Grinde, B. (2002). Happiness in the perspective of evolutionary psychology. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3, 331–354.
- Haidt, J. (2006). *The happiness hypothesis: Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom*. New York, NY: Basic.
- Harari, Y. (2015). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Herodotus (2003). *The history*. (A. Sélincourt, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Hill, S. E., DelPriore, D.J., & Major, B. (2013). An evolutionary psychological perspective on happiness. In S. A. David, I. Boniwell, & A. C. Ayers (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of happiness* (pp. 875–886). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ivanhoe, P.J. (2013). Happiness in early Chinese thought. In S. A. David, I. Boniwell, & A. C. Ayers (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of happiness* (pp. 263–278). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jaspers, K. (2010). *The origin and goal of history* (M. Bullock Trans.). Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Keping, W. (2001). Dao, Confucianism, and Buddhism: Happiness in Chinese philosophy and religion. In S. McCready (Ed.), *The discovery of happiness* (pp. 37–55). Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.
- Maryanski, A., & Turner, J.H. (1992). *The social cage: human nature and the origin of society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- McCloskey, B. (2016). *Bourgeois inequality: How ideas, not capital or institutions, enriched the world*.

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

McMahon, D.M. (2004). From the happiness of virtue to the virtue of happiness: 400 B.C–A.D.1780. *Daedalus*, 133, 2, 5–17.

McMahon, D.M. (2006). *Happiness: A history*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.

McMahon, D. M. (2010). What does the ideal of happiness mean? *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 77, 2, 469–490.

McMahon D.M. (2013). Finding joy in the history of emotions. In S. J. Matt & P.N. Stearns (Eds.), *Doing emotions history* (pp. 103–119). Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

McMahon, D. M. (2016). Living well in the light of science. *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, 1384, 36–38.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1986). *The fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press.

Oishi, S, Graham, J., Kesebirm S., & Galinha, I. C. (2013). Concepts of happiness across time and cultures. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39, 559–577.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M.E.P (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A classification and handbook*. New York: Oxford University Press/Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Pomeranz, K. (2000). *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Porter, R. (2000). *Enlightenment: Britain and the creation of the modern world*. London: Allen Lane.

Reddy, W. (2001). *The navigation of feeling: A framework for the history of emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sahlins, M. (1972). The original affluent society. In M. Sahlins (Ed.), *Stone Age Economics* (pp. 1–40). Chicago & New York, NY: Aldine Atherton.

Sanderson, S.K. (1995). *Social transformations*. Oxford: Blackwell UK.

Scheidel, W. (2017). *The great leveler: Violence and the history of inequality from the Stone-Age to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Scott, J.C. (2017). *Against the grain: A deep history of the earliest states*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Stearns, P. N. (2012). *Satisfaction not guaranteed: Dilemmas of progress in modern society*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Taylor, C. (2012). What was the Axial revolution? In R. N. Bellah & H. Joas (Eds), *The axial age and its consequences* (pp. 30–46). Cambridge, MA: Belknap.

Veenhoven, R. (2005). Is life getting better? How long and happily do people live in modern society? *European Psychologist*, 10, 330-343.

Wilson, J. (2007). Considerations and extent on the nature of the legislative authority of the British parliament. In K. L. Hall & M. D. Hall (Eds). *Collected works of James Wilson*, Vol. 1 (pp. 3–31). Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.



© 2018 Ed Diener. Copyright Creative Commons: Attribution, noncommercial, no derivatives