

In his book *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being*, Daniel M. Haybron (2008) presents the emotional state theory in an attempt to portray the nebulous concept of human happiness in a condensed yet comprehensive manner. This theory claims that people's happiness constitutes in their overall emotional condition (Haybron, 2008, p. 109). Haybron further proposes the following three broad dimensions of happiness. Briefly, attunement manifests in one's peace of mind, confidence and security. Engagement signifies that an individual actively and enthusiastically participates in joyful or fulfilling activities. Endorsement deals with the cheerful experiences or "smiley-face feelings" in everyday life. It is noteworthy that Haybron stresses that these three dimensions follow a descending order of importance for happiness. In addition, attunement is fundamental to the attainment of the other two modes of happiness.

For the most part, Haybron's promotion of attunement as the most critical form of happiness is an insightful generalisation of its universal importance in an individual's emotional well-being. However, the author's assertion about the relative ranking of importance may be unnecessarily restrictive, as it neglects the disparate ways in which people pursue or experience happiness in life under vastly different life circumstances. In this paper, I would contend that this order of fundamentality does not hold true in all cases. In fact, the other modes of happiness can exist without attunement and the order of importance depends on one's life circumstances. Also, the interdependence of the three aspects of happiness is more fluid in nature as they can generate each other. Through elucidating the flexibility and intricacies behind these dimensions, I hope that this paper will complement Haybron's theory by guiding us to apply his theory with discretion<sup>1</sup>, and at the same time, help us broaden our views on the conditions of happiness in our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> This point was suggested by Rafi Kamsani during a writing workshop.

I concede that the descending order of importance of attunement over engagement and endorsement as argued in the emotional state theory does offer an insightful generality. As much as a theory should not oversimplify a multifaceted concept, it should also provide general and valuable insight into how happiness is achieved for most people. It is generally true that tranquility, inner confidence, stability and balance, among others, form the cornerstone of happiness (Haybron, 2008, p. 116). In most cases, one needs to feel secure and fully at home in one's life in order to exercise the other forms of happiness. This is partly reflected by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which states that basic necessities such as safety and security have to be fulfilled first before other needs can be satisfied (Maslow, 1943). After all, an internally troubled and deeply insecure person is unlikely to be fully engaged in meaningful activities without having his or her mind flooded with negative thoughts. Neither is he or she able to appreciate the little moments of endorsement in everyday life. This shows that, to a large extent, the prominence of attunement over the other two aspects of happiness as suggested by the emotional state theory concisely generalises the conditions of happiness in an ordinary individual.

However, I believe that the claim that the roles of these three modes of happiness follow an order of importance inevitably neglects the fact that different individuals' perceptions of happiness are inherently different. Although Haybron acknowledges that he "will not endorse a particular ideal of happiness, though each dimension is important" and "there is clearly more than one way to be happy" (Haybron, 2008, p. 112), he actively attempts to extol the prominence of attunement in happiness (Haybron, 2018, p. 121). The hierarchy of the relative roles of the three dimensions in happiness manifests in the notion that a certain level of each dimension of happiness needs to be present first before people can gain happiness in the

subsequent dimensions. Nevertheless, this ranking fails to consider the myriad of ways in which people pursue happiness based on what they value the most, what life goals they want to achieve, what desires they wish to fulfill, and how the circumstances in their lives influence them. Therefore, I believe that the interconnection among attunement, engagement and endorsement is more intricate and fluid in reality.

I would like to first argue that it is possible for someone to achieve sustained happiness related to the other dimensions without attaining attunement. Attunement requires one to feel settled and unperturbed. More importantly, one's circumstances should not be alien, imposing or threatening (Haybron, 2008, p. 116). However, in some cases, people may derive happiness from engagement even in the absence of attunement. Let us suppose an adventurer, such as Bear Grylls<sup>2</sup>, who finds an immense passion in exploring the wild. He is constantly on unfamiliar terrains awash with potentially life-threatening uncertainties. Basic needs such as food and shelter are luxuries to which he has no guaranteed access. As a result, it is unrealistic to claim that he enjoys attunement due to the lack of security, peace of mind and fulfilment of basic needs. Yet, no one can conclusively judge that he is unhappy, for he is truly living his life to the fullest. He is passionately engaged in what interests him and willingly continues being so even though it may encroach on his supposed "attunement". In this case, what makes him happy is primarily the engagement aspect of happiness. Therefore, contrary to Haybron's theory, attunement is not always necessary for the attainment of the other aspects of happiness.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Michael Grylls, better known as Bear Grylls, is a British adventurer, writer and television presenter. He is widely known for his television series *Man vs. Wild*. In his post on Twitter on 22 August 2011, he listed "follow your dreams" as part of "Bear's key to happiness".

Having illustrated that the lack of attunement can coexist with the other modes such as engagement, I would like to further suggest that the importance of the various dimensions of happiness largely depends on people's priorities in their lives. In the pursuit of various life goals, people may value a certain mode of happiness more than the others which are less relevant to them in view of their prevailing life circumstances. For instance, an entrepreneur spearheading his budding start-up company may regard ensuring the success of his enterprise as the top priority. His primary life goal now is to strive for the realisation of his passion, in this case, the success of his start-up. We may call this a form of engagement, as reflected in his zeal for his entrepreneurial endeavour which he considers as a fulfilling experience. Yet, he inevitably has to face some degree of disattunement in the form of insecurity about the prospects of his project, stress and feeling cooped up by his commitments. Nonetheless, it is hard for us to deny that he lives a happy life, if we consider the alternative: he has a decently paying job and stable life circumstances but an unfulfilled passion and a zero possibility of his self-actualisation. The form of happiness this entrepreneur derives from engagement may not necessarily be inferior to attunement. In fact, if he really values and is earnest about this entrepreneurial process, it is possible for him to derive tremendous happiness from it, even though another person, when going through the same circumstances but with different values and priorities, may not call it "happiness". It is even possible that he may see this temporary reduction of attunement as a step towards securing greater attunement later when his company is successful and more settled<sup>3</sup>. This shows that the order of importance of the different dimensions of happiness may vary for people under different life circumstances.

Moreover, I believe that the intricate interdependence of the various dimensions of happiness means that their relationship is more dynamic and flexible in nature. As a result, an ordered

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<sup>3</sup> This point was suggested by Dr Bart Van Wassenhove in his comments on my previous draft of this paper.

ranking may not be the best way to capture this relationship. Haybron does acknowledge “the interdependence of the three modes of response” and that “a given type of situation may call for a multifaceted response, so that affect types need not conform strictly to the three-mode schema” (Haybron, 2008, p. 121). However, his description of this interdependence mainly centers on how a given scenario can generate a combination of various modes of happiness, whereas I would like to further expand this interdependence to incorporate the notion that these three dimensions of happiness can give rise to each other. This idea will be further elaborated in the following two paragraphs.

To illustrate this point, I would propose that attunement may grow out of engagement in some cases. Consider the case of a university freshman. She may find herself “disattuned” initially as she has just entered an alien environment filled with unfamiliar faces. She may be uncertain about her upcoming university life and stressed by the overwhelming curriculum. However, at the same time, she may also be actively engaged in various activities which she believes bring joy and fulfilment to her. We can even say that through this process of engagement, she starts to grow more attuned to her new life. This is because these activities have enabled her to become more accustomed to her new environment and make several friends who allow her to feel more at home<sup>4</sup> and secure due to the presence of a support network. In this case, her priority is to receive an education that allows her to develop holistically. This implies that she has to step out of her comfort zone, lead a lifestyle totally different from before, and derive happiness through engagement without attunement. In fact, attunement actually comes as a result of engagement. Moreover, if we further analyse the constituents of happiness in the example of Bear Grylls as mentioned above, we may conclude that through his engagement in exploration, he may have developed a sense of

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<sup>4</sup> This point was suggested by Rafi Kamsani in a writing workshop.

equanimity amidst uncertainties in the natural environment<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, he feels at peace with the current state of his life, leading to attunement. As he becomes more attuned to the natural world, his inner peace transcends his physical surroundings and allows him to sustain happiness while pursuing his passion. Therefore, engagement is capable of generating attunement in some circumstances.

In addition, I believe that it is possible for people to gain attunement through endorsement. Endorsement concerns short-term, fleeting feelings of joy and sadness experienced by people on a daily basis (Haybron, 2008, p. 113). Its importance, however, is understated by Haybron, who considers endorsement as a lower form of happiness as compared to attunement and engagement in his emotional state theory. This can be seen from his claim that the endorsement form of happiness is “a simple matter of fleeting emotions that quickly dissipate, ultimately leaving us back at our temperamental ‘set point’<sup>6</sup> level of cheerfulness” (Haybron, 2013, p. 20). Although I concede that endorsement-related emotions are mostly ephemeral, their collective impact is actually much more long-lasting. A growing collection of empirical data indicates that all types of pleasures and displeasures can impact our moods in profound ways. Trivial pleasures are significant as they have the propensity to dispose us to experience other pleasures (Morris, 2011, p. 270). Occasional doses of joy are essential as they help regulate one’s mood and remind one, be it consciously or subconsciously, that he or she has a life worth living. Their positive influence can make people feel satisfied and at peace with their current living circumstances, leading to attunement. After all, it is oft-said that it is the little moments of happiness that really count. Or, as Denis Waitley<sup>7</sup> once put it, “a good life is a collection of happy moments”. Although it seems too simplistic to think of

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<sup>5</sup> This point was suggested by Dr Bart Van Wassenhove in his comments on one of my papers.

<sup>6</sup> Some researchers claim that there exists an innate “set point” level of happiness partially determined by our genes. Over time, we tend to adapt to most changes in our lives, ending up roughly as happy as we were before (Haybron, 2013, p. 53).

<sup>7</sup> Denis E. Waitley (born 1933) is an American motivational speaker, writer and consultant.

life-long happiness as a mere sum of joyful emotions, this notion does reveal some truth about an important aspect of happiness, that is the ability to appreciate the many tiny bits of delightful moments in life indeed contributes to long-term happiness. Therefore, endorsement can actually engender attunement.

Finally, after having established that the order of fundamentality of the three dimensions of happiness is more fluid in reality due to their intricate interdependence, I believe that it is paramount for us to explore more deeply into how my approach of complementing the emotional state theory as detailed in my previous arguments can benefit us. Firstly, we should focus on our life goals and assess what we want out of pursuing them. There may be potential tradeoffs between the various dimensions of happiness. When clashes among different dimensions arise, it is helpful for us to first focus on our life priorities and our own values then determine how our emotional condition is being affected. Perhaps we need a life-plan as a guidance to decide on the trade-offs that we are willing to make according to what we want to prioritise for the attainment of life goals<sup>8</sup> (Kekes, 1982, p. 183). Secondly, we should not be afraid to step out of the comfort zone and pursue a new area of interest or change our current life circumstances. Comfort zones are a symbol of attunement, but they can also impede our endeavour to achieve higher states of happiness. Through engaging more with our lives and exploring uncharted waters, we may at times reduce our level of attunement below what is necessary to sustain happiness. For example, stress can build up and we feel emotionally confined. However, it is presumptuous to insist that we are limited in deriving happiness from this process of engagement and exploration. A higher state of happiness may be achieved through reducing some aspects of happiness temporarily. For instance, the reduction in attunement in the case of the entrepreneur as mentioned above may result in

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<sup>8</sup> This point was suggested by Dr Bart Van Wassenhove in his comments on my previous draft of this paper.

greater happiness later due to the fulfilment of his life goal. Thirdly, we should take note of the flexible and dynamic ways in which the three broad dimensions of happiness influence each other. Having a good balance, as determined by how we value our varying priorities, of occasional endorsement, active engagement, and conducive life circumstances for attunement is key to attaining a favourable emotional state.

In conclusion, the order of fundamentality of attunement, engagement and endorsement to achieving happiness is more flexible in reality, as it is not always necessary to achieve attunement first and the order of importance ultimately boils down to how one values one's life priorities. Furthermore, these three broad dimensions of happiness give rise to and complement each other. For disparate individuals under differing circumstances, one dimension may be more relevant than the others, and that particular dimension may serve as the starting point for the other modes of happiness to develop. Thus, an ordered ranking does not reflect the true nature of happiness. A more fluid and dynamic model of interdependence is better able to account for individual variations in what constitutes happiness. We can apply this adaption of the emotional state theory to assess our emotional well-being and strive to attain a balance among the three modes of happiness based on what we value and prioritise in our lives.

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