

20 The Happiness Problem

Sam Wren-Lewis, The Happiness Problem – Exam Notes

1. The Control Strategy

What it is

A common (but mistaken) approach to happiness:

1. Belief 1: If I work hard enough, I can get everything on my “life list” (career, money, status, relationship, etc.).
2. Belief 2: Once I get these things, I will be happy and secure.
3. Conclusion: I should devote almost all my energy to getting and protecting these things.

This creates a “problem-solving bubble”:

You focus on fixing, optimizing, and controlling your life as if happiness were a problem to be solved by getting the right external conditions.

Why Wren-Lewis thinks it is problematic

1. Insecurity is inescapable
 - No matter how much we achieve, we remain vulnerable:
 - Health can fail.
 - Relationships can end.
 - Jobs and money can be lost.
 - So the idea that we can make ourselves fully secure through control is an illusion.
2. Endless striving, no lasting peace
 - Achieving one goal quickly leads to new worries (hedonic adaptation, moving the goal-posts).
 - We always need the next achievement to feel safe, so deep contentment never arrives.
3. “Going to war with reality”
 - Control strategy treats unwelcome facts (aging, loss, uncertainty) as enemies to be defeated.
 - This fuels anxiety, perfectionism, and frustration rather than acceptance or peace.
4. Mistaking means for ends
 - Control (plans, achievements, status) is treated as the ultimate goal.
 - But control is at best a means to living well; it has no guaranteed connection to meaning or deep happiness.

- If we fail to get what we want, the control strategy leaves us with nothing: no meaning, no acceptance, just “I failed.”
5. Missing what really matters
- In focusing on ticking off items on a list (career milestones, wealth, etc.), we often neglect:
 - Relationships
 - Purpose
 - Personal growth
 - We may be “successful” but still feel empty because we never asked what actually matters to us.

Key contrast phrase:

Control strategy = “going to war with reality.”

2. The Understanding Strategy

What it is

An alternative approach:

1. Accept insecurity
 - Recognize that some vulnerability is built into human life.
 - Stop trying to eliminate all uncertainty; instead, learn to live with it.
2. Shift aim: from control to understanding
 - Spend time trying to understand:
 - Yourself (your values, fears, patterns, motives)
 - Others (their backgrounds, needs, struggles)
 - The world (how things actually work, limits of control)
 - The goal is not total control, but a wise relationship to reality.
3. Discovering and creating what matters
 - What matters to you is not just “found” like a ready-made object.
 - It is an ongoing process of:
 - Discovery: noticing what genuinely brings you meaning and fulfillment.
 - Creation: committing to projects, roles, and relationships that make your life meaningful.
 - Tools like life review exercises (reflecting on past experiences of meaning) help clarify this.
4. Control reinterpreted
 - Control is still useful—but only as a means, not the central goal.
 - We use control tools (planning, effort) to serve what we have understood to matter, not to chase security itself.
5. Intrinsic value of understanding
 - Understanding has value even when circumstances don’t improve.
 - Better self-knowledge, empathy, and realism can themselves make life more meaningful and bearable.

Key contrast phrase:

Understanding strategy = “striving for peace with reality,” not war against it.

3. Commitment: Risks and Rewards

What is commitment?

A commitment is a long-term, binding involvement with: - A person (e.g. marriage, close friendship),
- A role (e.g. being a parent), - A project (e.g. a demanding career, creative work, activism).

It involves: - Ongoing effort, - Willingness to endure difficulties, - Letting this person/project shape your identity and life.

Wren-Lewis: At some point, we must stop endlessly searching and actually commit, if we want deep meaning.

Rewards of commitment

1. Deep sources of joy and meaning
 - Intimate relationships, parenting, and serious projects can bring:
 - A sense of belonging,
 - Purpose,
 - Fulfillment that short-term pleasures cannot match.
2. Growth and identity
 - Commitments shape who we become.
 - They give life structure, a story, and reasons to get up in the morning even when things are hard.
3. Escaping the shallow list mentality
 - Commitment forces us off the endless “optimization” treadmill.
 - We build a life around what we genuinely care about, not just what looks impressive on a list.

Risks and difficulties of commitment

1. Risk of failure
 - Marriages can end; projects can collapse; children can struggle.
 - We cannot guarantee success; commitment exposes us to heartbreak and disappointment.
2. Inevitable hardships
 - Serious commitments are demanding:
 - Conflict, boredom, sacrifice in relationships.
 - Stress, setbacks, and long hours in projects or careers.
 - No commitment brings only pleasure.
3. Loss of options
 - Saying “yes” to one path means saying “no” to others.
 - Some people fear feeling “trapped” or missing out on other possibilities.

Appropriate response to failure: self-compassion

- When commitments go badly, the control strategy might say:

- “I failed; I should have controlled better.”
- Wren-Lewis recommends self-compassion:
 - Recognize limits of control.
 - Treat yourself with kindness rather than harsh judgment.
 - Learn from the experience instead of letting it define your worth.

Key point:

Without commitment, we may avoid risks, but we also miss the deepest sources of joy and meaning.

4. Understanding Others: Beyond Moral Judgment

Why not stop at moral judgment?

We often: - See someone behave badly → label them (“selfish,” “lazy,” “cruel”) → stop thinking.

Wren-Lewis argues this is inadequate because:

1. Judgment blocks understanding
 - Once we’ve judged someone, we often stop asking why they act this way.
 - We lose curiosity and empathy.
2. People are shaped by causes
 - Upbringing, trauma, culture, mental health, and social pressures all influence behavior.
 - Pure moral judgment ignores these deeper explanations.
3. Moral labels are too simple
 - Most people are not just “good” or “bad.”
 - They may have mixed motives, conflicting values, or be acting under pressure or fear.
4. Understanding ≠ excusing
 - Explaining behavior (e.g. via past trauma) does not mean:
 - The behavior is okay,
 - We must tolerate harm.
 - We can still hold people accountable, while seeking deeper understanding.
5. Compassion improves relationships and insight
 - Compassion encourages us to ask:
 - What pain, fear, or need is behind this behavior?
 - This can:
 - Reduce anger,
 - Improve communication,
 - Help us respond more wisely instead of just punishing or rejecting.

Key idea:

We should move from mere judgment (“You’re bad”) to explanation and understanding (“What led you here?”).

5. Example: Deeper Explanation, Deeper Understanding

You must be able to describe at least one such example. Here is one you can use:

Example: The “lazy” coworker

Initial situation: - A coworker, Alex, is often late and misses deadlines. - First reaction: “Alex is lazy and irresponsible.”

Moral judgment only: - We label Alex as morally flawed. - We feel resentment and maybe complain about them. - We don’t ask what is going on in their life.

Looking for a deeper explanation: - You later learn: - Alex is a single parent caring for a sick child. - They are also working a second job at night. - They have been dealing with severe anxiety and lack of sleep.

New understanding: - Alex’s behavior (lateness, missed deadlines) is still a problem and may still need addressing. - But you now see: - It is driven by overwhelming responsibilities and stress, not simple laziness. - Their “failure” reflects difficult circumstances and limited support.

How this changes your response: - You may still set boundaries or request changes. - But you are more likely to: - Talk compassionately with Alex, - Offer help or propose flexible arrangements, - Push for structural support (e.g. adjusted workload).

What this illustrates: - Moral judgment alone: “Bad worker; end of story.” - Deeper understanding: “A struggling person whose behavior has complex causes.” - This aligns with Wren-Lewis’s view that compassion and explanation lead to a richer, fairer understanding of others, without denying responsibility.

Core Contrasts to Remember

- Control strategy = chase total security through achievements; war with reality; control as end.
- Understanding strategy = accept insecurity; seek self/other/world understanding; peace with reality; control as means.
- Commitment = risky, often painful, but crucial for deep meaning and joy.
- Understanding others = don’t stop at “good/bad”; look for deeper explanations; use compassion without excusing harm.