

6

Emotional State

I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot; they amount to fourteen.

Abd-El-Raham¹

1. INTRODUCTION

Probably most languages have some counterpart to ‘happiness’ in its oldest meaning, a term for prosperity, good fortune, or “good hap”—roughly, well-being. This is the concept likely invoked at weddings, births, and other major events where we wish, utterly vaguely, for the individuals’ lives to go well for them: “May the newlyweds meet with happiness in their life together.” Once upon a time, this may have been conceptual apparatus enough for the general lot: the life of enviable fortune tended to be just that—mainly a matter of luck—with little point in troubling yourself about how well you were actually doing in that regard. Moreover, your well-being was at best a secondary concern. What mattered then—and still today in many parts of the world—was less a matter of personal fulfillment and more a matter of your family’s material wealth and social standing. You married for cattle, not love, and he who died with the most cows won. If you didn’t like cows, or your spouse, tough; no one was asking.

Once we started to regard the individual’s welfare as a top priority, and to believe that something could actually be done about it, we needed a richer vocabulary. The problem has been clear since human beings first settled down and started accumulating things: outward prosperity and success hardly guarantee personal flourishing; Abd-El-Raham found this out the hard way, after over fifty years of seemingly unblemished good luck, with little to complain about, left the tenth century Caliph of Cordoba desirous to complain. You can seem to be wildly successful in outward terms and yet fail in achieving a happy life; so too can the seemingly unsuccessful appear to thrive. If we want to promote and assess individual well-being, we will need to focus on more substantive and concrete matters than just formal, abstract notions like well-being or good fortune, since it is not obvious what these things amount to. Since the traditional emphasis on material endowments and public accomplishment plainly fails to suffice, we

need concepts bearing on how well these things serve the person: never mind just what you've got or what has happened in your life; how are *you* doing? We need, in addition to concepts regarding the condition of a person's life, concepts addressing the *person's* condition. The concept of health is one such, but it shares with external goods the difficulty that one can easily fare well with it yet still fall far short of flourishing or a happy life. Good health is more or less necessary, but not even close to sufficient, for well-being. Clearly, the missing element here is how all these things relate to the person's inner life: not her physical condition, but her psychological condition. Does the person flourish psychologically? If not, then the person does not flourish at all. If so, then the person probably does flourish—or so, at any rate, it seems. This, if we can pull it off, is a wonderful result: here we have a concrete, substantive good that most of us can agree is, if not sufficient for well-being, then so central to it that we can regard this item as a convenient proxy for it.

What shall the word be for this psychological condition? Since a person's being in this condition (enough of the time) appears almost to suffice for a happy life, why not adapt the familiar term and say, then, that the *person* is happy? And so it makes perfect sense—as it would not given the original meaning of the term—to sharpen our hopes for the newborn infant by expressing our desire that she be “happy and healthy” throughout her days. Now the term is no longer an evaluation of a life, but a description of a person's psychological condition. This is the psychological sense of the word identified in Chapter 2.

The aim of this chapter is to argue, in light of the reflections of the preceding chapters, that this condition is most profitably understood as a matter of a person's emotional condition. I will begin with a default version of the emotional state theory, and then discuss a fleshed-out form of the view, in which happiness is understood as a kind of “psychic affirmation,” to illustrate some of the more important types of states that happiness can involve. The next chapter fills in various gaps in the account, and argues that the psychological distinctions that concern us cut across, and extend beyond, the traditional categories of emotions and moods. I sketch the elements of a fuller view that incorporates the new distinctions and show that the resulting account of happiness is coherent and well-motivated. Moreover, it points to important omissions in standard views of human affect, and so should interest emotion researchers and others on that basis alone.

A subsidiary goal of both chapters is to show that the popular “smiley-face” stereotype of happiness, which may seem particularly salient on an emotional state view, grossly distorts and oversimplifies the phenomenon: happiness has a much richer, deeper, more complex, and less obvious psychology than the common image suggests. Cheery feelings matter, and do not deserve the abuse so often heaped on them, but they are a relatively uninteresting part of the story. And much of the story, we will see, is likely to be surprisingly opaque to the individual whose happiness is in question. So elusive, indeed, is the psychology of

happiness that I will not even try to offer a precise characterization of it: the theory defended here will be filled in as carefully as I can manage, but a complete account of happiness will require further progress in our scientific understanding of the emotional realm. Certainly a reductive analysis in familiar folk psychological terms, of the sort traditionally favored by analytical philosophers, will be out of the question. Here is an example of what I mean. In "A Theory of Happiness," Wayne Davis offers what he takes to be a hedonistic account, defining happiness as both believing and desiring the propositions one is thinking about.² The "happiness function" is:

$$h = \sum_{i=1}^n b(P_i)d(P_i), \text{ where } P_1, \dots, P_n \text{ is an enumeration of all thoughts } A \text{ is thinking.}$$

and

$$A \text{ is happy at } t \text{ iff } h_A^t > 0$$

$$A \text{ is unhappy at } t \text{ iff } h_A^t < 0$$

Meaning: "take every proposition A is thinking at the moment, multiply the degree to which it is believed by the degree to which it is desired, add up all the products, and the sum is A 's degree of happiness."³ If the sum is positive, A is happy; if negative, A is unhappy. This is, in significant respects, admirably precise. But it is also the sort of old-fashioned conceptual analysis that rarely yields believable results. As well, the theory is in significant ways imprecise: what is meant, for instance, by 'belief' and 'desire'? These terms cover a lot of ground, and some of the things within their province yield a much less plausible theory than others. And how are the beliefs and desires related? Is the idea that one believes, of the proposition one desires, that it obtains? Or that one desires, of the proposition one believes, that it obtain? Other readings are possible as well. At any rate, I will not so much as attempt this sort of formal precision in what follows.

My arguments will focus not on what it is to *achieve* happiness, but on the more fundamental question of what makes a state *happiness-constituting*: in virtue of what a state makes a constitutive difference in how happy or unhappy we are.⁴ This is the crucial issue: for we want to be as happy as we can be, consistently with the other things that matter. The further question of whether we will actually *be* happy, period, is less pressing. It also raises difficulties of its own.

2. FROM PLEASURE TO HAPPINESS

Since the emotional state theory can be seen as an effort to remedy the defects of hedonism, it is worth recapping two of the arguments from Chapter 4. First, it is *psychologically superficial*: it incorporates only the experiential aspect of our emotional conditions. Yet our emotional lives are extremely rich, and

do not reduce to their experiential surfaces. They involve unconscious processes of various sorts, and often have physiological components. Recall the paradigm cases from Chapter 3: it is simply not credible to regard them merely as so many experiential episodes. Nor is it plausible to claim that the states listed are happiness-constituting only *qua* pleasures. One is unhappy by virtue of being *depressed*, not by virtue of experiencing the unpleasantness of depression. Happiness has depth that the pleasure theory misses.

The second criticism of hedonism was that it is too inclusive, counting many *irrelevant* pleasures: in its usual incarnations, all pleasures and displeasures are considered happiness-constituting. Yet many pleasures seem trivial or superficial, making no difference to how happy we are. Even intensely pleasant experiences can fail to impact our happiness: notoriously, sexual activity can leave us cold. Sometimes it just doesn't move us. This is one of the hard lessons dealt to the unsophisticated libertine, or the troubled youth seeking to relieve his melancholy through meaningless sexual encounters. Consider also the pain of having one's gouty toe stepped on. Most of us will find unhappiness in such an experience. It is hard not to let intense pain get to you. But someone of a stoic nature may be disciplined enough that such pains don't get to her at all; she maintains her equanimity throughout. Intuitively, her happiness remains untouched.

3. EMOTIONAL STATE THEORIES: THE DEFAULT VIEW

Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know.

Hemingway

The distinction between happiness-constituting affects and mere pleasures seems to concern whether a given affect involves one's *emotional condition*. Certain affects, notably "mere" physical pains and pleasures, seem not to be particularly emotional, and need not make a difference in our emotional conditions: they don't get to us. Whereas others, such as the paradigm emotions and especially moods, do seem to alter our emotional conditions while they last. I say "paradigm" emotions because the term 'emotion' ranges extremely widely, including states that seem not to be particularly emotional, or to involve our emotional conditions. For instance, you might be angry with a distant government for some policy you disapprove of, or afraid that this policy will have a bad outcome, yet never *feel* the least bit angry or afraid; your attitudes are purely intellectualized, and would at most implicate your emotional state were you to ruminant on the matter and work yourself up into a genuine state of anger or fear about it. Such notional "emotions" amount to little more than beliefs, perhaps having no affective component at all, and are psychologically very different from paradigm

emotions of anger and fear.⁵ Thus we are sometimes careful to note that, while we might be "angry" or "fear" something in *some* sense, we are not *genuinely* mad or afraid. It is plausible that states of the latter sort diminish one's happiness thereby, whereas states of the more intellectualized sort do not. (If the reader's intuitions differ, this will probably be due to conceiving of happiness along the lines of attitudinal hedonism, discussed in Chapter 4, or an aggregative form of life satisfaction.) To capture the distinction, we might refer to the paradigm emotions as "passions," but this term may connote too much; I will just call them "emotions" or "emotions proper."

Here is a simple version of the emotional state theory, what we might call the *default emotional state theory* of happiness. It maintains that happiness consists in a person's overall emotional condition, which in turn consists in the aggregate of her moods and emotions. To be happy, on this view, is for one's emotional condition to be, on the whole, positive. That is, the overall balance of one's moods and emotions is positive rather than negative; positive emotions and moods outweigh the negative. As with a hedonistic account of happiness, the emotional state view allows happiness to be assessed over arbitrarily brief or long periods of time. As stated the theory is somewhat vague, but good enough to give us a starting point for further reflection. I will argue shortly for several modifications to this basic schema.

An even simpler form of the theory would count only moods, or only emotions. Without a special account of moods or emotions, however, such a move would be hard to sustain. If being in a depressed, irritable, or anxious mood makes a person less happy thereby, then presumably emotions of profound sadness or anger can as well, and vice versa.

The emotional state theory does not take happiness to *be* an emotion or mood. It is, rather, a *condition* consisting in (at least) the aggregate of a person's emotions and moods, and this can be a complex matter. You can be cheerful and anxious at the same time, for instance. It might be strictly more accurate, then, to call this an "emotional condition" theory, but calling happiness an emotional condition makes it sound like a disease. I will speak interchangeably of a person's emotional state and emotional condition.

It is plausible that some sort of emotional state theory can account for the paradigm cases; this will become clearer in the discussion to follow. Note that the acute emotion or mood of "feeling happy" is just one of the happiness-constituting states. Its role in happiness is grotesquely exaggerated in the popular imagination, doubtless accounting for much of the scorn heaped on happiness by dysthymic philosophers and the like. Intuitively, most happy people don't feel happy most of the time: they may be relatively tranquil, fulfilled, in good spirits, etc. They need not be brimming with giddy exhilaration. Indeed, a plausible form of the emotional state theory could well allow that some happy individuals might never feel happy: one can imagine an Archie Bunker-like kvetch—a New York deli owner, say—who is generally fulfilled and emotionally untroubled, as his

favorite sport, complaining, doesn't get him down. He may, despite appearances, be happy.

This sort of point comes through well in one of the better literary depictions of happiness. While Hemingway seems to have been no great fan of happiness as such, he arguably left us one of its more compelling illustrations. *The Old Man and the Sea's* Santiago is not the image of happiness in the "smiley-face" sense, which turns up only briefly if at all, notably at the beginning, where the reader learns that his eyes are "cheerful and undefeated."⁶ Yet he is a model of what the ancients called *ataraxia*—tranquility, imperturbability—and Hemingway's exemplar, I suspect, of genuine happiness. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the thought that the author very much envied the Cuban fisherman, who appeared in some ways to be his opposite—unreflective, destitute, bereft of physical comforts, and anonymous but utterly contented and at home in his world, in contrast to Hemingway's own uneasy wealth, fame, and intellectual achievements. (Within a decade of its publication, which quickly garnered a Pulitzer and a Nobel, Hemingway would take his own life. It may seem odd to call Santiago unreflective, since much of the book is taken up with his silent reflections, often perceptive and wise. But even the unreflective have an inner monologue, and all of us engage in some reflection; it is a matter of degree. "Do not think about sin, he thought. There are enough problems now without sin. Also I have no understanding of it... Do not think about sin. It is much too late for that and there are people who are paid to do it. Let them think about it."⁷ This is not someone you'd expect to find in a Left Bank café clutching a well-worn copy of *Being and Nothingness*.) Santiago's happy disposition shows itself at many points, but I will note just one: despite his poverty, his rotten luck, and tremendous physical discomfort, his sleep throughout is plainly untroubled, characterized by pleasant dreams of watching lions on a beach and the like. The last we hear of him, "the old man was dreaming about the lions," evidently unperturbed, even unimpressed, by the long ordeal that had just culminated in losing a record catch to sharks.⁸ Peaceful slumbers are an ancient sign of the tranquil mind, and the scene recalls Plato's depiction of Socrates at the start of the *Crito* (see Chapter 1). Hemingway drives the point home with the jarring introduction of clueless tourists immediately before this. They see the tattered remains of Santiago's marlin and take it for an impressive shark. Santiago's accomplishment will never be known beyond the village.

The emotional state theory bears some resemblance to hedonism, but differs in at least two important respects. In one respect, it is more restrictive, excluding many "superficial" pleasures that fail to implicate our emotional conditions. In another respect, it is more expansive, incorporating our emotional conditions in their entirety, including their unconscious and dispositional components. As well, it regards happiness as fundamentally a different sort of entity: not merely a sum of conscious episodes or events, but a psychological

condition. (See Chapter 4.) This point, somewhat cryptic here, will become clearer as we add further flesh to the version of the theory defended in this chapter.

So long as the reader grants the plausibility of some form of emotional state theory, the central aim of this chapter will have been met. But though it is possible for an emotional state theorist simply to identify happiness with the aggregate of an individual's moods and/or emotions, I think there is a more helpful way to distinguish the relevant states. We will return to that question, and discuss other technical matters, in the next chapter. In what remains of this chapter, I want to go beyond the default view and develop the basic schema in more concrete terms, aiming to illustrate the potential richness and depth, and broad appeal, of an emotional state theory. This will also help the reader develop an intuitive feel for the account before plunging into the more difficult territory of the chapter to follow.

4. THE THREE FACES OF HAPPINESS

4.1. Introduction: happiness as psychic affirmation

To fill out the emotional state view more concretely, it will be helpful to start with a broad ideal that can help guide our reflections about the specifics. A natural proposal is to think of being happy as an individual's responding favorably, in emotional terms, to her life—responding emotionally to her life *as if* things are generally going well for her. This usefully parallels the competing ideal of life satisfaction: more or less, the individual's judging that her life is going well enough for her. That is, roughly, responding rationally to her life as if things are generally going well for her. We might say that life satisfaction chiefly concerns the endorsement of the intellect, whereas happiness concerns the endorsement of the emotional aspect of the self (the “psyche,” as I will sometimes put it, for reasons to be discussed in the next chapter).⁹ Call this condition *psychic affirmation*. In more pronounced forms, we might call it *psychic flourishing*.¹⁰

The question is what psychic affirmation amounts to. My goal here is to sketch a rough and informal outline of a fuller view, with no pretensions at completeness or exactitude. It will be enough if the reader comes away with some appreciation of the diversity and elusiveness of the states encompassed by happiness. Approaching the matter from a biological perspective, we can ask how it would make sense to design emotional creatures such as ourselves. What sorts of emotional responses would be required? I would conjecture that all emotional states instantiate one or more of three basic modes of affirmative or negative response. At the most basic level will be responses concerning the individual's safety and security: for example, letting one's defenses down, making oneself fully at

home in one's life—being in a state of utter *attunement* with one's life, we might say—as opposed to taking up a defensive stance. Next come responses relating to the individual's commitment to or *engagement* with her situation and activities: is it worth investing much effort in them, or would it be wiser to withdraw or disengage from them? Finally, there will be more or less explicit *endorsements* signifying that one's life is not just free of threat and worth pursuing enthusiastically, but positively good, containing things that are to be built upon, sustained, repeated, or sought in the future—as, for example, when one has just achieved a goal or received a great benefit. (Theories of emotion frequently take *all* affects to be of this sort, and accordingly one of my aims is to call attention to other kinds of affective response.) While the three modes of response (arguably) concern progressively less fundamental aspects of well-being, affects of each kind can occur to some extent independently of the others. One need not enjoy security, for instance, to experience something as a positive benefit; on the other hand, the heights of joy may be unreachable for the deeply anxious. We will see as well that some affects appear to instantiate more than one mode of response.

For each of the three modes of response we can identify a corresponding aspect or dimension of happiness.¹¹ People have disagreed through the ages about the relative importance of these dimensions, so that for each we can identify one or more corresponding ideals that emphasize it. Since these ideals of living have probably arisen in every civilized age, it will be helpful to connect them with the familiar ancient Greek tradition, thus distinguishing Democritean, Aristotelian and Dionysian, and Stoic ideals of happiness. I will discuss them in reverse order, starting with the least fundamental, but most familiar:

1. Endorsement (Democritean)
2. Engagement (Aristotelian and Dionysian)
3. Attunement (Stoic)

Each mode of response encompasses negative as well as positive responses; it will be convenient (if inelegant) to refer to the negative counterparts as “disendorsement,” “disengagement,” and “disattunement.” I will not endorse a particular ideal of happiness, though each dimension is important. And there is clearly more than one way to be happy, as Mill observed in distinguishing two of our three dimensions, writing that “the main constituents of a satisfied life appear to be two, either of which by itself is often found sufficient for the purpose: tranquillity, and excitement. With much tranquillity, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure: with much excitement, many can reconcile themselves to a considerable quantity of pain.”¹² (Note also that these ideals can be driven by non-prudential considerations, such as beliefs about what matters for virtue.) But I will suggest that the standard contemporary view of happiness gets the relative priority of these dimensions pretty near backwards: the dimensions listed above appear in ascending order of importance, whereas we find the reverse ranking in the popular imagination.

4.2. Endorsement

My body restore for me.
My mind restore for me.
Happily I recover . . .
In beauty I walk.
It is finished in beauty.

The Night Chant (a Navajo healing ceremony for mental illness)¹³

In the present era, the lion's share of attention has gone to the endorsement aspect of happiness, typified by affects along the *joy–sadness* axis, especially those of feeling happy or cheerful.¹⁴ This is—or at least includes—the prototypically American version of happiness, perhaps because it suits the American emphasis on pursuing your dreams. Also, affects along this dimension are the hardest to miss, as we tend to wear them on our faces, in smiles, frowns, laughter, and the like. Even a child can grasp this sort of happiness. The historical literature, by contrast, tends not to emphasize such affects, as we saw in Mill's omission of them in distinguishing the main varieties of happiness. Perhaps this is because such affects can be so hard to sustain: it is difficult to make yourself *feel* happy for any lengthy period of time, at least if you are not already that way by temperament. As with sadness, happy feelings tend quickly to fade. But even among the ancients this sort of ideal seems to have had its defenders, notably in the views of Democritus—"the laughing philosopher"—who apparently held our goal to be *euthymia*, roughly cheerfulness. We know little of Democritus' views, and there is reason to believe that he viewed *euthymia* as more a matter of tranquility than smiley-face feelings. But he has been well-enough associated with ideals of cheerfulness that we might reasonably deem ideals of happiness that emphasize such feelings "Democritean."

While it is easy to overstate the importance of joy–sadness affects for happiness, we should not underestimate it either; in particular, we should bear in mind that such affects can vary widely in centrality or depth: the profound joy that one's children can bring must not be conflated with a high-fiver's jubilation, or the vacant cheeriness of a shopping mall devotee who finds his life agreeable but has no occasion for real joy. Consider also the Stoic notion of *chara*, joy, among the "good feelings," or the rapturous perception of the world's beauty expressed by the Navajo chant. A shallow cheeriness has its merits, but if that's the best that can be said for your emotional state then it is questionable whether we could sensibly deem you happy.

Other endorsement-type affects do exist, most important perhaps being irritability, which is most naturally contrasted with cheerfulness. The latter, however, appears to fall along the same axis as joy, both being variants of "feeling happy." Irritability appears to fall on a different axis, perhaps one without a

positive pole. (Since many emotion researchers regard positive and negative affects as independent rather than occupying opposite ends of common axes, this asymmetry need not be a problem.¹⁵ But nothing important hangs on whether joy and sadness truly fall along a single axis or not.) Other affects, including fulfillment and anger, will be mentioned later. But states along or near the joy–sadness axis constitute the central case.

4.3. Engagement

I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner.

Thoreau, *Walden*

A closely related but importantly distinct dimension concerns the individual's engagement with her life: not listless and withdrawn, but energetic and engaged. For one can affirm one's life, not just by giving it a "thumbs up," but by enthusiastically taking up what it has to offer. This can happen even when things are not going particularly well, for instance when struggling to accomplish a difficult goal. There are two ideals associated with engagement, the first of which centers on states of energy or vitality: the *exuberance–depression* axis.¹⁶ A passionate and demanding orchestra conductor, for instance, might be exuberant, even happy, without being obviously cheerful or joyful. I do not know whether the Cleveland's George Szell was like this, but he was evidently quite passionate in living—in his cooking at home as well as in his work—perhaps embodying a kind of exuberance. The mere fact that he was a harsh taskmaster need not disqualify him from happiness. A lot depends on whether his temper often left him deeply unsettled—as seems to have been the case for the mercurial Toscanini—or whether its manifestations were typically superficial and transient, leaving his internal state largely undisturbed.

This exuberant form of happiness is typified in ideals of passionate living, notably in Nietzsche, Goethe, and countless other romantics and artists.¹⁷ I am not sure who among the major ancient philosophers endorsed such an ideal, so I will refer to the ideal as "Dionysian." Proponents of the passionate life frequently claim to *oppose* happiness as a significant value, but I would suggest this owes to an overly narrow understanding of the phenomenon, conflating it with cheerfulness and quietude. Yet there is a real tension here: exuberance or passion often brings in its trail emotional disturbance of a distinctly negative sort, as Stoics, Epicureans, Buddhists, and other ancients were fond of pointing out. The passionate life will normally involve a fair dose of anger, frustration, and sorrow, and so this form of happiness can be hard to achieve without compromising other aspects of happiness. It can thus be a bad bet from the

perspective of the individual's well-being. (Though it might be admirable, and thus worth seeking, all the same.) But one need not pursue the passionate life to the Nietzschean extreme: some forms of exuberant living are less risky than others, and many people lead lives of great vitality without plunging themselves into the depths. Exuberance need not entail epic struggles. (Think Whitman's "barbaric yawp," which was not intended to be the howl of a tormented artist.)

A quieter form of engagement than exuberance or vitality can arguably be found in Aristotle's work, and more recently in the notion of "flow" propounded by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.¹⁸ This is the state one assumes when fully engaged in an activity, typically a challenging activity performed well. In states of flow, individuals lose all sense of self-awareness, of the passage of time, and are not aware of feeling anything at all. It is nonetheless a highly pleasant state, and clearly a state in which the individual is happy. We might regard its opposite to be boredom. While the other states we have been discussing may seem clearly to involve a person's psychic disposition or stance, flow may not seem like that. But it is: to be in a state of flow is to assume, emotionally and cognitively, a stance of interest and engagement—a kind of psychic coupling with the objects of one's attention. Aristotle does not write explicitly of flow, but his treatment of the pleasures supervening on virtuous or excellent activity clearly resonates (as Csikszentmihalyi notes¹⁹). Certainly, the happiness that attends Aristotelian well-being—virtuous activity—will include a strong component of flow. We might thus term the idea of happiness as engagement in the sense of flow the "Aristotelian" ideal. (To call it that is not to suggest that Aristotelian ethics centers on promoting flow; clearly it does not.²⁰ The point concerns the psychological states that tend to be *associated* with Aristotelian ideals, even if only as a by-product of the virtuous activity that really matters.)

The significance of engagement becomes clearest in cases of depression, where the characteristic lethargy and listlessness signals a broad psychic disengagement from one's life. While sometimes disordered and always awful, this sort of withdrawal can sometimes be functional, facilitating major life changes by pulling us out of our existing routines and signaling that our present way of living may not be worth continuing.²¹

4.4. Attunement

Journal notes, August 8.

Sundown on the Pond. A gull is laughing from a perch on a post in the Pond. Now a skimmer glides by, plowing a tiny furrow through the shallows. No permanent mark. Nothing is permanent out here. Sand and water . . . no mark endures save of notion, of idea . . . Here the veil between us and the truth of existence is very thin and, to my mind, can be pierced. These past few weeks, I have settled into mindless existence, with few thoughts and no dreams. My being is effortless, untroubled by pain, unstirred by joy. This

being is meditative, with no need of mantras or quiet rooms. Here on the seam between objective and subjective reality no special effort is required to contemplate the merge. When I perceive the gull and apply my perceptual sieves, it is accomplished.

Ron Haybron, *Island*²²

The third and perhaps most important dimension of happiness is best approached by reflecting on states that fall along on the *tranquility–anxiety* axis. This is not the occasion to plumb the nuances of tranquility, but we might think of tranquility as “settledness”: not merely peace of mind or lack of internal discord but a kind of inner surety or confidence, stability and balance, or imperturbability.²³ Whereas endorsement’s characteristic appearance is the smile, and engagement’s the jaunty gait, tranquility presents itself in the relaxed, easy posture. It is clearly a highly pleasant state, and not simply the absence of disturbance or other feeling. Nor does it rule out states of high arousal or exuberance; indeed, exuberance without any sort of tranquility is liable to be jittery and unstable. But tranquility seems crucial for being happy. Not long ago, during a somewhat stressful period preceding the birth of our twins, I noticed how happy my mood would become while bathing my three-year-old. Yet even during those moments I do not think *I* was happy, for beneath the good cheer ran a distinct undercurrent of anxiety, and I never stopped feeling off balance, unsettled. Hemingway’s Santiago, by contrast, is an exemplar of tranquility. (Those of a Nietzschean bent take note: as Santiago makes clear, tranquility entails neither complacency nor passivity.)

So misleading is the conventional understanding of tranquility that it is useful to set that notion aside momentarily and consider the fundamental biological condition that it represents. When an organism is in familiar and safe circumstances, where it has mastery of its environment, it can let down its defenses—dialing down the cortisol, for instance—and confidently engage in whatever pursuits it wishes. It is this condition, in a person, we are concerned with. The Stoics might have said that the individual in that situation finds her life *oikeion*—familiar—to her; she is utterly at home in her life. *In her element*. Similarly, think of the state one assumes when relaxing with a still-close friend after a long separation, particularly if one normally has few close friends nearby. You feel completely at home with that person. ‘Tranquility’ seems too narrow a term for the condition of psychically being at home in one’s life; I will call it a state of *attunement*.²⁴ In this state a person relaxes and blossoms, living as seems natural to her, according to her internal priorities, and without inhibition. The opposite of attunement, disattunement, is not merely anxiety, but more broadly *alienation*: your circumstances are in some sense alien to you—unfamiliar, imposing, threatening. Defenses go up: anxiety, stress, insecurity.

I will not try formally to define the notion of attunement here, but it appears to have three basic aspects: (1) inner calm or peace (“tranquility” in the colloquial

sense); (2) confidence or surety; and (3) openness or expansiveness of mood or spirit, or a sense of freedom (feeling "carefree" being one form of this). To fully capture the notion of being at home in one's life, perhaps we should also add a sense of continuity or fit between self and world—a bit perhaps like the "oceanic feeling" Freud spoke of. 'Confidence' refers to an internal emotional or psychic condition, and bears only a loose relation to one's opinion of oneself. The phenomenon of what we might call "somatic confidence"—feeling wholly at home in one's body—is illustrative. Those who have felt the extremes of somatic confidence know how vastly better it is to have it than not, and how much happier one seems to be when in it than not: think, at the negative pole, of Nixonian awkwardness (the former president seemed to personify a Cartesian dualism of body and mind gone badly askew); at the positive end, the athletic grace of a ballet dancer. This is an important part of what is meant here by 'confidence.' (Is somatic confidence any part of one's emotional condition? I submit that it is: when enjoying such a state one is not edgy or nervous; one's emotional condition is more favorable, and one is happier. You could have stood *behind* Nixon while he thrust his appendages skyward to signal "victory" and known immediately that you were not observing an entirely happy man.)

The term 'attunement' is not ideal; it connotes a state of harmonious coexistence with, or rapt attention to, one's environment. Yet a logger could enjoy this condition whilst clear-cutting the last stand of ancient redwoods; and while someone in a state of "attunement" with her life is indeed likely to have a healthy outward focus, being receptive to her surroundings, being "attuned" to things in the environment is neither central nor essential to it. The attunement in question is broadly emotional, not perceptual.

Among the ancients, the ideal of happiness as attunement seems most naturally to be associated with the Stoics, given the apparent affinity between the present conception of attunement and the Stoics' *'oikeion'*, and more broadly their focus on living according to nature and not being at odds with one's life as it is. To call happiness as attunement a "Stoic" ideal might sow confusion given the common view of the Stoics as joyless ascetics who regarded emotions as a pestilence rather than a central aspect of well-being. While the Epicureans are better known for placing a kind of attunement at the center of the good life, the Stoic resonances seem to me sufficiently compelling that I will call this ideal of happiness "Stoic."

Without going to the Stoic extreme, I would suggest that attunement does indeed form the core of happiness, being not ancillary but quite central to it. Anxiety, stress, insecurity, and related states are not merely unpleasant in themselves; they rob us of much of our capacity for the other dimensions of happiness. Some measure of cheerfulness you might get while suffering from these forms of psychic disattunement, but exuberance, flow, and joy will be hard to come by. Intuitively, a troubled, anxious, tense, or stressed out person—more broadly, someone who does not seem psychically to be at home in his life—does

not seem to be happy, however cheerful he might be. This point will prove significant later.

4.5. Attunement, part two: stress and compression

I distrust the perpetually busy; always have. The frenetic ones spinning in tight little circles like poisoned rats. The slower ones, grinding away their fourscore and ten in righteousness and pain. They are the soul-eaters.

Mark Slouka, "Quitting the Paint Factory"

It is easy to overlook the importance of the attunement dimension of happiness for human well-being, in great part because it does not command our attention like the others do. (I will suggest in Chapter 10 that it may be less conspicuous than other affective states by design.) Consider for example the phenomenon of stress, in the sense of being stressed (this term is vague, but nowadays we all know it well enough that it needs no introduction). It is important to see how deeply anathema this state is to well-being, for it is said to be pervasive in the present culture, yet seems nonetheless not to be taken very seriously. A major reason for this is that it is not usually all that unpleasant—not agonizing like back pain, chemotherapy, or depression can be, and not something we must urgently labor to relieve. It can seem more a nuisance than a great problem. The appearance is misleading, for the trouble with stress lies not mainly in the suffering it immediately involves but in its corrosive impact on the person: it compresses and flattens the spirit and smothers the individual's capacity for pleasure. Stressed individuals get less out of life, for they cannot as easily enjoy, or even notice, what life offers them. The joy of living, the manifold small pleasures that leaven our days—whose importance is readily dismissed, but is never lost on those peering into the grave—are substantially foreclosed when we are stressed. What remains is usually quite bearable, but a lot less worth having.

What of this "flattening of the spirit"? What is meant by it and why does it matter? The phenomenon in question, relating primarily to the expansiveness aspect of attunement, might be termed affective, psychic, or spiritual *compression*. (Though talk of the spirit or soul bears unfortunate connotations of cheap New Age sentimentality, I use these terms in a common secular and naturalistic sense. I mean them to suggest something psychologically deep, intimate, and important to us.) The word may be new but the basic notion, first broached in Chapter 1, should be familiar to any contemporary, and arguably appears in various forms in the works of many writers, notably Mill and Nietzsche. It is easier illustrated than defined: e.g., someone leading a harried life—caught up in the "rat race," as we say—may find himself feeling pressed-upon and confined, like a caged animal, emotionally deflated, small, ant-like—"pinched and hidebound," as Mill memorably put it. (Mill actually used

'compression' to describe the process of making a person like that: e.g., the public's approved "ideal of character is to be without any marked character; to maim by compression, like a Chinese lady's foot, every part of human nature which stands out prominently.")²⁵ The uncompressed person, by contrast, will feel free, expansive, spiritually enlarged. This is not mere phenomenology: it is how these individuals will seem to perceptive observers as well. To the uncompressed person, her psychically compressed counterparts will seem like "little people," worker bees or ants rather than full-sized human beings—to the ancient Greeks, perhaps, the *mikropsuchoi* (literally, "small-souled").²⁶ Whereas the uncompressed person is liable to strike others as a "free spirit." The contrast might be seen in comparing our stereotype of, say, an English aristocrat with that of a flamboyant Caribbean islander. Or consider the sharp differences between John Brown, Queen Victoria's uninhibited Scottish servant—or for that matter Billy Connolly, the man who played him in John Madden's film *Mrs. Brown*—and more typical members of a royal court. Uncompression is not exuberance: quieter forms of uncompression exist as well; there is no smallness or compression of spirit in Hemingway's Santiago, or the Dalai Lama. And these are not mere matters of temperament: all of us have experiences of greater and less compression in our lives. You might experience affective expansion when thoroughly engaged in your favorite activity, particularly if it involves physical virtuosity. Surfing does it for some, sculpture for others, trading commodities for still others.

To get a better fix on the idea, it may be useful to indulge in a bit of speculation about how evolutionary processes could favor tendencies toward compression in certain circumstances. (It matters little whether the following story is true: the point is to illustrate what compression involves.) Imagine the predicament of an individual who is in a threatened subordinate position—e.g., is under the watchful eye of a hostile and belligerent dominant figure. One natural response to this kind of situation would be to avoid trouble by keeping a low profile and making oneself as invisible as possible. Hunker down. This is a reactive stance in which one's behavior is driven not internally but by the agendas of others: go with the flow, be agreeable, and don't make waves. What would the emotional aspect of such a strategy be like? We might expect individuals in such a position to be relatively introverted rather than extroverted, to be less likely to be in what we call an expansive mood, to be relatively anxious or prone to anxiety, to be tentative rather than confident, to feel confined or trapped—not liberated—and perhaps to be somewhat flat emotionally. Such individuals might also tend to be relatively petty and selfish—too focused on their own precarious status to care much about others. These are all, I think, among the hallmarks of compression. And we should not be surprised if someone who exhibits these characteristics experiences a certain phenomenology: feeling small, or small-spirited. This is the core phenomenology of compression.

Compression appears to be a response to oppressive circumstances, such as these, in which one's behavior can be neither natural nor free. There appear to be at least two basic sources of compression, each yielding a different form of the phenomenon (which is not to say they cannot combine). First is *imposition* or repression: that is, being in circumstances in which one's functioning is dictated by forces other than one's own nature. Social pressures demanding conformity are an obvious case here (it is ironic, but also fitting, that Victoria's closest confidant should have been a man who personified opposition to the buttoned-down ethos that bore her name).²⁷ But overscheduled living or struggling just to survive can have the same effect. Second is *threat*, which exerts pressure in a different way: not exactly dictating what one does, but requiring one to assume a reactive and wary stance, anxious and vigilant. In fact all forms of compression seem fundamentally to involve a reactive stance: one's functioning reflects external demands too much, and one's own nature too little. Little wonder that a form of this notion should make its way into Mill's wonderful manifesto on behalf of individuality. Compression is effectively the sleep of individuality. I would suggest that what makes compression so bad is not just that it is not a very pleasant way to be; but that it involves the hindrance of self-expression or self-fulfillment. This intuitively seems like a bad thing, and we will see why that should be so in Chapter 9: well-being consists largely in self-fulfillment. Compression does not seem compatible with that.

Returning to the question of stress, we can see that stressful living often involves both forms of compression: the imposition of having too much to do in too little time, and the constant threat of failing to get things well enough done. Living under a constant bombardment of "insane demands," as Ginsburg put it,²⁸ and being under continual threat of failure to meet them, tends not to enlarge the soul. Still less if success or failure is judged, not by oneself, but—as often happens in the more anonymous and competitive forms of society—by others whom one may not like or even know.

Of course it would be desirable to define compression in more exact terms; I have been able to do little more than gesture at the phenomenon here. But the sheer difficulty of doing so, or even of pointing toward it with any discernment, is revealing in itself, and rather congenial to the purposes of this book. It illustrates how easily overlooked even central aspects of psychological well-being can be. Probably few people under high levels of compression have had much experience of radically uncompressed living, save in early childhood, and probably few have much notion of the difference, or perhaps even that there is anything missing in the reduced condition. Compression seems easy to live with, however undesirable it may be.

4.6. Summary

Summing up: we have identified three broad dimensions of happiness, each representing a different mode of emotional response to one's life, and each

tending to be favored over the others in various ideals of living. The dimensions, and their chief constituents, are (now in descending order of importance for happiness, though not within each dimension):

1. Attunement
 - a. Peace of mind vs. anxiety.
 - b. Confidence vs. insecurity.
 - c. Uncompression vs. compression.
2. Engagement
 - a. Exuberance or vitality vs. listlessness.
 - b. Flow vs. boredom or ennui.
3. Endorsement
 - a. Joy vs. sadness.
 - b. Cheerfulness vs. irritability.

The prominence of attunement reflects what we may think of as the stages of flourishing for a creature: the first priority is to establish conditions of safety and security, where the basic needs for functioning are firmly established so that it can make itself at home and blossom—like placing a sapling in fertile soil. The organism is in its element; it assumes a stance of attunement. This established, a stance of engagement will tend naturally to follow, as the creature exploits the situation in the energetic pursuit of its goals. Last comes the stance of endorsement, as the organism succeeds in meeting its goals. Note that the ranking concerns the relative roles of these states in happiness; you could accept it while ranking them differently in terms of *value* or choiceworthiness. A Nietzschean, for instance, might value states of vitality or exuberance over peace of mind, even if this means being less happy.

Naturally, this schema, if illustrative, is a bit oversimplified. For example, I couched compression as a failure of attunement, a kind of psychic disattunement or alienation—it certainly is not a way of being psychically at home in one's life—but it appears to involve the engagement dimension of happiness as well, since the reactive stance characteristic of compression tends not to combine well with exuberance. And states of flow seem to involve a lessening of compression. The example illustrates the interdependence of the three modes of response: affective states will often if not usually involve more than one. This makes sense since a given type of situation may call for a multifaceted response, so that affect types need not conform strictly to the three-mode schema. I will mention a few other examples to illustrate, and to show how some important states fit in the present account of happiness.

Fear is typically thought to involve withdrawal (the engagement dimension), a defensive disturbance akin to anxiety (the attunement dimension), and a

negative appraisal of the object (the endorsement dimension).²⁹ Anger presents an interesting case: it at least involves a negative appraisal, and possibly some defensive disturbance, but it also seems to involve approach tendencies characteristic of engagement. It thus appears, in that respect, to be a *positive* affective state, whilst being negative in others. Though contrary to initial appearances, this seems rather plausible: anger counts against happiness in the obvious ways, but it can also count *toward* happiness to some extent, as might be imagined in the case of a warrior resolutely pursuing a vendetta against a hated enemy, drawing strength from his anger. There can be an aspect of dark flourishing in such a case, for the individual is fully and energetically engaged in the business of living. But we would hesitate to describe such a person as happy on the whole, since there remains a clear sense in which the anger is primarily a negative state.

On the positive side, there is the interesting question of what to make of emotional fulfillment, or feeling fulfilled. This seems a crucial aspect of happiness when we picture its prototypical forms, and we are unlikely to regard as happy someone whose life is unfulfilling. The question merits a fuller treatment than it will get here, but I would venture that fulfillment is chiefly a mixture of attunement and joy (usually muted but deeply felt)—a state that paradigmatically follows on the fulfillment of the heart's desires. We can think of this as taking two forms. At the heights we have the fulfillment of repose, as happens when reflecting on one's great fortune. The more pedestrian variety, the fulfillment of engagement, arises when engaged in activities that well suit our natures. States of flow may sometimes be like this, or perhaps the fulfillment follows them.

It must be emphasized that the preceding taxonomy is intended to be rough and informal, meant to serve as a plausible starting point for further reflection and investigation. The core points, regarding the richness and demandingness of happiness, and the basic character of some of its more important states, could survive even with substantial adjustments to the picture. A rigorous development of the account would need to be put in the context of a more or less complete theory of affect—a project well beyond the scope of this book, and possibly premature given the state of scientific knowledge in this realm. Much greater attention must also be given to each of the states involved in happiness, only some of which have been touched on here. Were there a reasonably mature literature on the subject, we would find numerous journal articles dedicated to each of the many states involved here—significant bodies of work on, for example, the nature and significance for happiness of tranquility, or confidence, or vitality, or flow.³⁰ For now, a rough sketch will have to do.

In the next chapter we will develop the present version of the emotional state theory in greater detail. First, however, I want to note some advantages of an emotional state approach, illustrating how it can diminish common doubts about the significance of happiness.

5. IS HAPPINESS IMMUTABLE?

If someone still wishes to maintain that happiness is not important, it is hard to know what to say. Neither Nietzsche nor the Stoics, who seem to define the limits of sane opinion in such matters, went that far. It would appear to be a bitter, not to say monstrous, view of human life that denies significance across the board to such things as imperturbability, peace of mind, vitality of spirit, fulfillment, inner surety and expansiveness of soul. If there are those who want to embrace such an ethic, they are welcome to it.

The more interesting questions concern *how* important happiness is, and it is true that happiness is not the only thing that matters in life, or even for well-being. Moreover, it is clearly overvalued by many—those who are all too eager to trade their integrity for the promise of happiness, or who, thinking themselves entitled to be happy, do terrible things to their families, co-workers, or strangers in the name of an imaginary birthright. Others shoot themselves in the foot by valuing happiness so much they forget to put much value on anything else, leaving themselves with no real source of happiness. We should grant that happiness is not as important as some people think it is, and that it ranks firmly beneath virtue in a good life: to sacrifice the demands of good character in the name of personal happiness—or, I would add, personal welfare—can never be justified. We must, above all, act decently, if not well. Or so, at any rate, I am prepared to grant. None of this is incompatible in the least with the aims of this book. Happiness is a matter of central importance for a good life, and an important object of practical concern. To dismiss happiness as a lightweight matter of little import is most likely to be working with a lightweight conception of happiness.

Many other interesting doubts have been raised either about the importance of happiness or about whether we should pursue it. Here I will mention only certain worries about the extent to which our emotional conditions really track well-being. The aim will be not to rebut them fully, but to gesture at the resources an emotional state theory of happiness can bring to bear in addressing them. A familiar concern to those who have followed the empirical literature concerns adaptation and the idea that people have happiness “set points” toward which their happiness naturally tends to gravitate.³¹ These set points are said to be substantially heritable, perhaps as much as .80, though .50 is a more widely accepted figure. Recent events, even quite major ones, can move people up or down for a brief period, maybe a few months, but usually they will return to their set point—no more or less happy or unhappy than before. In one of the best recent philosophical treatments of happiness, Elijah Millgram pressed a version of this worry, arguing essentially that happiness functions to track not well-being, but *changes* in well-being. (Peter Railton has been developing

a version of this idea, suggesting a “delta meter” model of happiness.³²) The issues are too complex to address here fully, but it bears noting that most researchers now seem to believe that past claims about the relative immutability of happiness were often overstated.³³ Here I want to note a few ways in which an emotional state view of happiness may be less susceptible to such objections.

One version of the adaptation worry arises in political thought, where happiness is frequently dismissed for being too subject to adaptation, raising the specter of happy slaves and the like.³⁴ Policymakers should thus focus their attention on other matters, such as the distribution of resources or capabilities. An emotional state view of happiness seems less vulnerable on this count than other theories. For while it is easy to imagine people becoming resigned to oppressive circumstances, even registering satisfaction with their lives or showing the world a happy face, it is not so easy to imagine the enslaved, the solitary homeless, and the browbeaten sweatshop laborer leading *emotionally fulfilling* lives. When reading Martha Nussbaum’s admirable depictions of struggling Indian women, ‘psychic flourishing’ is not the first term that comes to mind.³⁵

Second, we should question the standard rationale for expecting strong forms of adaptation to occur—that it usually doesn’t make sense evolutionarily or otherwise to feel happy or sad forever after an event, because we need to get on with our lives and deal with them as they now are. Emotions need to facilitate a response to the change and then get out of the way. There is something to this thought, but notice that it chiefly applies to endorsement-type states, which are neither the whole nor even the most important aspect of happiness. If relationships and work and leisure activities improve markedly, and remain so, then why should you gradually settle back to a “set point” level of engagement—ceasing to experience as much flow, and feeling less energetic and alive? Consider, particularly, states of anxiety or stress: if you are living under threat, and things stay that way for a long time, it makes little sense to let your defenses down and cease responding as if you are under threat. So long as they are out to get you, you had best stay prepared; so long as they are not, you should relax and stop toasting your brain and body with stress hormones. The point is not to deny that adaptation occurs with such states. But there is no reason to expect the strong sort of adaptation in such states that we seem to see with feelings of happiness and sadness. It is important to note as well that the empirical research mainly focuses on feelings like these—in the case of self-reported “happiness,” indirectly, given the likelihood that people tend to focus inordinately on such feelings when making such reports—or on other measures, like life satisfaction reports, that may also be especially prone to adaptation.³⁶ (A further limitation of most research, particularly regarding the heritability of happiness, is the homogeneity of the populations studied. To an Amish farmer or San hunter, or the fishermen on the island mentioned

in Chapter 1, the affluent Westerners who mostly get studied may seem to be leading pretty near identical ways of life. If all your subjects live in similar environments, then *of course* the role of environment in determining happiness is going to seem limited. It is as if one were to run a series of studies on zoo bears and circus bears, find not much difference in well-being between the groups, and conclude that it doesn't matter very much what environment you put bears in.)

Third, our emotional conditions plausibly tend to be keyed to the general conditions of our lives, not the details.³⁷ And once our basic needs for health and security are met, they seem to depend chiefly on how we live. Over the long haul, what we have and what happens to us—the sorts of objective variables that tend to get studied—seem to be secondary, typically of little more than transient concern (this is the wisdom embodied in the adaptation literature). If so, then we might expect happiness to seem immutable even if is not: it is hard to change the basics of how we live, at least at the level of individual decision. Consider the sorts of goods that tend to be cited as the main positive sources of happiness: notably, active social engagement, and meaningful activities that are well-matched to your abilities.³⁸ Such things are not easily changed. If you're lonely, harried, and bored to tears by your work now, you stand a good chance of being lonely, harried, and bored for a long time. And unless you've got the nerve and the ability to make some fundamental changes in how you live, and the wisdom to do it well, there may not be much you can do about it. The fact that your big paycheck, your designer home, your aromatherapy sessions, your personal coach, and your washboard abs have done nothing to make you happier scarcely shows that you've got a brain defect, or that unhappiness is written into your genes. Perhaps these aren't the things you need for a good life.

The pursuit of happiness is not easy. Given that the basic conditions of our lives, and the way we live, are so heavily dependent on our social environment, we may want to look more closely at the societal dimensions of the question. (If this isn't clear yet, it should become so in Part IV.) Even if we are suspicious of using policy instruments to promote happiness, we might at least consider the limits of individual effort, and the importance of context, in shaping how happy we are. Take, for example, recent initiatives to develop and teach methods by which people can make themselves happier. Such efforts can produce very real benefits, and in fact many of the ancients were in a version of same business.³⁹ While there are legitimate worries about such techniques sometimes reducing to cheap spiritual analgesics, I see no reason why this cannot be avoided.⁴⁰ A more interesting question, it seems to me, is how far individual efforts like this are likely to improve human well-being on a broad scale. If the problem lies chiefly in the way you live, and this in turn depends heavily on the kind of society you inhabit, then positive thinking techniques and the like are only going to get you so far.⁴¹

The difficulty of pursuing happiness is no reason to think happiness a mainly biological or temperamental affair, unchangeable and unconnected with the conditions of our lives. Consider the way that depression has skyrocketed in recent decades. How should we explain this trend? It could be due to some environmental contaminant burning up our neurotransmitters. Or perhaps there is something wrong with the way many of us are living.