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# If We Are So Rich, Why Aren't We Happy?

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*Ever since systematic thought has been recorded, the question of what makes men and women happy has been of central concern. Answers to this question have ranged from the materialist extreme of searching for happiness in external conditions to the spiritual extreme claiming that happiness is the result of a mental attitude. Psychologists have recently rediscovered this topic. Research supports both the materialist and the mentalist positions, although the latter produces the stronger findings. The article focuses in particular on one dimension of happiness: the flow experience, or the state of total involvement in an activity that requires complete concentration.*

**P** psychology is the heir to those "sciences of man" envisioned by Enlightenment thinkers such as Giambattista Vico, David Hume, and the baron de Montesquieu. One of their fundamental conclusions was that the pursuit of happiness constituted the basis of both individual motivation and social well-being. This insight into the human condition was condensed by John Locke (1690/1975) in his famous statement, "That we call Good which is apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain" (p. 2), whereas evil is the reverse—it is what causes or increases pain and diminishes pleasure.

The generation of utilitarian philosophers that followed Locke, including David Hartley, Joseph Priestley, and Jeremy Bentham, construed a good society as that which allows the greatest happiness for the greatest number (Bentham, 1789/1970, pp. 64–65). This focus on pleasure or happiness as the touchstone of private and public life is by no means a brainchild of post-Reformation Europe. It was already present in the writings of the Greeks—for instance, Aristotle noted that although humankind values a great many things, such as health, fame, and possessions, because we think that they will make us happy, we value happiness for itself. Thus, happiness is the only intrinsic goal that people seek for its own sake, the bottom line of all desire. The idea that furthering the pursuit of happiness should be one of the responsibilities of a just government was of course enshrined later in the Declaration of Independence of the United States.

Despite this recognition on the part of the human sciences that happiness is the fundamental goal of life, there has been slow progress in understanding what happiness itself consists of. Perhaps because the heyday of utilitarian philosophy coincided with the start of the enormous forward strides in public health and in the manufacturing and distribution of goods, the majority of those who

thought about such things assumed that increases in pleasure and happiness would come from increased affluence, from greater control over the material environment. The great self-confidence of the Western technological nations, and especially of the United States, was in large part because of the belief that materialism—the prolongation of a healthy life, the acquisition of wealth, the ownership of consumer goods—would be the royal road to a happy life.

However, the virtual monopoly of materialism as the dominant ideology has come at the price of a trivialization that has robbed it of much of the truth it once contained. In current use, it amounts to little more than a thoughtless hedonism, a call to do one's thing regardless of consequences, a belief that whatever feels good at the moment must be worth doing.

This is a far cry from the original view of materialists, such as John Locke, who were aware of the futility of pursuing happiness without qualifications and who advocated the pursuit of happiness through prudence—making sure that people do not mistake imaginary happiness for real happiness.

What does it mean to pursue happiness through prudence? Locke must have derived his inspiration from the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who 2,300 years ago already saw clearly that to enjoy a happy life, one must develop self-discipline. The materialism of Epicurus was solidly based on the ability to defer gratification. He claimed that although all pain was evil, this did not mean one should always avoid pain—for instance, it made sense to put up with pain now if one was sure to avoid thereby a greater pain later. He wrote to his friend Menoeceus

The beginning and the greatest good . . . is prudence. For this reason prudence is more valuable even than philosophy: from it derive all the other virtues. Prudence teaches us how impossible

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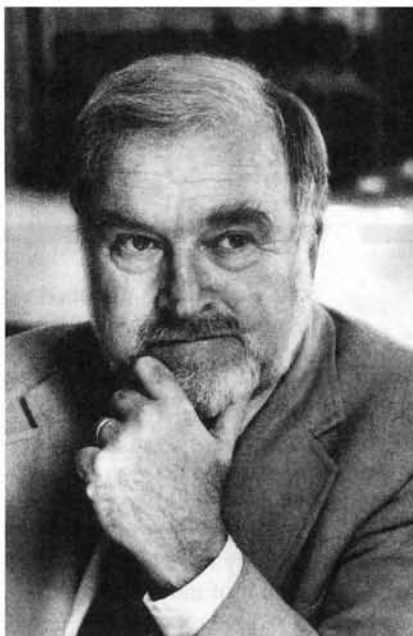
*Editor's note.* The January 2000 issue of this journal is a special issue devoted to articles on optimal human functioning, happiness, and positive psychology. The issue was guest edited by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Martin E. P. Seligman.

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it is to live pleasantly without living wisely, virtuously, and justly . . . take thought, then, for these and kindred matters day and night . . . . You shall be disturbed neither waking nor sleeping, and you shall live as a god among men. (Epicurus of Samos, trans. 1998, p. 48)

This is not the image of epicureanism held by most people. The popular view holds that pleasure and material comforts should be grasped wherever they can, and that these alone will improve the quality of one's life. As the fruits of technology have ripened and the life span has lengthened, the hope that increased material rewards would bring about a better life seemed for a while justified.

Now, at the end of the second millennium, it is becoming clear that the solution is not that simple. Inhabitants of the wealthiest industrialized Western nations are living in a period of unprecedented riches, in conditions that previous generations would have considered luxuriously comfortable, in relative peace and security, and they are living on the average close to twice as long as their great-grandparents did. Yet, despite all these improvements in material conditions, it does not seem that people are so much more satisfied with their lives than they were before.

### **The Ambiguous Relationship Between Material and Subjective Well-Being**

The indirect evidence that those of us living in the United States today are not happier than our ancestors were comes from national statistics of social pathology—the figures that show the doubling and tripling of violent crimes, family breakdown, and psychosomatic complaints since at least the halfway mark of the century. If material well-being leads to happiness, why is it that neither capitalist nor socialist solutions seem to work? Why is it that the crew on the flagship of capitalist affluence is becoming increasingly

addicted to drugs for falling asleep, for waking up, for staying slim, for escaping boredom and depression? Why are suicides and loneliness such a problem in Sweden, which has applied the best of socialist principles to provide material security to its people?

Direct evidence about the ambiguous relationship of material and subjective well-being comes from studies of happiness that psychologists and other social scientists have finally started to pursue, after a long delay in which research on happiness was considered too soft for scientists to undertake. It is true that these surveys are based on self-reports and on verbal scales that might have different meanings depending on the culture and the language in which they are written. Thus, the results of culturally and methodologically circumscribed studies need to be taken with more than the usual grain of salt. Nevertheless, at this point they represent the state of the art—an art that will inevitably become more precise with time.

Although cross-national comparisons show a reasonable correlation between the wealth of a country as measured by its gross national product and the self-reported happiness of its inhabitants (Inglehart, 1990), the relationship is far from perfect. The inhabitants of Germany and Japan, for instance, nations with more than twice the gross national product of Ireland, report much lower levels of happiness.

Comparisons within countries show an even weaker relationship between material and subjective well-being. Diener, Horwitz, and Emmons (1985), in a study of some of the wealthiest individuals in the United States, found their levels of happiness to be barely above that of individuals with average incomes. After following a group of lottery winners, Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) concluded that despite their sudden increase in wealth, their happiness was no different from that of people struck by traumas, such as blindness or paraplegia. That having more money to spend does not necessarily bring about greater subjective well-being has also been documented on a national scale by David G. Myers (1993). His calculations show that although the adjusted value of after-tax personal income in the United States has more than doubled between 1960 and 1990, the percentage of people describing themselves as "very happy" has remained unchanged at 30% (Myers, 1993, pp. 41–42).

In the *American Psychologist's* January 2000 special issue on positive psychology, David G. Myers (in press) and Ed Diener (in press) discuss in great detail the lack of relationship between material and subjective well-being, so I will not belabor the point here. Suffice it to say that in current longitudinal studies of a representative sample of almost 1,000 American adolescents conducted with the experience sampling method and supported by the Sloan Foundation, a consistently low negative relationship between material and subjective well-being has been found (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, in press). For instance, the reported happiness of teenagers (measured several times a day for a week in each of three years) shows a very significant inverse relationship to the social class of the community in which teens live, to their parents' level of

education, and to their parents' occupational status. Children of the lowest socioeconomic strata generally report the highest happiness, and upper middle-class children generally report the least happiness. Does this mean that more affluent children are in fact less happy, or does it mean that the norms of their social class prescribe that they should present themselves as less happy? At this point, we are unable to make this vital distinction.

Yet despite the evidence that the relationship between material wealth and happiness is tenuous at best, most people still cling to the notion that their problems would be resolved if they only had more money. In a survey conducted at the University of Michigan, when people were asked what would improve the quality of their lives, the first and foremost answer was "more money" (Campbell, 1981).

Given these facts, it seems that one of the most important tasks psychologists face is to better understand the dynamics of happiness and to communicate these findings to the public at large. If the main justification of psychology is to help reduce psychic distress and support psychic well-being, then psychologists should try to prevent the disillusionment that comes when people find out that they have wasted their lives struggling to reach goals that cannot satisfy them. Psychologists should be able to provide alternatives that in the long run will lead to a more rewarding life.

## **Why Material Rewards Do Not Necessarily Make People Happy**

To answer this question, I'll start by reflecting on why material rewards, which people regard so highly, do not necessarily provide the happiness expected from them. The first reason is the well-documented escalation of expectations. If people strive for a certain level of affluence thinking that it will make them happy, they find that on reaching it, they become very quickly habituated, and at that point they start hankering for the next level of income, property, or good health. In a 1987 poll conducted by the *Chicago Tribune*, people who earned less than \$30,000 a year said that \$50,000 would fulfill their dreams, whereas those with yearly incomes of over \$100,000 said they would need \$250,000 to be satisfied ("Pay Nags," 1987; "Rich Think Big," 1987; see also Myers, 1993, p. 57). Several studies have confirmed that goals keep getting pushed upward as soon as a lower level is reached. It is not the objective size of the reward but its difference from one's "adaptation level" that provides subjective value (e.g., Davis, 1959; Michalos, 1985; Parducci, 1995).

The second reason is related to the first. When resources are unevenly distributed, people evaluate their possessions not in terms of what they need to live in comfort, but in comparison with those who have the most. Thus, the relatively affluent feel poor in comparison with the very rich and are unhappy as a result. This phenomenon of "relative deprivation" (Martin, 1981; Williams, 1975) seems to be fairly universal and well-entrenched. In the United States, the disparity in incomes between the top

percentage and the rest is getting wider; this does not bode well for the future happiness of the population.

The third reason is that even though being rich and famous might be rewarding, nobody has ever claimed that material rewards alone are sufficient to make us happy. Other conditions—such as a satisfying family life, having intimate friends, having time to reflect and pursue diverse interests—have been shown to be related to happiness (Myers, 1993; Myers & Diener, 1995; Veenhoven, 1988). There is no intrinsic reason why these two sets of rewards—the material and the socioemotional—should be mutually exclusive. In practice, however, it is very difficult to reconcile their conflicting demands. As many psychologists from William James (1890) to Herbert A. Simon (1969) have remarked, time is the ultimate scarce resource, and the allocation of time (or more precisely, of attention over time) presents difficult choices that eventually determine the content and quality of our lives. This is why professional and business persons find it so difficult to balance the demands of work and family, and why they so rarely feel that they have not shortchanged one of these vital aspects of their lives.

Material advantages do not readily translate into social and emotional benefits. In fact, to the extent that most of one's psychic energy becomes invested in material goals, it is typical for sensitivity to other rewards to atrophy. Friendship, art, literature, natural beauty, religion, and philosophy become less and less interesting. The Swedish economist Stephen Linder was the first to point out that as income and therefore the value of one's time increases, it becomes less and less "rational" to spend it on anything besides making money—or on spending it conspicuously (Linder, 1970). The opportunity costs of playing with one's child, reading poetry, or attending a family reunion become too high, and so one stops doing such irrational things. Eventually a person who only responds to material rewards becomes blind to any other kind and loses the ability to derive happiness from other sources (see also Benedikt, 1999; Scitovsky, 1975). As is true of addiction in general, material rewards at first enrich the quality of life. Because of this, we tend to conclude that more must be better. But life is rarely linear; in most cases, what is good in small quantities becomes commonplace and then harmful in larger doses.

Dependence on material goals is so difficult to avoid in part because our culture has progressively eliminated every alternative that in previous times used to give meaning and purpose to individual lives. Although hard comparative data are lacking, many historians (e.g., Polanyi, 1957) have claimed that past cultures provided a greater variety of attractive models for successful lives. A person could be valued and admired because he or she was a saint, a bon vivant, a wise person, a good craftsman, a brave patriot, or an upright citizen. Nowadays the logic of reducing everything to quantifiable measures has made the dollar the common metric by which to evaluate every aspect of human action. The worth of a person and of a person's accomplishments are determined by the price they fetch in the marketplace. It is useless to claim that a painting is

good art unless it gets high bids at Sotheby's, nor can we claim that someone is wise unless he or she can charge five figures for a consultation. Given the hegemony of material rewards in our culture's restricted repertoire, it is not surprising that so many people feel that their only hope for a happy life is to amass all the earthly goods they can lay hands on.

To recapitulate, there are several reasons for the lack of a direct relationship between material well-being and happiness. Two of them are sociocultural: (a) The growing disparity in wealth makes even the reasonably affluent feel poor. (b) This relative deprivation is exacerbated by a cultural factor, namely, the lack of alternative values and a wide range of successful lifestyles that could compensate for a single, zero-sum hierarchy based on dollars and cents. Two of the reasons are more psychological: (a) When we evaluate success, our minds use a strategy of escalating expectations, so that few people are ever satisfied for long with what they possess or what they have achieved. (b) As more psychic energy is invested in material goals, less of it is left to pursue other goals that are also necessary for a life in which one aspires to happiness.

None of this is intended to suggest that the material rewards of wealth, health, comfort, and fame detract from happiness. Rather, after a certain minimum threshold—which is not stable but varies with the distribution of resources in the given society—they seem to be irrelevant. Of course, most people will still go on from cradle to grave believing that if they could only have had more money, or good looks, or lucky breaks, they would have achieved that elusive state.

## Psychological Approaches to Happiness

If people are wrong about the relation between material conditions and how happy they are, then what *does* matter? The alternative to the materialist approach has always been something that used to be called a "spiritual" and nowadays we may call a "psychological" solution. This approach is based on the premise that if happiness is a mental state, people should be able to control it through cognitive means. Of course, it is also possible to control the mind pharmacologically. Every culture has developed drugs ranging from peyote to heroin to alcohol in an effort to improve the quality of experience by direct chemical means. In my opinion, however, chemically induced well-being lacks a vital ingredient of happiness: the knowledge that one is responsible for having achieved it. Happiness is not something that happens to people but something that they make happen.

In some cultures, drugs ingested in a ritual, ceremonial context appear to have lasting beneficial effects, but in such cases the benefits most likely result primarily from performing the ritual, rather than from the chemicals per se. Thus, in discussing psychological approaches to happiness, I focus exclusively on processes in which human consciousness uses its self-organizing ability to achieve a positive internal state through its own efforts, with minimal reliance on external manipulation of the nervous system.

There have been many very different ways to program the mind to increase happiness or at least to avoid being unhappy. Some religions have done it by promising an eternal life of happiness follows our earthly existence. Others, on realizing that most unhappiness is the result of frustrated goals and thwarted desires, teach people to give up desires altogether and thus avoid disappointment. Still others, such as Yoga and Zen, have developed complex techniques for controlling the stream of thoughts and feelings, thereby providing the means for shutting out negative content from consciousness. Some of the most radical and sophisticated disciplines for self-control of the mind were those developed in India, culminating in the Buddhist teachings 25 centuries ago. Regardless of its truth content, faith in a supernatural order seems to enhance subjective well-being: Surveys generally show a low but consistent correlation between religiosity and happiness (Csikszentmihalyi & Patton, 1997; Myers, 1993).

Contemporary psychology has developed several solutions that share some of the premises of these ancient traditions but differ drastically in content and detail. What is common to them is the assumption that cognitive techniques, attributions, attitudes, and perceptual styles can change the effects of material conditions on consciousness, help restructure an individual's goals, and consequently improve the quality of experience. Maslow's (1968, 1971) *self-actualization*, Block and Block's (1980) *ego-resiliency*, Diener's (1984, in press) *positive emotionality*, Antonovsky's (1979) *salutogenic approach*, Seeman's (1996) *personality integration*, Deci and Ryan's (1985; Ryan & Deci, in press) *autonomy*, Scheier and Carver's (1985) *dispositional optimism*, and Seligman's (1991) *learned optimism* are only a few of the theoretical concepts developed recently, many with their own preventive and therapeutic implications.

## The Experience of Flow

My own addition to this list is the concept of the *autotelic experience*, or *flow*, and of the autotelic personality. The concept describes a particular kind of experience that is so engrossing and enjoyable that it becomes autotelic, that is, worth doing for its own sake even though it may have no consequence outside itself. Creative activities, music, sports, games, and religious rituals are typical sources for this kind of experience. Autotelic persons are those who have such flow experiences relatively often, regardless of what they are doing.

Of course, we never do anything purely for its own sake. Our motives are always a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic considerations. For instance, composers may write music because they hope to sell it and pay the bills, because they want to become famous, because their self-images depends on writing songs—all of these being extrinsic motives. But if the composers are motivated only by these extrinsic rewards, they are missing an essential ingredient. In addition to these rewards, they could also enjoy writing music for its own sake—in which case, the activity would become autotelic. My studies (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1996, 1997) have suggested that happiness de-

depends on whether a person is able to derive flow from whatever he or she does.

A brief selection from one of the more than 10,000 interviews collected from around the world might provide a sense of what the flow experience is like. Asked how it felt when writing music was going well, a composer responded,

You are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don't exist. I have experienced this time and time again. My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what is happening. I just sit there watching in a state of awe and wonderment. And the music just flows out by itself. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 44)

This response is quite typical of most descriptions of how people feel when they are thoroughly involved in something that is enjoyable and meaningful to the person. First of all, the experience is described as "ecstatic": in other words, as being somehow separate from the routines of everyday life. This sense of having stepped into a different reality can be induced by environmental cues, such as walking into a sport event, a religious ceremony, or a musical performance, or the feeling can be produced internally, by focusing attention on a set of stimuli with their own rules, such as the composition of music.

Next, the composer claims that "you feel as though you almost don't exist." This dimension of the experience refers to involvement in the activity being so demanding that no surplus attention is left to monitor any stimuli irrelevant to the task at hand. Thus, chess players might stand up after a game and realize that they have splitting headaches and must run to the bathroom, whereas for many hours during the game they had excluded all information about their bodily states from consciousness.

The composer also refers to the felt spontaneity of the experience: "My hand seems devoid of myself . . . I have nothing to do with what is happening." Of course, this sense of effortless performance is only possible because the skills and techniques have been learned and practiced so well that they have become automatic. This brings up one of the paradoxes of flow: One has to be in control of the activity to experience it, yet one should not try to consciously control what one is doing.

As the composer stated, when the conditions are right, action "just flows out by itself." It is because so many respondents used the analogy of spontaneous, effortless flow to describe how it felt when what they were doing was going well that I used the term *flow* to describe the autotelic experience. Here is what a well-known lyricist, a former poet laureate of the United States, said about his writing:

You lose your sense of time, you're completely enraptured, you are completely caught up in what you're doing, and you are sort of swayed by the possibilities you see in this work. If that becomes too powerful, then you get up, because the excitement is too great . . . The idea is to be so, so saturated with it that there's no future or past, it's just an extended present in which you are . . . making meaning. And dismantling meaning, and remaking it. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 121)

This kind of intense experience is not limited to creative endeavors. It is reported by teenagers who love studying, by workers who like their jobs, by drivers who enjoy driving. Here is what one woman said about her sources of deepest enjoyment:

[It happens when] I am working with my daughter, when she's discovered something new. A new cookie recipe that she has accomplished, that she has made herself, an artistic work that she's done and she is proud of. Her reading is something that she is really into, and we read together. She reads to me and I read to her, and that's a time when I sort of lose touch with the rest of the world. I am totally absorbed in what I am doing. (Allison & Duncan, 1988, p. 129)

This kind of experience has a number of common characteristics. First, people report knowing very clearly what they have to do moment by moment, either because the activity requires it (as when the score of a musical composition specifies what notes to play next), or because the person sets clear goals every step of the way (as when a rock climber decides which hold to try for next). Second, they are able to get immediate feedback on what they are doing. Again, this might be because the activity provides information about the performance (as when one is playing tennis and after each shot one knows whether the ball went where it was supposed to go), or it might be because the person has an internalized standard that makes it possible to know whether one's actions meet the standard (as when a poet reads the last word or the last sentence written and judges it to be right or in need of revision).

Another universal condition for the flow experience is that the person feels his or her abilities to act match the opportunities for action. If the challenges are too great for the person's skill, anxiety is likely to ensue; if the skills are greater than the challenges, one feels bored. When challenges are in balance with skills, one becomes lost in the activity and flow is likely to result (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1997).

Even this greatly compressed summary of the flow experience should make it clear that it has little to do with the widespread cultural trope of "going with the flow." To go with the flow means to abandon oneself to a situation that feels good, natural, and spontaneous. The flow experience that I have been studying is something that requires skills, concentration, and perseverance. However, the evidence suggests that it is the second form of flow that leads to subjective well-being.

The relationship between flow and happiness is not entirely self-evident. Strictly speaking, during the experience people are not necessarily happy because they are too involved in the task to have the luxury to reflect on their subjective states. Being happy would be a distraction, an interruption of the flow. But afterward, when the experience is over, people report having been in as positive a state as it is possible to feel. Autotelic persons, those who are often in flow, tend also to report more positive states overall and to feel that their lives are more purposeful and meaningful (Adlai-Gail, 1994; Hektner, 1996).

The phenomenon of flow helps explain the contradictory and confusing causes of what we usually call happiness. It explains why it is possible to achieve states of subjective well-being by so many different routes: either by achieving wealth and power or by relinquishing them; by cherishing either solitude or close relationships; through ambition or through its opposite, contentment; through the pursuit of objective science or through religious practice. *People are happy not because of what they do, but because of how they do it.* If they can experience flow working on the assembly line, chances are they will be happy, whereas if they don't have flow while lounging at a luxury resort, they are not going to be happy. The same is true of the various psychological techniques for achieving positive mental health: If the process of becoming resilient or self-efficacious is felt to be boring or an external imposition, the technique is unlikely to lead to happiness, even if it is mastered to the letter. You have to enjoy mental health to benefit from it.

### **Making Flow Possible**

The prerequisite for happiness is the ability to get fully involved in life. If the material conditions are abundant, so much the better, but lack of wealth or health need not prevent one from finding flow in whatever circumstances one finds at hand. In fact, our studies suggest that children from the most affluent families find it more difficult to be in flow—compared with less well-to-do teenagers, they tend to be more bored, less involved, less enthusiastic, less excited.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that each person should be left to find enjoyment wherever he or she can find it or to give up efforts for improving collective conditions. There is so much that could be done to introduce more flow in schools, in family life, in the planning of communities, in jobs, in the way we commute to work and eat our meals—in short, in almost every aspect of life. This is especially important with respect to young people. Our research suggests, for instance, that more affluent teenagers experience flow less often because, although they dispose of more material possessions, they spend less time with their parents, and they do fewer interesting things with them (Hunter, 1998). Creating conditions that make flow experiences possible is one aspect of that “pursuit of happiness” for which the social and political community should be responsible.

Nevertheless, flow alone does not guarantee a happy life. It is also necessary to find flow in activities that are complex, namely, activities that provide a potential for growth over an entire life span, allow for the emergence of new opportunities for action, and stimulate the development of new skills. A person who never learns to enjoy the company of others and who finds few opportunities within a meaningful social context is unlikely to achieve inner harmony (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1998; Inghilleri, 1999), but when flow comes from active physical, mental, or emotional involvement—from work, sports, hobbies, meditation, and interpersonal

relationships—then the chances for a complex life that leads to happiness improve.

### **The Limits of Flow**

There is at least one more important issue left to consider. In reviewing the history of materialism, I have discussed John Locke's warnings about the necessity of pursuing happiness with prudence and about the importance of distinguishing real from imaginary happiness. Are similar caveats applicable to flow? Indeed, flow is necessary to happiness, but it is not sufficient. This is because people can experience flow in activities that are enjoyable at the moment but will detract from enjoyment in the long run. For instance, when a person finds few meaningful opportunities for action in the environment, he or she will often resort to finding flow in activities that are destructive, addictive, or at the very least wasteful (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1978; Sato, 1988). Juvenile crime is rarely a direct consequence of deprivation but rather is caused by boredom or the frustration teenagers experience when other opportunities for flow are blocked. Vandalism, gang fights, promiscuous sex, and experimenting with psychotropic drugs might provide flow at first, but such experiences are rarely enjoyable for long.

Another limitation of flow as a path to happiness is that a person might learn to enjoy an activity so much that everything else pales by comparison, and he or she then becomes dependent on a very narrow range of opportunities for action while neglecting to develop skills that would open up a much broader arena for enjoyment later. A chess master who can enjoy only the game and a workaholic who feels alive only while on the job are in danger of stunting their full development as persons and thus of forfeiting future opportunities for happiness.

In one respect, the negative impact on the social environment of an addiction to flow is less severe than that of an addiction to material rewards. Material rewards are zero-sum: To be rich means that others must be poor; to be famous means that others must be anonymous; to be powerful means that others must be helpless. If everyone strives for such self-limiting rewards, most people will necessarily remain frustrated, resulting in personal unhappiness and social instability. By contrast, the rewards of flow are open-ended and inexhaustible: If I get my joy from cooking Mediterranean food, or from surfing, or from coaching Little League, this will not decrease anyone else's happiness.

Unfortunately, too many institutions have a vested interest in making people believe that buying the right car, the right soft drink, the right watch, the right education will vastly improve their chances of being happy, even if doing so will mortgage their lives. In fact, societies are usually structured so that the majority is led to believe that their well-being depends on being passive and contented. Whether the leadership is in the hands of a priesthood, of a warrior caste, of merchants, or of financiers, their interest is to have the rest of the population depend on whatever rewards they have to offer—be it eternal life, security, or material comfort. But if one puts one's faith in being a



passive consumer—of products, ideas, or mind-altering drugs—one is likely to be disappointed. However, materialist propaganda is clever and convincing. It is not so easy, especially for young people, to tell what is truly in their interest from what will only harm them in the long run. This is why John Locke cautioned people not to mistake imaginary happiness for real happiness and why 25 centuries ago Plato wrote that the most urgent task for educators is to teach young people to find pleasure in the right things. Now this task falls partly on our shoulders. The job description for psychologists should encompass discovering what promotes happiness, and the calling of psychologists should include bringing this knowledge to public awareness.

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