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Building Bridges

Some recent lines of research help both to rationalize a multi-pronged approach to sustainable well-being (local action, corporate champions, broadening the information base, changing individual and policy perceptions, and broadening social identities to the global span needed to a design and deliver a sustainable future) and to bridge some of the remaining differences of view (subjective versus objective measures, narrow versus broad conceptions of happiness)?

Amartya Sen, as part of an inspiring address to the Rome Science Congress in January 2013, (the Congress was entirely on happiness), drew on linguistic philosophy to make a key distinction between two quite different ways of using the word 'happiness'. One is happiness as an emotion, e.g. 'are you happy now?', which elicits someone's mood. The other involves a judgmental use of the word, e.g. 'Are you happy with the baggage retrieval system at Heathrow?', which asks someone to make a cognitive evaluation of the quality of something. I made precisely the same distinction in my earlier talk, although I referenced HP Grice while he used Wittgenstein, a difference only in shades of blue, Oxford or Cambridge.

Given that Sen and I had independently come to the same distinction between these two conceptions of happiness, then how could I be strongly supportive of the expanding use of subjective measures of well-being as ways of measuring human progress, and he remain very sceptical? The answer is that the applied science of subjective well-being has only recently developed an empirical base large enough to match answers to specific subjective questions about happiness against different philosophical conceptions. And the evidence shows that people quite easily grasp the distinction between these two linguistic uses of 'happiness', and to give appropriate answers to the questions asked.

These new research findings offer an intellectual and philosophical bridge between what are sometimes seen as competing versions of happiness, with the distinction variously described as hedonic vs eudaimonic, or the accumulation of net momentary pleasures vs a life judged to be full of meaning and good purpose.

Amartya Sen and others have worried that people asked how happy they are would, through adaptation or not knowing what they might be missing, report themselves to be happy even in conditions that others would describe as miserable, thus failing to capture the extent to which they were deprived of the essential capabilities for a good life. Although there are more grounds for this worry for affective than for evaluative measures of happiness, in both cases people report themselves materially less happy in those situations where capabilities and freedoms are few.

But there is a striking difference between the conclusions based on affective measures of happiness (how happy were you yesterday?) and those based on evaluative measures of happiness (how happy are you with your life as a whole?), and the difference is exactly such as to make the latter questions a good measure of the eudaimonic qualities that both Sen and Aristotle would like to measure.

See, for example, the contrasting results of the affect and life evaluation regressions in Table 3.1 of the first *World Happiness Report* and Table 2.1 of WHR 2013. It is quite clear that the key elements of the Aristotelian good life are front and centre as determinants of life evaluations, but not of affect. Social connections are the only variables that are as strong for affect as they are for life evaluations. This is shown in chapter 2 of WHR 2013 to be because, in an Aristotelian view (I speak as his former RA), positive affect should play a strong role, above and beyond the constituents of a life of goodness, as a determinant of a highly rated life. And when positive affect is included, it is partly at the expense of the social connection variable, suggesting a mediating role for positive affect in the transmission from social connections to life evaluations.

The UNDP chapter in WHR 2013 will also be arguing that life evaluations encompass in their determinants of key elements of the Human Development Approach, and can hence enrich the information available to judge the extent to which human development is being achieved.

Once the appropriate distinctions are made between affective judgments and life evaluations, they both become more useful, and it becomes easier to deal with the previous scepticism of (emotional) happiness expressed by Amartya Sen and others. Although life evaluations have the breadth required to reflect the importance of life purpose and the other aspects of Bhutan's GNH, and of Martin Seligman's PERMA, they should be seen as supplements rather than replacements for the necessary attempts to measure and improve the basis for sustainable future lives. A good thermometer may enable a person's temperature to be measured. But without some clear understanding of disease, and of the patient's past and current circumstances, the temperature is of little value, and nothing much can be done to make things better for this or future patients.