

PUBLIC POLICY AND THE CONDITIONAL VALUE OF HAPPINESS

JAN-WILLEM VAN DER RIJT

University of Bayreuth, Germany
Jan-Willem.VanderRijt@uni-bayreuth.de

This paper examines the increasingly popular view that new insights from the science of subjective well-being (SSWB) should play a prominent role in the determination of public policy. Though there are instrumental reasons for caring about societal happiness too, these political aspirations of the SSWB appear to be mostly intrinsically motivated. As the intrinsic value of happiness is endorsed across the political–philosophical spectrum, there is some initial plausibility to the expectation that it should not be too difficult to develop intrinsically motivated policies that can count on widespread support. This paper argues, however, that intrinsically motivated policies based on SSWB findings will always be highly controversial. This is because, although happiness is widely held to be *intrinsically* valuable, it is usually not deemed *unconditionally* valuable. By exploring the policy implications of three different views of this conditionality – happiness as a fitting response to the state of the world, authenticity, and merit – it is shown that different views of the conditionality of the intrinsic value of happiness have widely diverging policy implications, which greatly undermines the political aspirations of the SSWB.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been a steady increase in our scientific understanding of happiness. The science of subjective well-being (SSWB),

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as this area of study is also known, claims to be increasingly able to tell us which psychological processes, what activities and which sociological and economic circumstances are conducive to people's experiencing positive emotions, life satisfaction or, in short, happiness (for reviews see e.g. Kahneman *et al.* 1999; Kahneman and Krueger 2006; Eid and Larsen 2008). Where, a little over a decade ago, leading figures in this discipline were merely hopeful that this new science of subjective well-being would one day deliver results that would be relevant to public policy (Kahneman *et al.* 1999: xi), it did not take them very long to become confident that they had indeed reached the point where this was in fact the case (e.g. Diener and Seligman 2004;¹ Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Diener *et al.* 2009; Bok 2010). These political aspirations of the SSWB have not been without success. The recent economic crises have left many disillusioned with the standard political focus on economic indicators such as GDP and per capita purchasing power and have created a political climate that is receptive to the suggestion that we should be more interested in how satisfied citizens are with their lives, rather than on how much they have to spend. As a result, parties from across the political spectrum have expressed a sympathetic interest in the political overtures of SWB scientists. All the signs suggest that sooner or later governments will indeed start using methods and results developed by the SSWB to guide their policies (see e.g. the famous Report by Stiglitz *et al.* (2010) ordered by the right-wing French president Sarkozy; for a left-wing enthusiast for this development see e.g. Halsema (2008)).

This development raises a number of important issues, which are becoming increasingly pressing as the political aspirations of the SSWB gain momentum. First of all, I should mention that there still are various kinds of methodological questions related to the issue of whether it is at all possible to reliably measure something as elusive as happiness.² Though I by no means wish to suggest that such concerns are unwarranted, or that the SSWB has already succeeded in finding sufficiently convincing replies to such worries, I do not wish to focus on such issues here. Hence, for the purpose of this paper, I will by and large assume that SWB scientists are indeed capable of reliably measuring what they claim to be measuring, or will be so in the not-too-distant future. Instead, I wish to focus on the question of how we are to consider this development from a political-philosophical perspective. If – either now or in the future – the SSWB

¹ There is some ambiguity in Diener and Seligman (2004) in this regard, though. On the one hand they are adamant that present SSWB findings are relevant to public policy and that they *should* influence public policy, offering various suggestions as to how they could, while simultaneously maintaining that present findings are 'not strong enough to serve as the basis of policy' (2004: 1).

² For a review of strengths and weaknesses of methods used see Pavot (2008).

does indeed give us reliable information about people's own assessment of their happiness, are these findings then relevant to the development of public policy?

In any discussion of whether SSWB findings should influence public policy, a complicating factor is that different scientists of subjective well-being who have expressed the view that the results of this new science should be heeded by policy-makers do not offer a very detailed and/or coherent explanation of the precise role they envision happiness should have in public policy. Some are radical hedonists, who would be willing to accept even a Brave New World if that would produce the greatest happiness (e.g. Layard 2005: 114) – though usually they are quick to point out that SSWB findings indicate that such a world would *not* lead to maximum happiness.³ Others are less extreme, regarding subjective happiness as only one of several important values in human life, but a very important one nonetheless (e.g. Frey and Stutzer 2007; Bok 2010). As they believe the present state of affairs is such that great progress in this area of human existence can still be made without becoming overly detrimental to these other values, they too support the political aspirations of this new science.⁴ Others explicitly evade the question of the role that happiness should play in public policy as something that is not for science to decide (Diener and Seligman 2004: 4). Nonetheless, even authors who take this last position seem to take it for granted *that* there is indeed a role for subjective happiness to play in public policy, even if it is not clear exactly what role that should be.⁵

³ Layard, for instance, claims that the main drawback of chemical methods of inducing happiness (drugs) is that they cannot deliver lasting pleasure (Layard 2005). Increased tolerance to the drug would lead to ever-increasing dosages, accompanied by ever-increasing, unpleasant side effects. (It is interesting to note, however, that though this may hold for chemical ways of inducing subjective happiness, it is not a foregone conclusion that it would also hold for happiness experiences resulting from other artificial methods, such as deep brain stimulation).

⁴ In other work, Frey does explicate more clearly what the political role of SSWB findings should be. Somewhat uncharacteristically for SWB scientists, however, he argues that they should only be used by citizens as inputs in a directly democratic process, not by governments or policymakers in order to promote happiness (Frey 2008: ch. 13, 14).

⁵ One of the more specific proposals is found in Kahneman and Krueger (2006), who claim that their U index could be used to identify specific causes of unhappiness or misery, which policymakers could then target for elimination. This suggestion, however, is mentioned almost in passing, without too much further discussion. Noting that more all-encompassing policies aimed at maximizing 'Gross National Happiness' cannot (yet?) be sustained by the current state of knowledge and limitations of measurement tools within the SSWB, they make the pragmatic point that it may be easier to convince policymakers to target specific causes of misery than to pursue more widespread happiness policies (2006: 22). A similar ambiguity is found in Diener *et al.* (2009: 10), where the authors for present purposes distance themselves from utilitarianism, yet also make the caveat that this may only be temporary: '[...] we are not proposing a form of utilitarianism. That is, we are not

In the next section I first explore the different kinds of reasons why happiness findings could be relevant to public policy. SWB scientists point to instrumental reasons why policy-makers should care about their findings, but often their deeper commitments are intrinsically motivated. In Section 3 I show that the intrinsically motivated argument in favour of SSWB-directed public policy faces significant problems, even though initially it appears it could be endorsed by a wide variety of philosophical views. I therefore conclude that blanket claims to the political relevance of SSWB findings are not tenable, and that any wide-ranging SSWB-directed policy will always be highly controversial. Lastly, however, I argue that there may nonetheless be particular policy issues that escape this controversy and discuss the example of providing readily accessible mental health care.

2. POSSIBLE GOVERNMENT REASONS FOR INTEREST IN SUBJECTIVE HAPPINESS

As stated, SSWB scientists believe that government officials should take heed of their findings because they hold these to be of relevance to public policy. This relevance will, however, not be immediately obvious to everyone, so we should first ask ourselves why this would be so. For most SWB scientists, the answer to this question lies in the fact that (in their view) happiness is essential (and according to some of the more radical SWB scientists perhaps even identical) to well-being,⁶ and well-being is something that governments should promote. Though some may regard these claims as so plausible that they approach the status of self-evident truths, both of them are in fact quite controversial: there is considerable disagreement about the precise relation between subjective happiness and well-being (and their relation to closely connected notions such as utility and preference satisfaction – see e.g. Griffin 1986; Nussbaum and Sen 1993; Sumner 1996; Kelman 2005; Barrota 2008; Cahn and Vitrano 2008; Haybron 2008; Hausman 2012)⁷ and the role that ought to be assigned to well-being within public policy is no less fiercely contested, varying from a total rejection of its political relevance (e.g. libertarians) to its

advocating the maximization of population levels of wellbeing as the primary policy goal (though future research might possibly bear this out as a reasonable one).⁷

⁶ Hence also the name they gave to their new science: science of subjective *well-being*.

⁷ In this regard it is worth mentioning that some have suggested that happiness measurements can be used as measurements of (or proxies for, resp. indicators of) utility, though this is certainly not uncontested (cf. e.g. Kahneman *et al.* 1997; Kelman 2005; Kahneman and Sugden 2005; Kahneman and Krueger 2006; Frey 2008; Diener *et al.* 2009; Benjamin *et al.* 2010; Hausman 2010). If this proves to be the case, however, then this would arguably also open up new perspectives for pursuing a Benthamite style utilitarian project, as envisioned by some of the more radical among the SWB scientists, such as Layard and – at least in some of his works – Kahneman.

being the very *raison d'être* of the state (e.g. utilitarians and welfare egalitarians) and pretty much everything in between. Clearly, not all such positions are equally amenable to the claim that happiness findings are politically relevant – libertarians, for one, will almost certainly dismiss it out of hand. It may seem that in order to ascertain the merit of the claim that happiness findings are politically relevant we would first have to take a stance in these debates; only then do we have a clear point of view from which to determine the role (if any) that happiness findings should play in the determination of public policy. This, however, would make our analysis severely limited in its scope; it would only be of interest to those who happen to agree with the positions taken. Moreover, happiness findings could, perhaps in different ways, be relevant to a wide variety of political views – certainly SWB scientists believe so, and the general nature of their claim to political relevance of their findings clearly indicates that their appeals are not exclusively addressed to adherents of a few, highly specific views on the purpose of society. Hence it is preferable to abstract as much as possible from specific views on the precise nature of the relation between happiness and well-being, and similarly to exclude as few political perspectives beforehand as is feasible. This will allow us to give the SSWB claim to political relevance its fairest possible hearing. The following analysis will therefore take no position on the exact relation between happiness and well-being, only assuming that happiness is of sufficient importance to human existence to be at least *prima facie* regarded as relevant to public policy. Though this latter assumption may still be unpalatable to some political views (like the aforementioned libertarians), it is the minimal one that is required to give the SSWB claim to political relevance a fair hearing.⁸

Assuming that happiness is at least *prima facie* relevant to public policy, we can draw a distinction between intrinsic and instrumental reasons why policy-makers should be interested in happiness findings. Instrumental reasons are the least controversial; they are also – philosophically – the least interesting. Many SWB scientists have found striking correlations, and probable causal connections (often in both directions), between happiness and, for instance, health and longevity, productivity, employment, crime, religiosity, sociability and public spiritedness, even democratic participation (see e.g. Argyle 1999; Diener and Seligman 2004; Kahneman and Krueger 2006; Frey 2008; Diener *et al.*

⁸ Moreover, the analysis provided may yet prove of interest even to those who have principled objections to the very idea that governments should involve themselves in the happiness of the citizenry, as it will show that even these relatively weak assumptions lead to problematic outcomes for the political aspirations of the SSWB. Thus, it may offer detractors of public happiness programmes new ammunition in their opposition to the present political turn towards happiness.

2009; Inglehart 2009, 2010; Pacek 2009; Bok 2010). Thus, scientists of SWB point out, even if you are one of those odd fellows who do not believe that happiness is itself something for which governments should be responsible, you can have good reason to support government happiness policies, because they will lead to increases in things you do deem politically important. If, for instance, you are a radical fan of Aristotelian-inspired, direct democracy who regards active participation in public life as the sole feature that makes human existence worthwhile, you will probably believe that a high rate of democratic participation is important and a legitimate political goal. Then, even though you may not care at all about the subjectively experienced happiness of citizens, you already have ample reason to support government happiness initiatives, for such policies would be likely to increase public participation in political life – or so SWB scientists may argue.

It must be said, however, that when scientists of SWB who deem their findings politically relevant offer these kinds of arguments, they often appear to be mostly designed to counter resistance from those whom they regard as being in the opposite camp politically. Though it is hard to generalize about the various SWB scientists who expressed political ambitions, it seems fair to say that many of them appear to subscribe to some version of the view that governments should not just be interested in subjective happiness for instrumental reasons,⁹ but should consider their findings politically relevant because happiness is deemed intrinsically valuable. Happiness is very important to most people, and it is important to them for its own sake: we want to be happy simply for the sake of being happy. With some simplification, the intrinsically motivated argument in favour of government happiness policy seems to boil down to this:

1. subjective happiness is in itself very important to human beings (i.e. intrinsically good);
2. aided by the SSWB, governments can do much to increase the amount of happiness people experience;
3. if governments can do good (i.e. create or increase intrinsic value), they should do so;
4. therefore, governments should use SSWB findings to increase the happiness of people.

The premises in this argument deserve some further discussion. I shall start with the second: some may not be convinced by the view

⁹ There may even be reasons to be quite wary of governments that are interested in happiness research for instrumental reasons only: as any successful dictator knows, as long as you manage to keep the populace fairly satisfied, there is little danger they will rise up against you.

that governments can indeed do much to increase the happiness experienced by individual people. A classical hedonistic argument against paternalistic government, for instance, holds that individual people are much better placed to determine the things that are conducive to their own happiness. They have a more detailed understanding of their own circumstances, know their own talents and abilities better and, most of all, have privileged insights into their own wants, desires and values. Thus, when it comes to promoting the happiness of its citizenry, it is best to leave them a wide degree of autonomy when it comes to the goals they decide to pursue or the means they wish to employ in order to achieve them. One of the most robust findings of the SSWB undermines this line of argument, however. In fact, as it turns out, people are actually quite bad at pursuing their own happiness. All kinds of psychological mechanisms ensure that people very often make the wrong decisions and end up distinctly less happy than they could have been. Moreover, many of these errors follow predictable patterns (see e.g. Gilbert 2006; Kahneman and Thaler 2006; Frey 2008; Haybron 2008; Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Hausman 2012). So, in fact, it is indeed quite possible that, as the SSWB develops, we shall reach a point where governments are indeed better able to predict what will make people happy than the people themselves. As I pointed out at the start of this paper, I do not wish to challenge the validity of the scientific findings of the SSWB here, so for the purposes of this paper I assume that premise 2 is true, or will be at some point in the future.

Let us therefore turn to premise 3. This premise makes the very plausible point that if governments can do good, they should do so. In itself, this point does not seem very controversial. It might be argued that the premise is a little too general, and needs some minor specification – for instance that it is necessary to build in some kind of *ceteris paribus* clause, so as to ensure that there are no side-effects with negative value that offset the increase of intrinsic value governments create by increasing happiness – but if such considerations are taken into account, I do not see any immediate reason to reject this premise. If it is indeed possible, taking all relevant constraints and side-effects into consideration, to create or increase intrinsic value, then generally this gives us reason to do so.¹⁰ I shall therefore not take significant issue with premise 3, either.

¹⁰ The kinds of side-effects that might offset any intrinsic value that is created by government SSWB-directed policies are manifold, and will depend closely on the nature of the specific policy implemented and on the view one takes on the nature of, for instance, rights, justice and equality. This merely means, however, that when we evaluate a particular government programme that increases happiness, we must take such considerations into account. It does not detract from the general point that if we can create or increase intrinsic value, this in itself gives us reason to pursue the policy that does so, and that, barring offsetting considerations, it will generally also give us sufficient reason to do so.

This leaves us with premise 1 (and the conclusion, 4). At first glance, premise 1 seems unobjectionable. It seems hard to deny that subjective happiness – whether it be further specified in terms of (life) satisfaction, positive emotions, or even, to some degree, pleasure – is indeed an important and integral part of the good life. A life wholly bereft of happiness in any of these senses is not necessarily wholly without value, but it could certainly be improved, and will not easily satisfy any plausible conception of the good life. In fact, most prominent philosophical traditions also accept this view. Happiness is deemed intrinsically important not just by classical hedonists, but also by, for instance, Aristotelians and Kantians.¹¹ However you want to put it, it seems hard to get around the position that happiness matters.

This suggests that we should also accept premise 1, and that the conclusion is most plausible too. This would mean that the idea of an intrinsically motivated happiness policy should quite easily be able to derive support from adherents of widely varying philosophical traditions.

Nonetheless, I would venture to guess that this is not the case: the mere suggestion that governments should be deemed responsible for ensuring happy lives will almost instantaneously fill many political philosophers with distrust and concerns about such crucial political values as freedom, autonomy and personal dignity. Moreover, this reaction is not just a matter of traditional dogmatic obstinacy (Kant, for instance, is famously on record as describing a government that takes its *raison d'être* to be the provision of happiness as 'the greatest despotism thinkable' (Kant 1996: 291), and some Kantians may take this as gospel): there does seem to be something wrong with the argument outlined above. It is just a bit too pat, a bit too sleek.

The main deficiency of the argument, I believe, is that premise 1 lacks an important qualification. Though it is true, at least according to most leading philosophical traditions, that happiness is intrinsically valuable and an essential part of the good life, this does not mean that happiness is also *unconditionally* valuable.¹² If the good life were just the sum of a number of independent parts, or a list of independently good things, of which happiness was one, the argument might indeed work, but (un)fortunately, any plausible vision of the good life is more complex. When it comes to the possibility that the SSWB can enrich the lives of persons at the individual level, I do not believe this conditionality

¹¹ Nussbaum, for example, includes various forms of satisfaction, enjoyment and pleasure in her list of ten central human capacities (Nussbaum 2010: 106–107); for Kant, see, for instance, his description of the *Summum Bonum* (e.g. Kant 1996: 228–231, 282), Hill (2002: 170, 196) or Johnson (2002: 319).

¹² In fact, the initial plausibility of the argument outlined seems to trade on an ambiguity in the term 'intrinsically valuable'. This ambiguity is discussed in detail in Kagan (1992: 183–185).

will cause too many problems. The SSWB will then mostly serve as a 'how to' manual, an educational tool providing people with useful information on how best to pursue happiness, if that is what they would like to do; and individual people can be left to figure out how happiness fits into their vision of the good life. When they believe promoting their own happiness is the thing to do, or when to sacrifice personal happiness for other values is a value judgement with which the SSWB need not concern itself. However, when it comes to the suggestion that governments should use happiness findings when developing policy because of the intrinsic value of happiness, then things become different. In this paper I argue that the conditional nature of the value of happiness causes significant problems for the political aspirations of the SSWB. My main conclusion is that, though the intrinsic nature of the value of happiness constitutes a view shared by most leading philosophical traditions, which gives credence to the general statement that there may be a role for governments to play in the promotion of happiness, there are probably no wide-ranging happiness policies possible that can count on support from across the political–philosophical spectrum. As leading philosophical traditions differ vehemently about the conditions that make happiness intrinsically valuable, happiness policies would have to be directed in widely divergent ways according to each of these views. This means that the blanket claim that governments should start using SSWB findings when developing policy simply because happiness is intrinsically valuable, as some SSWB scientists promote, is perhaps rhetorically powerful but is in fact far less uncontroversial than it may initially seem.

3. THE CONDITIONAL VALUE OF HAPPINESS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

A notorious issue in philosophy is the question of what exactly constitutes true happiness; predictably, views vary considerably on the answer to this question.¹³ For obvious reasons this is not a question that can be addressed in detail here. Luckily, neither is it necessary. In this paper I focus on the SSWB, and within that discipline two kinds of conceptions of happiness are especially dominant: hedonistic views on happiness, and life satisfaction conceptions of happiness. Though both views probably have radical defenders who would hold that their preferred view on happiness is unconditionally valuable, the plausibility of this view is easily undermined by the following, frequently used example.

According to Genghis Khan – so it is said – 'man's greatest happiness is to crush and kill his enemy, steal his possessions, rape his women and

¹³ For a collection of such views see Cahn and Vitano (2008).

use their weeping bodies as his bedclothes, all the while kissing their rosy breasts and lips'. The traditional interpretation of this statement specifying the nature of happiness is hedonistic, for – if he did indeed hold this view – it seems reasonable to assume that Genghis took quite some pleasure in such activities. We may just as easily interpret this quote in terms of life satisfaction, however. It is quite conceivable that Genghis not only took hedonistic pleasure in his activities, but also saw enjoying the fruits of his conquests as a highly worthwhile activity. Looking back on his life, we may well imagine him most satisfied with it, endorsing it in every way, for it was filled with the successful pursuit of those activities he valued most: subjugation, conquest, rape and pillage – what more could a man want in life?

Both in hedonistic terms and according to the life satisfaction view, Genghis counts as a happy person, and if we imagine him being questioned by a (rather brave) SWB scientist, we would expect him to score very highly on their measurements. Similarly, we might imagine that within our own societies there are also a number of individuals who hold similar views to Genghis – luckily, however, they are probably not as successful in their pursuit of happiness as Genghis was. Such wannabe-Genghises would then score very low on the happiness measurements, frustrated as they are that they do not get to do what they value doing most. Furthermore, if there were enough of such people within a given society, we would have to assume that this society would count as rather unhappy according to SWB scientists. Moreover, if we also assume that this society is powerful enough, we can easily concoct a public policy that would greatly increase the happiness within it: invade your neighbours' lands, slaughter their menfolk, carry off their possessions, and take your pleasure with their weeping women. Nonetheless, I do not believe that any SWB scientist would favour such a policy, not even if it would produce higher levels of hedonic happiness or increase reported life satisfaction to previously unseen levels. Moreover, I also assume (and hope) that the reluctance to embrace such a policy is, for most people, not based solely on the fact that the happiness of the conquering society is offset by the misery and despair of the conquered one. As standard objections against unmitigated hedonism show – and they apply equally to life satisfaction derived from similar sources – there are some things that may indeed generate pleasure (or life satisfaction), but do so in such a way that such pleasures are not to be regarded as intrinsically good (in fact, if anything, such pleasures and satisfactions are intrinsically bad); and pursuing the provision of such forms of happiness should certainly not be the object of public policy.¹⁴ There may be something to the SWB

¹⁴ Note that this familiar line of reasoning does not have to deny that such questionable forms of pleasure and satisfaction make a person *happy*. They can suffice – and for the

scientists' claim that we should look at the possibilities available to make people happier, but we certainly do not want to return to the days of bread and circuses.

The main point illustrated by this example is that happiness, whether conceived hedonistically or in terms of life satisfaction, is not necessarily unconditionally good. Or, to put the same point differently: subjective happiness as typically measured by SWB scientists is only of intrinsic value if certain additional conditions are met with regard to this happiness. We can disagree and debate over exactly what conditions have to be fulfilled in order for happiness to be of intrinsic value – some of these are discussed below – but the fact that there are such conditions is at the very least highly plausible. As will be shown in the remainder of this paper, this conditional nature of the value of subjective happiness creates problems for the political aspirations of SWB scientists on a number of levels. First of all, it creates problems because the conditions that are deemed to make subjective happiness valuable are not currently being measured by the SSWB, and, perhaps depending somewhat on the precise nature of these conditions, it is not clear if they even can be. Secondly, and for the political aspirations of the SSWB probably more damningly, whereas there is broad consensus that subjective happiness is intrinsically valuable under the right conditions, there is no such agreement on the nature of these conditions that make subjective happiness valuable; views on what counts as 'the right conditions' vary greatly. A quick glance at some of the most prominent conditions that have been proposed suffices to show the deep chasms that exist in this regard. Sumner (1996), for instance, famously requires that subjective happiness must be authentic for it to be truly valuable, whereas Nozick (1989) insists that subjective happiness must also be supported by facts that give you sufficient reason to be happy; others hold that happiness is only intrinsically valuable if it is deserved or merited. This latter view is typically held by Kantians (see e.g. Kant 1996, 1998; Guyer 2000; Hill 2002), but also by hedonists such as Feldman (1992) and may be expected to carry quite some weight among those who set great store by what is sometimes called 'folk psychology' as well.

For the sake of simplicity, and because this notion of happiness is closest to that used by the particular authors I discuss, I focus on life satisfaction conceptions of happiness in the remainder of this paper. The notion of life satisfaction is in some ways a complex one. Within the SSWB, it is typically measured by asking persons to answer questions of the kind 'on a scale from 1–5, all things considered, how satisfied are you with your life today?'. If you try to answer such a question conscientiously

purpose of this paper, that is also the line I take – with the claim that the happiness that is derived from such sources lacks intrinsic value.

you will quickly find that it consists of two broadly distinguishable elements. First of all, it asks you to judge the state of your life. This implies a substantial cognitive task: you have to ascertain the present state of your life, and you have to evaluate it normatively. At the same time, it has an affective component too: to ask how satisfied you are, is to ask how you feel about it. These two aspects of life satisfaction – the cognitive and the affective – are not entirely unrelated.¹⁵ If you judge your life favourably, you would also expect to feel good about it; if you judge it to be going poorly, you would expect to feel unhappy about it. Nonetheless, the two can also come apart, and the SSWB has shown this is no purely theoretical possibility. This raises the question which of the two aspects of life-satisfaction is the one that truly matters: cognitively endorsing your life, or feeling good about your life. The case that the cognitive aspect is of essential importance is easily made. Indeed, it is the cognitive aspect that makes life satisfaction immune to some of the classic objections to hedonic utilitarianism. Whereas classical utilitarianism could be blamed for disregarding ‘the self’ (see e.g. Rawls 1971/1999: 24, 152, 163–167, 491–492; 1982/1999: 380–386), thereby reducing human beings to passive consumers of pleasure, the cognitive aspect of life satisfaction ensures that this objection cannot be levied against life satisfaction, as life satisfaction implies the person judges her own life, and she should judge it according to those normative standards she endorses as the relevant ones to judge her life by. Thus, the notion of life satisfaction is closely linked to a person’s own values and judgements, and thereby takes her seriously as a valuer and judge.¹⁶ Does this mean that the affective aspect of life satisfaction is irrelevant? Probably not. As Nozick (see below) argues, when we think of the good life we do not just think of a life that we rationally judge to be measuring up favourably against a certain standard – even a standard we personally endorse as the right one. We also believe that the good life includes this judgement giving rise to an appropriate emotional response. To cognitively judge your life favourably, but to miss out on the happy feeling that should go with it, is indeed just that: to miss out on something, and this something matters. Thus, even though we may reasonably ponder which would be better (or less deplorable) – cognitive endorsement without the feeling of satisfaction, or the feeling of satisfaction without the cognitive endorsement – this

¹⁵ For an extensive discussion of life-satisfaction, including its cognitive and affective components, see Sumner (1996: 140–156); for a very critical view, see Haybron (2008: ch. 5).

¹⁶ Though perhaps not necessarily also as a doer or an actor, and as such it may still fail to offer sufficient guarantees of personal liberties and freedoms. Frey (2008: 166) makes a similar point in his defence of active citizenship and direct democracy. (For utilitarianism’s lack of principled commitment to freedom and basic liberties see e.g. Rawls 1971/1999, esp. 138–139, 154–155, 181–185, 502.)

	Happy	Unhappy
Conditions fulfilled	I	II
Conditions not fulfilled	III	IV

TABLE 1.

is asking about second-best possibilities.¹⁷ The truly good thing implies having both: to endorse your life as going well *and* to feel satisfied accordingly (cf. also Sumner 1996: 146).¹⁸

With these two essential aspects of happiness as life satisfaction in mind, let us now return to the conditionality of the intrinsic value of happiness and the context of public policy. Before saying more about the specific conditions imposed by different authors, I should like to establish more clearly which instances would be suitable candidates for government happiness policy. As stated, the authors to be discussed impose conditions that they believe have to be fulfilled in order for happiness to be intrinsically valuable. In any given case where a person is either happy or unhappy, these conditions can be met, or they may not be met.¹⁹ This gives us four possibilities, schematically represented in Table 1.

In situation I, the person in question is happy, and the conditions that make this happiness valuable are fulfilled. Obviously, this is a blissful situation. In such a situation, there seems to be little need for government happiness policy: all is as it should be. More interesting are cases II, III and IV. As the interpretation of these cases differs according to the different

¹⁷ Personally, I would be inclined to say that the former is to be preferred among these two possibilities, but readers with less rationalist inclinations may disagree.

¹⁸ It should also be mentioned that the relation of life satisfaction to a person's well-being is interpreted differently by different authors. Whereas some see life satisfaction as a (subjective) overall aggregator of all aspects of a person's life, others regard being satisfied with your life as only one aspect of well-being (especially if you emphasize the affective component of life satisfaction). This distinction is highly relevant to the aforementioned debate on the precise relation between happiness and well-being, as it is to the question of the degree to which happiness measurements can be used as reliable measures of well-being or personal utility – of special interest in this regard is the fact that life-satisfaction (particularly when interpreted as an overall aggregator), like preference satisfaction, need not be purely a matter of self-interested considerations and can be greatly influenced by context (cf. e.g. Haybron 2008, ch. 5; Hausman 2012, Part II). This distinction is of less importance here, however, because in either case (whether being satisfied with your life is taken to be only one aspect of well-being, or whether it is taken as a subjective overall aggregator) it may, under the right conditions, be regarded as being of intrinsic value.

¹⁹ For simplicity's sake, and because it is not really relevant to the structure of the argument, I generally disregard the possibility that both happiness and the fulfilment of the conditions that make happiness intrinsically valuable, may be matters of degree.

views on what makes happiness intrinsically valuable, I discuss them in order.

Nozick's happiness as a fitting response

In his famous paper on happiness (Nozick 1989), Robert Nozick readily acknowledges the importance of happiness, but then quickly turns to a discussion of various facts of life that show, first, that happiness is not the only thing that matters, and, second, that there may be things that undermine the value of any happiness that a person does experience. Happiness that is based on deliberate deception forms a clear example (1989: 105–106).²⁰ Ultimately, he comes to the conclusion that happiness is only really worthwhile if it is based on facts about ourselves and our lives that give us reason to be happy: '[w]hat we want, in short, is a life and a self that happiness is a fitting response to – and then to give it that response' (1989: 117).²¹

Though Nozick is not too explicit on this, I take it that for many experiences of happiness which are not based on facts that give a person reason to be happy, they are not just less (intrinsically) valuable than they would be if the facts would also give reason for this happiness, but they become completely without intrinsic value – though perhaps this may vary somewhat depending on the precise nature of the value undermining factor. I also assume that when Nozick speaks of 'a fitting response', this fittingness is not just a wholly subjective matter, and has at least in some ways an objective or at least trans-subjective aspect to it (this distinguishes Nozick's view from, for instance, Sumner's (see below)).²²

With this in mind we can interpret the different cases II, III and IV in Table 1. Let us look first at cases of type IV. In these cases, people are unhappy, and they are right to be so: the conditions of their lives are such that they have every reason to be unhappy. In such a situation, it

²⁰ 'Few of us think that only a person's experiences matter. We would not wish for our children a life of great satisfactions that all depend upon deceptions they would never detect: although they take pride in their artistic accomplishments, the critics and their friends too are just pretending to admire their work yet snicker behind their backs; the apparently faithful mate carries on secret love affairs; their apparently loving children secretly despise them; and so on. [...] That person is living in a dream world, taking pleasure in things that aren't so. What he wants though, is not merely to take pleasure in them; he wants *them to be so*. He values their being that way, and he takes pleasure in them because he thinks they *are* that way. He doesn't take pleasure merely in *thinking* they are' (Nozick 1989: 105–106).

²¹ The notion that appropriateness or fittingness of response is crucial to intrinsic value can also be found in the work of other philosophers, e.g. Wolf (1997) and Raz (2004).

²² Moreover, it should also be noted that there probably are certain kinds of happiness and satisfaction that are not just bereft of intrinsic value, but that are of intrinsic disvalue. For more on this possibility see the discussion of merited happiness below.

seems that a case for intervention can readily be made: if the government can improve the circumstances of citizens in situation IV, and we assume that the citizens' response to these changes will be appropriate (that is, we move from IV to I, not to II), it would create intrinsic value, which would be a good thing. What is important to note in these cases, however, is that a government happiness policy would *not* be directly targeted at making people feel more happy, but on changing their situation in such a way that they have reason to be happy. In effect, the way SSWB findings would be relevant to government policy in these cases is as a diagnostic tool. Low happiness levels indicate that there is something amiss with the state of people's lives, and this should spur governments to find out what is wrong, and what can be done about it. High levels of societal happiness, on the other hand, would indicate that all is well, and that the government should primarily focus on continuing to do whatever it is doing. That is, of course, assuming that type IV situations can be successfully distinguished from type II, and type I situations from type III, which is probably not an easy task.

If type III situations occur frequently, then they certainly cause a problem for the use of societal happiness measurements as a diagnostic tool: high societal happiness levels caused by type III cases would indicate that all is well, but in fact it is not. Thus, using SSWB measurements of societal happiness as a diagnostic tool would require us to develop means to distinguish between type III and type I cases. The most obvious way to do so would be to try to measure the conditions of people's lives directly, and then see if happiness levels track these conditions. If this can be done successfully, however, it does raise an important question with regard to the SWB scientists' claim to political relevance. For though such an approach would allow us to distinguish case III from case I (and II from IV), and thus 'get things right', it raises the question of why we would be interested in happiness findings at all. If we can measure the conditions of people's lives directly, we would not need the indirect information that SSWB methods would provide us. As a diagnostic tool, SSWB measurements would then be obsolete.²³

Correctly identified type III cases could also pose an interesting dilemma from a political-philosophical perspective, however. This dilemma occurs when we have individuals in type III cases, whose lot we – for whatever reason – cannot improve. Such people are content with their lives, but ought not be: the appropriate response to the conditions of

²³ This criticism only holds if type II and III cases are indeed common. If it can be shown or argued that such cases were rare, then, for statistical reasons, the diagnostic use of SSWB measurements for policy purposes would remain viable even without distinguishing these cases on an individual level. I see no *prima facie* reason to assume this to be the case, however.

their lives would, by definition, be unhappiness.²⁴ But, if it is really not possible to improve the conditions of their lives, would we really want to move them to situation IV by making them aware how lousy and hopeless their situation really is? To do so seems incredibly cold-hearted. On the other hand, if we do believe that III is better than IV, it seems that a person in situation IV whom we cannot help move to I, would also be better off in III. Deliberately moving a person from IV to III does not appear to be correct either, though. It is one thing to make a person realise it is impossible to improve his or her lot and that they therefore would do better to accept it; it is quite another to tell them they should also be happy about it. And if it is callous to do this overtly, it is even worse to do it surreptitiously.²⁵

In type II cases, too, we have the problem that they may disrupt the possibility to use SSWB measurements as a diagnostic tool. More importantly, however, it would be very relevant to identify type II situations, even if that would call for the separate measurement of life conditions, for in type II cases, a person whose life conditions warrant happiness is not experiencing this happiness. Thus, if we can allow him to experience an appropriate response to his life conditions (happiness), then we would thereby generate intrinsic value. These cases warrant our questioning what would cause a person who has every reason to be happy to fail to respond appropriately. Roughly, this attitudinal deficiency can come in two types, connected to the two aspects of life-satisfaction described earlier: cognitive and emotional/affective. If the deficiency is cognitive, this can again be due to two causes: she may be unaware of the circumstances of her life, and therefore rate it as less satisfactory than she ought to; or she has an accurate understanding of the state of her life, but suffers from a judgemental deficiency of some kind, which prevents her from making the appropriate value judgement. In the first case, it would generally seem that the most obvious remedy would be the provision of the right kind of information.²⁶ In the second case, the appropriate solution is less clear-cut: to license governments to directly target the

²⁴ An example of such a case would be the habitually exhausted, yet nonetheless content coolie, described by Sen (1987: 45–46); cf. also Elster's (1983) analysis of satisfaction that is achieved by adaptation.

²⁵ The fact that it is unclear whether type III is to be preferred over type IV or vice versa is probably because there are two possibly incommensurate values at issue here. In terms of well-being, type III is arguably preferable to type IV, while in terms of dignity and personal honesty, type IV would seem to be preferable to type III.

²⁶ This only holds generally: in particular cases there may be overriding reasons that make it inappropriate or otherwise undesirable for governments to provide such information. Privacy considerations form a particularly clear example of such overriding factors. Even if person B derives great happiness from his mistaken belief that his spouse A is faithful, which in fact she is not, it does not seem prudent to have governments gather and disseminate such information.

judgemental powers of individuals is scarcely similar to allowing them to engage in indoctrination. Nonetheless, it may be that certain non-coercive educational provisions might be acceptable ways to tackle problems of these kinds.²⁷ When it comes to affective deficiencies, the issues connected to possible government intervention is similar to that of a judgmental cognitive deficiency. Here, a person recognizes that she has all the reasons to be happy, but nonetheless fails to feel happy. If this is a persistent condition, it seems that such a person could benefit from psychological therapy or psychiatric medication. A government happiness programme could then take the form of ensuring that such help is readily accessible (cf. e.g. Diener and Seligman 2004; Layard 2005; Diener *et al.* 2009; Bok 2010).²⁸

Sumnerian authentic happiness

According to Sumner (1996), we should regard happiness as intrinsically valuable if and only if it is authentic. In some ways Sumner's position can be seen as a reaction to Nozick's reference to an objective standard that would make happiness valuable, which he regards as objectionable. Of course, to claim that it is authenticity that makes happiness intrinsically valuable raises the question of what exactly it means for happiness to be authentic. In Sumner's view, authenticity requires two things. First, the happiness a person experiences must not be based on a misconception of the circumstances and state of her life. Like Nozick, Sumner generally does not believe that the happiness people experience only due to deliberate deception, for instance, is to be regarded as intrinsically valuable. There is an important difference between Nozick's view and Sumner's in the way they regard such misinformation as undermining the intrinsic value of happiness, however. For Nozick, such misinformation would void the value of happiness because it means that the happiness experienced that is based on this misinformation is in fact not supported by the state of the world; the person is happy because of something she believes to be the case, but which in fact is not the case: the happiness experienced has no connection to reality and this connection to reality is essential, according to Nozick. Such a person may believe she has reason

²⁷ A number of SWB scientists mention education, especially in various skills, as one of the ways to increase happiness levels – albeit often in a different context than that of judgement (see e.g. Argyle 1999; Diener and Seligman 2004; Layard 2005; Bok 2010).

²⁸ I take it for granted that governments must not be allowed to force or even pressure people who have this problem to undergo such treatment. Even if it were the case that such compulsory government treatment programmes would succeed in creating intrinsically valuable happiness, it is a virtual certainty that this increase in value will be more than offset by the violation of the autonomy of citizens this entails. Forcing people to be free is already a most dubious practice; forcing them to be happy would be even worse.

to be happy, but in fact she does not, and hence the state of the world is not such that happiness would be a fitting response to it. Sumner believes this is too austere a view. Wary as he is of violating the subjectivity he regards as essential to happiness and well-being, Sumner regards as objectionable an appeal to objective reasons generated by the state of the world, which is implicit in Nozick's notion of fittingness. Instead, he believes we should focus on the importance the person concerned would herself attach to the deception (Sumner 1996: 160–161). If she would not consider it important that the happiness is based on make-believe, then Sumner sees no reason to regard the deception as a factor that undermines the intrinsic value of that happiness. If she would care, however, then it does diminish the value of the happiness experienced. Whereas Nozick connects the intrinsic value of happiness to objective reality, Sumner connects it primarily to the subjective valuations of the individual concerned. Misinformation is thus only a value-negating force if it affects these valuations.

What Sumner regards as essential if happiness is to be intrinsically valuable is that it is truly 'owned' by the subject who experiences it; the happiness of the subject must be genuinely hers. It must be based on the values that she identifies herself with/by, and she must have come to embrace these values autonomously.²⁹ This second requirement ensures that we do not award intrinsic value to happiness that is, for instance, the result of deliberate brainwashing (Brave New World scenarios, for example, would thus not constitute worlds that are full of intrinsic value), but would allow for happiness that could be considered frivolous or inappropriate, based on some objective standard, if the person concerned does not embrace this objective standard. The autonomy requirement is severely problematic from a practical point of view, however, for as Sumner himself notes (1996: 166–171), it is far from clear exactly which endorsements are to be considered autonomous, and which not. As Sumner himself deliberately avoids answering this question, we too shall leave it open here, and see what conclusions we can draw for the possibility of a SSWB-findings-based public happiness policy without taking too detailed a stance on the precise nature of autonomy.

Based on the view that happiness must be authentic for it to have intrinsic value, we can interpret the different possibilities in Table 1 as follows. In situation I, a person is authentically happy, and all is as it should be. In II, the authenticity requirements are met, and this leads the person be unhappy about her life. In III, the person is inauthentically

²⁹ This also means that Sumner generally accepts the view that sadistic happiness can have intrinsic value (1996: 199). He does not argue, however, that governments should seek to provide such a kind of happiness, and the possibility of such misanthropic happiness may well be one of the underlying reasons for his reticence in advocating direct happiness policies (1996: 222–223).

happy, while in IV she is unhappy, and the authenticity requirements are not met: she is inauthentically unhappy.

In situation II, a person is authentically unhappy. That is, she judges her life situation correctly (no relevant misinformation or delusions), and the negative judgement is based on values that are truly her own. Thus, there is no reason to question the validity of her judgement that her life is not satisfactory. In such a case, the answer to the question of what a government should do if it seeks to create intrinsic value by raising authentic happiness levels seems fairly straightforward: it should provide those things that would make this person authentically endorse the condition of her life. Whatever it is she believes is missing, then seek to provide that. Things are not as straightforward as that, however. First of all, as noted, a person may require things to be authentically happy that the government has good reasons for not providing, for authenticity does not rule out nastiness and other dubious character traits (there is no reason to assume, for example, that Genghis's happiness was not authentic). Moreover, some things that have a great impact on a person's happiness would lose much of their appeal if they were to be directly provided by a government (sex, love and other aspects of genuine interpersonal relationships may be examples).³⁰ Third, as the SSWB has repeatedly shown, people are notoriously bad at predicting what will make them happy and satisfied. Thus, it may well be that a person who is authentically unhappy is correct in her judgements that her present condition does not meet the standards she regards as essential for a satisfactory life, but would still be unhappy if her presently unfulfilled wishes and desires were to be fulfilled. As some SSWB research suggests, people may well end up much happier if they are not provided with what they believe will make them happy, but rather if they are provided with what the SSWB predicts will make them happy. It would seem, however, that there is an inherent tension between any such happiness and the autonomy requirement which is essential for authenticity.³¹ Thus, depending on what it is that would make a person authentically happy, it may be impossible or undesirable for governments to provide it, and there may even be cases where authentic happiness is not possible because the person concerned is so constituted that any happiness they can be made to experience would not count as authentic.³²

³⁰ On the impact of such factors on happiness see e.g. Argyle (1999), Diener and Seligman (2004), Layard (2005), Bok (2010).

³¹ In fact, it is possible to interpret certain SSWB findings as indicating that authentic happiness would be something that is extremely rare (if this is indeed the case will, of course, depend on how stringent your notion of autonomy is).

³² Another possibility that could, in some cases, enable the government to increase the happiness of authentically unhappy persons would be to convince them to embrace

None of this of course is to deny that for those authentically unhappy persons who do not have such problematic requirements, governments may well be able to develop policies that do generate authentic happiness and thereby create intrinsic value. What such policies would look like is hard to determine in general terms. Because of the subjectivity central to Sumner's claim, it would seem that this would have to be determined almost on a case-by-case basis. Practically, that would certainly create problems, and ways of developing policy-relevant rules of thumb may have to be developed;³³ from a theoretical point of view, though, there would seem to be little objectionable about governments seeking to enable people to live lives that connect better to their own autonomously developed standards (cf. 1996: 220).³⁴

Type III and IV situations concern cases where the authenticity requirement is not fulfilled. This can be either due to people's lack of relevant information about the true conditions of their lives, or because of a deficiency in their autonomy. On inauthenticity that is purely based on an informational deficit I shall not dwell here, since these cases have already been discussed in the section on Nozick. As was the case there, there seems to be little against the view that, were a government able to remedy such informational deficits, it could be permitted to do so – provided there are no overriding considerations that make this information privileged. For that reason I focus here on inauthenticity that is the result of deficiencies in the autonomy condition.

Due to Sumner's emphasis on the importance of the subject – a subject's happiness is only intrinsically valuable if it is genuinely hers – deficiencies in autonomy cause significant problems. The reason for this is that when autonomy is absent, as Sumner puts it, '*we cannot know wherein people's well-being consists*' (1996: 219).³⁵ In an important way, the

different standards. Though this seems highly dubious as a government practice and not easily reconciled with the autonomy requirement implicit in authenticity, it is noteworthy that several SWB scientists, in a variety of contexts, have emphasized the detrimental effect of excessively high expectations (see e.g. Diener and Suh 1999; Diener and Seligman 2004; Bok 2010; Inglehart 2010).

³³ A policy based on teaching people relevant skills, rather than seeking to provide them specific goods or services, may be an appealing way to attempt to deal with this subjectivity. On the other hand, it must also be noted that the range of skills people can acquire is limited, and that skills alone often will not be sufficient. Indeed, the possession of skills acquired only after difficulty, without opportunities to put them to good use, will be greatly frustrating. In some ways, such a skill-focused approach will show similarities to the well-known capability approach.

³⁴ Again, this holds only *ceteris paribus*. If providing these means to authentic happiness leads to violations of other politically relevant values, such as dignity or justice, it may be that such concerns should take precedence.

³⁵ In Sumner's view, a person's well-being is identical to her authentic happiness, and well-being he regards as the only thing that ultimately matters (i.e. has intrinsic value).

subject is prior to her well-being in Sumner's account. Without autonomy, it is impossible for a person to make anything truly her own, which also makes any happiness she experiences valueless. The other side of this coin, however, is that any unhappiness she experiences would also have to be regarded as equally valueless, since any misery she experiences is equally not truly hers. Thus, cases III and IV are to be regarded equally in terms of intrinsic value, namely zero.³⁶ In terms of public policies directed by SSWB findings, cases III and IV face the same problem: because of the priority of the subject over her happiness, the SSWB findings are not directly relevant. In order that any intrinsic value be created, it would first be necessary to address the deficiencies in the person's autonomy, because only after that is it possible to determine what her authentic happiness would consist of. On how to remedy these kinds of shortcomings – which, for obvious reasons is a most tenuous issue for political policy anyway – the SSWB has very little relevant information to contribute, as it is not its subject matter. Thus, type III and IV cases would have to be changed to type I and II cases before findings of the SSWB could even become relevant. Only in type II cases – and because, as noted above, much happiness generated by government interventions based on SSWB findings would be of type III rather than of type I, only in a highly specific subset of type II cases – would there then be a possible relevance for SSWB findings in the direction of public policy.

Merited happiness

Where Sumner seeks the conditionality of the intrinsic value of happiness primarily within the subject, Nozick places it in the state of the world. These are not the only possibilities, however, and possibly not even the most commonly held views on the nature of the conditionality of the intrinsic value of happiness. A third view links this conditionality to merit or desert. It comes in two variants. Both of these hold that happiness is only of intrinsic value if it is merited or deserved, but they differ on the nature of undeserved/unmerited happiness. One view, which we can call the more moderate view, simply holds that undeserved happiness is *without* intrinsic value, whereas the more puritan version – particularly prominent among retributivists – regards undeserved happiness as having intrinsic *disvalue*. From the point of view of public policy based on happiness findings, the merit-based view has some

³⁶ Not everyone regards this implication as acceptable. Haybron, for instance, believes it is better to be inauthentically happy than inauthentically unhappy, if only because it feels more pleasant (Haybron 2008: 189). It is not a forgone conclusion, however, that in terms of *intrinsic* value, such a pleasant feeling tone is to be regarded as relevant. As the ancient stoics have already argued, from the fact that something is preferable to something else one cannot deduce that it is also more valuable.

obvious drawbacks – not the least of which is the need for governments to take a position on the nature of merit and desert, and then to measure and monitor the desert of citizens.³⁷ It is also quite unlikely that many SWB scientists have such a perspective in mind when they push for political relevance of their findings, as they tend to see their research as fundamentally democratic in nature precisely because it avoids taking a normative stance by focusing on subjective experiences and judgements.³⁸ Nonetheless, the merit-based view needs to be discussed because it is one that is probably widely held, and may therefore be expected to play a significant role in the initial plausibility of the intrinsically based argument on the political relevance of SSWB findings outlined in Section 2. The merit- or desert-based view³⁹ is popular among, for instance, Kantians (who are always highly suspicious of any suggestion that governments should be concerned with happiness findings), but also has supporters among hedonists (see e.g. Feldman 1992). It shows close affinity with the views of authors who propound a desert-based notion of justice with happiness as its currency (cf. e.g. Pojman 2001), and can likely also count on considerable support among the populace at large: the view that there is something intrinsically good about the virtuous being happy, which is absent in the happiness of evildoers, is one that we may reasonably assume has widespread intuitive appeal.⁴⁰ It is therefore useful to sketch what a merit-based, SSWB-findings-directed public happiness policy would look like. If such a policy appears unattractive, as it may well do, then this is a significant point because, even though few SWB scientists endorse this view themselves, it would greatly diminish the likelihood that we can develop public happiness policies that can count on widespread, intrinsically motivated support.

So let us now turn to the way Table 1 would be interpreted if we take merit as the condition that makes happiness valuable. Again, in case I, all is well, and there is no need for a government happiness policy. In case II there is a clear case for government to step in: a person who fully

³⁷ This will put significant pressure on the *ceteris paribus* clause as discussed in connection with premise 3.

³⁸ It should be noted that, though perhaps to a lesser degree, this tension also exists if we adopt a position like Nozick's, which requires governments to take a position on which circumstances warrant the response happiness, and which do not.

³⁹ For the purpose of this paper I make no distinction between merit and desert, and will treat them as synonyms.

⁴⁰ This view is not often explicitly expressed by Aristotelians, but we may assume that they too will have considerable sympathy towards it. The reason Aristotelians do not often explicitly endorse this view is that they tend to *equate* happiness with virtuous activity, which would make the claim that the intrinsic value of happiness is conditional on merit or desert rather redundant. When we define happiness in terms of pleasure or (life-) satisfaction, however, the view that Aristotelians would consider it intrinsically valuable only if it is suitably embedded in virtuous activity seems very plausible.

deserves to be happy is not. If the government – aided by SSWB-findings and without intruding on the freedom and autonomy of the citizen – could enhance her happiness, it would thereby create intrinsic value. There does not seem any immediate reason why it should not then do so.

A merit-based happiness policy becomes more problematic, however, when it comes to cases where the person does not merit happiness: cases III (happy, but no merit) and IV (unhappy, no merit). Here we need to distinguish between two ways in which happiness can be unmerited. One case is where a person has done nothing to merit happiness, but also has not done anything to deserve being unhappy. If such a person were to turn out to be unhappy, it seems a similar line of reasoning could be used as in case II to legitimize raising her happiness levels in accordance with her merit (in this case the zero level). If such a person happens to be happy, however, we face a predicament. Some would perhaps be inclined to want to reduce this person's happiness, so that her happiness comes into balance with her merit. This would seem to be rather misanthropic, however. A more moderate view would hold that though this undeserved happiness is without (intrinsic) value, it does not have any negative worth, either: government does not have any reason to raise this person's happiness, but nor need it seek to reduce it. When it comes to people who have done nothing bad, the more moderate view seems to be the most appealing.⁴¹

Suppose, however, we are dealing with a person who has not just failed to do anything meritorious – and therefore does not deserve any happiness – but with someone who has engaged in distinctly immoral and/or unworthy activities: someone who, as far as merit is concerned, merits unhappiness. What are we to make of these cases? Certainly – though this is probably not a very popular view among the more forgiveness minded – a case can be made that any happiness such degenerate persons experience is not just without intrinsic value, but is actually of intrinsic disvalue, giving credence to the more puritanical position. If you do hold such a view, then III is a situation that governments should probably seek to rectify, and move any people who are in situation III to IV. Such a view, which is especially popular amongst certain kinds of retributivists, holds that there is something intrinsically good about the suffering of the wicked. In such cases, governments could use SSWB findings to reduce the well-being of those who deserve to be miserable. This is probably not how most SWB scientists advocating the use of their findings for public policy would want their findings to be used. This underlines the problem with the underspecification of their claims to political relevance, however: without specifying how these

⁴¹ Similar reasoning applies to a person whose merit is only moderately deserving but is happy to a degree that is far in excess of his desert.

findings are to be used, or what kind of view of the value of happiness underlies their appeals to the political relevance of their findings, these, in some ways more negative, kinds of usages cannot be excluded out of hand.⁴²

A particularly noteworthy implication of the merit-based approach is that it is not just type I cases that are considered 'good', but (at least certain) type IV cases as well. If those who deserve to be unhappy are unhappy then this is either to be considered as intrinsically good itself, or even if it is not, it is still a case that does not call for government happiness intervention.⁴³ Possible usages for SSWB-directed policies would thus seem to be limited to type II and type III cases, where it must also be remarked that in type III cases, SSWB findings would not be used to increase happiness, but to diminish it.

4. CONCLUSION

I started this paper with a discussion of the claim made by SWB scientists that governments should use the findings of this new science when designing public policy. Though SWB scientists who push for government use of their findings are often quite vague when it comes to the precise role they envision happiness as playing within public policy, it seems safe to say that many of them regard happiness-oriented policies as warranted not just for instrumental reasons, but (also) because they regard happiness as intrinsically valuable. This claim to political relevance has some initial plausibility, because most philosophical traditions share the view that happiness has intrinsic value. I have argued, however, that though the view that happiness is intrinsically valuable is widely shared, most leading philosophical traditions simultaneously hold that this intrinsic value is not unconditional. Each of the three approaches to the conditionality of the intrinsic value of happiness I have discussed show that SSWB findings would only be relevant in very specific cases.

If we take a Nozickian view of the conditional nature of the value of happiness, SSWB findings would be primarily useful as a diagnostic tool, used to inform governments when the conditions of life in society

⁴² If you do hold the view that there is intrinsic value in the suffering of the wicked, an interesting tension can arise between the intrinsic and instrumental value of happiness: we may have instrumental reasons to keep a person happy who for intrinsic reasons should be made unhappy.

⁴³ In principle it could perhaps be argued that for such type IV cases a government policy should focus on making the person more meritorious, which would in turn give it license to create intrinsic value by making this more meritorious person happy. Such re-education policies also have obvious drawbacks, however, and are not easily reconciled with crucial values such as individual autonomy and respect for persons.

are amiss, and should be addressed. Only when we are dealing with unfounded unhappiness would there be a case for policies that directly seek to increase happiness itself, and even then only under notable constraints. A Sumnerian view makes SSWB-influenced policy that directly targets happiness even more tricky. In cases where autonomy is absent, happiness policies could not be targeted, as without autonomy there cannot be authenticity. Only when people are authentically unhappy would a direct happiness policy be called for, but even then there may be limiting factors. There is an inherent tension between authenticity and government-induced happiness, and even when this is not the case, the subjectivity of the Sumnerian account can make policy development very difficult. From the viewpoint of intrinsically motivated happiness policies, the merit-based approach has clear drawbacks too, especially because it would require the state to start adjudicating and monitoring merit. If we abstract from that problem – admittedly, this would be a rather significant abstraction – it is possible to derive relatively clear results as to when targeting happiness would be appropriate, though. The most eye-catching result of this view, however, is that happiness policies are not uniquely focused on increasing happiness, but that it also values low happiness levels in cases where merit and desert are absent. They may even lead to cases where governments would use SSWB findings to *reduce* the happiness of certain persons in the most efficient way – a use of SSWB findings many a SWB scientist would probably not approve of.

In some ways, this paper's main message is therefore critical of the political aspirations of the SSWB, and equally wary of the political developments that may stem from them. I have argued that blanket claims to political relevance of SSWB findings are unfounded, and that specific proposals can only be maintained within highly specific – and contested – political-philosophical outlooks on the value of happiness. Thus, any particular happiness policy proposal aimed at the intrinsic value of happiness is likely to be highly controversial, as it must rely on a specific, more broadly encompassing political-philosophical view for its justification. Furthermore, both the merit-based view and the view that happiness is only intrinsically valuable if it is appropriate given the conditions of one's life, are problematic if one holds to the ideal of a neutral liberal state. Indeed, SWB scientists tend to see their focus on subjective happiness as inherently democratic: they make no judgements on what should make people happy, they only look at what does make them happy. Though this may be a suitable perspective from a scientific point of view, it is (or should be) a clear liability when it comes to their political aspirations. When one disregards the fact that only certain experiences of happiness are of intrinsic value, pursuing happiness as a government goal would be democratic only in the most plebeian sense of

the word, and we would revert to a society that differs from one of bread and circuses only in terms of the sophistication of the tools used to keep the populace satisfied.

The idea that governments should use SSWB findings to increase the happiness of people for intrinsic reasons is therefore much more controversial than might initially appear. Nonetheless, there may still be specific issues where government interventions aimed at increasing happiness could be acceptable to all the perspectives discussed here. An example is the field of mental health – the importance of which is also widely emphasized by SWB scientists (see e.g. Diener and Seligman 2004; Layard 2005; Kahneman and Krueger 2006; Bok 2010). To Nozickians, mental health care should be important both because it can contribute to developing 'li[ves] and sel[ves] that happiness is a fitting response to'⁴⁴ and because it may help people whose lives do warrant happiness to give it that response, should they be unable to do so due to affective shortcomings. This latter point can also be embraced by Sumnerians, who may furthermore be expected to value mental health care insofar as it helps those who lack autonomy to develop it. For the merit-based approach, the case for mental health care is a little more complicated. Nonetheless, I believe such a case can be built. First of all, we should note that – perhaps with a few highly specific exceptions⁴⁵ – it is hard to conceive that poor mental health is something one can merit or deserve. If we do not merit poor mental health, then it is plausible that we shall generally also not merit the misery that poor mental health brings – and as the SSWB shows us, this suffering tends to be considerable.⁴⁶ Thus, those who hold to the merit-focused view also have reason to support the initiatives of SWB scientists who emphasize the importance of readily accessible mental health care, as it contributes to the elimination or alleviation of undeserved misery.

That providing adequate mental health care can count on such widespread support from all three views on the conditionality of the intrinsic value of happiness is especially noteworthy because, judging by present standards and developments, this is an issue the importance of which policy-makers in many countries tend to severely underestimate.

⁴⁴ If you suffer from a severe mental illness, this would give you reason to be unhappy about your life.

⁴⁵ As examples of such an exception one might think of a justly sentenced prisoner whose depression is the direct result of his incarceration, or people who are themselves directly responsible for their poor mental health (e.g. long-term drug abusers).

⁴⁶ Such suffering would only be acceptable from the merit-based perspective if it happens to offset unmerited happiness that the person in question derives from other sources. That, however, will generally be purely coincidental.

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