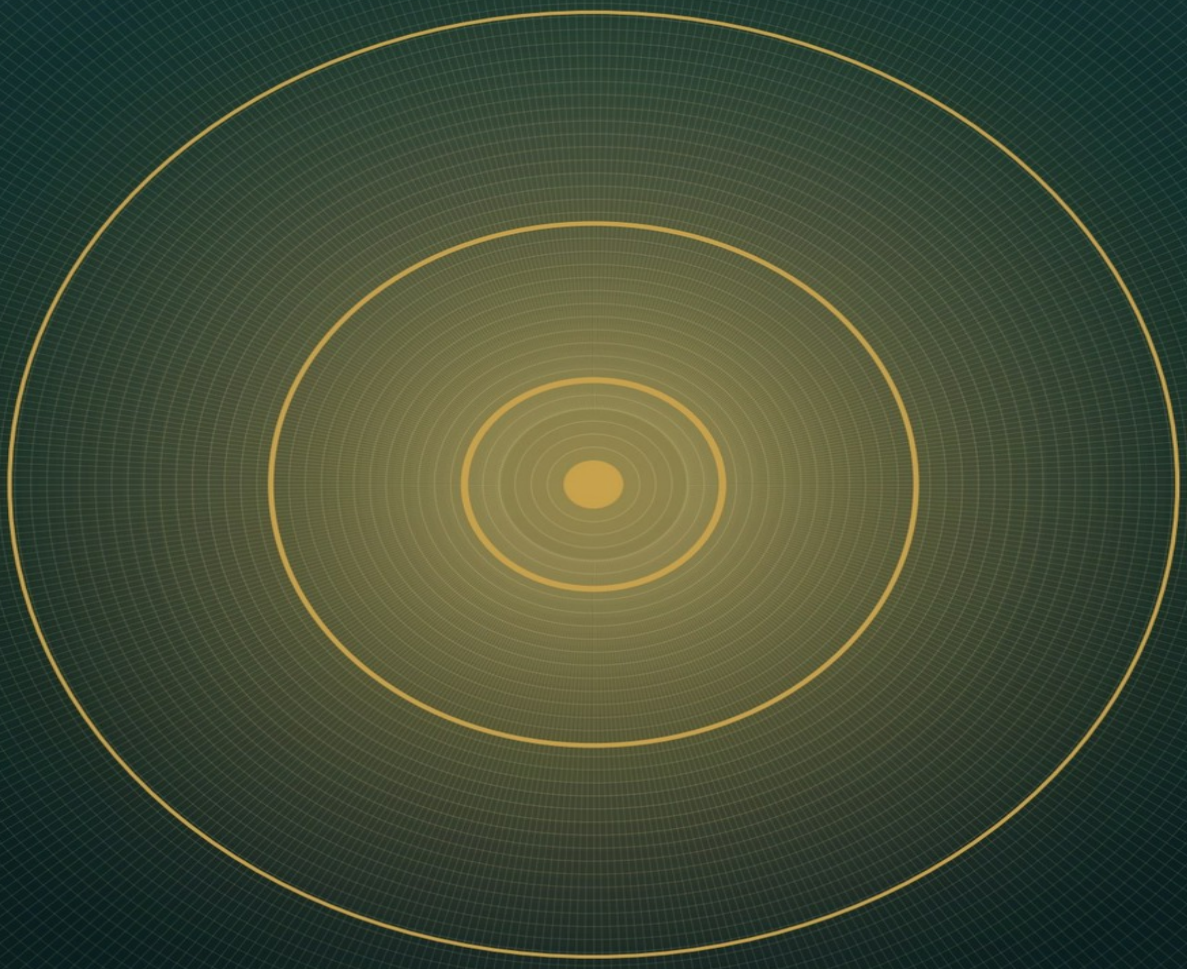
THE PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE OF

Well-Being

Twenty-Five Centuries of Wisdom, One Century of Evidence, and the Art of a Life Well Lived

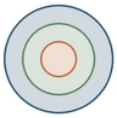


DR. QUANTUM & MATT A.

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Well-Being

Twenty-Five Centuries of Wisdom, One Century of Evidence, and the Art of a Life Well Lived



DR. QUANTUM & MATT A.

FIRST EDITION · 2026

The Philosophy and Science of Well-Being: Twenty-Five Centuries of Wisdom, One Century of Evidence, and the Art of a Life Well Lived

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First edition, 2026.

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Figures marked *illustrative* are schematic drawings of published patterns, not plots of original data. Translations of ancient texts are the author's own renderings unless stated. Sources for every study discussed appear in the Notes & Sources.

All artwork in this edition — the cover, the six part paintings, the labyrinth, the ensō, the wheel and the figures — was generated specifically for this book.

The print edition is set in EB Garamond, with display lines in Cormorant Garamond.

For everyone who has ever lain awake
wondering whether they are living well —
and for the people who made the question bearable.

One swallow does not make a spring, nor does one fine day; and so one day, or a short time, does not make a person blessed and happy.

ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, I.7

happiness

ENGLISH · FROM HAP, CHANCE (AS IN HAPPEN, PERHAPS)

Glück

GERMAN · LUCK AND HAPPINESS IN ONE WORD

geluk

DUTCH · LUCK AND HAPPINESS IN ONE WORD

εὐδαιμονία

GREEK · HAVING A GOOD DAIMON, A FAVOURABLE SPIRIT

bonheur

FRENCH · BON HEUR, A GOOD OMEN

felicità

ITALIAN · FROM LATIN FELIX, FRUITFUL, LUCKY

счастье

RUSSIAN · A GOOD SHARE, ONE'S LUCKY PORTION

幸せ　shiawase

JAPANESE · ONCE: HOW THINGS HAPPEN TO FALL TOGETHER

幸福　xìngfú

MANDARIN · GOOD FORTUNE AND BLESSING

In most languages, the word for happiness began as a word for luck.

Contents

How to Read This Book

Prologue: The Crisis of a Happy Machine

PART ONE: THE ANCIENT QUESTION

1. Hap: Luck, Fortune and the Good Daimon
2. Aristotle's Wager
3. The Garden and the Porch
4. Paths from the East
5. Pleasure, Duty and the Abyss

Interlude I: A Plot in the Garden

PART TWO: THE MEASURE OF A LIFE

6. Can Happiness Be Measured?
7. The Two Selves
8. The Treadmill and the Thermostat
9. The Brain in Pursuit of Joy

Interlude II: The Weight of Tomatoes

PART THREE: THE INGREDIENTS OF A GOOD LIFE

10. Other People
11. What Money Can Buy
12. The Wise Body
13. Absorbed: Work, Play and Flow
14. The Search for Meaning
15. Goodness and Gladness

Interlude III: The First Frost

PART FOUR: THE SHADOW AND THE PARADOX

16. The Uses of Sorrow

17. The Paradox of Pursuit
18. The Comparing Mind
19. The Shape of a Life
Interlude IV: What Remains

PART FIVE: THE WIDER CIRCLE

20. The Happiness of Nations
21. The Many Shapes of Happiness
22. Well-Being in the Age of Machines
Interlude V: The Gardener's Notebook

PART SIX: THE ART OF LIVING

23. The Three Horizons: A Synthesis
24. Practices: An Evidence-Graded Guide

Epilogue: Cultivate Our Garden

Questions for Reflection

A Timeline of the Good Life

Glossary

Notes & Sources

Index

How to Read This Book



This is a book about the oldest practical question human beings have asked — what makes a life go well? — and about the two great conversations that have tried to answer it. The first is philosophy, which has been arguing about the good life for twenty-five centuries. The second is science, which began measuring happiness barely a century ago and has spent the last forty years learning, sometimes painfully, how to do it well. Most books choose one conversation. This one listens to both, because each keeps correcting the other.

The chapters can be read in order, as a single argument, or dipped into as a reference. Either way, a few recurring features hold the book together.

The Three Horizons. Early on, in the Prologue, you will meet a simple map of well-being: the near horizon of *the moment* (how life feels), the middle horizon of *the story* (how life goes, as you judge it), and the far horizon of *the world* (what your life means beyond itself). Every chapter ends by asking how its subject plays out across these three horizons, and every chapter opening carries a small three-ringed emblem showing which horizons it touches most. By the final part, the map becomes a theory — and, I hope, a tool.

The Evidence. Tinted cards set out the key studies: who ran them, what they did, what they found and — always — the caveat. Science of well-being has had its share of overstatement, and a reader deserves to know which findings are bedrock and which are sand.

The Laboratory of One. Each chapter closes with small experiments you can run on your own life. Philosophy, in its ancient form, was a way of living, not only a way of arguing; science is a method for learning from what actually happens rather than what we

expect. Put them together and you get the examined life as an experiment.

The Garden Dialogues. Between the parts of the book, two people talk across a community garden over the course of a year: Theodora, a retired teacher of classics, and Sam, a young researcher who studies well-being for a living. Their conversations are fiction. The ideas they wrestle with are not.

Threads. Ideas in this book keep reappearing in new costumes — the Buddha's diagnosis of craving returns as a finding in neuroscience; Aristotle's doctrine of the mean returns as a curve in psychology; Solon's warning to a king returns as a rule about memory. At the end of each chapter, a short note points backward and forward along these threads, so the book can be read as what it is: one long, connected conversation.

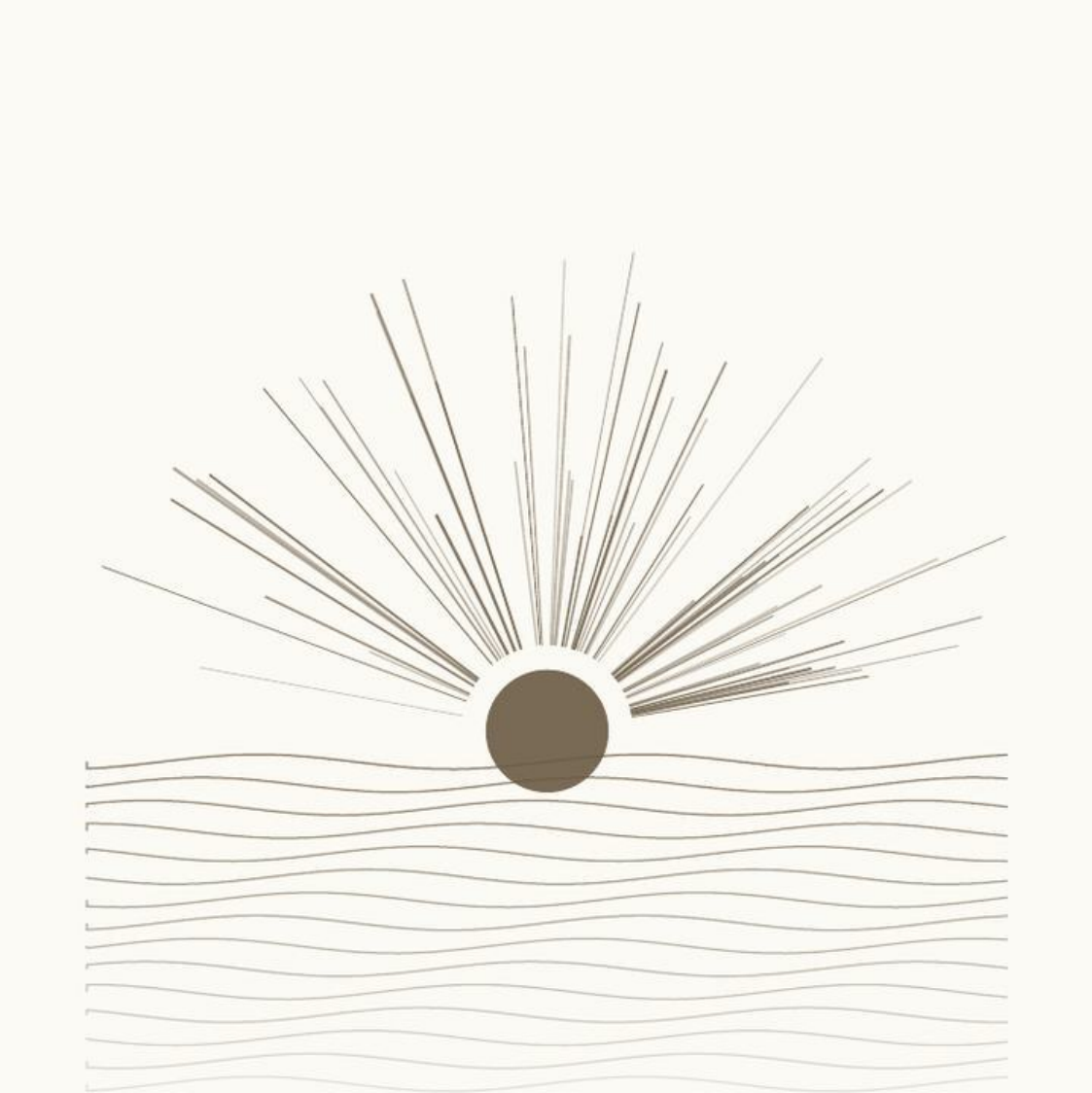


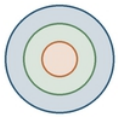
PLATE I

PROLOGUE

The Crisis of a Happy Machine

Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness … Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.

JOHN STUART MILL, AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1873)



IN THE AUTUMN OF 1826, a twenty-year-old Englishman sat down with a question he had been avoiding, and the question broke him.

His name was John Stuart Mill, and he had been raised as an experiment. His father, the philosopher James Mill, together with his friend Jeremy Bentham, had set out to manufacture a reformer: a mind trained from infancy to serve the principle that the right action is the one that produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number. The boy began Greek at three. By eight he was reading Latin; by twelve, logic; by thirteen, political economy. He had no holidays, few friends his own age, and no religion. What he had instead was a purpose so large it could fill a life: he would help build a world in which human happiness was maximized, systematically, scientifically, by design.

Then, one dull autumn, in a mood he later described as a state in which pleasures became insipid and indifferent, he put the question to himself directly. Suppose all your objects in life were realized — every reform achieved, every institution remade, this very instant. Would that be a great joy and happiness to you? And, as he wrote half a century later, *an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!"*

The foundation on which his life had been built gave way. For months he went through the motions of work, a perfectly engineered

happiness-maximizer who could feel no happiness at all. The habit of analysis, he concluded, had worn away his capacity for feeling; he had been taught to take everything apart, and nothing had been left whole enough to love.

The way out came sideways. Reading the memoirs of a French writer, he reached a scene in which a boy, after his father's death, resolves to be everything to his grieving family. Mill wept — and the tears told him he was not, after all, a stone. A year or two later he discovered the poems of William Wordsworth: plain verses about hills, light, memory and ordinary feeling. They did not argue with him. They simply gave him, as he put it, a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared by all human beings and had no connection with struggle or imperfection.

From the crisis Mill drew two lessons that would shape the rest of his life. The first was that happiness, though it remained for him the test of all rules of conduct, could only be reached by not making it the direct aim. Ask yourself whether you are happy, he wrote, and you cease to be so. The second was that the cultivation of feeling — through poetry, art, nature and human sympathy — mattered as much as the cultivation of intellect. A person was not a calculating machine. A good life was not a sum.

The whole subject in one life

I begin with Mill because his breakdown contains this entire book in miniature.

It contains the **philosopher's question**: what *is* happiness — pleasure, the satisfaction of desire, or something richer, like a life of meaning and virtue? It contains the **scientist's ambition**: if happiness is the goal, surely it can be measured, compared, and increased. It contains the **paradox** that has haunted both: the harder you grip happiness, the faster it slips away. And it contains a hint of the **remedy**: feeling, connection, beauty and a purpose larger

than oneself — pursued not as techniques for producing happiness but for their own sake.

Above all, Mill's crisis shows that well-being is not one thing. He had organized his life around a cause that mattered to the world, and in that sense his life was full of meaning. He had a clear story — the reformer in training, the heir to a philosophy. What had collapsed was something nearer and humbler: the felt texture of his days. He had lost the moment. Wordsworth gave it back.

A good life is not a sum. It is a harmony — and harmonies can be broken from any direction.

Two conversations

For most of history, the question of the good life belonged to philosophers, prophets and poets. Aristotle argued that a good life was an activity rather than a feeling; Epicurus that it was a matter of tranquil pleasure among friends; the Stoics that virtue was enough; the Buddha that the trouble lay in craving itself. Their answers were brilliant, conflicting, and impossible to test.

Then, in the twentieth century, something new happened. Researchers began to ask people, systematically, how happy and satisfied they were — first in small questionnaires in the 1920s and 1930s, later in national surveys, eventually in polls covering almost every country on earth. In 1984 the psychologist Ed Diener published a landmark review that gave the field its working name, *subjective well-being*. In 1998 Martin Seligman used his presidency of the American Psychological Association to call for a *positive psychology* that would study what makes life worth living, not only what makes it go wrong. Economists joined, then neuroscientists, then governments. Today there are national well-being statistics, a World Happiness Report, and a Global Flourishing Study following more than two hundred thousand people across twenty-two countries.

This new science has made discoveries the ancients could not have made: that memories of pain obey strange rules; that the brain's machinery for *wanting* is distinct from its machinery for *liking*; that people adapt to almost everything, but not quite to everything; that income and happiness are linked in a precise, logarithmic way; that loneliness is a risk to life on a par with other well-known hazards to health. But it has also rediscovered, with charts and confidence intervals, things that philosophers said long ago — and, more than once, it has embarrassed itself by forgetting them.

The premise of this book is that the two conversations need each other. Philosophy without evidence floats free of human beings as they actually are. Evidence without philosophy does not know what it is measuring, or why it should matter. When they are brought together, something remarkable happens: each starts to explain the other.

The Three Horizons

Here is the map that will guide us. It grew out of a puzzle that runs through both conversations — the stubborn fact that people mean at least three different things when they say a life is going well — and it will take the whole book to earn it fully. But you can carry it with you from the start.

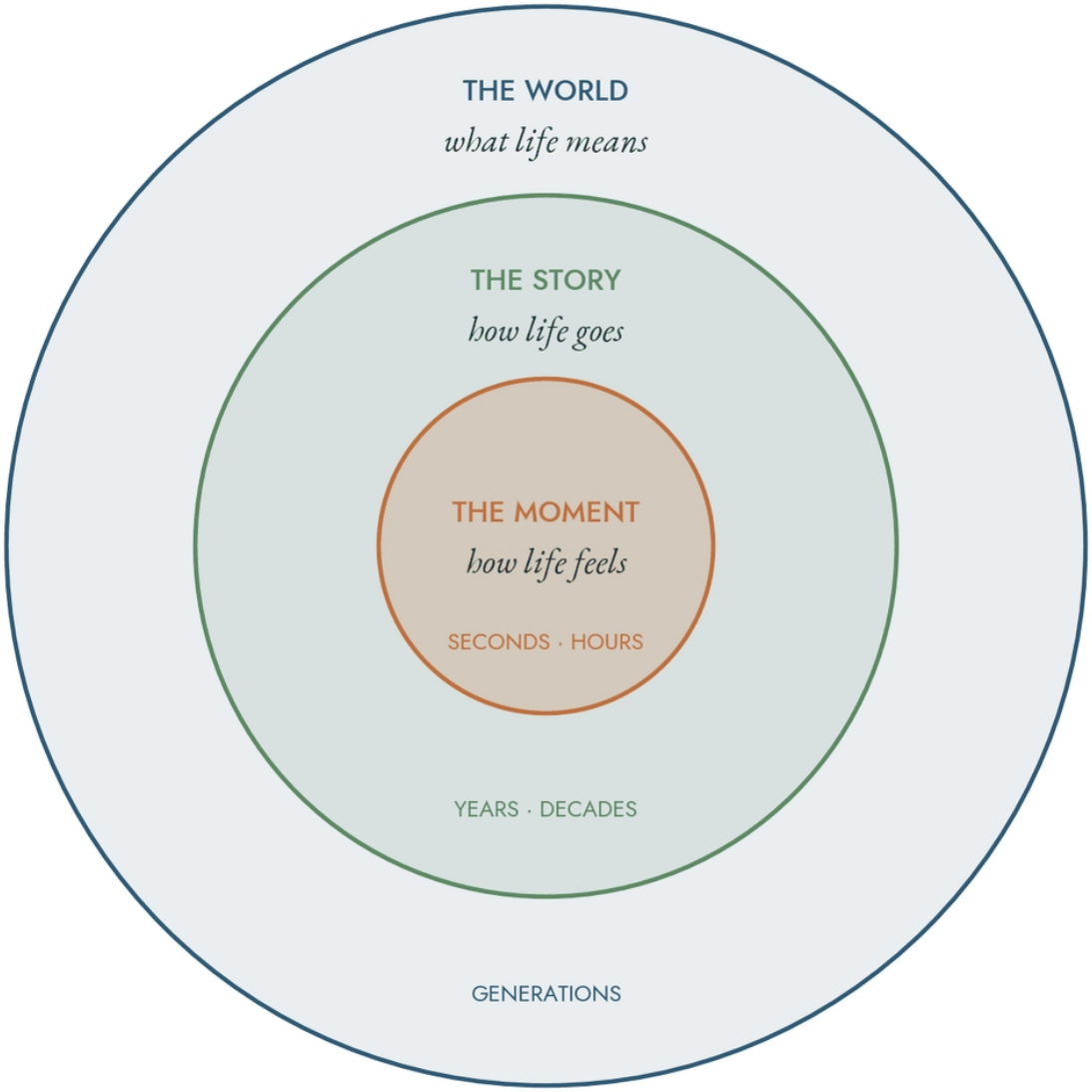


FIGURE *The Three Horizons of well-being. Each ring asks a different question of a life, on a different timescale.*

The near horizon is the moment: how life feels. It is measured in seconds and hours — the warmth of a conversation, the ache of a commute, the absorption of good work, the slow pleasure of evening light. Philosophers who placed well-being here were hedonists, from Epicurus to Bentham. Scientists study it with experience sampling: buzzing people at random moments and asking what they are doing and how they feel.

The middle horizon is the story: how life goes, as you judge it. It is measured in years and decades — whether your life is approaching what you hoped for, whether your projects are succeeding, whether the plot makes sense. Philosophers who placed well-being here spoke of desires satisfied and life-plans fulfilled. Scientists study it by asking people to evaluate their lives as a whole — for instance, to imagine a ladder whose top rung is the best possible life and to say where they stand.

The far horizon is the world: what your life means beyond itself. It is measured in generations — what you give, what you serve, what you leave, how you are woven into something larger than your own experience. Philosophers who placed well-being here spoke of virtue, meaning and goods that are worth having whether or not we feel them. Scientists study it through purpose, meaning and flourishing.

Each horizon is real. Each can be measured. And — this is the crucial point — they can come apart. A day can feel wonderful and mean nothing. A life can be a success story and feel empty from the inside, as Mill discovered. A life can be devoted to something magnificent and be miserable to live, moment by moment. The most common mistakes people make in pursuing a good life, I will argue, come from optimizing one horizon while starving the others. And the things that the evidence most reliably links to well-being — close relationships, absorbing and useful work, kindness, time in nature, learning — share a curious property: they pay out on all three horizons at once.

The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1807)

Mill, in this light, is a parable. He lived almost entirely on the far horizon — the improvement of mankind — and on a story written for him by his father. He was starving on the near horizon, and Wordsworth fed him. His famous line about finding happiness by the way is a sentence about horizons: aim at the far one, live fully in the near one, and the middle one, the story, tends to take care of itself.

The shape of the journey

The book moves in six parts. **Part One** listens to the ancient question: the Greeks, the Stoics and Epicureans, the great traditions of India and China, and the moderns from Bentham to Camus. **Part Two** follows the scientists as they learn to measure a life — and discover the two selves, the treadmill and the wanting brain. **Part Three** examines the ingredients: other people, money, the body, work and flow, meaning, and goodness. **Part Four** turns towards the shadows: sorrow, the paradox of pursuing happiness, comparison, and mortality. **Part Five** widens the circle to nations, cultures and machines. **Part Six** brings everything together into a synthesis and a practice.

Between the parts, Theodora and Sam will be waiting in the garden. Everything begins there, as it did for Epicurus — and as it did, in a sense, for Mill, among Wordsworth's hills.



THE THREE HORIZONS

Mill's crisis is a case study in horizon failure. His far horizon was vast: he was devoted to the good of humanity. His middle horizon was secure: his life story had been written and was going according to plan. His near horizon had gone dark. The cure did not come from more purpose or a better plan; it came from feeling — tears over a

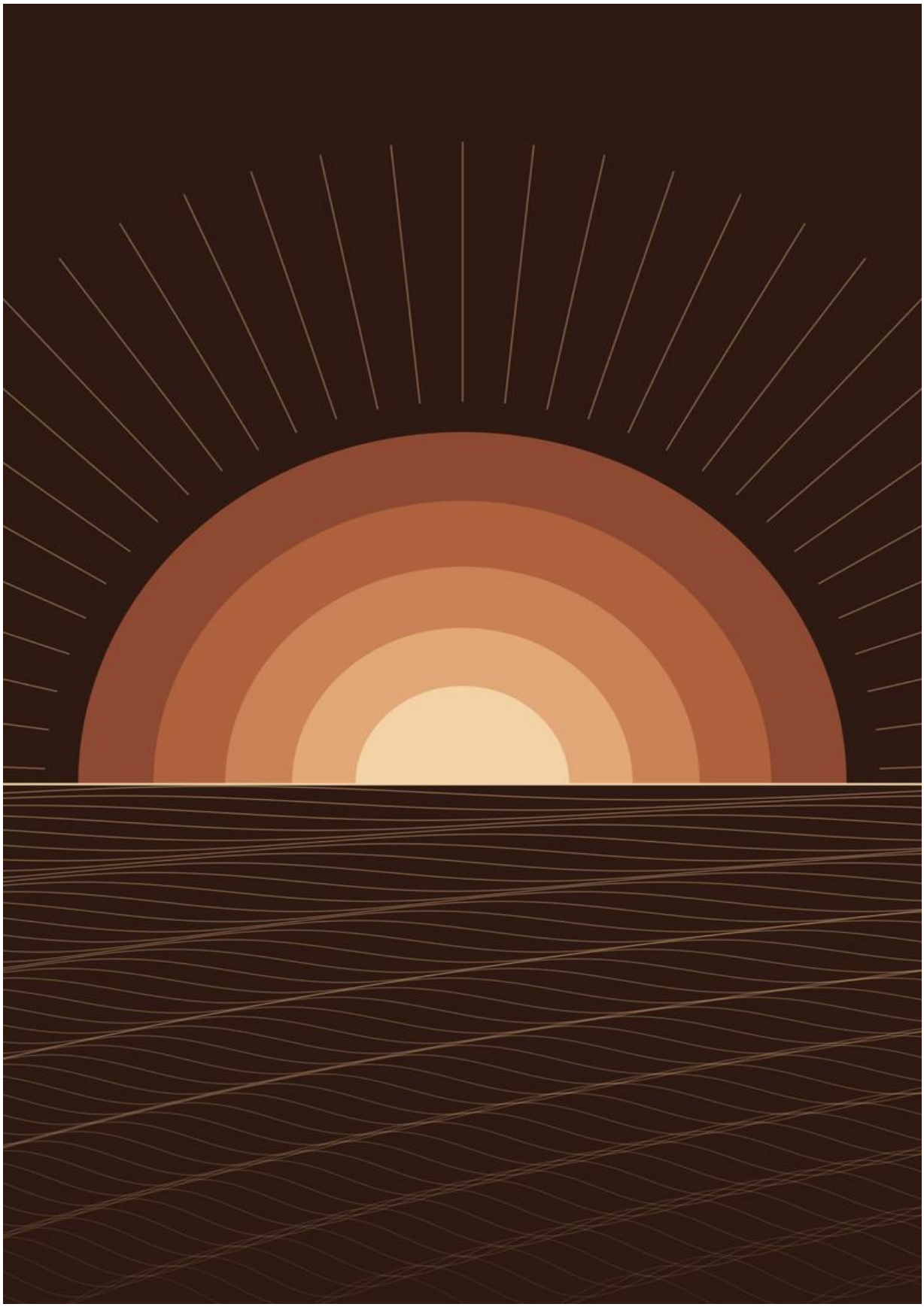
memoir, delight in a poem. Keep this pattern in mind. We will meet its mirror image, people rich in moments but poor in meaning, many times.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Draw three concentric circles on a page. In the inner one, write three things that made recent days *feel* good. In the middle ring, three things that make you judge your life as going well. In the outer ring, three things your life gives to something beyond you. Notice which ring was hardest to fill.
2. Ask Mill's question gently, once: if every goal you are pursuing were achieved tonight, what would still be missing? Write the answer down without editing it.
3. For one week, before sleep, note a single moment from the day that you would happily live again. This is the near horizon, and it is easy to forget it exists.

THREADS

Mill's rejection of pure calculation returns in Chapter 5 (the moderns), his paradox in Chapter 17, and his rescue by poetry in the Epilogue. The Three Horizons are developed in Chapter 6, where they turn out to match the main ways scientists measure well-being, and assembled into a full theory in Chapter 23.



PART ONE

The Ancient Question

Philosophy's twenty-five-century argument about the good life

For most of human history, the question of how to live well was not a research topic. It was a matter of survival, ritual, fortune and the gods. Then, in a few remarkable centuries — roughly the sixth to the third before the common era — thinkers in Greece, India and China began to ask it in a new way: not *what do the gods allow?* but *what should a human being do?*

Their answers still shape how we think. Part One listens to them in turn: the language of luck from which the word "happiness" grew; Aristotle's bet that excellence and enjoyment converge; the rival therapies of Epicurus and the Stoics; the diagnoses of the Buddha, Confucius and the Daoists; and the moderns who tried to turn happiness into arithmetic, a duty, or an abyss.

1 · Hap: Luck, Fortune and the Good Daimon

2 · Aristotle's Wager

3 · The Garden and the Porch

4 · Paths from the East

5 · Pleasure, Duty and the Abyss

Interlude I: A Plot in the Garden

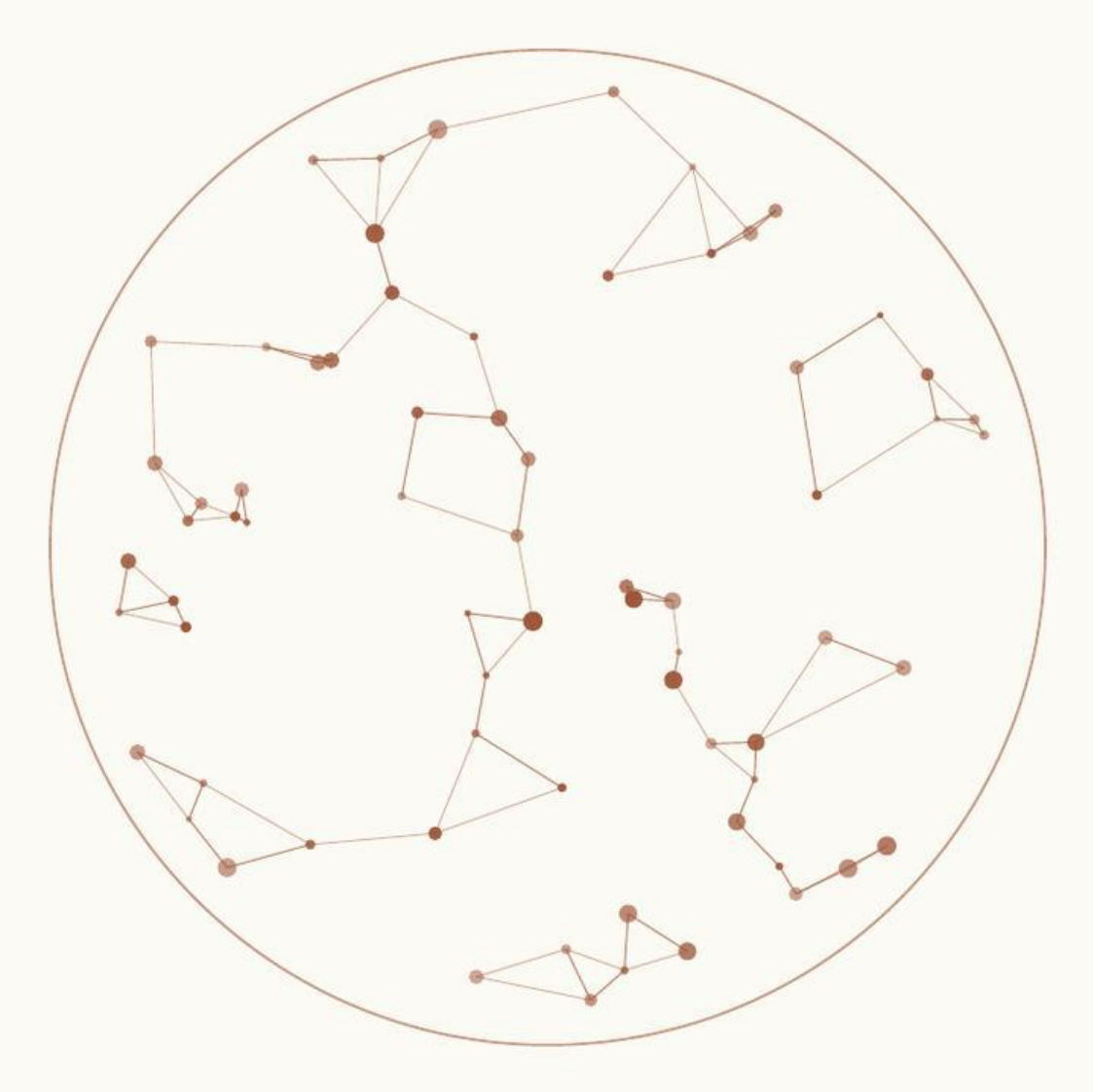


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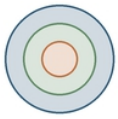
CHAPTER

1

Hap: Luck, Fortune and the Good Daimon

Until he is dead, hold back, and do not yet call him happy — only lucky.

SOLON TO CROESUS, IN HERODOTUS, HISTORIES I.32



CROESUS, KING OF LYDIA, was the richest man in the world, and he wanted to hear it said. Around the middle of the sixth century before the common era, according to the historian Herodotus, the Athenian statesman Solon arrived at the king's capital of Sardis on his travels. Croesus had him shown through the treasuries — gold, silver, the accumulated tribute of an empire — and then put a question that was not really a question. Of all the people you have seen, he asked, who is the happiest?

Solon named an Athenian called Tellus. Tellus had lived in a prosperous city, raised good sons, and seen grandchildren born who all survived him; then he died bravely in battle defending his city and was buried with public honours where he fell. Croesus, irritated, asked who came second. Solon named two young brothers from Argos, Cleobis and Biton. When their mother needed to reach a festival of Hera and the oxen were late from the fields, the brothers yoked themselves to her cart and pulled it miles to the temple. The crowd praised them; their mother prayed that the goddess give her sons the best thing that can befall a human being. That night, after the sacrifice and the feast, they lay down in the temple and never woke.

Croesus was furious. Was his own prosperity worth nothing? Solon's reply is one of the most quoted sentences of antiquity.

Human life, he said, is a long run of days, and no one of them brings exactly what another does. Look to the end. Until a man is dead, hold back from calling him happy; call him, for now, merely lucky.

Herodotus finishes the story with relish. Years later Croesus attacked Persia, lost, and was placed on a pyre by the conqueror Cyrus. As the flames rose, the fallen king cried out Solon's name three times. Cyrus, curious, demanded an explanation, heard it, saw himself in it, and ordered the fire put out.

Happiness began as luck

Notice the two Greek words in Solon's warning. The word he refuses to use too soon is *olbios*, "blessed" or "truly happy." The word he offers instead is *eutychēs*, "of good fortune." The distinction is the seed of this entire book. Is a good life something that happens to us, or something we do?

Language suggests that, for most of history, people believed the former. The English word *happy* comes from *hap*, meaning chance — the same root as *happen*, *perhaps* and *mishap*. In German, *Glück* still means both luck and happiness; so does the Dutch *geluk* and the Danish *lykke*. The French *bonheur* is literally *bon heur*, a good omen. The Latin *felix*, ancestor of "felicity," meant fertile, fortunate, favoured. The Russian *schast'ye* is usually traced to the idea of a good share, one's lucky portion. The Japanese *shiawase* once meant how things happen to fall together, for better or worse. Even the Greek philosophers' favourite term, *eudaimonia*, means having a good *daimon* — a favourable spirit or allotted fortune.

THE EVIDENCE

Happiness as luck, across languages

WHO AND WHEN Shigehiro Oishi and colleagues, 2013.

WHAT THEY DID Examined dictionary definitions of "happiness" in thirty languages, and changes in American dictionary definitions over time.

WHAT THEY FOUND In most of the languages, the word for happiness was defined in terms of good luck or fortune. In American English, the dominant meaning shifted over the twentieth century from fortune towards a pleasurable inner feeling.

THE CAVEAT Dictionaries record usage, not experience. But the shift tracks a real historical change: happiness moved from the world into the self.

The historian Darrin McMahon has traced the long journey of that word. For the ancient world, happiness was largely in the hands of fate and the gods. The Greek philosophers made a daring move: they argued that it could be achieved, at least in large part, through reason and virtue. Christianity relocated perfect happiness to the life to come. The Enlightenment brought it back to earth and turned it into a right — the "pursuit of happiness" of the American Declaration of Independence. And the modern age turned it into a feeling, something we can monitor in ourselves, expect, and even feel guilty for lacking. The whole history, in McMahon's telling, is the story of happiness moving from fortune to skill, from heaven to earth, and from the world to the mind.

We will see that modern science has partly vindicated Solon. A substantial share of the differences between people's happiness is associated with genes, temperament and circumstance — with *hap*. But we will also see that the Greek gamble was not foolish. Much of what makes lives go well is learnable.

Call no one happy until they are dead. Until then, call them lucky.

AFTER SOLON, IN HERODOTUS, HISTORIES I.32

What well-being means

Before going further, we need to be precise about what we are looking for. Philosophers use the term *well-being* — or *welfare*, or *prudential value* — for what is good *for* a person: what makes a life go well for the one who lives it. This is not the same as what makes a life morally good, or admirable, or important to the world. A saint who sacrifices everything may live a morally magnificent life that goes badly for her. A cheerful scoundrel may live a life that is good for him and bad for everyone else. Whether, in the end, these can truly come apart is one of the oldest disputes in ethics. But the concepts are distinct, and keeping them distinct prevents a great deal of confusion.

So what makes a life go well for the person living it? In an appendix to his 1984 book *Reasons and Persons*, the philosopher Derek Parfit sorted the major answers into three families. Nearly every theory since can be placed among them.

Hedonistic theories say that what is good for you is pleasure, broadly understood — enjoyment, positive feeling, the felt quality of experience — and what is bad for you is pain and suffering. Your life goes well to the extent that it contains a favourable balance of the one over the other. This is the oldest and simplest answer, defended in different forms by Epicurus and by Jeremy Bentham, and it has an intuitive force: surely nothing could matter to you that made no difference whatsoever to your experience?

Desire-fulfilment theories say that what is good for you is getting what you want — or, in more sophisticated versions, what you would want if you were fully informed and thinking clearly. Your life goes well to the extent that your desires, especially your deepest and most considered ones, are satisfied. This view respects the variety of human lives: a mountaineer and a monk want very different things, and each life goes well on its own terms.

Objective list theories say that certain things are good for a person whether or not she wants them or enjoys them: knowledge, friendship, achievement, the development of one's capacities,

perhaps virtue, beauty and pleasure itself. Your life goes well to the extent that it contains these goods. This is the family to which Aristotle belongs.

Each family is vulnerable to a famous objection. Against desire theories, Parfit offered the case of a stranger on a train. You meet someone, learn that he is gravely ill, and sincerely want him to recover. You never see him again and never learn what happened. If he recovers, your desire is satisfied. Is your life better for it? It seems not — which suggests that not every satisfied desire makes a difference to your well-being. The philosopher John Rawls imagined a brilliant man whose only wish was to count the blades of grass on lawns. If he gets to count grass all his life, desire theory says his life went well. Many people find that hard to accept.

Against objective list theories, the objection is alienation. Suppose knowledge is on the list, but a particular person has no interest in it whatever. Can it really be good *for him* to know things he does not care about? The theory begins to sound like a parent insisting that a child is enjoying the museum.

The machine

Against hedonism, the objection is the most famous thought experiment in the philosophy of well-being. In 1974 the philosopher Robert Nozick asked his readers to imagine an *experience machine*. Superb neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, making a friend, reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. You could pre-program your life's experiences for years at a time, choosing from a library of the best. Would you plug in for life?

Most people, asked this question, say no. And if they are right, Nozick argued, then something matters to us besides how our lives feel from the inside. He suggested three things. We want to *do* certain things, not merely to have the experience of doing them. We

want to *be* a certain sort of person — brave, kind, loving — and a body floating in a tank is no sort of person at all. And we want contact with reality: real friends, real achievements, a real world, not a simulation, however lovely.

If we would refuse the machine, then something matters to us besides how our lives feel from the inside.

The machine has haunted the subject ever since — and, as we will see in Chapter 22, it has recently stopped being purely hypothetical. It also turns out that people's reactions to it are less stable than Nozick assumed. But for now notice what it reveals: our intuitions about well-being point beyond the moment. We care how life feels. We also care how it goes, and what it is connected to.

Three theories, three horizons

Here the ancient debate meets the map from the Prologue. The correspondence is rough, not exact, but it is illuminating.

Hedonism is a theory of the **near horizon**: life goes well when the moments go well. Desire-fulfilment theories, especially those that focus on a person's overall plan for life, are theories of the **middle horizon**: life goes well when your story unfolds as you would want it to. Objective list and virtue theories reach towards the **far horizon**: life goes well when it is connected to goods larger than your own feelings and wishes — truth, love, excellence, the welfare of others.

Seen this way, the three families are not simply rivals. Each has hold of something real, and each goes wrong when it claims to be the whole truth. That is why so many contemporary philosophers have proposed *hybrid* theories. Parfit himself suggested that what is best for a person might be enjoying what is genuinely good — knowledge, love, beauty, rational activity — while strongly wanting just these

things. The philosopher Susan Wolf, whom we will meet in Chapter 14, says something similar about meaning: it arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness. The good life, on these views, is the place where the horizons line up.

◎

Solon understood something important when he told Croesus to look to the end. A life is not a pile of moments, nor a single feeling, but a whole with a shape; and much of its shape is not in our control. Aristotle, a little over two centuries later, would take Solon's warning seriously and try to answer it — to show that, while luck can wreck a life, the best part of a good life is something we make. His answer is the subject of the next chapter.

◎



THE THREE HORIZONS

The three classical theories of well-being map, roughly, onto the three horizons: hedonism onto the moment, desire and life-plan theories onto the story, objective list theories onto the world. The language of luck reminds us that all three horizons are exposed to fortune — and the long history of the word "happiness" is the story of human beings trying to bring each of them within reach of skill.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Take Nozick's test seriously for five minutes. Write down exactly what you would lose by plugging into the experience machine. Your list is a rough portrait of your own objective goods.
2. List three things in your life that were mainly luck and three that were mainly practice. Which list shapes how you feel about your life more?
3. Try Solon's perspective: describe your life as a stranger might summarize it at your funeral. Then describe one ordinary hour from yesterday. Notice that these are two different kinds of truth.

THREADS

Solon's rule about endings returns as the peak-end rule in Chapter 7 and in the shape of a life in Chapter 19. The three theories reappear as three ways of measuring well-being in Chapter 6. The experience machine is rebuilt — out of screens and algorithms — in Chapter 22.

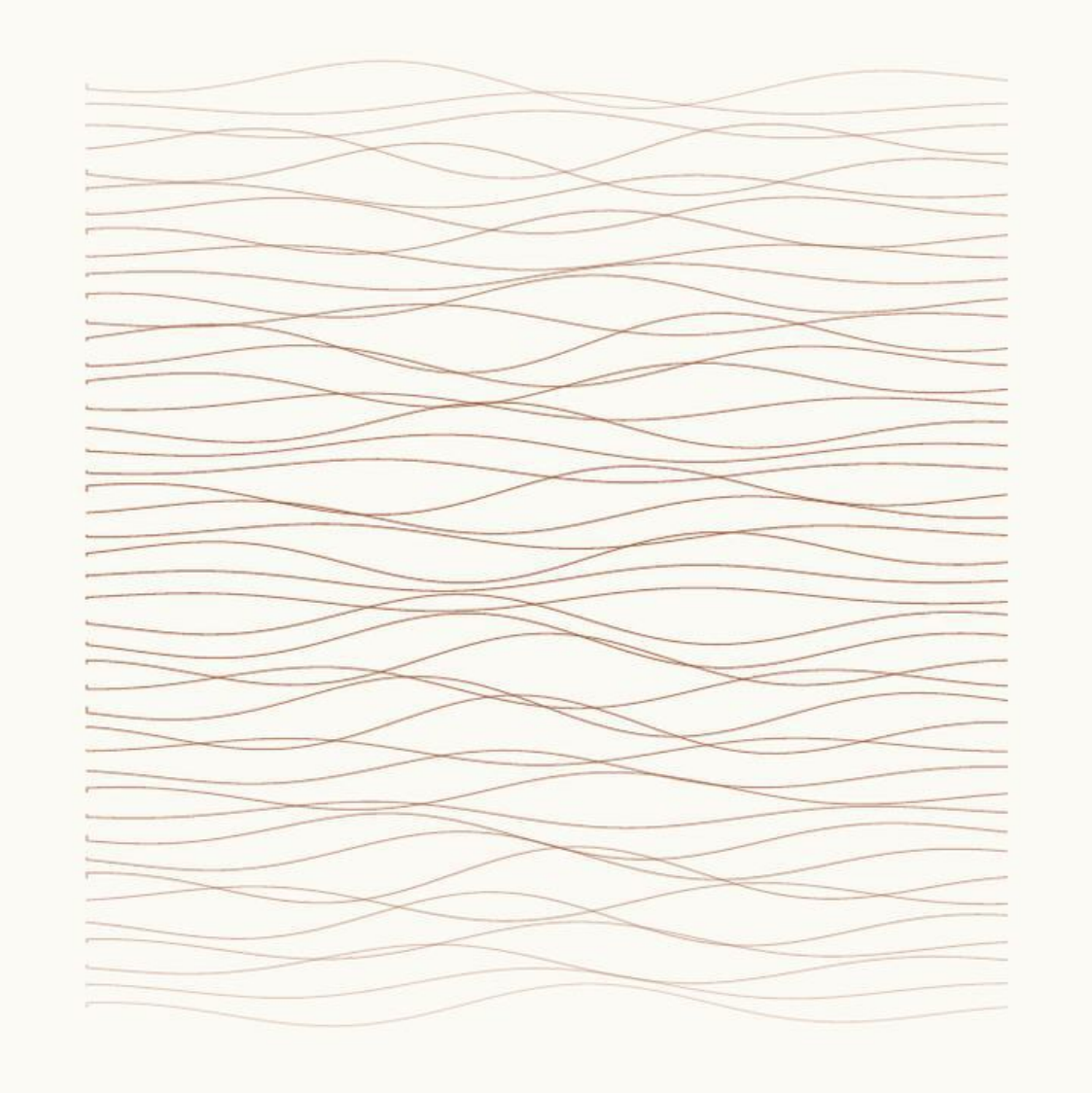


PLATE III

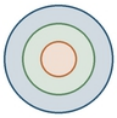
CHAPTER

2

Aristotle's Wager

The human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with excellence — and in a complete life.

ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, I.7



AROUND 335 BEFORE THE common era, Aristotle opened a school in a grove outside Athens sacred to Apollo Lykeios. The Lyceum had covered walkways, and Aristotle was said to lecture while walking, so his followers came to be called the *Peripatetics*, "the ones who walk around." Among the notes from those walks is a work we call the *Nicomachean Ethics*, probably named for his son Nicomachus. It is arguably the most influential book ever written about the good life, and it begins with a deceptively simple observation.

Everything we do, Aristotle says, aims at some good. We take medicine for health, build ships for sailing, earn money for what money can buy. But the chain of "for the sake of" cannot go on forever. There must be something we want for its own sake, and for the sake of which we want everything else. Nearly everyone, he notes, agrees on its name: *eudaimonia*. The trouble is that they disagree about what it is.

Three lives, and a fourth

Aristotle surveys the candidates. The many identify the good life with pleasure, and Aristotle is withering: they choose, he says, a life fit for

grazing animals. The ambitious identify it with honour, but honour depends on those who confer it, and seems too superficial to be the good we are looking for — we want honour, after all, mainly as a confirmation of our own worth. Money is plainly a means rather than an end. That leaves a life devoted to excellence, and, above all, the life of contemplation, to which he will return at the very end of the work.

To decide among them, Aristotle makes his most famous argument, from *function*. For a flute player, a sculptor or any craftsman, the good — the "well" — lies in the function: a good flautist is one who plays the flute well. If human beings have a characteristic function, then the human good will lie in performing it well. What is distinctive of us is not merely being alive (plants share that) or perceiving (animals share that) but living by reason, in thought and in action. So the human good is excellent rational activity: activity of the soul in accordance with excellence, *aretē* — the word usually translated "virtue." And, he adds, in a complete life. For one swallow does not make a spring.

Happiness is a verb

The most radical word in that definition is *activity*. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is not a feeling, nor a state you can be in while asleep. It is something you do. A person could possess every virtue and spend her life asleep, he observes, and no one would call her happy. As at the Olympic Games it is not the finest and strongest who are crowned but those who compete, so in life it is those who act well who win the prize.

This is why many modern scholars prefer to translate *eudaimonia* not as "happiness" but as "flourishing" or "living well." The English word happiness has drifted, as the previous chapter showed, towards a feeling. Aristotle's word points to a way of being active in the world. Think of the difference between "she is happy" and "she is thriving." The first describes a mood. The second describes a life in motion.

For Aristotle, happiness is not something you feel. It is something you do — and keep doing.

The architecture of character

If the good life is excellent activity, how do we become capable of it? Aristotle's answer is practical and deeply un-mystical. We become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; just so, we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. Virtues are not innate gifts or abstract knowledge. They are *hexeis* — settled dispositions, acquired by practice, until good action comes naturally and even pleasantly. A generous person is not someone who forces herself to give; she is someone who enjoys giving well.

Twenty-three centuries later, research on habit has turned this into measurable fact. Diary studies by the psychologist Wendy Wood and colleagues found that something like half of everyday behaviour is repeated in the same context, almost automatically, while the mind is elsewhere. Our days are built less out of decisions than out of grooves.

THE EVIDENCE

How long does a habit take?

WHO AND WHEN Phillippa Lally and colleagues, University College London, 2010.

WHAT THEY DID Followed volunteers who chose a new daily behaviour — drinking water with lunch, a short run before dinner — and tracked how automatic it felt over twelve weeks.

WHAT THEY FOUND Automaticity rose along a curve and levelled off; the median time to reach the plateau was about sixty-six days, with a range from roughly three weeks to most of a year. Missing a single day did not derail the process.

THE CAVEAT A small sample and simple behaviours. But the shape — slow, curved, forgiving of lapses — fits Aristotle's picture of character as something grown, not switched on.

The mean

Aristotle's second great idea about character is the *mean*. Each virtue, he argues, lies between two vices, one of deficiency and one of excess. Courage lies between cowardice and rashness; generosity between stinginess and extravagance; friendliness between surliness and obsequiousness; wit between boorishness and buffoonery. And the mean is not arithmetical. It is the mean *relative to us*: the right amount of food for the wrestler Milo is not the right amount for a beginner. Finding it requires *phronēsis*, practical wisdom — the skill of perceiving what a particular situation calls for.

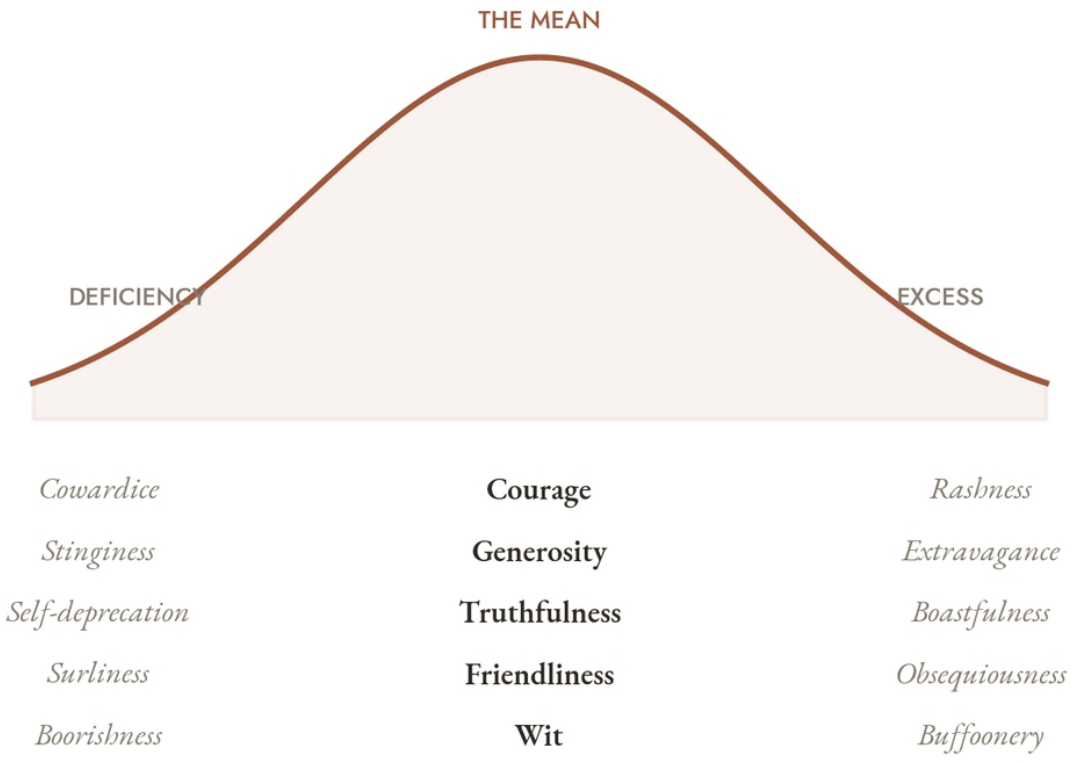


FIGURE 2.1 *Aristotle's doctrine of the mean: each virtue sits between a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess.*

The doctrine of the mean has often been mocked as a recipe for mediocrity. Modern psychology suggests it was a discovery. In 2011 the psychologists Adam Grant and Barry Schwartz surveyed research

across the behavioural sciences and found the same shape again and again: an *inverted U*. Too little optimism leaves people passive; too much makes them careless. Too little generosity isolates; too much exhausts. Even happiness itself seems to have an optimum. A study by Shigehiro Oishi, Ed Diener and Richard Lucas found that people who rated their life satisfaction at eight or nine out of ten did better on income, education and political participation than those at a perfect ten — though the tens did best of all on relationships. A little discontent, it seems, keeps people striving. The curve Aristotle drew in words keeps reappearing in data.

Friends and fortune

Aristotle devotes two of the ten books of his *Ethics* to friendship — more space than to any single virtue. No one, he says, would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods. He distinguishes three kinds of friendship: friendships of utility, which last as long as they are useful; friendships of pleasure, which last as long as they are fun; and friendships of character, in which each person loves the other for who they are and wishes them good for their own sake. The last kind is rare and takes time — people must, as the proverb has it, eat salt together — but it is the most complete, and in it the friend becomes "another self." Chapter 10 will show how strikingly modern research has borne this out.

Unlike some later philosophers, Aristotle refused to pretend that virtue makes us invulnerable. A good life also needs external goods: friends, some wealth, health, a decent city, children who turn out well. Someone who suffers terrible misfortunes, like King Priam of Troy, who lost his sons and his city, cannot be called blessed. And yet, he adds, even in great misfortune nobility shines through, when a person bears many and great calamities with good temper — not because he does not feel them, but because he is generous and great of soul. The virtuous person will never become wretched, because he will never do what is hateful and mean. This is Aristotle's answer to

Solon: fortune can take away blessedness, but it cannot easily take away the excellence of the person who meets it.

The wager

At the end of the *Ethics*, Aristotle makes a claim about pleasure that sounds almost like a scientific hypothesis. Pleasure, he says, is not the goal of good activity, but it completes it — supervening on it like the bloom of youth on those in their prime. The most excellent activities, performed by someone in good condition, are also the most pleasant. Excellence and enjoyment are not opposites to be traded off. They converge.

This is Aristotle's wager, and it is the boldest bet in the history of the subject. If he is right, the conflict between the near horizon (how life feels) and the far horizon (what life is for) is, in the best lives, an illusion produced by bad habits. Train a person well, and doing good will feel good. The rest of this book is, in a sense, an examination of the wager. The research on flow in Chapter 13 and on kindness in Chapter 15 will suggest that Aristotle won more of it than he lost.

Pleasure completes the activity, as the bloom of youth does those in their prime.

ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS X.4

Aristotle's influence on the modern science of well-being is direct. When the psychologist Carol Ryff proposed in 1989 that well-being involves not only feeling good but self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, mastery of one's environment, purpose in life and personal growth, she drew explicitly on Aristotle. Psychologists now routinely distinguish *hedonic* well-being — pleasure and satisfaction — from *eudaimonic* well-being — meaning, growth and the realization of one's potential. The terms come straight from the Lyceum.



THE THREE HORIZONS

Aristotle's account spans all three horizons and refuses to separate them. The moment matters, because the good life is activity and pleasure completes it. The story matters, because one swallow does not make a spring — happiness belongs to a complete life. The world matters, because excellence is defined by what is genuinely good, not merely by what we want. His wager is that, for a well-formed character, the three converge.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Choose one virtue you would like to grow — patience, generosity, courage. Each day for the next sixty-six days, perform one small act of it. Record only whether you did it. Watch for the moment it starts to feel natural.
2. Pick one quality you value and ask where you sit on Aristotle's curve: in the deficiency, the mean or the excess? Ask a trusted friend the same question about you.
3. Sort your friendships, privately and without judgment, into Aristotle's three kinds. Then do one thing this week to deepen a friendship of character.

THREADS

The inverted U returns in Chapter 16, where some adversity proves better than none. Pleasure as the "bloom" on excellent activity reappears as flow in Chapter 13. Aristotle's friendship of character is tested against eighty years of data in Chapter 10, and his concern for a "complete life" against the science of memory in Chapter 7.

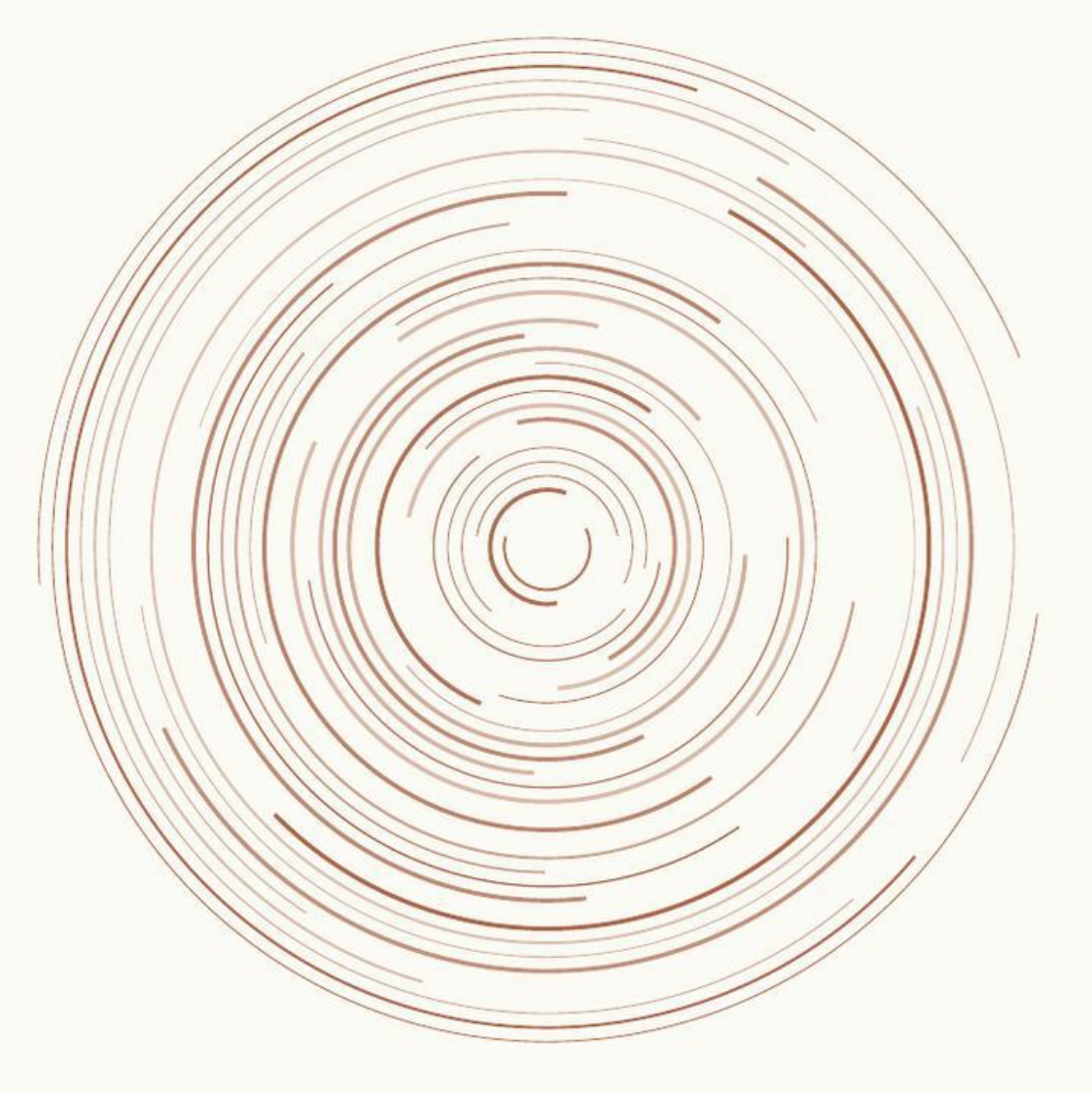


PLATE IV

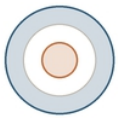
CHAPTER

3

The Garden and the Porch

It is impossible to live pleasantly without living wisely, well and justly — and impossible to live wisely, well and justly without living pleasantly.

EPICURUS, PRINCIPAL DOCTRINES 5



AROUND 306 BEFORE THE common era, a philosopher from the island of Samos bought a house with a garden just outside the walls of Athens and invited his friends to live with him. The community that gathered there was unlike any other school in the city. It admitted women, including the courtesan Leontion, who wrote philosophy; it admitted slaves, including one named Mys, whom the founder later freed. Over the gate, if a later Roman report is right, stood an inscription: *Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.*

The founder was Epicurus, and few thinkers have been so thoroughly misunderstood. His name gave English the word *epicure*, a lover of fine food. In fact he lived mostly on bread and water. In one surviving letter he asks a friend to send him a little pot of cheese, so that, when he likes, he may have a feast.

The quiet pleasure

Epicurus did say that pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life. But what he meant by pleasure was not what the word

usually suggests. He distinguished two kinds. *Kinetic* pleasures are pleasures of motion: the delight of eating when hungry, the stimulation of novelty, the thrill of a game. *Katastematic* pleasures are pleasures of condition: the state of being free from pain in the body, *aponia*, and free from disturbance in the mind, *ataraxia*. The second kind, he argued, is the highest. Once pain and want are removed, pleasure cannot be increased further, only varied. A life of calm, sufficient, untroubled contentment is not a lesser happiness than a life of thrills. It is the summit.

To reach it, Epicurus offered a practical sorting of desires. Some are *natural and necessary* — for food, shelter, safety, friendship — and easy to satisfy. Some are *natural but unnecessary* — for luxurious food, for particular pleasures — and harmless if held lightly. And some are *empty*: desires for fame, power and wealth beyond need. These are not natural at all but planted by opinion, and they have no limit, so they can never be satisfied. If you wish to make a person rich, he is reported to have said, do not add to his money; subtract from his desires.

If you wish to make a person rich, do not add to his money. Subtract from his desires.

Two further remedies completed the cure. The first was friendship. Of all the things wisdom provides for the blessedness of a whole life, Epicurus wrote, by far the greatest is friendship. Before you look for something to eat and drink, look for someone to eat and drink with. The second was the removal of fear — fear of the gods, who in his view did not meddle in human affairs, and fear of death. Death is nothing to us, he argued: what has dissolved has no sensation, and what has no sensation is nothing to us. Where death is, we are not; where we are, death is not. His followers condensed the teaching into a four-part medicine, the *tetrapharmakos*: God is nothing to fear; death is nothing to feel; the good is easy to get; the terrible is easy to endure.

Epicurus died around 270 BCE of a painful kidney illness. In his last letter he wrote that this was a blessed day, the last of his life; that his pains were extreme; and that against them all he set the joy in his mind at the memory of his conversations with his friends. His ideas survived above all in a long Latin poem, Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*. A single manuscript, rediscovered in a German monastery in 1417, helped carry them into the modern world; centuries later Thomas Jefferson would describe himself, in a private letter, as an Epicurean.

The porch

At almost the same moment, across the city, a shipwrecked merchant from Cyprus named Zeno began teaching in the Stoa Poikile, the Painted Porch at the edge of the Athenian marketplace. His followers became the Stoics, and their school would last five centuries and produce three of the most read philosophers in history: Seneca, a Roman statesman and tutor to the emperor Nero; Epictetus, a lame former slave who taught in Greece; and Marcus Aurelius, who ruled the Roman Empire and wrote private notes to himself we call the *Meditations*.

The Stoics agreed with Epicurus that the goal was a tranquil, untroubled life. They disagreed about everything else. For them, pleasure was not the good at all. The only true good was virtue — wisdom, justice, courage and self-control — and the only true evil was vice. Health, wealth and reputation were *preferred indifferents*: reasonable to choose, but irrelevant to whether one lived well.

Their central tool was a single distinction. *Some things are up to us and some are not,* begins the handbook of Epictetus. Up to us are our judgments, intentions, desires and aversions — in a word, our own actions of mind. Not up to us are our bodies, property, reputation, offices — everything that is not our own doing. Disturbance comes from confusing the two: from staking our peace on what we cannot control. And, in Epictetus' most famous sentence,

people are disturbed not by things, but by their judgments about things.



FIGURE 3.1 *The Stoic dichotomy of control, with the middle ring that many modern Stoics add: things partly up to us, such as influence and preparation.*

The Roman orator Cicero preserved the best image of what this means in practice. Think of an archer. Everything up to the archer — training, choice of arrow, steadiness of aim, the moment of release — she should do as well as she possibly can. But once the arrow leaves the string, the gust of wind is not hers. Her goal is not to hit the

target, which depends on fortune, but to shoot well, which depends on her. She will be glad if she hits it. She will not be broken if she does not.

Exercises for the soul

The Stoics, like the Epicureans, did not think of philosophy as a body of theory. The French historian Pierre Hadot called ancient philosophy a set of *spiritual exercises*: daily practices designed to transform how a person perceives and lives. Several Stoic exercises have become famous again.

In *premeditatio malorum*, the premeditation of evils, one imagines in advance the losses that might come — illness, exile, the death of those one loves. Not to wallow, but to drain such events of their power to shock, and to wake up to the value of what one has now. Seneca, writing after a fire destroyed the city of Lyon in a single night, urged his friend to expect everything, so that nothing would find him unprepared. We suffer more often in imagination than in reality, he wrote elsewhere.

In the *view from above*, practised by Marcus Aurelius, one imagines rising high over the earth and seeing human affairs — the cities, wars, quarrels and ambitions — shrink to their true size. In the evening review, practised by Seneca, one examines the day: what did I do well, what badly, what can I do better tomorrow? And in the acceptance the Stoics urged towards events — later summed up by Nietzsche in the phrase *amor fati*, love of fate — one learns to want things to happen as they actually do.

It is easy to misread this as emotional suppression. It was not. The Stoics distinguished destructive passions from *eupatheiai*, good feelings such as joy, caution and goodwill, which the wise person would have in abundance. The aim was not to feel nothing, but to stop feeling things on the basis of false judgments.

THE EVIDENCE

Rethinking versus bottling up

WHO AND WHEN James Gross and Oliver John, Stanford University, 2003.

WHAT THEY DID Measured how habitually people use two emotion-regulation strategies — *reappraisal* (changing how one interprets a situation) and *suppression* (hiding the emotion one feels) — and tracked their emotional lives, relationships and well-being.

WHAT THEY FOUND Habitual reappraisers experienced and expressed more positive emotion and less negative emotion, had closer relationships and reported greater well-being. Habitual suppressors showed the reverse pattern.

THE CAVEAT Correlational, and reappraisal is not always the right tool — some situations call for action, not reinterpretation. But the result maps neatly onto the Stoic distinction: changing a judgment works; gritting one's teeth does not.

The modern descendants of the Porch are everywhere. When the psychologist Albert Ellis developed his rational emotive therapy in the 1950s, he credited Epictetus. When Aaron Beck developed cognitive therapy, he too pointed to the Stoics as its philosophical ancestors. Cognitive behavioural therapy, which has been tested in hundreds of randomized trials and is among the best-supported psychological treatments for depression and anxiety, is in large part Stoicism with a laboratory.

Two routes to the same quiet

Set side by side, the Garden and the Porch look like two engineering solutions to the same problem: how to make a mind that fortune cannot easily shake. Epicurus worked on the *inputs* — trimming desires, choosing friends, arranging a simple, sheltered life. The Stoics worked on the *processing* — changing the judgments that turn events into disturbances. Modern psychology uses both. Some therapies change people's environments and behaviour, scheduling more of what nourishes them and less of what drains them; others change how they interpret what happens. The best use both together.

Both schools also anticipated, in their way, the central finding of the next part of this book: that people adapt to almost everything. Epicurus' claim that pleasure beyond the removal of pain can only be varied, not increased, is an ancient description of what scientists would call the hedonic treadmill. The Stoic insistence that external goods cannot make us happy is the same discovery seen from the other side. Twenty-three centuries before the experiments, the Garden and the Porch were betting that the secret was not getting more, but wanting differently.

We suffer more often in imagination than in reality.

SENECA, LETTERS TO LUCILIUS 13



THE THREE HORIZONS

The Garden and the Porch speak mainly to the near and far horizons. Epicurus perfects the moment: calm, sufficient, shared with friends. The Stoics anchor the self in the far horizon: virtue and reason, which no misfortune can take away. Both are wary of the middle horizon — ambition, reputation, the story others tell about us — which they saw as the main source of disturbance.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Sort your current wants into Epicurus' three bins: natural and necessary, natural but unnecessary, empty. Pick one empty desire and experiment with letting it go for a month.
2. Draw the Stoic circles for a problem that is worrying you. Write what is up to you, partly up to you, and not up to you. Act only on the first two.
3. Try a Senecan evening review for two weeks: three questions, three minutes. What did I do well? What badly? What will I do better tomorrow?

THREADS

Epicurus' two pleasures return in Chapter 9 as two systems in the brain, and in Chapter 21 as two cultural ideals. The Stoic archer returns in Chapter 17, where aiming at happiness turns out to be the surest way to miss it.

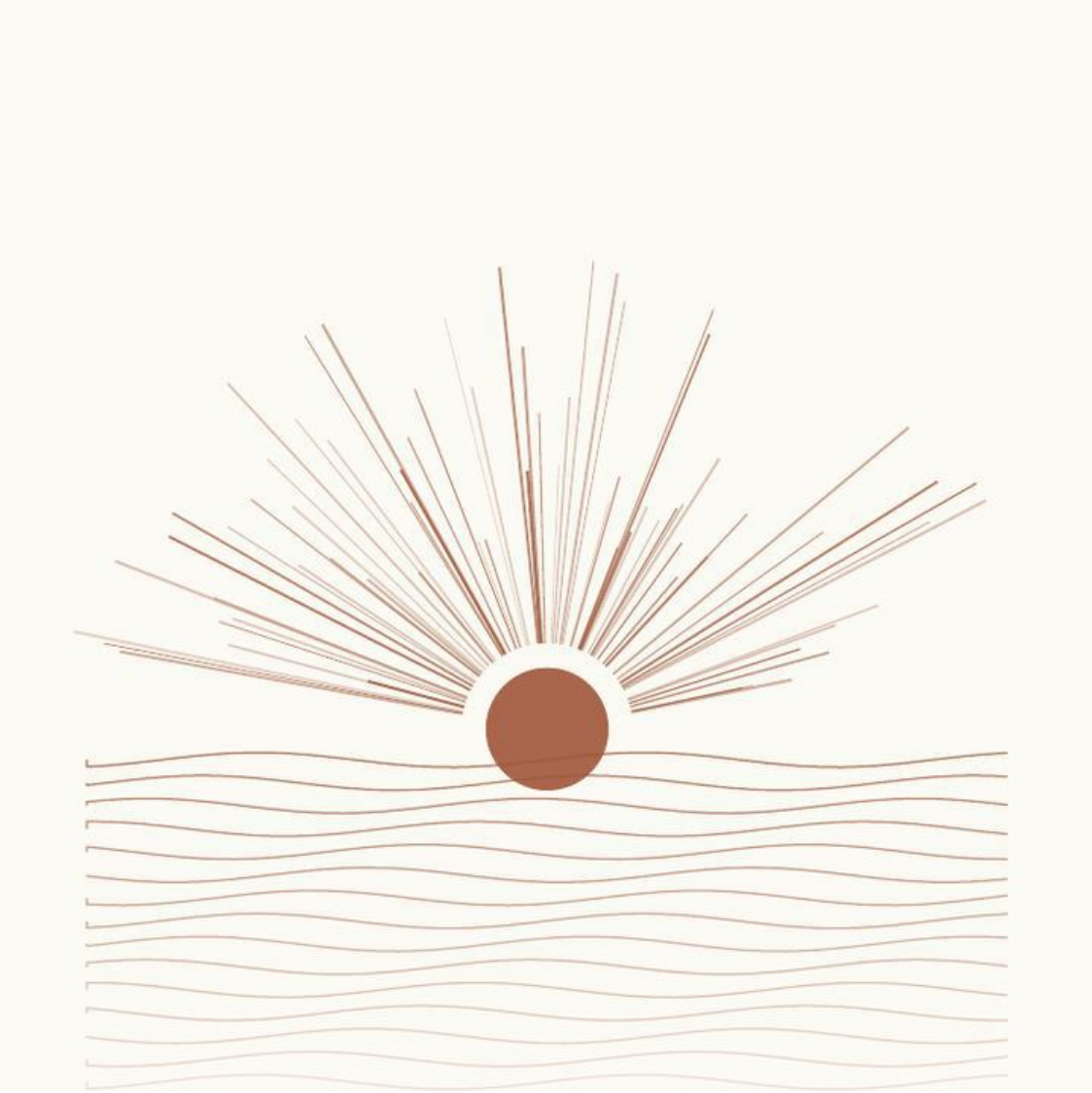


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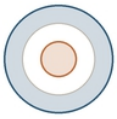
CHAPTER

4

Paths from the East

Mind goes before all things; mind is their chief; they are made by mind.

THE DHAMMAPADA, VERSE 1



THE PHILOSOPHER KARL JASPERS noticed something strange about the centuries around the middle of the first millennium before the common era. In China, India, Persia, Israel and Greece, largely independently, people began to ask a new kind of question about human life. They looked beyond ritual and tradition towards universal ideas of the good, the true and the self. Jaspers called this period the *Axial Age*. The Greeks we have met belong to it. So do three traditions from further east whose answers to the question of the good life have shaped billions of lives — and which modern science has begun, rather unexpectedly, to take seriously.

The physician of the mind

According to tradition, Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince of the Shakya clan, in what is now southern Nepal, and raised in deliberate luxury. As a young man he encountered, one after another, an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a wandering ascetic. The first three showed him that no palace could keep out ageing, illness and death; the fourth suggested that there might be a way of living with that truth. He left home, practised extreme austerities for years, nearly

starved, and concluded that self-torment was as fruitless as self-indulgence. The path he found between them he called the Middle Way — a phrase that would have made perfect sense to Aristotle. After his awakening, he became the Buddha, "the one who woke up."

His first teaching, at a deer park near Varanasi, is structured like a medical diagnosis. The first noble truth names the illness: *dukkha*. The word is usually translated "suffering," but it is broader — unsatisfactoriness, the chronic ill-fit of life to our wishes. A traditional, if disputed, gloss compares it to a wheel that does not run true on its axle. Even pleasant experiences are marked by it, because they pass. The second truth names the cause: *taṇhā*, literally "thirst" — craving for pleasure, for existence, even for non-existence. The third truth says the illness can be cured. The fourth prescribes the treatment: an eightfold path of right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.

Pain is the first arrow. The suffering we add to it — resistance, rumination, dread — is the second.

One short discourse contains an image that has travelled far beyond Buddhism. When an untrained person is touched by a painful feeling, the Buddha says, he sorrows, grieves and laments; he feels two pains, physical and mental, as if he had been shot with an arrow and then, right after, with a second. The trained person feels the first arrow and does not fire the second. Modern psychology has given the second arrow many names — rumination, catastrophizing, experiential avoidance — and much of contemporary therapy is an effort to stop people shooting it.

The Buddha's diagnosis went further than Epicurus or the Stoics. Behind craving lay a mistaken view of the self as a solid, separate thing that must be defended and fed. Seeing through it — recognizing the self as a flowing process — was meant to loosen craving at its root. And alongside insight came the cultivation of four boundless

states: loving-kindness, compassion, *muditā* or joy in others' joy, and equanimity.

THE EVIDENCE

Training warmth

WHO AND WHEN Barbara Fredrickson and colleagues, 2008.

WHAT THEY DID Randomly assigned 139 working adults either to a seven-week workshop in loving-kindness meditation or to a waiting list, and measured their daily emotions and personal resources.

WHAT THEY FOUND Meditators experienced more positive emotions day to day; over the weeks these built resources — greater mindfulness, purpose, social support and fewer symptoms of illness — which in turn predicted higher life satisfaction and fewer depressive symptoms.

THE CAVEAT One study, with modest effects and self-reported outcomes. But it suggests the boundless states are not only ideals but trainable skills.

The joy of learning

At about the same time, in the small state of Lu in what is now Shandong province, a teacher named Kong Qiu — known in the West as Confucius — was gathering students. His sayings, collected after his death as the *Analects*, open with a line about happiness that would surprise anyone who thinks of Confucianism as merely a code of duty. Is it not a pleasure, the Master asks, to learn something and practise it at the proper times? Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar?

Confucius' vision of the good life centred on *rén*, humaneness — the quality of being fully, warmly human towards others — expressed through *lǐ*, ritual propriety: the forms of courtesy, ceremony and respect that structure relationships. The aim was to become a *jūnzǐ*, an exemplary person, through a lifetime of study and practice. His most beloved student, Yan Hui, lived in a mean alley with a bowl of rice and a gourd of water; others could not have borne the hardship, the Master said, but Hui never let it alter his joy. Confucius said of

himself that with coarse rice to eat, water to drink and his bent arm for a pillow, there was joy to be found — and that wealth and rank gained unjustly were to him like floating clouds.

In one famous passage of the *Analects*, Confucius sketches his own development in a few lines. At fifteen he set his heart on learning; at thirty he stood firm; at forty he was free from doubt; at fifty he understood the decree of heaven; at sixty his ear was attuned; at seventy he could follow his heart's desire without overstepping what was right. It is the most compressed description ever written of what Aristotle meant by character: practice continued until the right thing becomes the natural thing — until duty and desire coincide.

The happiness of fish

The Daoist tradition, associated with the legendary Laozi and the brilliant, funny Zhuangzi, took a different path. Where Confucius emphasized cultivation, the Daoists emphasized *wú wéi* — often translated "non-action," but better understood as effortless action: acting in harmony with the grain of things, like water, which yields to everything and yet wears away stone. The highest good, says the *Daodejing*, is like water.

Zhuangzi tells of a cook named Ding who carved oxen for a lord. His knife moved with such ease that it seemed like a dance; he had used the same blade for nineteen years and it was as sharp as on the day it was made. At first, he explained, he saw only the whole ox; now he no longer looked with his eyes but let his spirit move along the natural joints and hollows. The lord, listening, declared that he had learned how to nurture life. Twenty-three centuries later, the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi would describe almost exactly this state — effortless absorption in a skilled activity — and call it *flow*.

Zhuangzi also recorded the earliest surviving argument about whether we can know another being's happiness. Strolling on a bridge over the river Hao, he remarked on the minnows darting

about: that is the happiness of fish. His friend Huizi objected: you are not a fish; how do you know what fish enjoy? Zhuangzi replied: you are not me; how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy? It is a joke, and it is also the founding question of the science we will meet in Part Two: can one mind measure another's happiness at all?



FIGURE 4.1 *An ensō, the Zen circle drawn in a single breath — complete and incomplete at once.*

Zhuangzi had little patience with usefulness as the measure of a life. He tells of an enormous, gnarled tree that a carpenter dismissed

as worthless: its wood would make leaky boats and rotting coffins. That night the tree appeared in the carpenter's dream. Useful trees, it pointed out, are cut down in their prime. Its own uselessness was the secret of its long and flourishing life. In an age that measures worth by productivity, the useless tree is one of the most subversive images in world literature.

The measure of bliss

In the Indian traditions that preceded and surrounded Buddhism, the good life was often described as having four aims, the *puruṣārthas*: *dharma*, right conduct; *artha*, material well-being; *kāma*, pleasure and love; and *mokṣa*, liberation. The scheme is unusual in refusing to choose between them. Pleasure and prosperity are legitimate aims, but they are held within dharma and oriented towards liberation — a layered model of the good life with a horizon beyond the self.

One of the oldest Upanishads, the *Taittirīya*, contains what may be the first attempt to put happiness on a scale. Take a young man, it says, good, learned, strong, with the whole earth full of wealth: that is one measure of human bliss. A hundred of those make one bliss of the celestial musicians; and so on, by hundredfold steps, up through the ancestors and the gods to the bliss of the absolute. Then comes the twist. At every step, the text adds, the same bliss belongs to the sage who is free from desire. The ladder is a parable: you can climb it by acquiring the world, or you can reach the top by wanting nothing. Epicurus would have understood.

The highest good is like water. Water benefits the ten thousand things and does not contend.

LAOZI, DAODEJING 8

Read together, the Eastern and Western traditions converge on a few insights so persistent that they look like discoveries rather than opinions. Craving and comparison disturb the mind (the Buddha, Epicurus, the Stoics). Character is cultivated by practice until it becomes second nature (Confucius, Aristotle). The best moments come when effort dissolves into skilled absorption (Zhuangzi). And death, faced squarely, loses some of its power to poison life (Zhuangzi, who drummed on a pot and sang after his wife's death, and Epicurus). Where they diverge most is on the self — something to perfect, something to see through, or something that exists only in relationship. We will return to that divergence when we look at culture in Chapter 21.



THE THREE HORIZONS

The Eastern paths emphasize the near and far horizons. Mindfulness and wú wéi cultivate presence in the moment; compassion, humaneness and liberation reach towards the world beyond the self. Like the Greeks, they are suspicious of the middle horizon's ambitions — of the story we tell to defend and enlarge the self.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. The next time something painful happens, label it silently: *first arrow*. Then watch for the second arrow — the story, the resentment, the dread — and label that too. Labelling alone often weakens it.
2. Practise *muditā* deliberately: once a day, notice someone else's good fortune and let yourself be glad of it. Note what happens to envy.
3. Find your Cook Ding activity — something you do with effortless skill. Schedule more of it, and pay attention to how time feels while you do it.

THREADS

The second arrow returns in Chapter 16 as the science of acceptance; Cook Ding returns as flow in Chapter 13; the craving the Buddha diagnosed reappears as the brain's "wanting" system in Chapter 9. Zhuangzi's fish open the question of measurement in Chapter 6.

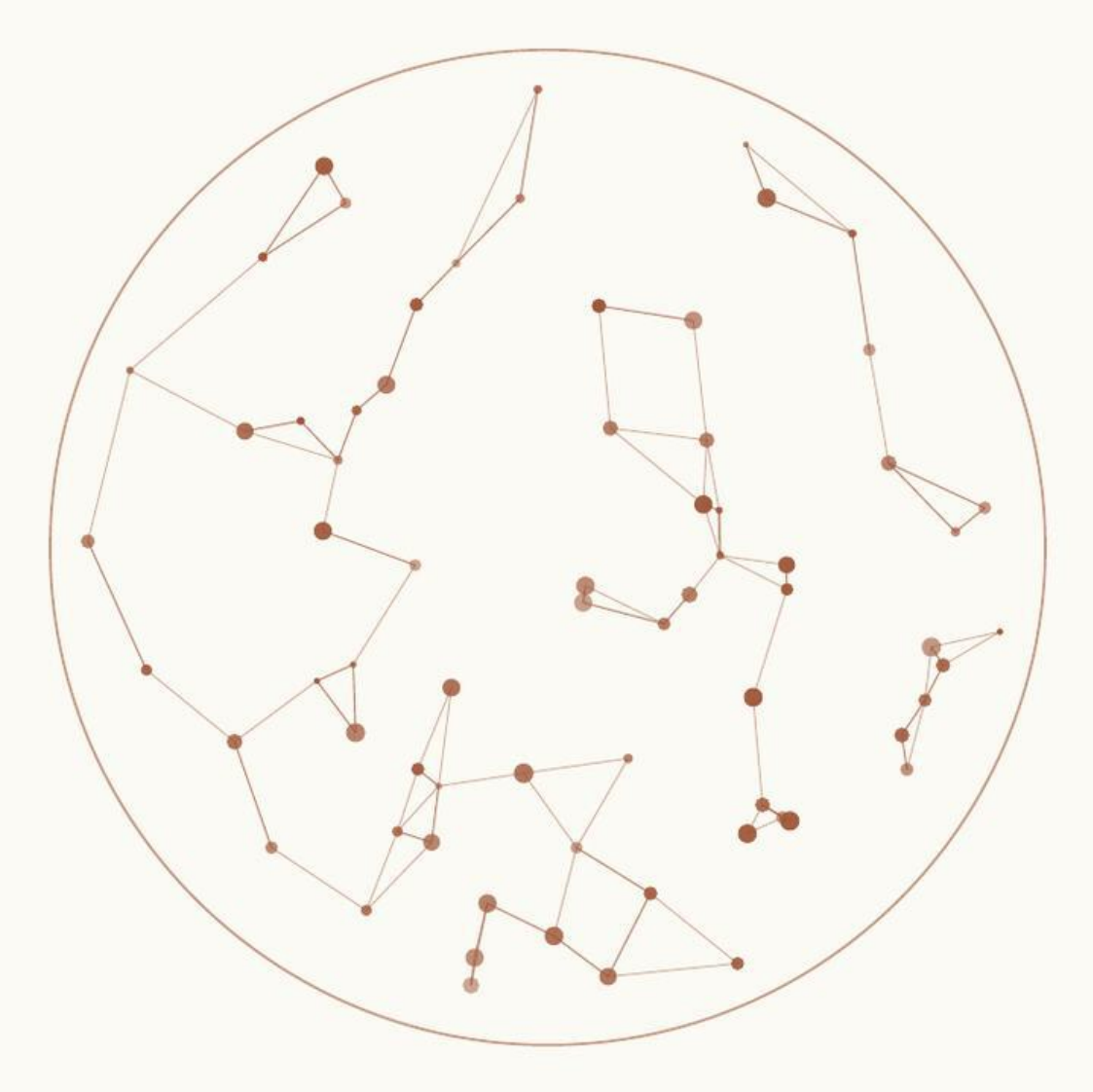


PLATE VI

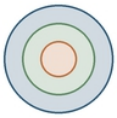
CHAPTER

5

Pleasure, Duty and the Abyss

If we have our own why of life, we can bear almost any how. Man does not strive for happiness; only the Englishman does.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS (1889)



FOR A THOUSAND YEARS after the fall of Rome, the question of earthly happiness largely went quiet in Europe. Not because people stopped wanting to be happy, but because the best minds placed true happiness elsewhere. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, addressed God with a line that would echo for centuries: you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Thomas Aquinas distinguished the imperfect happiness available in this life from the perfect happiness, *beatitudo*, that only the vision of God could give. In between, monks wrestled with *acedia*, the "noonday demon" — a listless despair that the desert fathers described so precisely that it reads, today, like a portrait of depression.

When happiness returned to earth, it did so with startling speed. In 1690 John Locke wrote of the pursuit of happiness as the highest perfection of intellectual nature. In 1776 the phrase entered the American Declaration of Independence as an inalienable right. In 1794 the French revolutionary Saint-Just announced to the National Convention that happiness was a new idea in Europe. It was not, of course, new. What was new was the conviction that it could be organized — by governments, by reason, perhaps even by arithmetic.

The arithmetic of joy

No one embodied that conviction more completely than Jeremy Bentham. *Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure,* begins his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* of 1789. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. From this he derived the principle of utility: the right action is the one that produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Bentham believed pleasure could be measured. He proposed a *felicific calculus* with seven dimensions: a pleasure's intensity, duration, certainty, nearness in time, fecundity (its tendency to produce further pleasures), purity (its freedom from accompanying pains) and extent (the number of people it affects). He was a great reformer — of prisons, law, the franchise, the treatment of animals — and he followed his philosophy to the end: at his request, his body was preserved and dressed, and it still sits in a glass case at University College London. He was also willing to follow his logic where others would not. Prejudice apart, he wrote, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. Pleasure is pleasure.

His disciple's son disagreed. In *Utilitarianism* (1863), John Stuart Mill — whose breakdown opened this book — argued that some pleasures are higher than others in quality, not merely quantity. The test was to ask those who had experienced both: competent judges, he believed, would prefer the pleasures of intellect, feeling and imagination even when mixed with discontent. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, he wrote; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. Critics have pointed out that Mill had smuggled something non-hedonistic into his hedonism: if one pleasure can be better than another in a way that is not more pleasant, then something other than pleasure is doing the work. Mill was reaching, without quite admitting it, from the near horizon towards the far one.

Worthy of happiness

In Königsberg, Immanuel Kant had already drawn a sharp line between happiness and morality. Happiness, he wrote in 1785, is so indeterminate a concept that, although everyone wants it, no one can say definitely and consistently what it is he wants. It is an ideal not of reason but of imagination. Morality, therefore, could not be built on it. The moral law tells us not how to make ourselves happy, but how to become *worthy* of happiness. Kant did not deny that the virtuous ought to be happy; he thought a just universe would see to it. But in this life, the two could diverge, and duty must win.

The pendulum

If Kant separated happiness from virtue, Arthur Schopenhauer separated it from possibility. At the root of all things, he argued in 1818, lies *will*: blind, endless striving. We want; wanting is painful lack; we get what we want; satisfaction lasts a moment and then turns to boredom, and a new want appears. Satisfaction is merely negative — the brief cessation of a pain. Life, he concluded, swings like a pendulum, back and forth between pain and boredom.

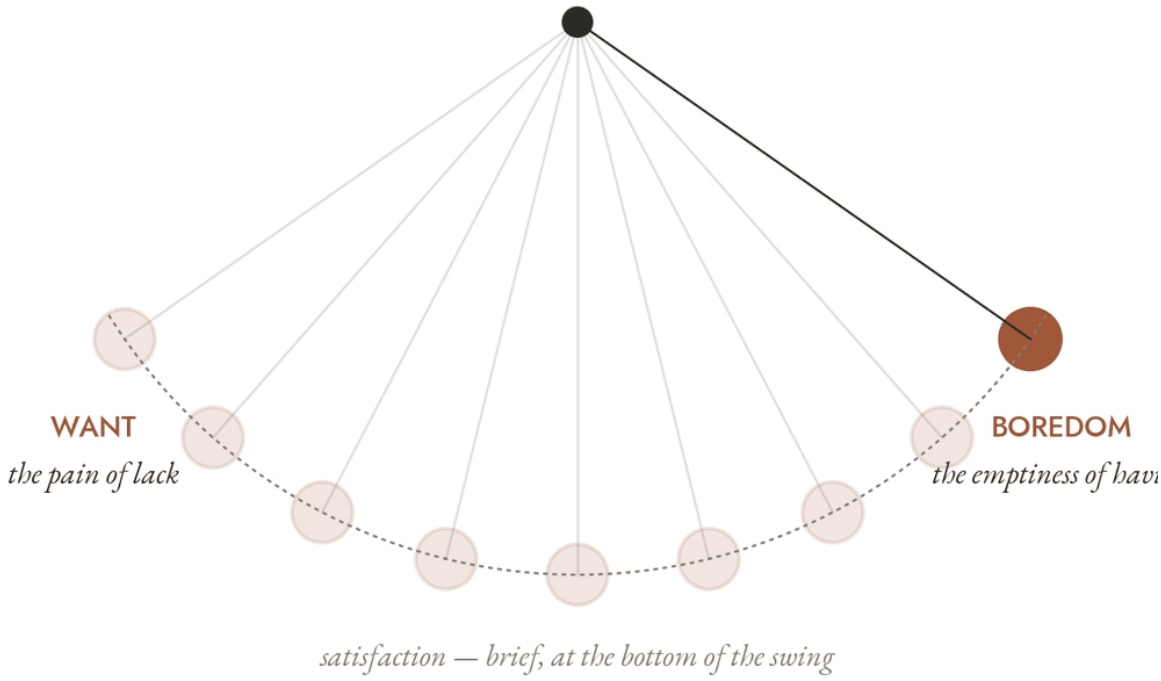


FIGURE 5.1 *Schopenhauer's pendulum: life swings between the pain of wanting and the emptiness of having, pausing only briefly at satisfaction.*

Schopenhauer is easy to dismiss as a gloomy eccentric. But look at what he described: a system in which getting what we want produces only brief satisfaction, followed by a return to restless wanting. Part Two will show that this is a startlingly accurate description of two things modern science has found — hedonic adaptation, and the behaviour of the brain's dopamine system. Schopenhauer's remedies, for what it is worth, were aesthetic contemplation, in which the will falls briefly silent before beauty, and compassion, in which we recognize our shared suffering. Wordsworth, who rescued Mill, would have approved of the first. The Buddha would have approved of both.

Beyond happiness

Friedrich Nietzsche, who learned much from Schopenhauer and rejected his pessimism, mocked the whole English project. Man does not strive for happiness, he jeered; only the Englishman does. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he imagined the "last men" of a comfortable future, who have invented happiness and blink. What mattered was not comfort but greatness, creation, the overcoming of oneself — and the meaning that makes suffering bearable. If we have our own *why* of life, he wrote, we can bear almost any *how*.

Nietzsche's most powerful contribution to our subject is a thought experiment. Imagine, he wrote in 1882, that a demon crept into your loneliest loneliness and told you that you would have to live this life again, exactly as it is, innumerable times — every pain and joy, every thought and sigh. Would you throw yourself down and curse the demon? Or would you answer: never have I heard anything more divine? The *eternal recurrence* is not a theory of time. It is a test of the middle horizon: can you affirm the story of your life as a whole? His word for that affirmation was *amor fati*, love of one's fate.

Would you curse the demon who told you that you must live your life again, exactly as it is, forever — or call it divine?

AFTER FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THE GAY SCIENCE §341 (1882)

Søren Kierkegaard, in Copenhagen, approached the same territory from another angle. In *Either/Or* (1843) he portrayed an "aesthetic" young man who lives for pleasure and interesting experiences, and who fights boredom by rotating his amusements like a farmer rotating crops. Kierkegaard's point was that this life, however clever, ends in despair: it has no centre, no commitment, no self. Read now, the aesthete's strategy looks uncannily like the advice modern psychologists give for slowing hedonic adaptation — vary your pleasures — and Kierkegaard's verdict looks like a warning about what happens when that is all one does.

The abyss and the climb

The twentieth century brought both catastrophe and a new seriousness to the question. Albert Camus, writing in occupied France in 1942, asked whether a life without ultimate meaning was worth living, and answered with the image of Sisyphus, condemned forever to roll a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down. The struggle itself towards the heights, Camus concluded, is enough to fill a human heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Viktor Frankl, a Viennese psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz and the Dachau camps, drew a different conclusion from even darker material. In the camps, he observed, those who had something to live for — a person waiting for them, a task unfinished — were more likely to endure. He quoted Nietzsche's line about the *why* and the *how*. Everything can be taken from a person, he argued, except the freedom to choose one's attitude to one's circumstances. And happiness, he insisted, cannot be pursued; it must *ensue*, as the unintended side effect of dedication to a cause greater than oneself or love for another person.



By the middle of the twentieth century, then, philosophy had mapped the territory with extraordinary richness and left it bitterly contested. Bentham had reduced the good life to the near horizon — moments of pleasure, summed. Kant had placed duty, a far-horizon matter, above happiness altogether. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard had made the shape of a whole life — its story, its commitments, its affirmation — the decisive question. Camus and Frankl had found meaning at the edge of the abyss.

What none of them could do was check. Was Bentham right that people's experience of their lives could be measured? Was Schopenhauer right that satisfaction always fades? Was Frankl right that purpose sustains life? These were, at least in part, empirical questions. In the decades after the Second World War, a new kind of investigator began to ask them.





THE THREE HORIZONS

The moderns pull the three horizons apart and set them against each other. Bentham builds everything on the moment; Kant subordinates happiness to the moral world; Nietzsche's eternal recurrence makes the story of a life the ultimate test; Frankl finds in the far horizon of meaning a strength that survives the collapse of everything nearer. Each saw something the others missed.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Run Nietzsche's test on an ordinary week: would you be willing to live it again, exactly, forever? If not, what single change would make the answer yes?
2. Try Bentham's calculus on a decision you face. Score the options on intensity, duration, certainty, nearness, fecundity, purity and extent. Then notice what the calculus leaves out.
3. Write your own *why* in one sentence. Keep it somewhere you will see it on a hard day.

THREADS

Schopenhauer's pendulum is tested in Chapter 8 (the hedonic treadmill) and Chapter 9 (the dopamine system). Frankl and Camus return in Chapter 14, where meaning is measured. Mill's dictum about not asking whether you are happy is put to the experimental test in Chapter 17.

INTERLUDE I

A Plot in the Garden

THE GARDEN DIALOGUES · SPRING

◎

A community garden on the edge of a city, early April. Rows of allotments, a shed with a kettle, a water butt. An old woman in a wide hat is kneeling at plot fourteen, planting broad beans. At the next plot, choked with last year's weeds, a young woman stands holding a brand-new spade as if it might bite her.

THEODORA You're holding it like a lecture pointer.

SAM Is there a wrong way to hold a spade?

THEODORA There are many wrong ways to hold a spade. That is the first lesson of gardening, and also of philosophy. I'm Theodora. Plot fourteen, for eleven years.

SAM Sam. Plot fifteen, as of yesterday. My therapist suggested I get a hobby that doesn't involve a screen.

THEODORA Your therapist is an Epicurean. What do you do when you're not attacking weeds?

SAM I study happiness. Professionally. I'm a postdoctoral researcher — well-being science. I run surveys, mostly. Experience sampling. I ping people on their phones at random times and ask how they feel.

THEODORA (sitting back on her heels) Do you. And how do they feel?

SAM On average? Slightly good. Most people, most of the time, are mildly positive. It's one of the most robust findings we have.

THEODORA Mildly positive. Aristotle would be appalled. He thought happiness was the highest good, the end of all ends, and you've turned it into a number between one and ten.

SAM Zero and ten, usually. And with respect, Aristotle never checked. He wrote that happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Fine. How would you know if he was wrong?

THEODORA How would you know if *you* were wrong? When you ask someone how happy they are, what do you think you're measuring?

SAM Their answer.

THEODORA Exactly. And is their answer their happiness?

SAM It's … evidence about it. Good evidence, actually. It correlates with what their friends say about them, with how often they smile, with their health years later.

THEODORA Zhuangzi stood on a bridge and said: look at the fish, how happy they are. His friend said: you are not a fish, how do you know? And you, Doctor, are not your participants.

SAM (laughing despite herself) I'm not a doctor yet, technically. And Zhuangzi's answer was a dodge.

THEODORA Zhuangzi's answer was a joke, which is not the same as a dodge. He said: you're not me, how do you know what I know? He meant that we know each other's happiness the way we know anything about each other — imperfectly, through living near one another. Like neighbours.

She hands Sam a small trowel.

THEODORA Here. Weeds first. You can't plant into last year's decisions.

SAM Is that Epicurus too?

THEODORA That's my late husband. He was a plumber, and wiser than most philosophers. Epicurus would have said: begin by

removing pain. Clear the ground, and the pleasure takes care of itself.

SAM (kneeling, pulling at a dandelion) The data are on his side about one thing. People adapt to almost everything good. You get the promotion, the house, the partner — and a year later, you're back near where you started.

THEODORA Schopenhauer's pendulum. Want, then boredom, then want again.

SAM We call it the hedonic treadmill.

THEODORA You call everything by new names. It is very charming. In my day we called it the human condition.

SAM (sitting back) Can I ask you something? Why do you garden? Honestly.

THEODORA (considering) Because it is slow. Because the beans don't care what I think of myself. Because every year I plant something I may not see finished, and every year so far I have. And because once, after the worst year of my life, I found that the only hour of the week I could bear was the hour I spent here with my hands in the soil.

SAM That's — three different answers.

THEODORA Is it? Perhaps it is one answer seen from three distances.

A pause. A blackbird lands on the water butt.

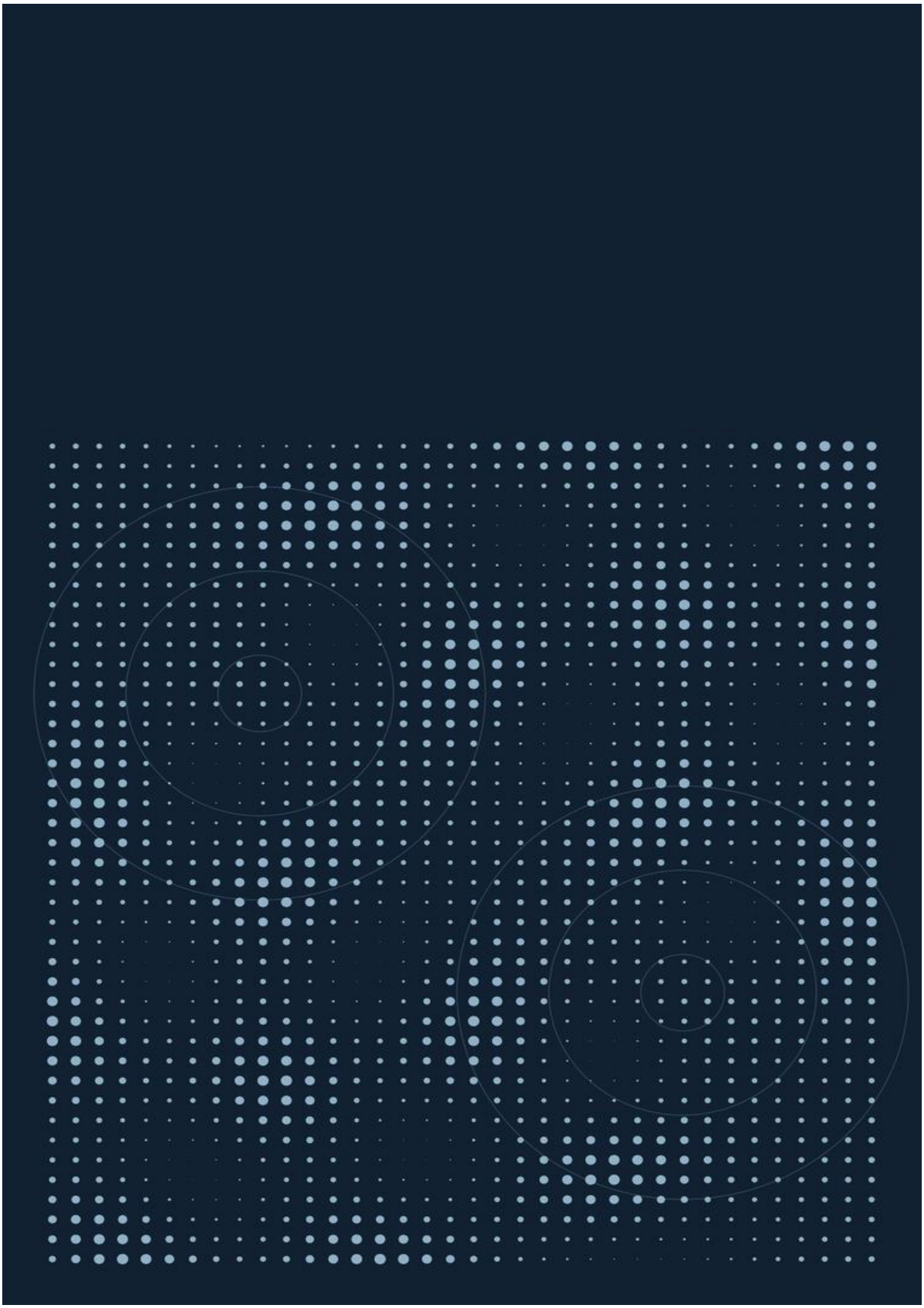
SAM My supervisor wants me to write a paper on what actually predicts well-being. Not what philosophers say. What the data say.

THEODORA Then let us make a bargain. You tell me what your data say, and I will tell you who said it first.

SAM You're going to be insufferable.

THEODORA I am seventy-eight years old and I have a trowel. I have earned it. Saturdays?

SAM (pulling up a long, stubborn root) Saturdays.



PART TWO

The Measure of a Life

How science learned to measure happiness — and what it found inside us

For twenty-five centuries the question of the good life was argued. In the last hundred years it began to be measured. The first instruments were crude: a questionnaire, a ladder drawn on a card, a pager that beeped at random hours. The results were often dismissed as soft. They turned out to be surprisingly hard — stable, predictive, and full of surprises.

Part Two follows the scientists as they learn to measure a life. We will discover that each of us contains two selves with different interests; that we adapt to almost everything, but not quite; that the brain's machinery for wanting is not its machinery for enjoying; and that some of what makes us happy was settled before we were born — though far less than the pessimists once claimed.

◎

6 · Can Happiness Be Measured?

7 · The Two Selves

8 · The Treadmill and the Thermostat

9 · The Brain in Pursuit of Joy

Interlude II: The Weight of Tomatoes

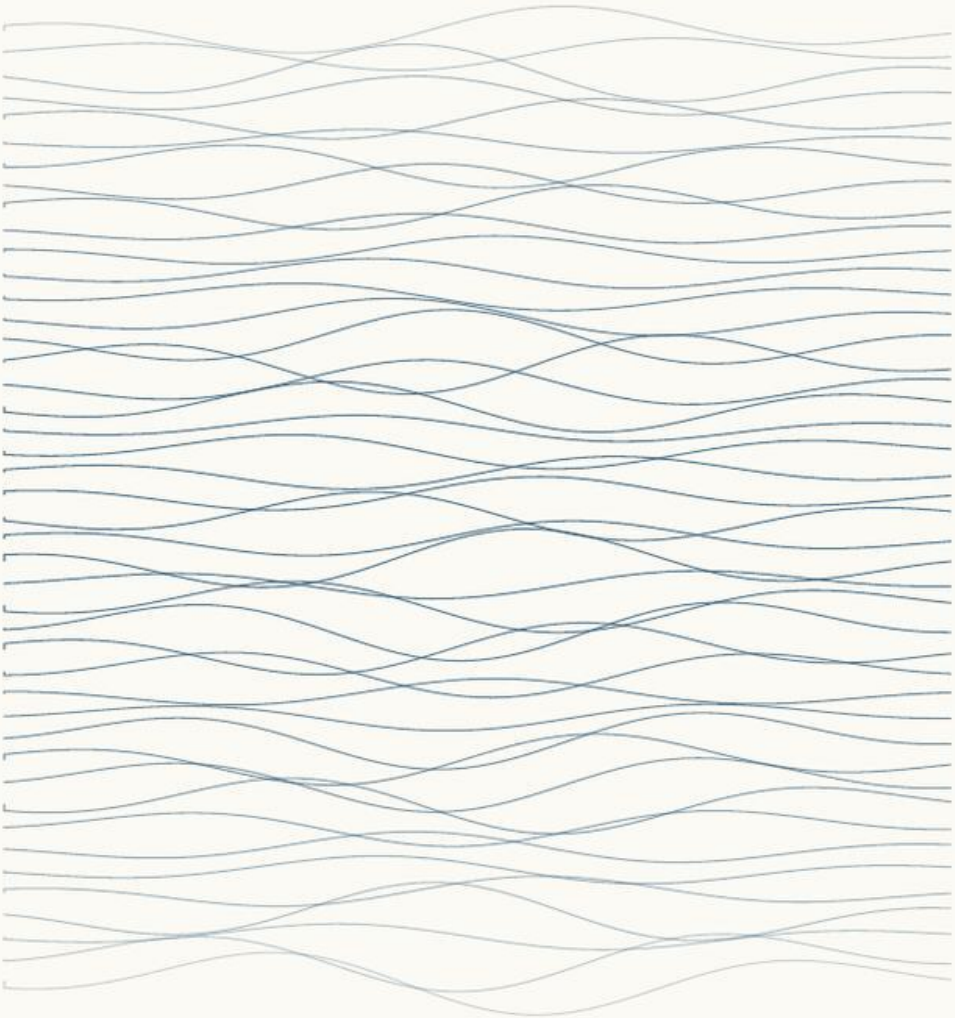


PLATE VII

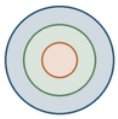
CHAPTER

6

Can Happiness Be Measured?

When you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind.

LORD KELVIN, LECTURE OF 1883



IN MARCH 2026, THE World Happiness Report announced that Finland was the happiest country on earth for the ninth year in a row, followed by Iceland, Denmark and Costa Rica. That same year, a different international survey, which simply asks people whether they consider themselves happy, found Indonesia at the top. A year earlier, the Global Flourishing Study, following more than two hundred thousand people in twenty-two countries, had also ranked Indonesia first, followed by Mexico and the Philippines; Japan, one of the richest and longest-lived societies in history, came last.

So which country is happiest? The honest answer is: it depends what you ask. And that answer, far from being an embarrassment to the science of well-being, is one of its most important discoveries.

A CLOSER LOOK

Three rankings, three questions

The World Happiness Report asks roughly a thousand people per country, through the Gallup World Poll, to imagine a ladder whose top is the best possible life for them and whose bottom is the worst, and to say which rung they stand on. It measures *life evaluation* — the story. In 2026, for the second year running, no English-speaking country made its top ten; the United States ranked 23rd and the United Kingdom 29th of 147.

The Ipsos Happiness Index asks people whether they would describe themselves as happy. Its answers lean towards *feeling* — closer to the moment.

The Global Flourishing Study combines measures of happiness and life satisfaction with health, meaning and purpose, character, close relationships and financial security. It reaches towards the far horizon — and rewards societies rich in relationships, faith and purpose even where incomes are modest.

From questionnaires to science

The first questionnaires about happiness appeared in the 1920s and 1930s, mostly in American universities, and they were easy to mock. You cannot put the soul on a scale. Yet the measures kept doing something awkward for the sceptics: they *worked*. They were stable over time, they agreed with other evidence, and they predicted things that mattered.

In 1965 the social psychologist Hadley Cantril published a study of hopes and fears in more than a dozen countries using a deceptively simple instrument: the ladder that the World Happiness Report still uses today. Four years later, the sociologist Norman Bradburn made a discovery that still surprises people. Positive and negative feelings, he found, are not simply opposites. A person can have many of both, or few of both; reducing someone's misery does not automatically fill their life with joy. Well-being has more than one dimension.

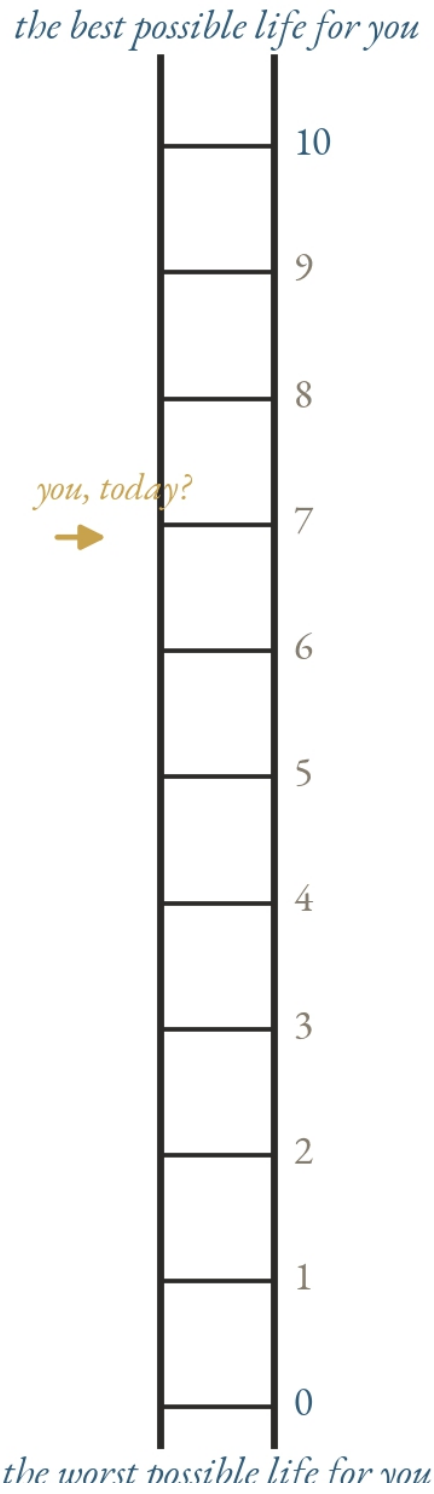


FIGURE 6.1 *The Cantril ladder, used in the World Happiness Report: a measure of the middle horizon, the story.*

In 1984 Ed Diener, then at the University of Illinois, drew the scattered research together under a name that stuck: *subjective well-being*. He proposed that it has three components — a cognitive judgment of life satisfaction, the presence of positive feelings, and the relative absence of negative ones. The following year he and his colleagues published a five-item Satisfaction With Life Scale, which asks people how far they agree with statements such as whether their life is, in most ways, close to their ideal. It has since been used in thousands of studies.

The next leap came from pagers. In the 1970s, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues began giving people beepers that went off at random moments during the day; each time, participants noted what they were doing, with whom, and how they felt. This *experience sampling method* caught life as it was lived rather than as it was later remembered. Today the pager is a phone app, and studies collect millions of such moments. Daniel Kahneman and colleagues later devised a cheaper cousin, the *Day Reconstruction Method*, in which people reconstruct the previous day as a series of episodes, like scenes in a film, and rate their feelings in each.

Does it measure anything real?

The obvious objection to all this is Zhuangzi's: how can anyone know another's happiness? And the more sophisticated objection is that self-reports are fragile. Ask people about their dating life just before asking about their life satisfaction, and the two become far more strongly linked than if you ask in the reverse order — the first question shapes what people bring to mind when answering the second. Ask on a sunny day and, in a famous early study, people reported higher life satisfaction than on a rainy one.

But the science of well-being has spent decades stress-testing its own instruments, and the results are reassuring. When researchers analysed the weather effect in samples of around a million people, it turned out to be vanishingly small. Self-reported happiness agrees

reasonably well with the ratings of friends and family, with the frequency of genuine smiles, with patterns of brain activity, and with what people do. And it predicts the future.

THE EVIDENCE

The nuns' autobiographies

WHO AND WHEN Deborah Danner, David Snowdon and Wallace Friesen, 2001.

WHAT THEY DID Analysed short autobiographies written in the 1930s and 1940s by 180 young Catholic nuns, then in their early twenties, counting expressions of positive emotion. Six decades later, they checked who was still alive.

WHAT THEY FOUND Nuns whose essays expressed the most positive emotion lived markedly longer than those who expressed the least — by most estimates around seven to ten years. The nuns shared diet, housing, work and access to care, which removed many usual confounds.

THE CAVEAT A single, unusual population, and emotional expression in writing is not the same as happiness. But similar links between positive feelings and health appear in large studies elsewhere, including one in which older adults whose moment-to-moment positive feelings were highest had a substantially lower risk of dying over the following five years.

The emerging consensus is not that self-reports are perfect but that they are like most scientific measures: noisy, biased in known ways, and informative when used carefully and at scale. The old quip applies: the plural of anecdote is not data, but the plural of honest self-report, collected properly, very nearly is.

Beyond feeling good

As the field matured, a second tradition grew alongside the first. In 1989 Carol Ryff argued that subjective well-being, however well measured, captured only part of what philosophers had meant by a good life. Drawing on Aristotle and on twentieth-century psychologists such as Erikson and Maslow, she proposed six dimensions of *psychological well-being*: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in

life and personal growth. Around the same time, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci developed *self-determination theory*, which holds that human beings have three basic psychological needs — for autonomy, competence and relatedness — whose satisfaction fosters well-being across cultures.

In 2002 the sociologist Corey Keyes proposed a diagnosis to mirror the diagnosis of mental illness. People who score high on both feeling good and functioning well are *flourishing*; people low on both are *languishing* — a hollow state of stagnation that is not depression but is not health either. In his American sample, fewer than one in five adults qualified as flourishing. In 2011 Martin Seligman offered a popular five-part model, PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. And in the 2020s, Tyler VanderWeele's Global Flourishing Study adopted six domains: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability.

Scientists inherited their categories from philosophers — often without knowing it.

The map reappears

Step back from this proliferation of scales and a striking pattern comes into view. The science of well-being has converged on three broad families of measures, and they correspond almost exactly to the three philosophical theories of Chapter 1 and to the Three Horizons of the Prologue.

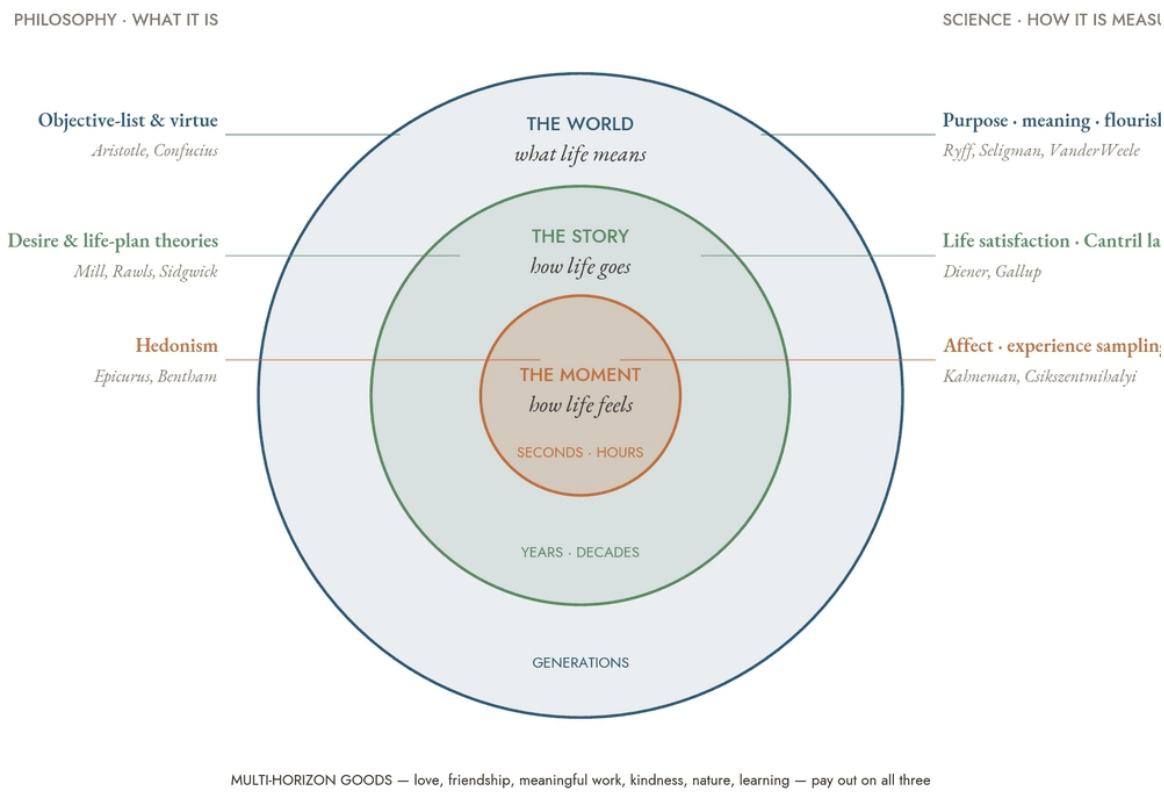


FIGURE 6.2 *The Three Horizons as a meeting point: each philosophical theory of well-being has a scientific counterpart that measures it.*

Measures of experience — moment-by-moment feelings, sampled in real time — are the science of the near horizon, and the heirs of hedonism. **Measures of evaluation** — life satisfaction, the Cantril ladder — are the science of the middle horizon: they ask people to step back and judge the story of their lives against their own standards, much as desire and life-plan theories said they should. **Measures of flourishing** — purpose, meaning, growth, virtue, relationships — are the science of the far horizon, and the heirs of Aristotle and the objective list.

These measures overlap, but they are not interchangeable, and they respond to different things. This is why Finland, Indonesia and Japan can occupy such different positions in different rankings. Finland's security, trust and institutions give its citizens a sturdy middle horizon: they judge their lives as going well. Indonesians, in the Flourishing Study, scored highly on relationships, meaning and religious community — the far horizon — despite lower incomes.

Japan, wealthy and long-lived, scored low on several of the measures most connected to social connection and meaning. None of these rankings is wrong. Each is looking at a different ring.

You are not a fish. How do you know what fish enjoy?

HUIZI TO ZHUANGZI, ZHUANGZI 17

The idea that well-being has several dimensions, measured on different timescales, may seem like a complication. It is actually a liberation. It means that a life can be going well in one way and badly in another, and that knowing which is which tells you what to do. Someone whose days feel fine but whose life seems to be going nowhere needs something different from someone whose life is a success story but whose days are joyless. Mill, at twenty, could have scored perfectly on a measure of purpose while failing every measure of feeling.

Zhuangzi, standing on his bridge, was right that no one can step inside another's mind. But he was also right in his answer: we know one another's happiness as neighbours do, by attending carefully and over time. The science of well-being is, at its best, a very large and very careful neighbourhood.

THE THREE HORIZONS

Each horizon now has its instrument: experience sampling for the moment, the ladder for the story, purpose and flourishing scales for the world. The measures diverge in instructive ways, and their divergence explains why "the happiest country" depends on the question asked. Measuring all three is the first step towards caring for all three.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Rate yourself three ways tonight, each from 0 to 10: how good today *felt*; where your life stands on the ladder; how much your life *matters* beyond yourself. Notice which number surprised you.
2. Run a one-week experience sampling study on yourself: set three random phone alarms a day, and each time note what you are doing, with whom, and how you feel. At the end, look for patterns you did not expect.
3. Ask someone who knows you well to rate how happy they think you are. Compare it with your own rating.

THREADS

The difference between experience and evaluation is explored in Chapter 7 (the two selves) and Chapter 11 (why money affects one more than the other). National differences return in Chapter 20, and cultural differences in what people want to feel in Chapter 21.

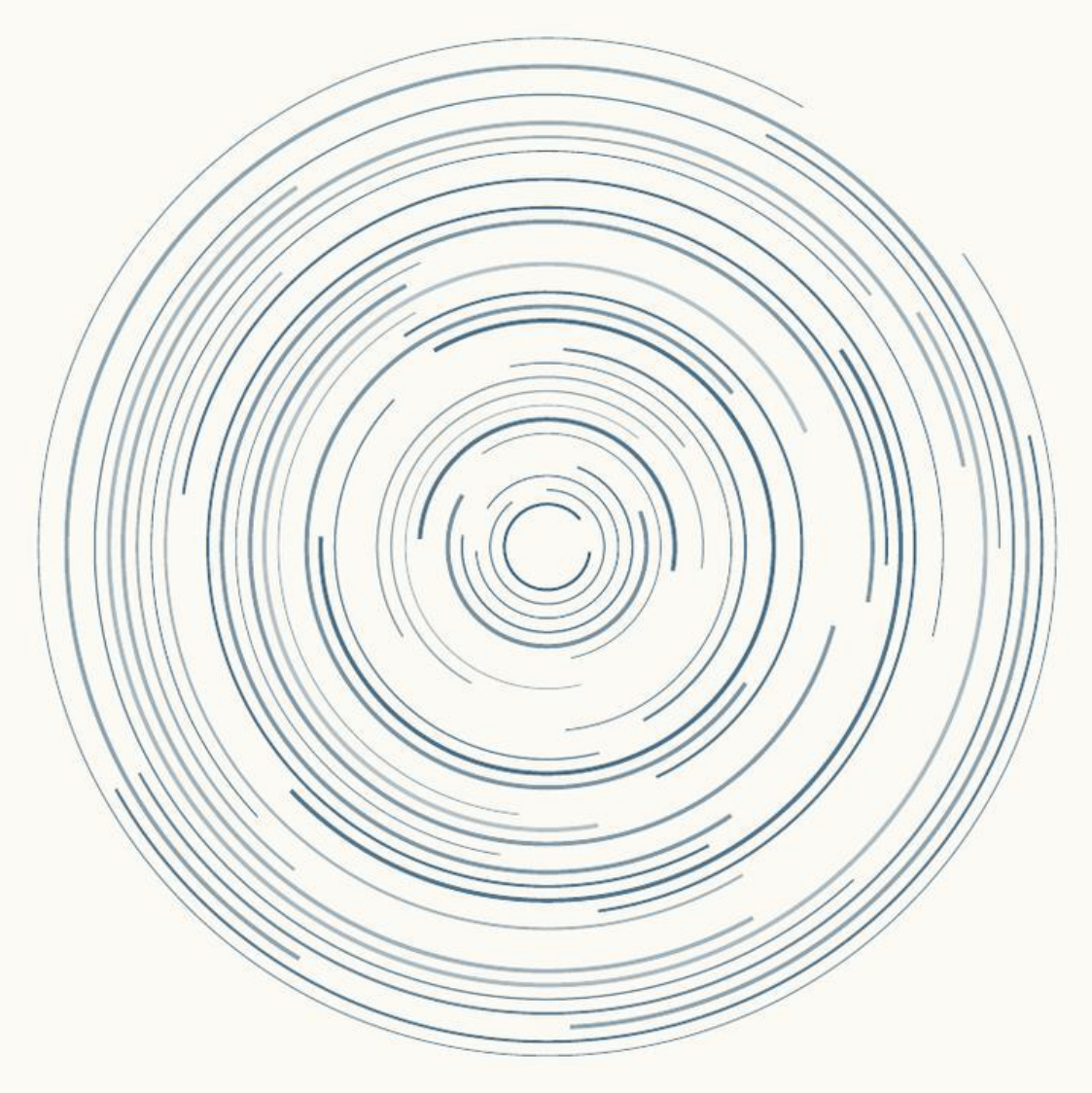


PLATE VIII

CHAPTER

7

The Two Selves

Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD, JOURNALS (1843)



IMAGINE YOU ARE A volunteer in a psychology laboratory in the early 1990s. You are asked to plunge one hand into water cold enough to hurt — fourteen degrees Celsius — and hold it there for sixty seconds. Some minutes later, you do it again with the other hand. This time the trial lasts ninety seconds: the first sixty exactly as before, then thirty more during which, without telling you, the experimenters let a little warmer water flow in, raising the temperature by about a degree. Still painful, but slightly less so.

Then you are told you must do one more trial, and you may choose which of the two to repeat.

Most people chose the longer one. They chose, in other words, to endure *more* pain — the same sixty seconds, plus thirty additional seconds of slightly milder discomfort — because the longer trial *ended* better, and so it was remembered as less bad.

The colonoscopy and the rule

The cold-hand study, published in 1993 by Daniel Kahneman, Barbara Fredrickson and colleagues, was one of a series of experiments that revealed something unsettling about how we

evaluate our own experience. A few years later, Donald Redelmeier and Kahneman studied patients undergoing colonoscopy, then a far more painful procedure than it is today. Patients reported their pain every sixty seconds; afterwards, they gave an overall rating of how unpleasant the whole thing had been.

The overall ratings followed a strikingly simple rule. They were predicted by two moments: the *peak* — the worst moment — and the *end*. The duration of the procedure, which ranged from a few minutes to more than an hour, barely mattered. Kahneman called these patterns the *peak-end rule* and *duration neglect*.

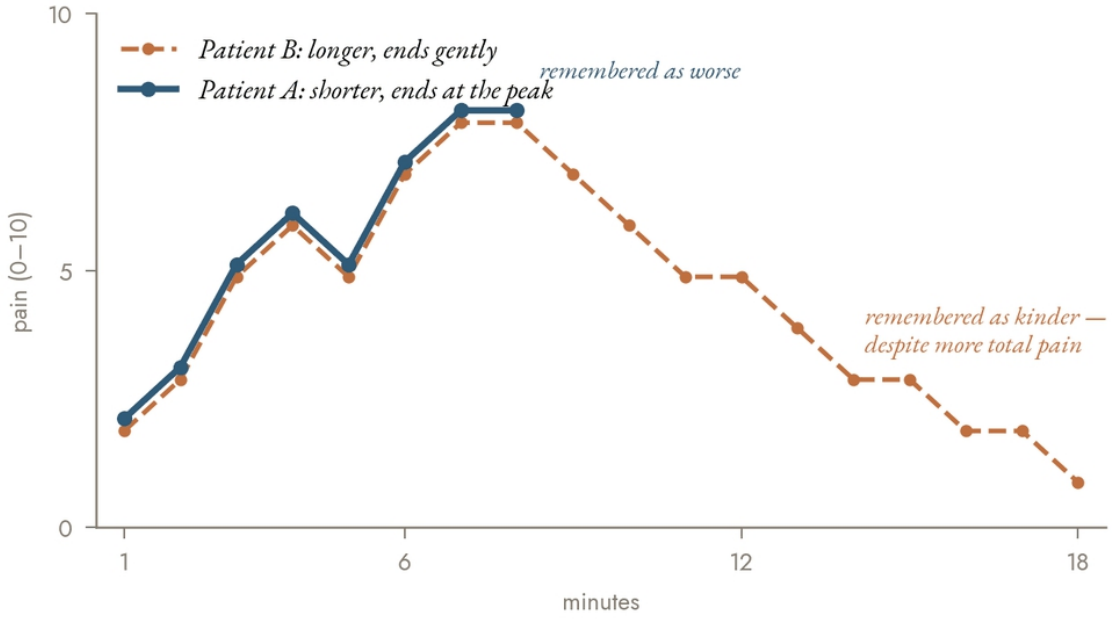


FIGURE 7.1 *Illustrative of Redelmeier and Kahneman (1996). Patient B endured more total pain, but because the procedure ended gently, B was likely to remember it as less unpleasant than A.*

The implications were tested in a randomized trial. For some patients, at the end of the procedure, the doctor left the scope in place for a short while without moving it — a mildly uncomfortable interval rather than a painful one. These patients went through more total discomfort. Yet they remembered the procedure as less

unpleasant, and were slightly more likely to come back for their next screening.

Two selves, two interests

Kahneman proposed that each of us contains two selves. The *experiencing self* lives in the present moment and answers the question "does it hurt now?" The *remembering self* keeps the score and answers the question "how was it, on the whole?" The two do not agree, and it is the remembering self, Kahneman observed, that makes our decisions. We do not choose between experiences; we choose between memories of experiences.

We do not choose between experiences. We choose between memories of experiences.

The remembering self governs our holidays, too. In one study, students on spring break reported their feelings several times a day during the trip and again afterwards. Whether they wanted to repeat the trip was predicted not by how they had felt during it but by how they *remembered* feeling — and the memories were rosier than the reality.

In the language of this book, the experiencing self lives on the **near horizon** and the remembering self composes the **middle horizon**: the story. The two selves have different interests, and they can be in direct conflict. The experiencing self would prefer the shorter colonoscopy. The remembering self prefers the gentler ending. Whom should we serve?

Philosophers will recognize the question at once. It is Solon's. The remembering self is the one who, like Solon, looks to the end. And Aristotle, two centuries later, worried at length about whether the fortunes of a person's descendants could affect how well the person's

life had gone — whether, in other words, a story can be changed after its hero is gone.

THE EVIDENCE

The James Dean effect

WHO AND WHEN Ed Diener, Derrick Wirtz and Shigehiro Oishi, 2001.

WHAT THEY DID Asked people to evaluate fictional lives — for example, a life of great happiness that ended abruptly, or the same life followed by five additional years that were pleasant but less so.

WHAT THEY FOUND Many people judged the life that ended at its peak to be more desirable than the life with five additional good years. Adding mildly happy years made the whole life seem worse. The researchers named it after the actor who died young at the height of his fame.

THE CAVEAT Judgments about imaginary lives may not reflect how people weigh their own. But the result is peak-end and duration neglect at the scale of a whole life — the remembering self judging a story rather than summing its days.

The fortune-tellers in our heads

If the remembering self distorts the past, the predicting self distorts the future. In a long series of studies beginning in the 1990s, Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson examined *affective forecasting* — people's predictions of how future events will make them feel. People turn out to be good at predicting whether an event will feel good or bad. They are poor at predicting how *much*, and especially for how *long*. This is the *impact bias*.

In one study, young academics predicted how unhappy they would be in the years after being denied tenure. Those who were in fact denied it turned out to be considerably less unhappy than they had expected. Similar patterns appeared for the end of romantic relationships, for elections lost by one's candidate, for bad results of medical tests. One reason, Gilbert and Wilson argued, is *immune neglect*: we underestimate the psychological immune system — our extraordinary capacity to make sense of, reframe and recover from bad events. Another is *focalism*: when we imagine a future event, we

imagine it in isolation, forgetting all the other things that will also fill our days.

The most memorable demonstration is the *focusing illusion*. David Schkade and Daniel Kahneman asked students in the American Midwest and in Southern California about their life satisfaction. The two groups were equally satisfied. Yet both groups predicted that Californians would be happier — because, when asked to imagine life in California, people focused on the most salient difference, the climate, and forgot that daily life in either place is mostly made of work, friends, commuting and sleep. When you think about any single feature of life, Kahneman concluded, it seems more important than it really is.

Editing the story

Because the remembering self is a storyteller, the stories it tells matter. The psychologist Dan McAdams has spent decades studying *narrative identity* — the internalized, evolving story each of us constructs to make sense of our lives. He and his colleagues found that people who tell their lives with *redemption sequences*, in which bad events lead to good outcomes — a loss that taught them something, a failure that redirected them — tend to report greater well-being and to be more committed to caring for others and future generations. People whose stories contain *contamination sequences*, in which good things turn bad, tend to report more depression.

The cause can run both ways: happier people may simply tell happier stories. But there is experimental evidence that changing how we narrate experience can change how we feel. In the 1980s the psychologist James Pennebaker asked students to write for fifteen minutes a day, on four consecutive days, about their deepest thoughts and feelings concerning a traumatic or upsetting experience. Compared with students who wrote about superficial topics, they visited the health centre less often in the following months. Later work suggested that the benefit came partly from

making sense of the experience — from turning a chaos of feelings into a story with a shape.

What was hard to endure is sweet to remember.

SENECA, HERCULES FURENS

What should we do with the knowledge that we contain two selves? One answer, which Kahneman himself favoured for much of his career, is that the experiencing self is the one that really lives our lives, and that we should give it more weight. But in interviews late in life, he admitted that people do not seem to want what that view prescribes. What they want, apparently, is to be satisfied with their lives — to have a story they can live with.

The better answer may be that we need both selves, and that the art is to make them allies. We can design experiences so that the moments and the memories both go well: protect the peaks, end things kindly, and refuse to let a single bad ending rewrite a good chapter. And we can remember, when making plans, that the remembering self is a biased narrator — that the commute, the drudgery and the weather we ignore when imagining the future will fill the days we actually live.



THE THREE HORIZONS

The two selves are the near and middle horizons given voices. The experiencing self lives in the moment; the remembering self writes the story and makes the choices. They obey different rules — the moment adds up, the story is ruled by peaks and endings — and much unhappiness comes from serving one while neglecting the other.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. End things well on purpose. Close each workday with one small pleasant ritual, finish holidays with your best day rather than a rushed departure, end difficult conversations with a moment of warmth.
2. Before your next big decision, write down how you predict you will feel one month after each option. Seal it. Check your forecast when the month is up.
3. Choose a setback from your past and write about it for fifteen minutes on three consecutive days, asking not only what happened but what it has come to mean. Do not force a happy ending; let the story find its shape.

THREADS

The peak-end rule returns at the scale of whole lives in Chapter 19, where endings shape regret. The impact bias explains why adaptation surprises us in Chapter 8. The storytelling self reappears in Chapter 14, where meaning in life is found to depend on coherence.

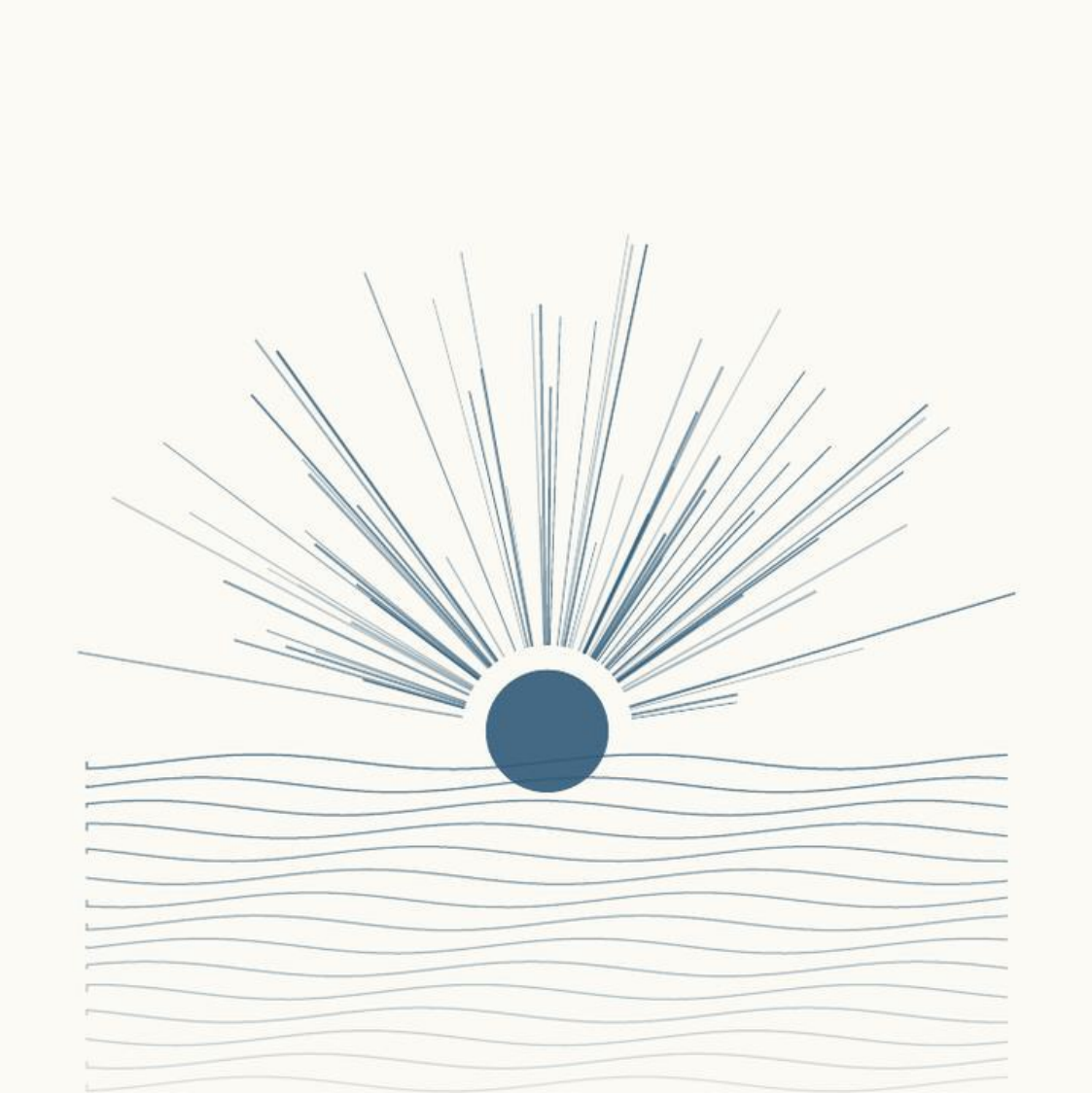


PLATE IX

CHAPTER

8

The Treadmill and the Thermostat

The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

ECCLESIASTES 1:8



IN 1971 THE PSYCHOLOGISTS Philip Brickman and Donald Campbell published an essay with a provocative title, "Hedonic relativism and planning the good society." Human beings, they argued, judge every experience against an *adaptation level* — a baseline set by their recent experience. When circumstances improve, we feel good, briefly; then the baseline rises to meet the new circumstances, and we feel as we did before. We are, they wrote, on a *hedonic treadmill*: running ever faster to stay in the same place. If that was true, they concluded, no amount of social progress could make people lastingly happier.

Seven years later, Brickman and two colleagues published the study that made the treadmill famous. They interviewed twenty-two people who had won large prizes in the Illinois state lottery, twenty-nine people who had been paralysed in accidents, and a comparison group of their neighbours. The lottery winners were not significantly happier than the comparison group, and they took less pleasure in ordinary things — talking with a friend, hearing a joke, eating breakfast. The accident victims were less happy than the others, but less unhappy than almost anyone would have predicted, and they expected to be as happy as anyone in the years ahead.

The legend and the data

Few studies in psychology have been retold so often or so loosely. It has been cited for the claim that winning the lottery makes no difference and that paralysis makes no difference. Neither claim is true, and the study, with its tiny samples, could not have established either.

Much larger studies have since filled in the picture. Economists studying British lottery winners found that medium-sized wins were followed, after a couple of years, by measurably better mental health. In 2020 a team led by Erik Lindqvist studied thousands of Swedish lottery players and found that large prizes produced sustained increases in *life satisfaction* — lasting, in their data, for many years — but little detectable change in day-to-day happiness or mental health. Notice the pattern. The money changed the middle horizon — how people judged their lives — more than the near horizon of how their days felt. We will meet exactly this pattern again when we look at income in Chapter 11.

THE EVIDENCE

Adaptation in the long run

WHO AND WHEN Richard Lucas, Andrew Clark, Yannis Georgellis and Ed Diener, 2003–2007.

WHAT THEY DID Used a German panel study that followed tens of thousands of people every year for well over a decade, observing their life satisfaction before and after major life events.

WHAT THEY FOUND On average, people got a boost around marriage that faded back to their earlier level within a couple of years. Widowhood produced a deep drop and a slow recovery that took many years. Unemployment lowered life satisfaction in a way that persisted even after people found new jobs. Serious disability produced substantial, lasting declines.

THE CAVEAT Averages conceal enormous individual differences — some people adapt quickly, some never. Adaptation is a powerful tendency, not a law.

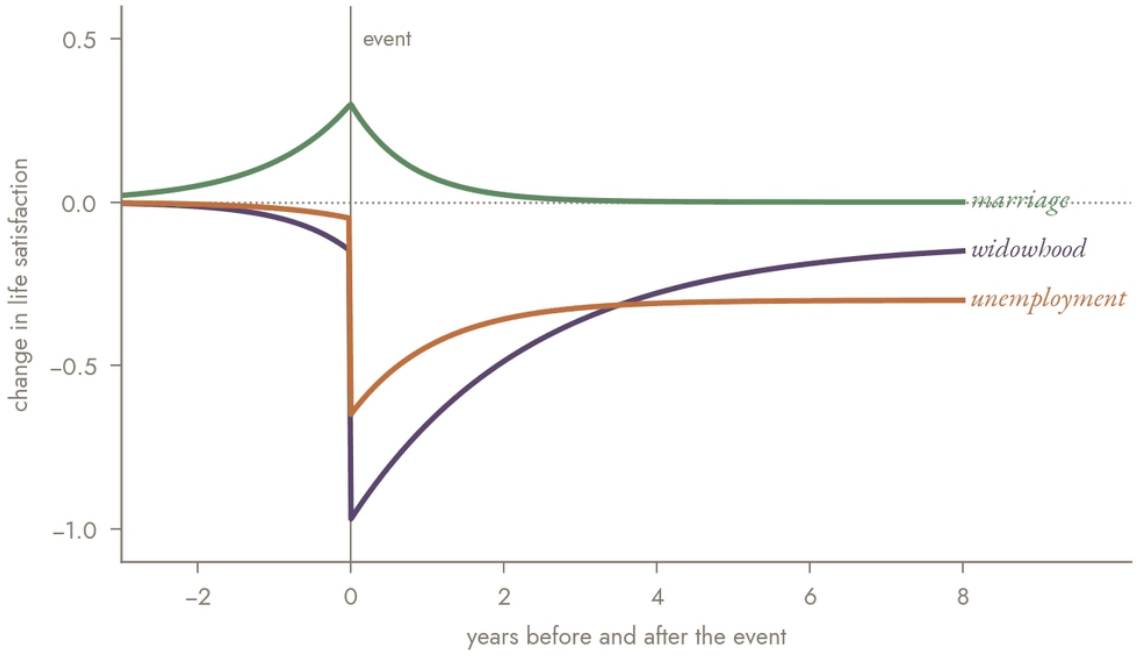


FIGURE 8.1 *Illustrative of the patterns reported by Lucas and colleagues: we adapt to many events, but not fully or equally to all.*

The thermostat

If the treadmill is one metaphor, the other is the thermostat. In the 1980s the Australian researchers Bruce Headey and Alexander Wearing proposed that each person has a characteristic level of well-being to which they tend to return — a *set point*, maintained by personality much as a thermostat maintains the temperature of a room. In 1996 the behavioural geneticists David Lykken and Auke Tellegen, studying hundreds of twins in Minnesota, reported that the stable, long-term component of well-being was strongly heritable. Their conclusion was famously bleak: trying to be happier, they suggested, might be as futile as trying to be taller.

They later softened that line, and the field has moved well beyond it. In 2006 Ed Diener, Richard Lucas and Christie Scollon proposed five revisions to set-point theory. Set points are not neutral: most people's baseline is mildly positive. People differ, partly because of

temperament. Each person may have several set points, for different components of well-being, which can move independently. Set points *can* change. And people differ in how fully they adapt.

What genes do and do not decide

Twin studies have now been pooled across many countries. A 2015 meta-analysis by Meike Bartels estimated that around a third of the differences between people in well-being are associated with genetic differences — roughly 36 per cent for well-being in general and 32 per cent for life satisfaction. Genome-wide studies have begun to identify specific genetic variants, each of tiny effect. Much of the genetic influence appears to run through temperament: people prone to positive emotion and sociability, and less prone to anxiety and gloom — high in extraversion, low in neuroticism — tend to report greater well-being.

But heritability is one of the most misunderstood numbers in science. It describes how much of the *variation* in a trait, within a particular population at a particular time, is associated with genetic variation. It says nothing about whether the trait can change. Consider height, which is highly heritable — around 80 per cent in well-nourished populations. In the mid-nineteenth century the Dutch were among the shorter peoples of Europe. Over the next century and a half, with better nutrition, health and living conditions, average Dutch height rose by around twenty centimetres, making them the tallest people on earth. The genes did not change. The environment did.

Heritability tells you how people differ. It does not tell you what is possible.

In 2005 Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon Sheldon and David Schkade published a model of what they called *sustainable happiness*, illustrated with a pie chart: 50 per cent of the differences in happiness due to genes, 10 per cent to circumstances, and 40 per cent to intentional activity. The pie became one of the most reproduced images in popular psychology, a promise that 40 per cent of our happiness was in our hands. In 2020 the researchers Nicholas Brown and Julia Rohrer published a careful critique. The 40 per cent had never been measured; it was simply what was left over. Variance decomposition describes populations and cannot be cut into slices for an individual. And genes and environment interact rather than adding up. The pie's original authors themselves came to describe it as an oversimplification.

The truth is less tidy and more hopeful. Genes shape our tendencies, but they work through behaviours, environments and choices — through the friends we make, the activities we seek, the way we interpret events. A temperament is not a sentence. It is a starting position.

Why the treadmill exists

Why would evolution build a mind that adapts away its own good fortune? The answer becomes obvious when you imagine the alternative. A creature permanently satisfied by its first good meal, its first safe shelter, its first mate would stop foraging, building and competing — and would soon be outcompeted by creatures who did not. Natural selection does not care whether we are happy. It cares whether we keep trying. Adaptation keeps us trying.

There is a deeper principle at work, which the next chapter will trace into the brain. Nervous systems are built to respond to *change*. A constant smell fades from awareness; a constant sound becomes background; a constant circumstance becomes the baseline against which new events are judged. This is why Epicurus could say that

pleasure beyond the removal of pain can only be varied, not increased, and why Schopenhauer's pendulum keeps swinging.

What we do not adapt to

The exceptions are as revealing as the rule. People adapt poorly to things that never settle into a predictable background: noise that is intermittent and uncontrollable; long commutes, whose daily friction never quite becomes invisible; chronic pain; ongoing conflict at home; loneliness. Economists studying German commuters found that people with longer commutes reported lower life satisfaction, and were not compensated by higher pay or better housing. The things that resist adaptation have something in common: they keep demanding attention.

That principle can be turned to our advantage. If we adapt to what stays the same, then the pleasures that last are those that stay *new*: experiences with variety and surprise, relationships that keep growing, skills that keep deepening. Kennon Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky found that positive changes in people's lives kept boosting their well-being for longer when people continued to experience variety in them and continued to *appreciate* them. And there is a still simpler trick. In one experiment, people who gave up chocolate for a week enjoyed it more when they returned to it than people who had been eating it freely. Abstinence, in other words, resets the treadmill.

A CLOSER LOOK

Working with the treadmill, not against it

Spend on things that keep changing — experiences, learning, time with people — rather than on things that become furniture.

Introduce variety into good routines: a different walk, a new recipe, an unfamiliar piece of music.

Practise appreciation deliberately: noticing what you have works against the baseline's silent rise.

Take occasional breaks from pleasures you love, so that you can meet them again.

Remove, where you can, the things that resist adaptation: the long commute, the constant noise, the chronic quarrel.

Nothing is enough for the one to whom enough is too little.

EPICURUS, VATICAN SAYINGS 68

The treadmill was once taken as proof that the pursuit of happiness was futile. It is better understood as a description of how the pursuit works. Some changes fade; some last; some resist adaptation entirely. The art is to know which is which — and to spend our efforts on the ones that last.

THE THREE HORIZONS

Adaptation acts differently on different horizons. The moment adapts fastest: new comforts quickly become the baseline against which days feel ordinary. The story adapts more slowly and less completely — lottery winners judged their lives better for years. The far horizon, as we will see, may be the least subject to adaptation of all.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Make an adaptation audit: list five things you bought or achieved in the past five years. Which still give you pleasure? What do the survivors have in common?
2. Give up one small pleasure for a week — coffee, a favourite show, dessert. On the eighth day, notice how it feels to return.
3. Identify one source of daily friction that you have not adapted to. Ask what it would take to remove or shorten it, and treat that as a serious investment in well-being.

THREADS

Schopenhauer's pendulum (Chapter 5) receives its neural explanation in Chapter 9. The divergence between the moment and the story appears again with income in Chapter 11. The idea that variety and appreciation slow adaptation returns as savouring and gratitude in Chapters 15 and 24.

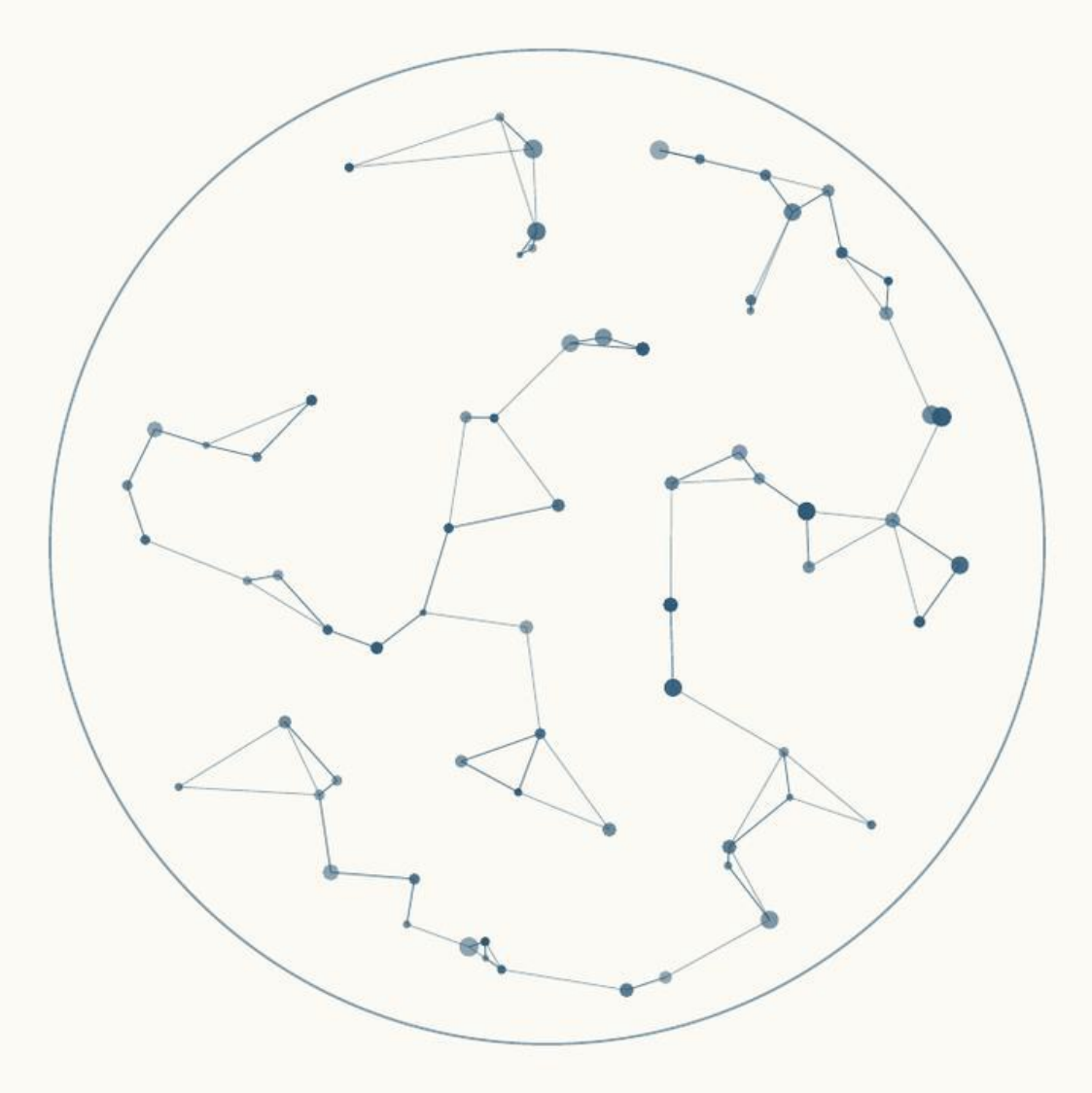


PLATE X

CHAPTER

9

The Brain in Pursuit of Joy

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, HAMLET, ACT II (C. 1600)



IN 1954 TWO YOUNG researchers at McGill University, James Olds and Peter Milner, were trying to implant electrodes in a region of the rat brain involved in arousal. One electrode missed its target. The rat that carried it kept returning to the corner of its box where it had received a mild current, as if hoping for more. When the researchers allowed rats with such electrodes to stimulate themselves by pressing a lever, some pressed it thousands of times an hour, neglecting food and water. Newspapers announced the discovery of the brain's "pleasure centre."

It took several decades to discover that the rats were not, in the simplest sense, experiencing pleasure at all.

Wanting is not liking

The key figure in this second discovery is the neuroscientist Kent Berridge. In the 1980s and 1990s, Berridge and his colleagues were studying the neurotransmitter dopamine, then widely regarded as the brain's pleasure chemical. To measure pleasure in animals, they used a clever tool: facial expressions. When a newborn human baby tastes something sweet, she licks her lips and her face relaxes; when she tastes something bitter, she gapes and wrinkles her nose. Rats

and apes show much the same reactions. These expressions offer a window into *liking*.

Berridge and his colleagues then destroyed almost all the dopamine in rats' brains. The rats would no longer eat voluntarily; without help, they would starve. And yet, when sugar was placed in their mouths, they still showed the full facial expression of liking. Conversely, when dopamine was boosted, animals worked much harder to get rewards, but did not seem to like them any more when they got them.

The conclusion overturned decades of assumption. Dopamine is not the chemical of pleasure. It is the chemical of *wanting* — of what Berridge calls *incentive salience*, the magnetic pull that makes a reward attention-grabbing and motivates us to pursue it. *Liking* — the actual pleasure — is produced by a different and far smaller set of mechanisms: tiny *hedonic hotspots*, in a rat each roughly a cubic millimetre in volume, in deep brain structures, using opioid and cannabinoid-like chemicals.

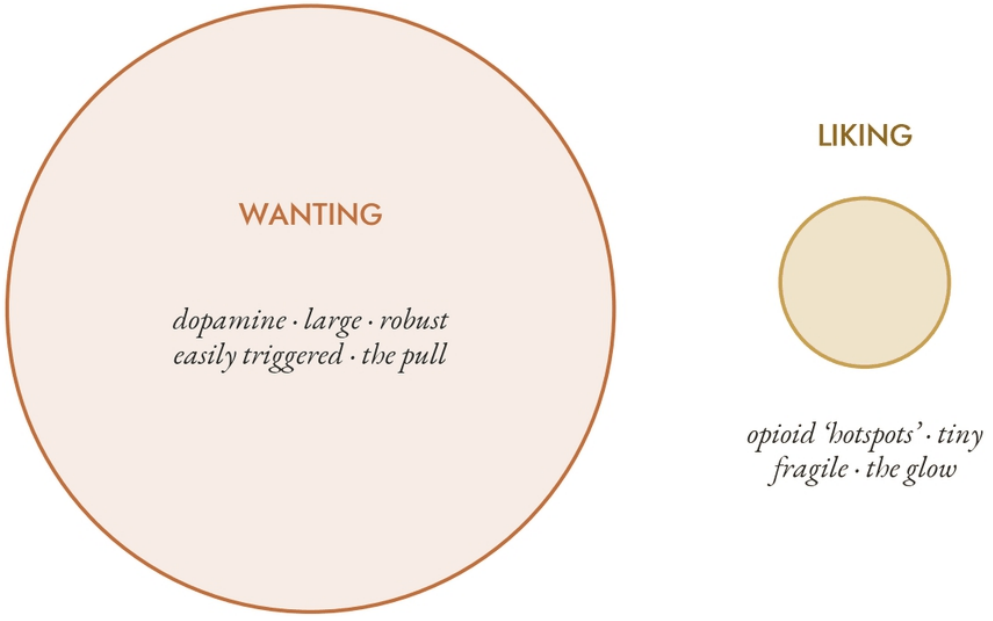


FIGURE 9.1 *Two systems: a large, robust system for wanting and small, fragile hotspots for liking.*

The asymmetry is the point. The wanting system is large and easily triggered. The liking system is small and easily disrupted. This explains a good deal about human life. It explains why craving is so easy and enjoyment so elusive. It explains addiction, in which — according to Berridge and Terry Robinson's theory of incentive sensitization — wanting grows stronger with each exposure while liking stays flat or declines, so that people come to want intensely what they no longer enjoy. And it suggests that a life organized around wanting will be restless, and a life organized around liking will be more contented.

Twenty-five centuries earlier, the Buddha had named the central problem of human life *taṇhā*, thirst. He had observed that craving and pleasure are not the same thing — that we can crave what does not satisfy, and be driven by thirst even in the midst of plenty. Neuroscience had found the thirst.

The surprise machine

A second discovery explained why the thirst never ends. In the 1990s the neuroscientist Wolfram Schultz recorded the activity of individual dopamine neurons in monkeys receiving drops of juice. When juice arrived unexpectedly, the neurons fired in a burst. But when a light reliably signalled that juice was coming, the burst moved from the juice to the light, and the juice itself, now fully expected, produced no burst at all. If the light appeared and the juice did not come, the neurons' activity dipped below baseline at the moment the juice should have arrived.

Together with the computational neuroscientists Peter Dayan and Read Montague, Schultz recognized what this was: a *reward prediction error* signal — a teaching signal that responds not to reward but to the difference between what was expected and what happened. Better than expected: a burst. As expected: nothing. Worse than expected: a dip.

The brain's reward signal does not register how good things are. It registers whether they are better than expected.

Here is the neural engine of the hedonic treadmill. A system that responds to surprise must, by its nature, stop responding to what has become predictable. Yesterday's delight becomes today's expectation, and only something *better* will register as reward. Schopenhauer's pendulum, Epicurus' claim that pleasure can only be varied, and the lottery winners' faded thrill all turn out to describe the same piece of machinery.

The joy of anticipation

None of this means that wanting is bad. The neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp described a *seeking* system, powered by dopamine, that underlies curiosity, exploration and the pleasant buzz of anticipation. Wanting, rightly directed, is one of life's great pleasures in itself. In a whimsical experiment in the 1980s, the economist George Loewenstein found that people would rather receive a kiss from the film star of their choice in three days than right away; they wanted time to savour the anticipation.

A study of more than 1,500 Dutch holidaymakers found something similar. Before their trips, the vacationers were happier than non-vacationers — the anticipation lifted their mood for weeks. After returning, most were no happier than people who had not gone away at all; the afterglow faded quickly. Much of the happiness of a holiday, it seems, is spent before we leave.

Epicurus' two kinds of pleasure can now be read with new eyes. His *kinetic* pleasures — the pleasures of motion, desire and consummation — belong largely to the world of wanting and the thrill of getting. His *katastematic* pleasure, the calm of a body free

from pain and a mind free from disturbance, looks more like the quiet glow of liking and satiety, when the seeking system falls silent. It would be too neat to say that Epicurus discovered neurochemistry. But he did notice, by careful attention to experience, that there are two kinds of pleasure, that one is restless and the other still, and that the still one lasts.

The wandering mind

The brain does not stop working when we stop working. In 2001 the neurologist Marcus Raichle and his colleagues described a set of brain regions that become *more* active when people are not engaged in any particular task — when they are, in effect, daydreaming. They called it the *default mode network*. Later research linked it to thinking about oneself, remembering the past, imagining the future and considering other people's minds: the machinery, in other words, of the remembering self and the storyteller.

THE EVIDENCE

A wandering mind is an unhappy mind

WHO AND WHEN Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert, Harvard University, 2010.

WHAT THEY DID Built an iPhone app that contacted 2,250 adults at random moments, asking what they were doing, how they felt, and whether they were thinking about something other than what they were doing.

WHAT THEY FOUND People's minds were wandering in 46.9 per cent of the samples. They were less happy when their minds wandered than when they did not — even when they wandered to pleasant topics, they were no happier than when focused. Mind-wandering tended to precede unhappiness, rather than the reverse.

THE CAVEAT Correlational, and mind-wandering also serves creativity and planning. But the finding gave scientific force to an old contemplative claim: attention is the gateway to the present.

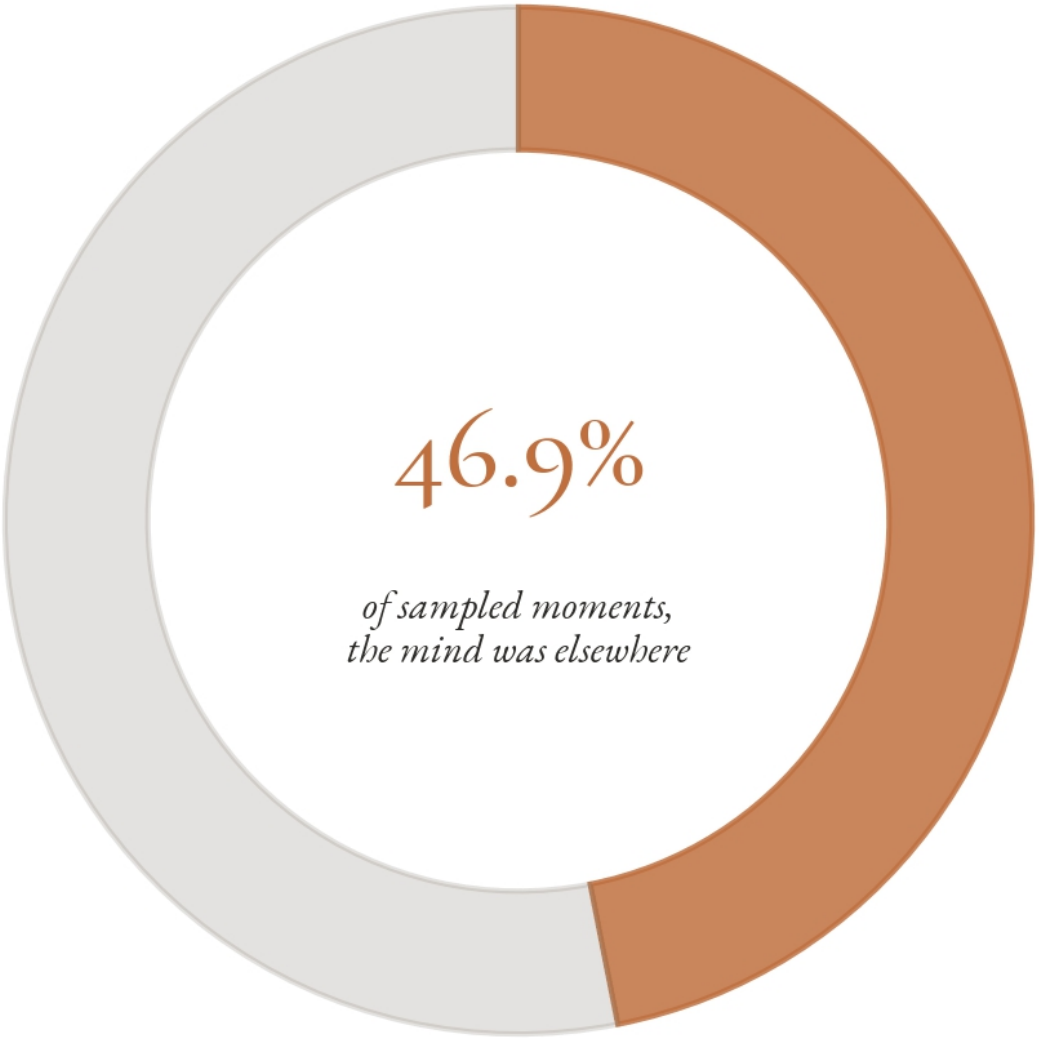


FIGURE 9.2 *The mind elsewhere: in Killingsworth and Gilbert's study, nearly half of sampled waking moments.*

The finding sent researchers back to the contemplatives. In 2011 Judson Brewer and his colleagues found that experienced meditators showed less activity in core regions of the default mode network, both while meditating and during other tasks. Studies of long-term Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in Richard Davidson's laboratory found unusual patterns of brain activity during compassion meditation. These are striking results, though the field has had to learn humility: a large and carefully designed trial in 2022 found no

evidence that an eight-week mindfulness course changed brain structure, contrary to earlier, smaller studies. The brain is plastic — London taxi drivers, who spend years memorizing the city's streets, show measurable differences in the hippocampus — but it does not reshape itself overnight.

No happiness centre

It is tempting to look for happiness in the brain as one might look for a gland. There is no such thing. The "pleasure centre" of the 1950s turned out to be a wanting circuit. The popular idea that depression is simply a shortage of serotonin is now widely regarded by researchers as far too simple. Well-being is not a substance in the skull but a pattern of activity across a brain embedded in a body, which is embedded in a world of other people.

What neuroscience offers instead is something more useful than a location: a set of mechanisms. Wanting and liking can come apart, so we should notice which one is driving us. The brain adapts to what is predictable, so variety, novelty and appreciation matter. Attention shapes experience, so where we put our minds is a choice about how our lives feel. And the brain is changed by practice, slowly, as Aristotle said character is.

There is no fire like craving, and no happiness higher than peace.

THE DHAMMAPADA, VERSE 202

THE THREE HORIZONS

The neuroscience of well-being is overwhelmingly a science of the near horizon — of moments of wanting, liking, surprise and attention. It cannot see the story or the world directly. But it explains why the moment is so hard to hold: a brain built to chase prediction errors will always be leaning towards the next thing.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Notice wanting versus liking. Next time you reach for your phone, a snack or a purchase, pause and ask: do I want this, or will I like it? Write down which it was afterwards.
2. Plan something to look forward to — a meal, a walk, a visit — a week ahead, and spend a few minutes each day anticipating it.
3. Practise one minute of attention three times a day: stop and notice five things you can see, four you can hear and three you can feel. Watch what happens to your mood.

THREADS

The wanting system returns in Chapter 22, where many digital technologies prove to be engineered around it. The calm of liking returns as low-arousal happiness in Chapter 21. Mind-wandering and attention are the basis of several practices graded in Chapter 24.

INTERLUDE II

The Weight of Tomatoes

THE GARDEN DIALOGUES · SUMMER

◎

Late July. Heat over the garden. Plot fifteen is now neat, if over-labelled: every row has a laminated tag. Sam is weighing tomatoes on a kitchen scale balanced on an upturned crate and typing into her phone. Theodora watches from a folding chair in the shade, fanning herself with a seed catalogue.

THEODORA What are you doing?

SAM Recording the yield. Grams per plant, by variety. I'm going to compare them at the end of the season.

THEODORA And then?

SAM And then I'll know which variety is best.

THEODORA Best at producing grams.

SAM (pausing) … Yes.

THEODORA My husband grew tomatoes for thirty years. He never weighed one. He judged them by whether the children ate them standing up in the garden, still warm.

SAM That's a measure too.

THEODORA It is a measure. It is a better one than yours.

SAM (laughing) It has a sample size problem.

She sits on the crate. A pause.

SAM Can I tell you something embarrassing? I measure everything. My sleep, my steps, my moods three times a day. I built my own experience-sampling app for myself before I built one for anyone else. And the data say I'm fine. Six point eight out of ten, very stable. And I don't feel fine.

THEODORA Six point eight is a very respectable number.

SAM I know! That's what's so annoying.

THEODORA Perhaps you are measuring the wrong ring. You told me about your two selves — the one that lives the day, and the one that keeps the score.

SAM The experiencing self and the remembering self.

THEODORA Which one is answering your questionnaires?

SAM (slowly) Both, sort of. The pings catch the experiencing self. The end-of-day ratings are the remembering self.

THEODORA And which one is not fine?

SAM Neither of them. That's the thing. It's something else. It's like — the days are okay, and the life is going according to plan, and none of it seems to be *for* anything.

THEODORA Ah. The third distance.

SAM The third what?

THEODORA You remember, in April, I gave you three answers about why I garden, and you said I'd given you three different answers. Slow pleasure. A thing that is bigger than my moods. A thing I plant for a future I may not see. I have been thinking about it since. I think they are answers at three distances. Near, middle, far.

SAM (taking out her phone, then putting it away again) Go on.

THEODORA When Kostas died — my husband — the near distance went dark for a long time. Every hour was heavy. The middle distance, the story of my life, felt finished; the main character had walked off stage. What kept me alive was the far one. Our daughter

was expecting. I wanted to be someone the child could know. That was all. It was enough to plant beans for.

SAM Viktor Frankl wrote about that. People who had something waiting for them survived.

THEODORA I have read Frankl. I did not need to.

Silence. Sam picks up a tomato, turns it in her hand.

SAM Can I ask how long it took? To feel — not okay. Better.

THEODORA The German statisticians in your journals would say about seven years, on average, for widows. I was quicker than most. Four. But the remembering self is a strange creature. Now when I think of him, I mostly think of the end — not the hospital, but the last summer, our first in this garden, when he stood exactly where you are standing and ate tomatoes straight from the vine, like the children. The peak and the end. Your Kahneman would be pleased.

SAM He'd say your memory is biased.

THEODORA Of course it is biased. It is biased towards love. I can think of worse biases.

An elderly man walks past along the path with a walking frame. Theodora stands, takes the bowl of tomatoes from Sam's crate, and holds it out to him.

THEODORA Mr. Halloran! Take some. They're weighed and catalogued, so they are of the highest scientific quality.

He takes three, says something that makes Theodora laugh, and moves on.

SAM Those were my data.

THEODORA Those were your tomatoes. The data are in your telephone, where they are perfectly safe. Now: which variety made Mr. Halloran smile?

SAM (after a moment, typing) The yellow ones.

THEODORA There. Your first meaningful result.



PART THREE

The Ingredients of a Good Life

What the evidence says matters — and why the ancients were mostly right

If you could change only one thing about your life to make it go better, what should it be? Philosophers offered many candidates: friends, virtue, tranquillity, wisdom, meaning. Modern research allows us, for the first time, to weigh them against one another, and against the things most people actually pursue — money, status, comfort.

Part Three examines the main ingredients one by one: other people; money; the body; work, play and absorption; meaning; and goodness. A pattern will emerge. The ingredients that matter most are not the ones that feel most urgent, and they share a strange property: they pay out on every horizon at once.

10 · Other People

11 · What Money Can Buy

12 · The Wise Body

13 · Absorbed: Work, Play and Flow

14 · The Search for Meaning

15 · Goodness and Gladness

Interlude III: The First Frost

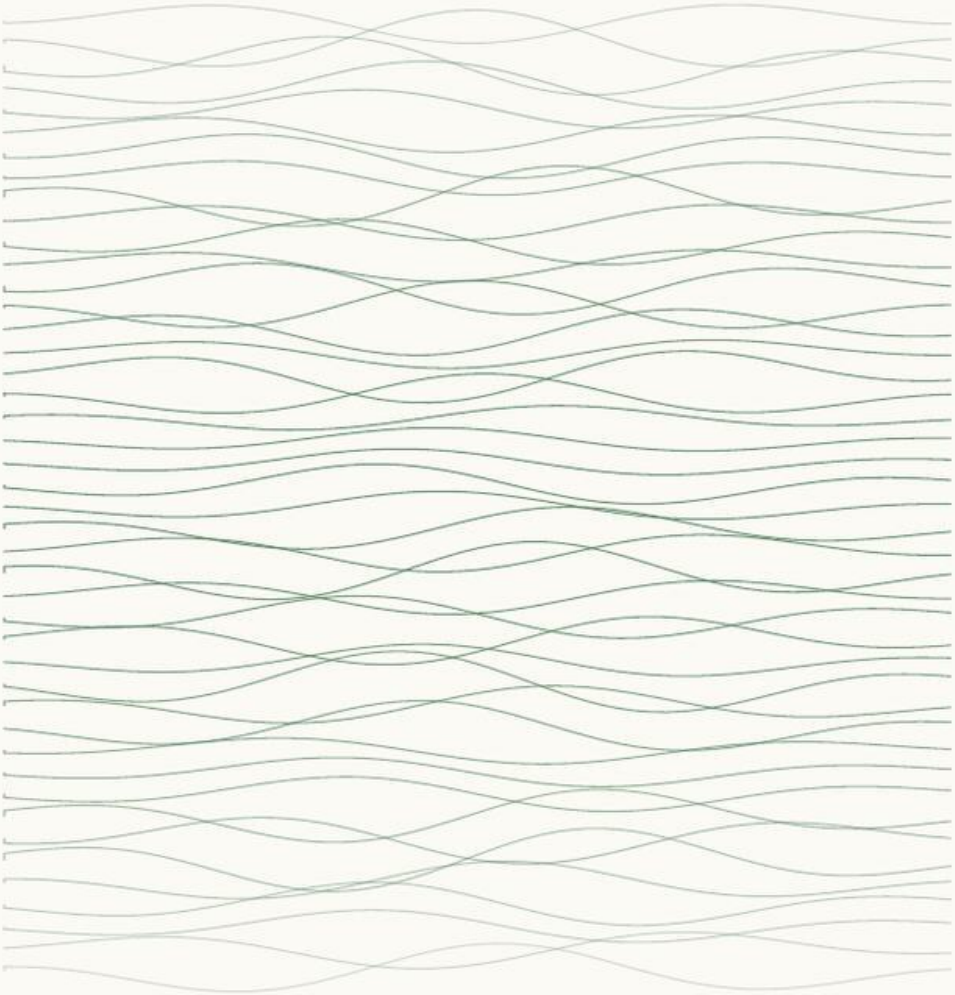


PLATE XI

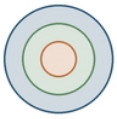
CHAPTER

10

Other People

If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than: because it was he, because it was I.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, ESSAYS I.28 (1580)



IN 1938, A PHYSICIAN at Harvard named Arlie Bock persuaded a department-store magnate to fund an unusual project. Instead of studying what made people ill, Bock wanted to study what made them thrive. He selected 268 healthy sophomores — all men, as Harvard students then were — and began following them: their health, their careers, their marriages, their moods. Around the same time, a husband-and-wife team of criminologists, Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, began studying several hundred boys from some of Boston's poorest neighbourhoods. Decades later the two projects were combined into what is now called the Harvard Study of Adult Development.

The participants were sent questionnaires every couple of years. They were interviewed in their homes, their medical records collected, their blood drawn, their brains scanned. Their wives were interviewed, and later their children. Many of the original participants lived into their nineties. A few became famous; it later emerged that one of the Harvard students had been John F. Kennedy. Most lived ordinary lives — as factory workers, lawyers, bricklayers and doctors — and that is what makes the study precious. It is one of the longest continuous studies of human life ever conducted.

What eighty years revealed

The study's third director, the psychiatrist George Vaillant, who led it for more than three decades, summed up what he had learned in five words: happiness is love, full stop. His successor, Robert Waldinger, put it more carefully. Across the decades, the strongest predictor of who would be happy and healthy in old age was not cholesterol, wealth, fame or social class. It was the warmth of their relationships. The men who were most satisfied in their relationships at fifty were the healthiest at eighty. Good relationships, Waldinger and his co-director Marc Schulz concluded, seemed to protect people's bodies and their minds — buffering them against the discontents of ageing, and even, it seemed, slowing memory decline.

The strongest predictor of a happy, healthy old age was not wealth or fame. It was the warmth of relationships.

The Harvard Study is not alone. In 2002 Ed Diener and Martin Seligman screened more than two hundred students and examined the happiest 10 per cent. Did these very happy people share anything? They did not exercise more, go to church more, or experience fewer bad events. But every one of them had strong social relationships. Good relationships were not *sufficient* for great happiness — some people with good relationships were not very happy — but they appeared to be *necessary*.

THE EVIDENCE

Loneliness and mortality

WHO AND WHEN Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy Smith and Bradley Layton, 2010.

WHAT THEY DID Combined the results of 148 studies following more than 300,000 people, on average for several years, comparing the survival of people with stronger and weaker social relationships.

WHAT THEY FOUND People with stronger social relationships had about a 50 per cent greater likelihood of survival over the study periods. The size of the effect was comparable to well-known risk factors such as smoking.

THE CAVEAT Observational studies cannot fully rule out reverse causation — illness can cause isolation. But the pattern has been replicated many times, and in 2025 a World Health Organization commission estimated that loneliness affects about one in six people worldwide and is linked to more than 871,000 deaths each year.

How other people get under our skin

Why should relationships matter so much, even to the body? Part of the answer is practical: friends and partners nag us to see the doctor, bring soup when we are ill and lend money when we are broke. But experiments suggest the effects run deeper.

In one study, the psychologist James Coan placed married women in a brain scanner and told them they might receive a mild electric shock. Sometimes they were alone; sometimes they held the hand of a stranger; sometimes they held their husband's hand. Holding a hand reduced activity in brain regions associated with threat — and holding the husband's hand reduced it most, especially for women in the happiest marriages. In another, people standing at the foot of a hill judged it less steep when they stood beside a friend; the longer they had known the friend, the gentler the slope appeared. Researchers studying couples found that small wounds healed markedly more slowly in couples whose arguments were hostile. The body keeps a ledger of our relationships.

The neuroscientist John Cacioppo, who devoted his career to loneliness, argued that it functions like hunger or thirst: a biological

alarm signalling that a basic need is unmet. For a social species, isolation was historically dangerous, so the brain treats it as a threat — raising vigilance, disturbing sleep and inflaming the body. The alarm is useful when it prompts us to reconnect. It is corrosive when it becomes chronic, because a lonely brain, primed for threat, reads other people as more dangerous and withdraws further.

The circles of a life

Aristotle distinguished friendships of utility, pleasure and character, and observed that the deepest kind is rare and slow to form. Modern research has put numbers on both observations. The anthropologist Robin Dunbar, studying the relationship between brain size and group size in primates, predicted that humans can maintain stable relationships with around 150 people. Our social worlds, he proposed, are organized in layers: an inner circle of about five, then fifteen, fifty, one hundred and fifty, and outwards. Each layer is roughly three times the size of the one inside it, and the inner layers absorb most of our time and emotional energy.

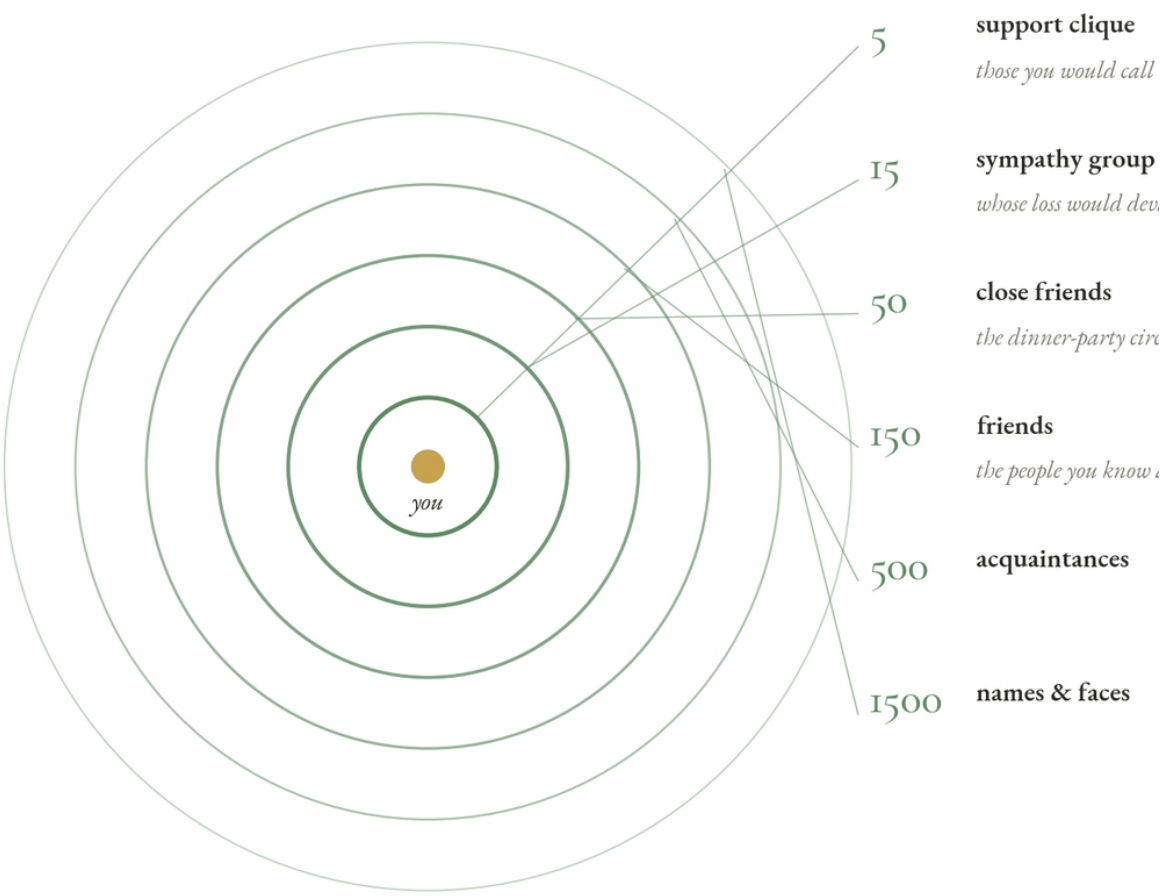


FIGURE 10.1 *Dunbar's circles: the nested layers of a human social world, each roughly three times larger than the one within.*

How do people move inward through these circles? The communication researcher Jeffrey Hall asked newcomers to a city how much time they had spent with the people they met. Moving from acquaintance to casual friend took, on average, around fifty hours together; to friend, around ninety; to close friend, more than two hundred. Aristotle said that people must eat salt together before they can truly know each other. Hall measured the salt.

Not all valuable connections are close ones. In a study by Gillian Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn, people who had a brief, genuine exchange with a barista — a smile, a few words — left the coffee shop in a better mood and feeling more connected than those who kept the transaction efficient. Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder asked Chicago commuters to talk to a stranger on their train, sit in solitude,

or do whatever they normally did. Those who talked had the most pleasant journey — yet beforehand, most had predicted the opposite. People consistently underestimate how much others want to talk to them, and, after a conversation, how much the other person liked them. Psychologists call it the *liking gap*.

The quality of our attention

What happens in good relationships, moment to moment? One answer comes from the psychologist Shelly Gable, who studied how people respond when a partner shares good news. Imagine someone tells you they got a promotion. You can respond passively ("That's nice"), destructively ("Will you have even less time now?"), or by changing the subject. Or you can respond *actively and constructively*: with enthusiasm, curiosity and questions — "That's wonderful! What did they say? How did you feel?" Gable found that this kind of response, which she called *capitalization*, predicted relationship satisfaction better than how partners responded to bad news. Love is tested in crises, but it is built in the ordinary days.

A famous study claimed even more: that happiness is contagious across social networks, spreading to friends of friends of friends. Critics showed that similar statistical methods could make height and acne appear contagious too, suggesting that much of the effect reflected people with similar traits clustering together. The truth is probably humbler. We do influence one another's moods; and happy people tend to find each other.

Before you look for something to eat and drink, look for someone to eat and drink with.

EPICURUS, AS REPORTED BY SENECA, LETTERS 19

Of all the ingredients of well-being, relationships come closest to universal agreement between philosophers and scientists. Epicurus called friendship the greatest of wisdom's gifts; Aristotle gave it two books of his *Ethics*; Confucius began the *Analects* with the joy of friends arriving from afar. Eighty years of data from Boston agree.

The Three Horizons suggest why. Relationships are the rare good that pays out on every horizon at once. In the moment, time with friends is consistently among the most enjoyable activities people report. In the story, relationships are among the strongest predictors of life satisfaction. And on the far horizon, relationships are the medium through which most people give, love, raise children and leave something behind. Most goods serve one or two horizons. Love serves all three — which is, perhaps, why it keeps topping the lists.



THE THREE HORIZONS

Relationships are the clearest example of a multi-horizon good. They make moments warmer, stories more satisfying and lives more meaningful, and they protect the body through all three. Loneliness, correspondingly, damages every horizon at once.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Draw your own Dunbar circles. Who is in your inner five? When did you last spend real, unhurried time with each of them? Schedule it.
2. For one week, respond to every piece of good news someone shares with you actively and constructively: ask at least two questions about it.
3. Talk to a stranger — a neighbour, a cashier, a fellow commuter — once a day for a week. Predict beforehand how it will go; record afterwards how it went.

THREADS

Relationships return as the strongest "multi-horizon good" in the synthesis of Chapter 23, and as the best-supported practice in Chapter 24. The liking gap reappears in Chapter 15, where people underestimate the power of gratitude, and loneliness in a digital age in Chapter 22.

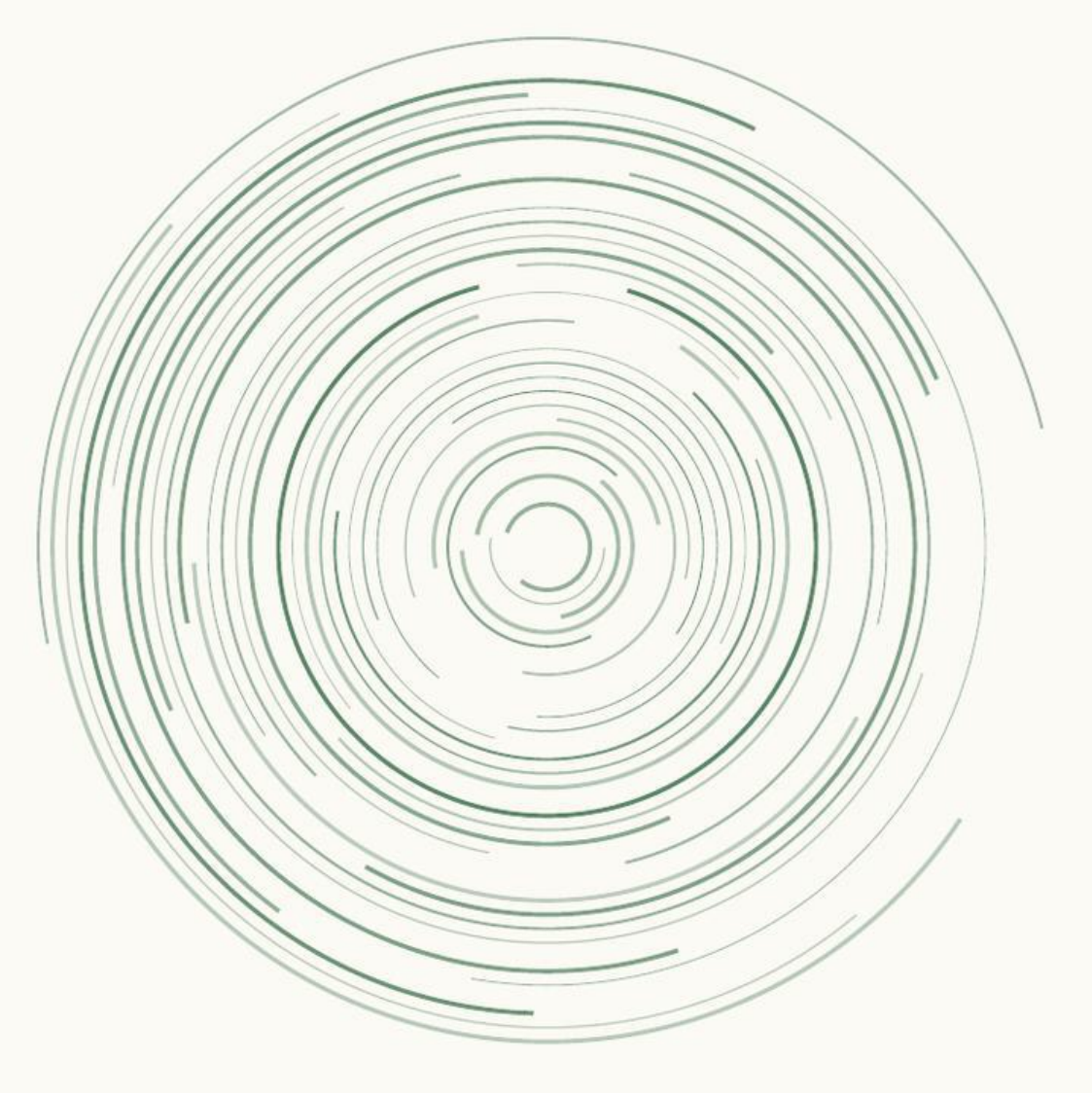


PLATE XII

CHAPTER

11

What Money Can Buy

It is not the one who has too little who is poor, but the one who craves more.

SENECA, LETTERS TO LUCILIUS 2



IN 1974 THE ECONOMIST Richard Easterlin published a paper with a disarming title: “Does economic growth improve the human lot?” He had gathered every survey of happiness he could find, from nineteen countries, and noticed something odd. Within any given country, at any given time, richer people were happier on average than poorer ones. But between countries, the relationship was weaker than expected. And over time — in the United States, from the end of the Second World War to the early 1970s — average incomes had risen enormously while average happiness had barely moved.

The *Easterlin paradox* became one of the most debated findings in the social sciences. In 2008 the economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, using much larger international datasets, argued that there was no paradox at all: richer countries were happier, and the relationship between income and life satisfaction looked much the same within and across countries, with no sign of a point beyond which more money stopped helping. Easterlin and others replied that over the long run, within countries, growth still did not seem to raise happiness as much as the cross-sectional data implied. The debate continues. But along the way, a clearer picture of money and happiness has emerged — and it depends, once again, on which horizon you measure.

The famous number

In 2010 Daniel Kahneman and the economist Angus Deaton — both Nobel laureates — analysed more than 450,000 responses to a daily American survey. They looked separately at two kinds of well-being. *Life evaluation*, measured with the Cantril ladder, rose steadily with income, without any sign of levelling off. *Emotional well-being* — whether people had experienced a lot of joy, stress, sadness or anger the previous day — also rose with income, but only up to an annual household income of about $75,000. Beyond that, it seemed to plateau. Their paper's title summarized it: high income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being.

The $75,000 figure became famous, quoted in boardrooms and advice columns as the price of happiness. Then, in 2021, Matthew Killingsworth — the researcher who had studied mind-wandering — published a study based on 1.7 million experience-sampling reports from more than 33,000 employed Americans. In his data, people's moment-to-moment feelings kept rising with income, with no plateau in sight.

A conflict resolved

The two findings seemed to contradict each other. Rather than trading criticisms in journals, Kahneman and Killingsworth did something rare and admirable: they joined forces, with the psychologist Barbara Mellers acting as arbiter, in what is known as an *adversarial collaboration*. Their joint paper, published in 2023 — one of Kahneman's last — found that both had been partly right. For most people, happiness continued to rise with income well beyond $75,000. But for the least happy fifth of people, happiness rose with income up to around $100,000 and then levelled off. Earlier measures, which mainly detected unhappiness, had picked up their plateau. Money, it seems, can relieve many kinds of misery up to a

point; beyond it, the remaining unhappiness of the unhappiest is caused by things money cannot fix — grief, heartbreak, depression.

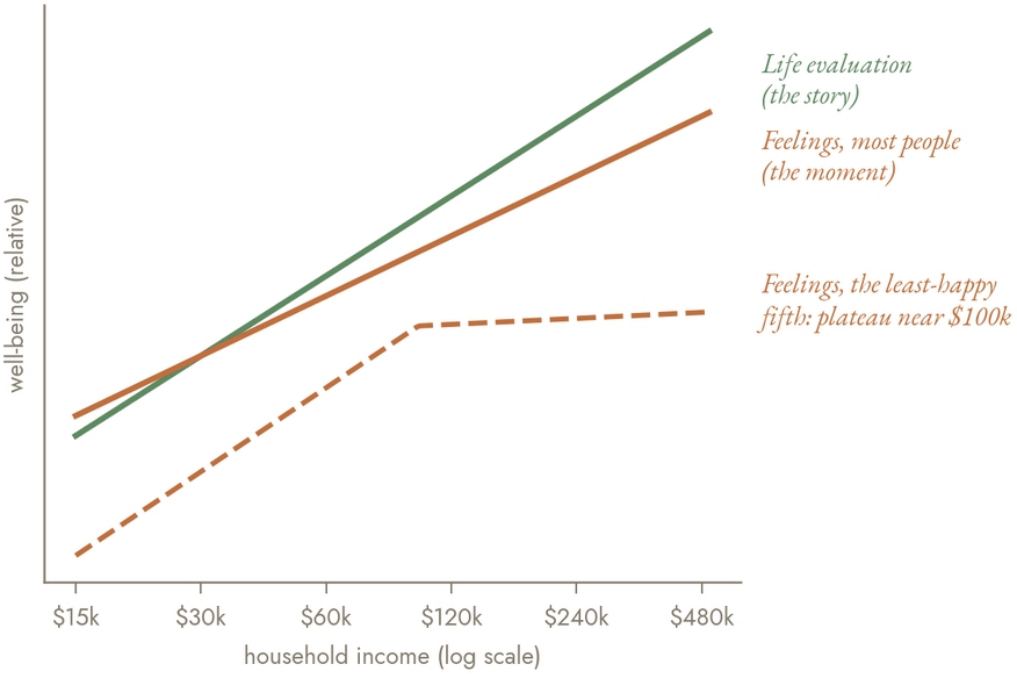


FIGURE 11.1 *Illustrative of the pattern reported by Killingsworth, Kahneman and Mellers (2023): well-being rises with the logarithm of income, but the least happy see a plateau, and life evaluation responds more strongly than feelings.*

Two features of the picture matter more than any threshold. First, the relationship is *logarithmic*. What matters is not the absolute amount of a raise but its proportion. Doubling one's income from $20,000 to $40,000 is associated with roughly the same increase in well-being as doubling it from $200,000 to $400,000. An extra $10,000 is life-changing near the bottom and barely noticeable near the top. This is one of the strongest arguments in the whole field for reducing poverty: money does the most good where there is least of it. In a randomized study in rural Kenya, unconditional cash transfers from the charity GiveDirectly led to meaningful improvements in recipients' happiness, life satisfaction and stress.

Second, money speaks most clearly to the **middle horizon**. Its effects on life evaluation are stronger and steadier than its effects on

how days feel. This is exactly what the Swedish lottery study in Chapter 8 found: large prizes raised life satisfaction for years while barely changing day-to-day happiness. Money buys security, options and a better story. It buys moments less reliably.

Money speaks most clearly to the story of a life. It speaks to the moments less reliably — and to the meaning hardly at all.

The neighbours' salaries

Money is also relative. The economist Erzo Luttmer found that, holding a person's own income constant, Americans whose neighbours earned more reported lower well-being. In a survey by Sara Solnick and David Hemenway, about half of respondents said they would prefer to earn $50,000 in a world where others earned $25,000, rather than $100,000 in a world where others earned $200,000 — choosing to be poorer, as long as they were richer than others. When a newspaper published the salaries of University of California employees, researchers found that workers who learned they were paid below the median for their department became less satisfied with their jobs; those paid above it did not become correspondingly happier. We will return to this comparing mind in Chapter 18.

How to spend it

If money's effects depend partly on how it is used, then how should we spend it? A decade and a half of research by Elizabeth Dunn, Michael Norton and their colleagues offers some surprisingly consistent answers.

THE EVIDENCE

Spending on others

WHO AND WHEN Elizabeth Dunn, Lara Aknin and Michael Norton, 2008; Aknin and colleagues, 2013.

WHAT THEY DID In Vancouver, gave people an envelope with $5 or $20 and instructions to spend it by five o'clock, either on themselves or on someone else. Later studies tested the same idea across the world, from Canada to Uganda.

WHAT THEY FOUND People who spent the money on others were happier that evening than those who spent it on themselves — and the amount made no difference. Across more than a hundred countries in survey data, people who gave to others reported greater well-being, rich and poor countries alike.

THE CAVEAT Effects are modest, and giving that feels obligatory or controlled seems to help less. But the direction has proved remarkably consistent across cultures.

Buy experiences more than things. Thomas Gilovich and Leaf Van Boven found that people tend to get more lasting happiness from experiential purchases — trips, concerts, meals with friends — than from material ones. Experiences are often shared, become part of our identity, are harder to compare and improve in memory, while objects fade into the background. The rule has exceptions; for people with very little money, a practical material purchase may bring as much happiness as an experience. But it holds well on average.

Buy time. In a 2017 study of more than six thousand people in the United States, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands, Ashley Whillans and colleagues found that people who spent money to save time — paying for help with chores they disliked — reported greater life satisfaction, and in a field experiment, a time-saving purchase improved people's mood more than a material one. Other research has found that feeling rich in time predicts well-being independently of feeling rich in money.

Buy many small pleasures rather than a few big ones, delay consumption to enjoy anticipation, and beware of what money does to savouring. In one study, wealthier people reported a reduced ability to savour everyday joys, and people merely reminded of money spent less time savouring a piece of chocolate.

The trap of more

Finally, there is the question not of how much money people have but of how much they want it. A large body of research, reviewed by the psychologist Tim Kasser and others, finds that people who place a high priority on materialistic values — wealth, possessions, image — tend to report lower well-being, more anxiety and poorer relationships. The causation probably runs in both directions: insecurity breeds materialism, and materialism breeds insecurity. Seneca made the point two thousand years ago. It is not the one who has too little who is poor, but the one who craves more.

Whatever you have, spend less.

SAMUEL JOHNSON, LETTER TO JAMES BOSWELL (1782)

Epicurus, who asked for a little pot of cheese so that he could feast whenever he liked, would have found nothing here to surprise him. Money matters, especially when it lifts people out of want; it matters for the security and options that give a life a stable story. But beyond sufficiency, its returns diminish, its effects on the texture of our days are modest, and the desire for more is itself a source of unhappiness. The best use of money, the evidence suggests, is to buy things that money cannot directly buy: time, experiences shared with others, and the pleasure of giving.



THE THREE HORIZONS

Money pays out mostly on the middle horizon: it raises life evaluation and secures the story. Its effects on the moment are real but smaller, and they depend on how it is spent — on time, experiences and others rather than on things. On the far horizon, money is neutral at best, unless it is given away.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Spend a small amount of money this week on someone else, in a way that lets you see their reaction. Note how you feel that evening.
2. Identify the chore you most dislike. Price out what it would cost to pay someone to do it, and run the experiment for a month.
3. Before your next significant purchase, ask: will this be an experience or a thing? Will I share it? Will it give me time or take it?

THREADS

The divergence between the story and the moment first appeared with lottery winners in Chapter 8. The comparing mind behind

relative income is examined in Chapter 18. Prosocial spending is one half of a larger story about goodness and gladness in Chapter 15. National wealth and happiness return in Chapter 20.

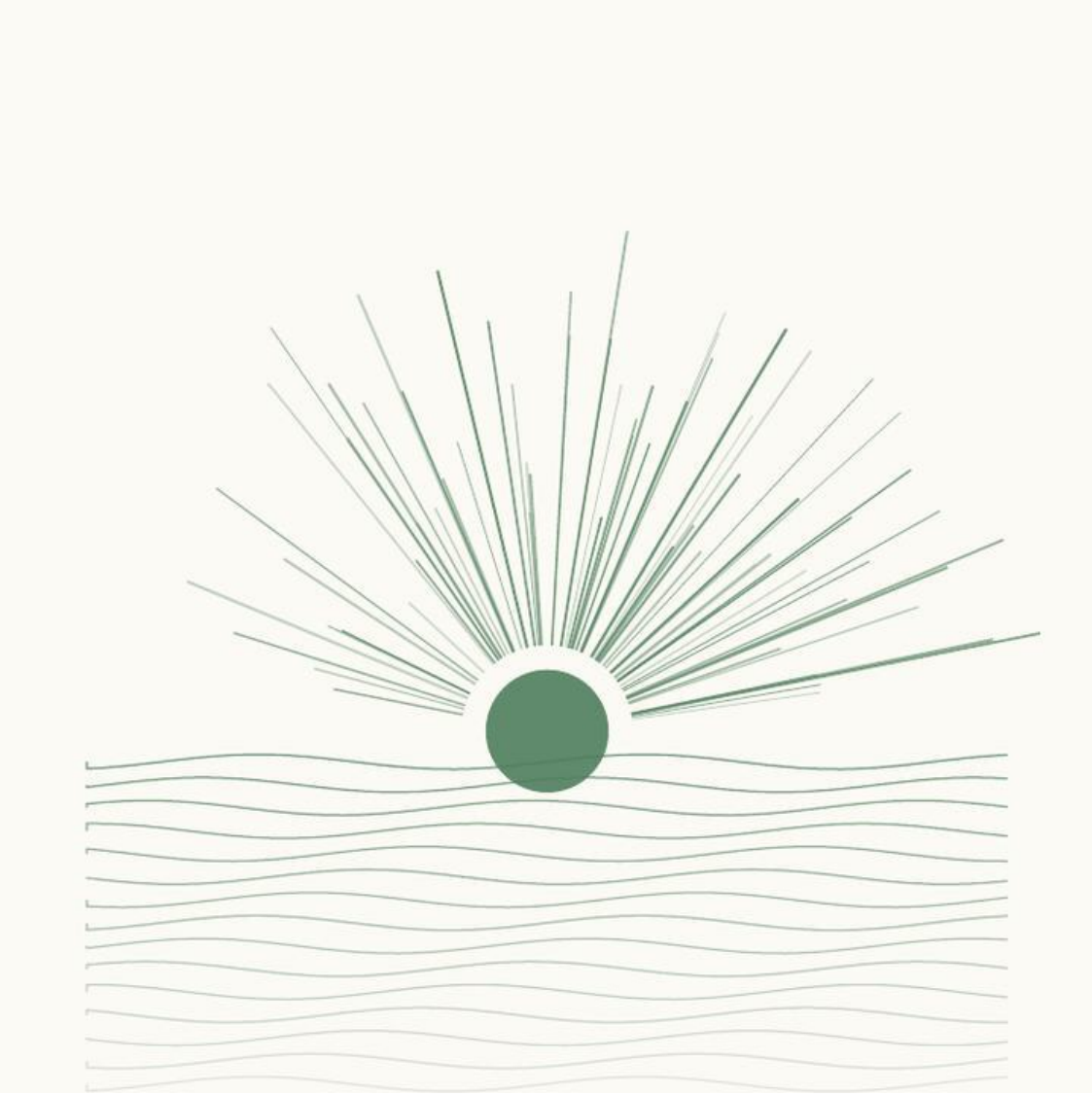


PLATE XIII

CHAPTER

12

The Wise Body

We should pray for a sound mind in a sound body.

JUVENAL, SATIRES X (C. 120 CE)



BETWEEN 1972 AND 1981, patients recovering from gallbladder surgery at a suburban hospital in Pennsylvania were assigned, more or less at random, to rooms on one side of a corridor or the other. From some windows, patients could see a small stand of trees. From the others, they looked at a brown brick wall. In 1984 an architect turned health researcher named Roger Ulrich went back through the records and compared matched pairs of patients. Those with the view of trees had shorter stays after surgery, received fewer negative comments in their nurses' notes and needed fewer doses of strong painkillers.

It was a small study, and correlational. But it helped launch a field, and its message has proved durable: the mind is not a passenger in the body, and the body is not a machine separate from its surroundings. Well-being grows in soil.

Philosophy was born in a gym

It is easy to forget how physical the ancient schools were. Plato's Academy took its name from a grove that held a gymnasium; Aristotle's Lyceum was another. Greek education joined *gymnastikē* and *mousikē* — training the body and training the soul through music and poetry — and philosophers argued about the good life in

places where young men wrestled and ran. The Roman satirist Juvenal, mocking the foolish things people pray for, concluded that one should pray only for a sound mind in a sound body. Modern research has put this ancient intuition on a firm footing.

Movement

THE EVIDENCE

Exercise as treatment

WHO AND WHEN Michael Noetel and colleagues, published in the BMJ, 2024.

WHAT THEY DID Combined the results of 218 randomized trials involving more than 14,000 people with depression, comparing different kinds of exercise with control conditions and with other treatments.

WHAT THEY FOUND Walking or jogging, yoga, strength training and mixed aerobic exercise all reduced depressive symptoms, with effects comparable to psychotherapy. More vigorous exercise tended to work better, and benefits appeared across ages and levels of severity.

THE CAVEAT Many trials were small and could not hide from participants which treatment they received. But the overall pattern is consistent, and it echoes older trials in which exercise performed about as well as an antidepressant over several months.

Exercise also helps people without depression. A study of more than a million Americans found that people who exercised reported substantially fewer days of poor mental health than people who did not, with the greatest benefits for sessions of around three-quarters of an hour, three to five times a week. Intriguingly, more was not always better: people exercising for very long periods every day reported worse mental health than those exercising moderately. Aristotle's inverted U, once again.

The mechanisms are many and still being worked out: changes in brain chemistry and inflammation, better sleep, a sense of mastery, time outdoors, often the company of others. But the experience is familiar to anyone who has gone for a walk in a bad mood and come back in a better one. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who

walked for hours a day in the Alps, claimed that only thoughts reached by walking have any value.

Sleep

If exercise is the most underused antidepressant, sleep may be the most underrated foundation of well-being. A 2021 meta-analysis of sixty-five randomized trials, involving more than eight thousand people, found that interventions that improved sleep — most often cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia — produced improvements in depression, anxiety, stress and rumination. And the more sleep improved, the more mental health improved: a dose-response relationship of the kind that strengthens the case for causation.

The brain without sleep is an emotionally different organ. In one study, after a single night of sleep deprivation, the amygdala — a brain region central to processing threat — responded to unpleasant images about 60 per cent more strongly than in rested people, and its connection with the prefrontal regions that normally calm it was weakened. Anyone who has been unreasonably upset after a bad night will recognize the finding. Before concluding that one's life is going badly, it is worth checking whether one is simply exhausted. Addiction counsellors teach a useful acronym: before acting on a strong feeling, ask whether you are *hungry, angry, lonely or tired*.

Green and blue

Two hours a week in nature: a modest dose, with a measurable effect.

Ulrich's trees opened a line of research that has grown enormously. In 2019 Mathew White and colleagues analysed data from nearly twenty thousand people in England and found that those who spent at least two hours a week in natural settings — parks, woods, beaches, countryside — were significantly more likely to report good health and high well-being than those who spent none. The benefit peaked at around three to five hours a week, and it did not seem to matter whether the time came in one long visit or several short ones.

Experiments help explain why. In 2015 Gregory Bratman and colleagues at Stanford sent participants on a ninety-minute walk, either through a green area near campus or along a busy, multi-lane road. Afterwards, those who had walked in nature reported less *rumination* — the repetitive, self-focused negative thinking that is a hallmark of depression — and showed reduced activity in a brain region associated with it. The psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan had proposed decades earlier that natural settings restore our capacity for directed attention by engaging a gentler "soft fascination": clouds, leaves and water hold our attention without demanding it. In Japan, the practice of *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, was promoted as a public health measure from the 1980s.

Awe

Nature also gives us one of the most interesting emotions to have been studied in recent years: awe. In 2003 Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt defined it as the feeling of encountering something vast that exceeds our current understanding — a mountain range, a night sky, a great piece of music, an act of extraordinary courage. Awe makes the self feel small, and that, it turns out, is good for us.

In one experiment, people who spent just one minute gazing up into a grove of towering eucalyptus trees were afterwards more helpful to a stranger who "accidentally" dropped a handful of pens than people who spent the minute looking at a tall building. In another, older adults were asked to take a fifteen-minute walk each

week for eight weeks; half were simply told to walk, while half were encouraged to look for things that inspired awe. The awe walkers reported more joy and more prosocial feelings, and less daily distress. When they took selfies during their walks, their own faces took up progressively less of each picture — and their smiles grew wider.

Here the body and the far horizon meet. The small self of awe is the same self that the Buddhists sought to loosen, that Marcus Aurelius shrank in his view from above, and that, as Chapter 14 will show, opens us to meaning.

What we eat, how we breathe

The evidence on diet and well-being is younger and more contested. In 2017 the SMILES trial, led by Felice Jacka, randomly assigned adults with moderate to severe depression either to dietary coaching towards a modified Mediterranean diet or to social support sessions. After twelve weeks, about a third of the diet group met criteria for remission, compared with fewer than one in ten of the support group. The trial was small and has not been uniformly replicated, and research on the gut-brain connection is still at an early stage. But the direction of evidence is that food is not irrelevant to mood.

Breathing, too, turns out to be a lever. In a 2023 study, about a hundred people were assigned to practise one of several five-minute daily breathing exercises or mindfulness meditation for a month. A technique called *cyclic sighing* — a double inhalation through the nose followed by a long, slow exhalation through the mouth — produced the largest improvements in positive mood. Slow exhalation engages the parasympathetic nervous system, the body's brake. The ancient practices of yoga and meditation, which made breath central, were on to something physiological as well as spiritual.

The body’s budget

Why should all these bodily things matter so much to how life feels? One influential answer comes from the neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett and others, who argue that a core job of the brain is to manage the body’s *budget* — its energy, water, salt, sleep and other resources — by anticipating its needs. Mood, on this view, is partly the brain’s running summary of how the budget is going. Sleep, food, movement, sunlight and the company of trusted people all replenish it; deprivation, illness and isolation drain it. When the budget is overdrawn, the world looks bleaker, and it is easy to mistake a depleted body for a failed life.

Only thoughts reached by walking have value.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS (1889)

None of this means that well-being is merely physical, or that every sorrow can be walked off. But the body is the soil in which every horizon grows. The Greeks who argued about virtue in gymnasia, the monks who walked in cloisters, Epicurus in his garden and Nietzsche on his mountain paths all understood something that modern trials have confirmed: that we think, feel and live better when the animal we are is cared for.

THE THREE HORIZONS

The body works mainly on the near horizon, changing how moments feel through sleep, movement, breath and surroundings. But it is the soil of the other horizons too: a depleted body darkens the story we tell about our lives, and awe in nature opens a path towards the far horizon of meaning.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Take an *awe walk*: fifteen minutes, once a week, somewhere with trees, water or sky. Look deliberately for something vast or intricate. Take one photo of it, not of yourself.
2. Keep a two-week sleep and mood log. Note bedtime, wake time and a 0–10 mood rating each evening. Look for the relationship.
3. When a dark mood arrives, run the HALT check: hungry, angry, lonely, tired? Address the body first, then reconsider the problem.

THREADS

The small self of awe returns in Chapter 14, where self-transcendence opens a door to meaning. Aristotle's inverted U reappears here in exercise and, in Chapter 16, in adversity.

Exercise, sleep and nature are graded alongside other practices in Chapter 24.

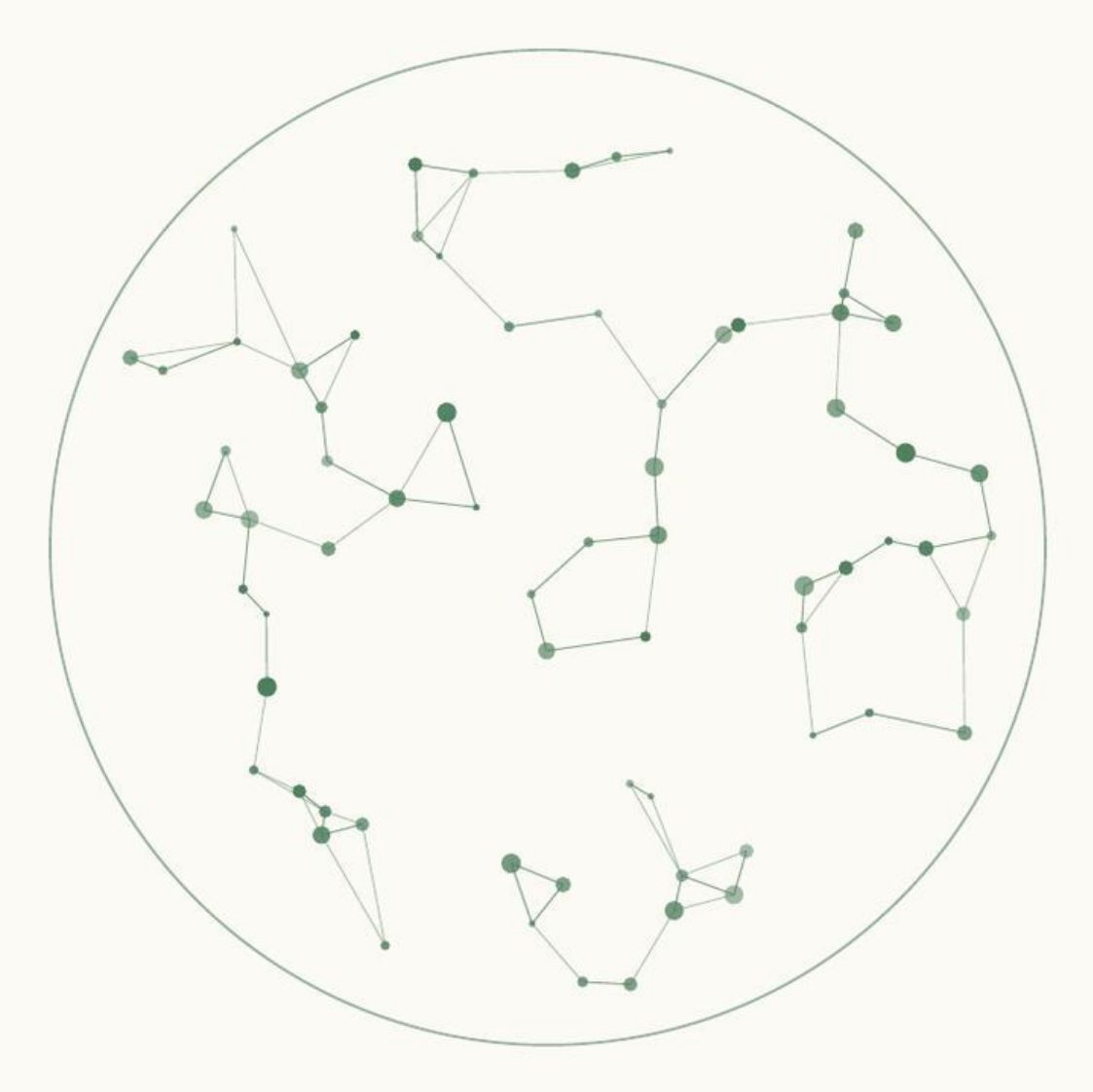


PLATE XIV

CHAPTER

13

Absorbed: Work, Play and Flow

Work is love made visible.

KAHLIL GIBRAN, THE PROPHET (1923)



MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI WAS A child in Hungary during the Second World War. He watched adults he had admired — successful, confident, respected — lose their homes, jobs and standing, and become helpless and empty. A few, however, kept their dignity and even their good humour amid the chaos. He began to wonder what made life worth living, and found the question poorly answered by the books he read. As a young man in Switzerland, he wandered into a lecture by Carl Jung and decided to study psychology. Eventually he went to Chicago, where in the 1960s he studied painters at work.

What fascinated him was how the painters behaved. They worked for hours in total concentration, forgetting to eat, oblivious to discomfort — and then, when the painting was finished, often lost interest in it entirely. The reward was not the finished product. It was the painting itself.

The river

Over the following decades, Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues interviewed chess players, rock climbers, dancers, surgeons and thousands of ordinary people, and found them describing the same

state in remarkably similar terms. Many reached for the same image: it was like being carried along by a current. He called it *flow*.

Flow, his research suggested, tends to arise under particular conditions. The activity has clear goals and gives immediate feedback; the challenge is high and matched by the person's skill. In flow, action and awareness merge; concentration is complete; self-consciousness falls away; time seems to bend, hours passing like minutes, or a few seconds expanding. And the activity becomes *autotelic* — worth doing for its own sake.

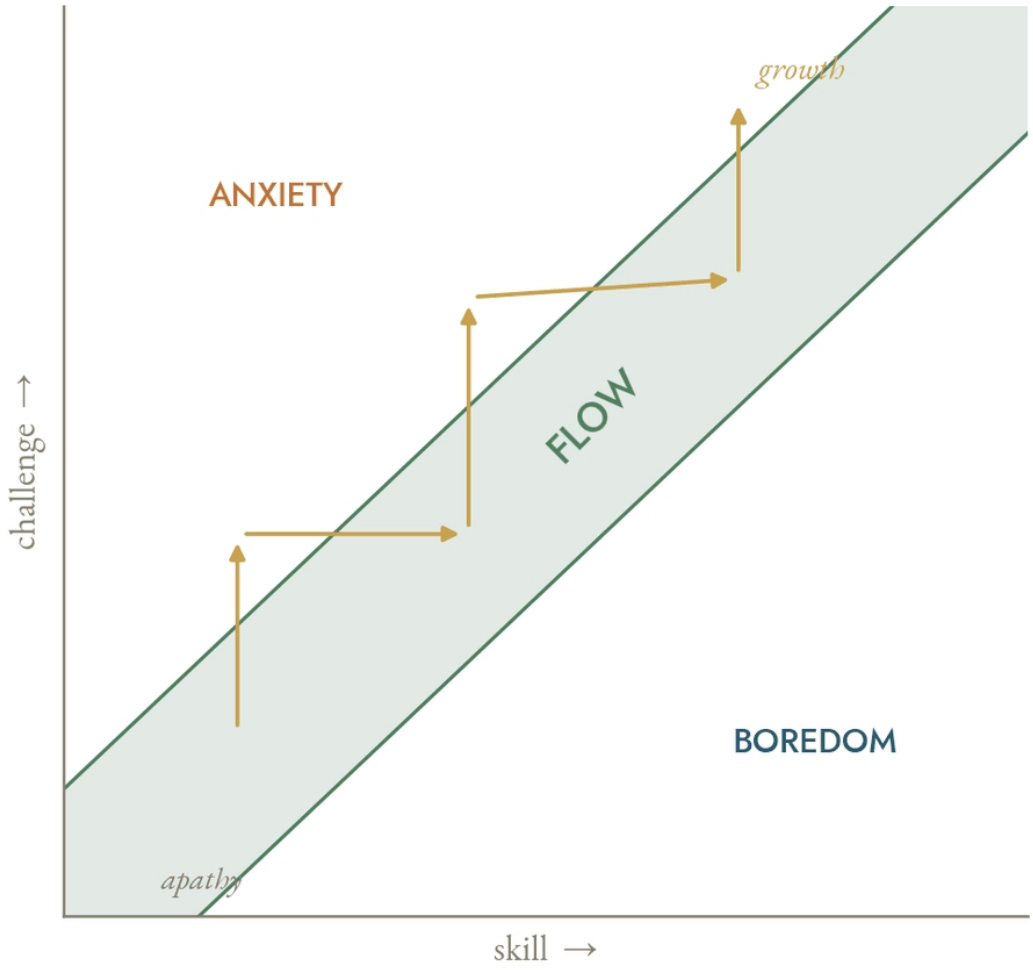


FIGURE 13.1 *The flow channel: flow arises when challenge and skill rise together. Growth zigzags upward, as rising skill demands a greater challenge.*

The most important condition is the balance. When challenge far exceeds skill, we feel anxiety; when skill far exceeds challenge, we feel boredom; when both are low, apathy. Flow lives in the channel between, and because skills grow with practice, staying in the channel requires seeking ever greater challenges. Flow is not only a pleasant state; it is an engine of growth.

Readers of Chapter 4 will recognize Zhuangzi's Cook Ding, whose knife glided through the ox along its natural joints, his spirit moving where his eyes no longer needed to look. And readers of Chapter 2 will recognize Aristotle's claim that pleasure completes excellent activity like the bloom on youth. Here is the wager tested: the experience of exercising a skill at its edge is among the most rewarding that human beings report.

There is one subtlety. During flow itself, people often do not report feeling especially *happy*; they are too absorbed to monitor their feelings at all. The happiness comes afterwards, in the glow of having been fully engaged. Flow is not a feeling so much as a way of being in which the question of how one feels temporarily disappears — which may be why it is so restorative for minds that otherwise wander nearly half the time.

The paradox of work

When Csikszentmihalyi and Judith LeFevre gave beepers to workers in a range of jobs, they found something that has puzzled researchers ever since. People experienced flow far more often at work than in their free time. Leisure, especially passive leisure such as watching television, was dominated by a mild apathy. Yet at work people more often said they wished they were doing something else; in leisure, they were content to be where they were. People seemed to be blind to where their best experiences actually came from, judging work by the cultural story that work is a burden rather than by how it felt.

People found more flow at work than at leisure — and still wished they were somewhere else.

Job, career, calling

How people experience work depends partly on how they understand it. In 1997 the organizational psychologist Amy Wrzesniewski and her colleagues found that people tend to relate to their work in one of three ways. Some see it as a *job*: a means of earning money to support the rest of life. Some see it as a *career*: a ladder of advancement and achievement. And some see it as a *calling*: work that is meaningful in itself and contributes to something larger. Strikingly, all three orientations appeared within the same occupations — among administrative assistants as among doctors — and those who saw their work as a calling reported the greatest satisfaction with their work and their lives.

The three orientations map onto the three horizons. A job is valued for what it buys in the rest of life. A career is valued as the main thread of one's story. A calling reaches towards the far horizon, towards what the work does for the world.

Callings can be found, but they can also be made. Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton described a practice they called *job crafting*, in which people reshape their work by changing its tasks, its relationships or how they think about it. Their most famous examples came from hospital cleaners. Some saw their work as a set of hygiene tasks. Others saw themselves as part of the team that healed patients: they chatted with patients and families, timed their cleaning to suit them, and in one case regularly rearranged the pictures on the walls of a comatose patient's room in the hope that the change might stimulate him. Same job description; entirely different work.

Callings have a shadow side. In a study of zookeepers, who often described their work as a calling, Stuart Bunderson and Jeffery

Thompson found that the sense of calling brought deep meaning, but also a willingness to accept low pay, poor conditions and personal sacrifice. A calling can be exploited, by employers and by ourselves. Even the far horizon needs boundaries.

What work gives, and what its loss takes

In 1931 a team of young Viennese social scientists, among them Marie Jahoda, went to study Marienthal, an Austrian village where the textile factory that employed most residents had closed. What they found was not revolution or anger but a kind of collapse of time. Men walked more slowly through the streets, stopping often; many no longer wore watches, since there was nothing to be on time for. Days lost their shape. Jahoda later argued that work provides not only income but a set of "latent" benefits: a structure for time, contact with people outside the family, participation in a collective purpose, a source of status and identity, and regular activity.

That analysis helps explain why unemployment, as Chapter 8 showed, is one of the few events to which people do not fully adapt — and why its scar can persist even after people find new jobs. It also explains why retirement goes best for people who find new sources of structure, community and purpose.

Leisure and play

Aristotle thought we are busy in order to have leisure, as we make war in order to have peace. His word for leisure, *scholē*, is the root of our word *school*. For him, leisure was not idleness but time free for the activities most worth doing for their own sake: friendship, music, conversation, contemplation. In 1938 the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga argued in *Homo Ludens* that play is older than culture itself — that law, art, poetry and even war grew out of play.

Many adults have forgotten how to play. Yet the research on flow suggests that well-chosen leisure — making music, playing sports, crafting, gardening, cooking, games that demand skill — can provide the same absorption as good work, without the pressure. The sociologist Robert Stebbins called such pursuits *serious leisure*, and they appear again and again in the lives of people who report the most satisfaction.

Protecting attention

Flow requires sustained attention, and modern work is engineered against it. The researcher Gloria Mark, who has studied attention in offices for two decades, found that the average time people spend on one screen before switching has fallen to well under a minute. Each switch leaves what the organizational psychologist Sophie Leroy calls *attention residue* — part of the mind remains on the previous task, degrading performance on the next. A day of constant switching can feel busy and exhausting while containing almost no flow at all.

We are busy in order to have leisure.

ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS X.7

The ancient philosophers who saw the good life as an activity rather than a feeling were describing something that modern researchers would rediscover in painters, surgeons and hospital cleaners: that human beings are at their best when fully absorbed in doing something well, especially something that matters to others. The question for each of us is how to arrange our work and our leisure so that more of our hours flow.

THE THREE HORIZONS

Flow lives on the near horizon — it transforms how hours are lived — but it builds the middle horizon too, because absorbed practice produces growth and competence, the stuff of a satisfying story. Work oriented as a calling reaches further, to the far horizon of contribution.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. For one week, note each time you lose track of time in an absorbing activity. At the end, list the conditions those moments shared.
2. Craft your job: change one task, one relationship or one way of thinking about your work so that it connects more clearly to the people it serves.
3. Protect one ninety-minute block each day from interruption — notifications off, door closed — and use it for your most demanding work.

THREADS

Flow is Aristotle's wager (Chapter 2) and Cook Ding's carving (Chapter 4) under laboratory conditions. The far horizon of work as

calling continues into meaning in Chapter 14. Attention returns as a battleground in Chapter 22.

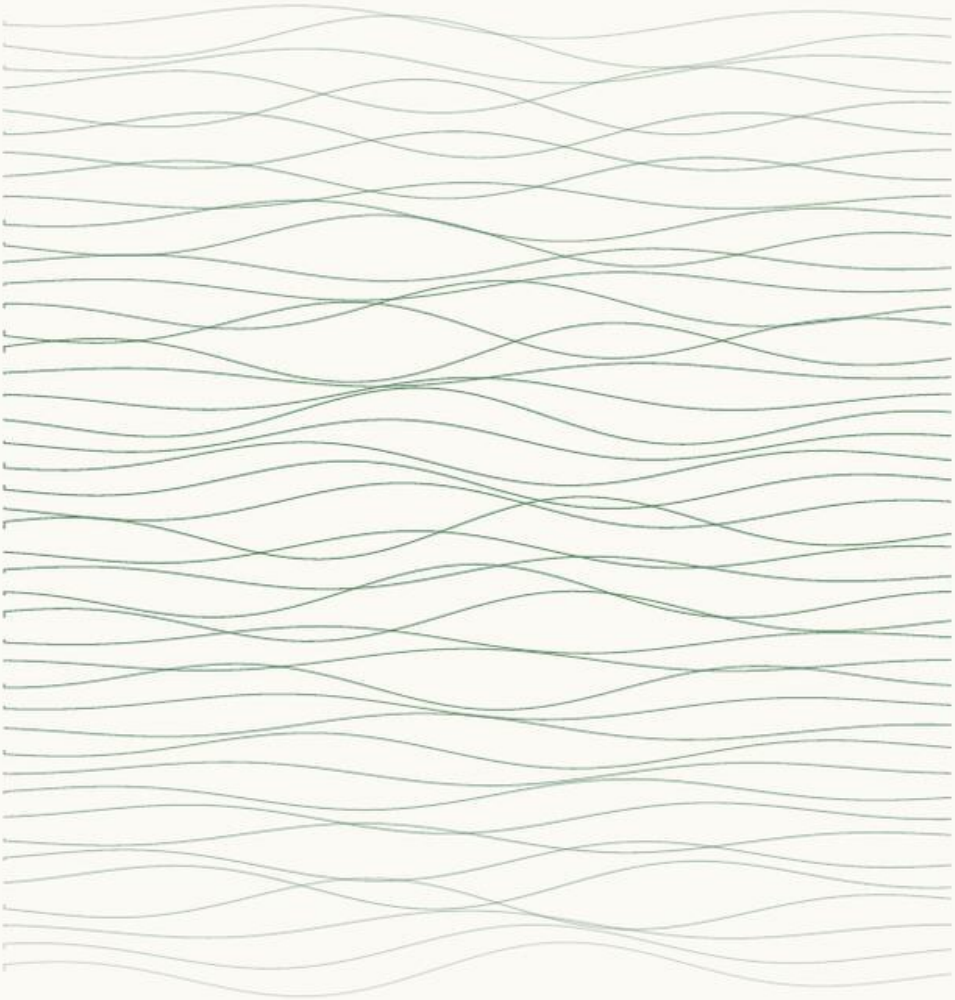


PLATE XV

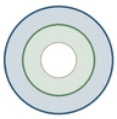
CHAPTER

14

The Search for Meaning

For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life.

GEORGE ELIOT, MIDDLEMARCH (1872)



AT AROUND THE AGE of fifty, Leo Tolstoy had everything a person could want. He had written *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. He was famous across Europe, wealthy, healthy, married with a large family, the owner of a beloved estate. And he found himself hiding a rope so that he would not hang himself from the beam between the wardrobes in his study, and no longer going out shooting, for fear of turning the gun on himself.

In *A Confession*, published in 1882, he described the question that had stopped his life. What will come of what I am doing today, or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything? It was, he said, the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every person from the foolish child to the wisest elder, and without an answer it was impossible to live.

Tolstoy's crisis rhymes with Mill's. Both men had succeeded by every measure of the middle horizon. Mill lost the near horizon — the capacity to feel. Tolstoy lost the far horizon — the sense that his life was connected to anything that would last. He found his way back, eventually, through the faith of the peasants on his estate, whose lives of labour and simplicity seemed to possess a meaning his own

lacked. His story poses the question this chapter takes up: is meaning a different thing from happiness, and does it matter?

Happy is not meaningful

In 2013 Roy Baumeister, Kathleen Vohs, Jennifer Aaker and Emily Garbinsky surveyed nearly four hundred American adults about their lives, asking how happy they were, how meaningful they found their lives, and a long list of questions about how they spent their time and what they thought about. Happiness and meaning were correlated — people with one tended to have more of the other — but they were far from identical, and the differences were revealing.

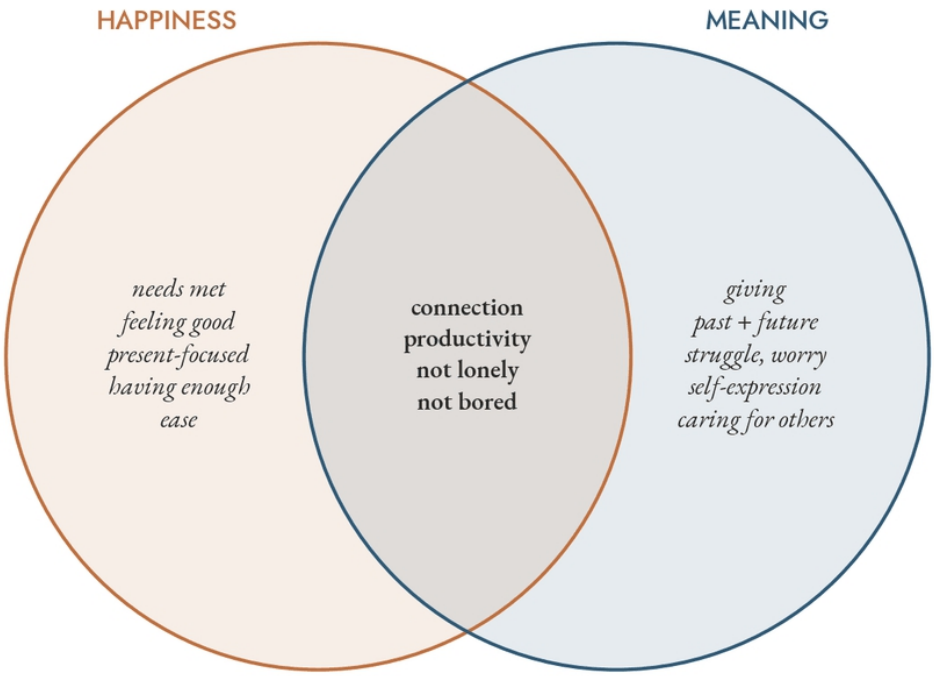


FIGURE 14.1 *After Baumeister and colleagues (2013): what predicted happiness, what predicted meaning, and what predicted both.*

Happiness was linked to having one's needs and wants satisfied, to feeling good, to having enough money, to focusing on the present,

and to being more of a “taker” than a “giver.” Meaning was linked to giving, to thinking about the past and future, to expressing oneself, and — strikingly — to stress, worry and struggle. Caring for children was associated with more meaning but not more happiness. What predicted both was feeling connected to others, feeling productive, and not being lonely or bored. In the researchers’ phrase, happiness was about getting; meaning was about giving.

Happiness was linked to getting. Meaning was linked to giving.

Three meanings of meaning

What do people mean when they say their life is meaningful? The psychologists Frank Martela and Michael Steger argued in 2016 that the word bundles three things. *Coherence*: life makes sense; events fit together into a comprehensible story. *Purpose*: life has direction; one is pursuing goals that matter. *Significance*: life is worth living; it matters, in some way, beyond the moment.

Each of these corresponds to a part of the territory we have already crossed. Coherence is the work of the remembering self and the narrative identity of Chapter 7. Purpose is the forward-looking side of the story. Significance is the far horizon itself.

The good news is that meaning is not rare. In a widely cited review, Samantha Heintzelman and Laura King found that most people, in most surveys, report that their lives are fairly meaningful. Meaning is not only found in grand projects; it is woven into routines, relationships and ordinary responsibilities. People even report greater meaning on days when they are in a good mood, and when their days have a reliable structure. The far horizon, it turns out, is often visible from the kitchen table.

Purpose and the body

Meaning may matter for the body as well as the mind.

THE EVIDENCE

Purpose and longevity

WHO AND WHEN Patrick Hill and Nicholas Turiano, 2014, using a national American study of midlife.

WHAT THEY DID Measured sense of purpose in life among more than six thousand adults, then tracked who died over the following fourteen years, controlling for other factors known to predict mortality.

WHAT THEY FOUND People with a greater sense of purpose were less likely to die during the follow-up — and the protective association held at every age, not only among older adults. Other studies have linked purpose to a lower risk of cognitive decline and of heart disease.

THE CAVEAT Purpose is not randomly assigned; healthier people may find it easier to feel purposeful. But the association is consistent across many large studies.

The Global Flourishing Study adds a related finding. Across its twenty-two countries, people who attended religious services weekly tended to score higher on flourishing — a pattern seen in many earlier studies too, including one that followed tens of thousands of American nurses for sixteen years and found lower mortality among frequent attenders. Researchers usually interpret such findings not as proof of any religion's truth but as evidence of the power of what religious communities provide: belonging, ritual, moral seriousness, service and a story that places a life within something larger. The challenge for secular societies is to find equally rich sources of those goods.

The philosophers' puzzle

Philosophers have long argued about whether meaning is something we feel or something we find. Camus, as we saw in Chapter 5, asked

us to imagine Sisyphus happy. In 1970 the philosopher Richard Taylor pushed the image somewhere more disturbing. Suppose the gods, in a moment of mercy, implanted in Sisyphus a burning desire to roll stones. Now his eternal task fulfils his deepest wish. Has his life become meaningful? From the inside, yes: he wants nothing more than what he does. From the outside, his labour is still pointless — the stone rolls down, the hill remains, nothing is built. Taylor concluded that meaning comes from within, from our wanting what we do. Many readers found the conclusion unsettling: it seems to make the drugged Sisyphus as meaningful as a person building a hospital.

Susan Wolf proposed a different answer. Meaning in life, she argued, arises when *subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness*: when people are passionately engaged in projects that are actually worth engaging in. The person who loves something trivial — Rawls's counter of grass, Taylor's drugged Sisyphus — lacks the second ingredient. The person who dutifully does worthy things with no love for them — Mill at twenty — lacks the first. Meaning requires both: you must care, and what you care about must be worth caring about.

Wolf's view is a hybrid theory of exactly the kind Chapter 1 described, and it maps neatly onto our horizons. Subjective attraction is felt, in the moment and the story. Objective attractiveness lies on the far horizon, in the value of the things we are connected to. Meaning is where they meet.

Generativity

In 1950 the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson proposed that each stage of life poses a central challenge. For midlife, he named the challenge *generativity versus stagnation*: the task of caring for and contributing to the next generation — through raising children, mentoring, teaching, creating, building institutions — rather than turning inward. Later research by Dan McAdams and others found

that adults high in generativity tend to report greater well-being and to tell their life stories with redemptive arcs. The far horizon is not only a direction of hope but a direction of care.

George Eliot ended *Middlemarch* with a tribute to her heroine, Dorothea, whose life was spent not in great historic acts but in many small ones, whose effect on those around her was incalculably diffusive. The growing good of the world, Eliot wrote, depends partly on unhistoric acts. It is the most consoling sentence ever written about the far horizon: that it is reached not only by the famous, but by everyone who lives faithfully a hidden life.

The small self

Chapter 12 described how awe makes the self feel small. That shrinking matters for meaning. The psychologist David Yaden and his colleagues have grouped awe together with flow, deep meditation, certain religious experiences and moments of profound connection under a single heading: *self-transcendent experiences*, in which the sense of a separate self recedes and the feeling of connection grows. People often count such moments among the most meaningful of their lives. Marcus Aurelius rising in imagination above the earth, the Buddhist loosening of the self and the hiker silenced by a mountain range are reaching for the same thing: the far horizon, felt for a moment from the inside.

What will come of what I am doing today, or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?

LEO TOLSTOY, A CONFESSION (1882)

Viktor Frankl argued that meaning could be found in three places: in creating a work or doing a deed; in experiencing something or encountering someone; and in the attitude we take towards unavoidable suffering. The research of the past few decades has, in its plodding way, confirmed all three. Meaning grows from contribution, from connection and from the stories we tell about our struggles. It is not the same as happiness. Sometimes it costs happiness. But a life without it, as Tolstoy discovered, can become unbearable — however pleasant its moments and however successful its story.



THE THREE HORIZONS

Meaning lives on the middle and far horizons: coherence and purpose in the story, significance in the world. It is often purchased at a cost to the near horizon — parenting and caregiving are the classic examples — which is why a life optimized only for feeling good can drift into meaninglessness, and a life optimized only for meaning can grind its moments to dust.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Write three short paragraphs: one on what makes your life *coherent*, one on what gives it *purpose*, one on why it *matters*. Notice which was easiest and which was hardest to write.
2. Wolf's test: list your three biggest commitments. For each, ask two questions: do I care about it, and is it worth caring about? Where one answer is no, consider what would change it.
3. Do one unhistoric act this week — something good that no one will ever credit to you.

THREADS

Tolstoy's crisis completes the pattern begun by Mill in the Prologue. The far horizon of legacy returns in Chapter 19, as time grows short. The trade-off between meaning and momentary happiness becomes the "parenting paradox" in the synthesis of Chapter 23.

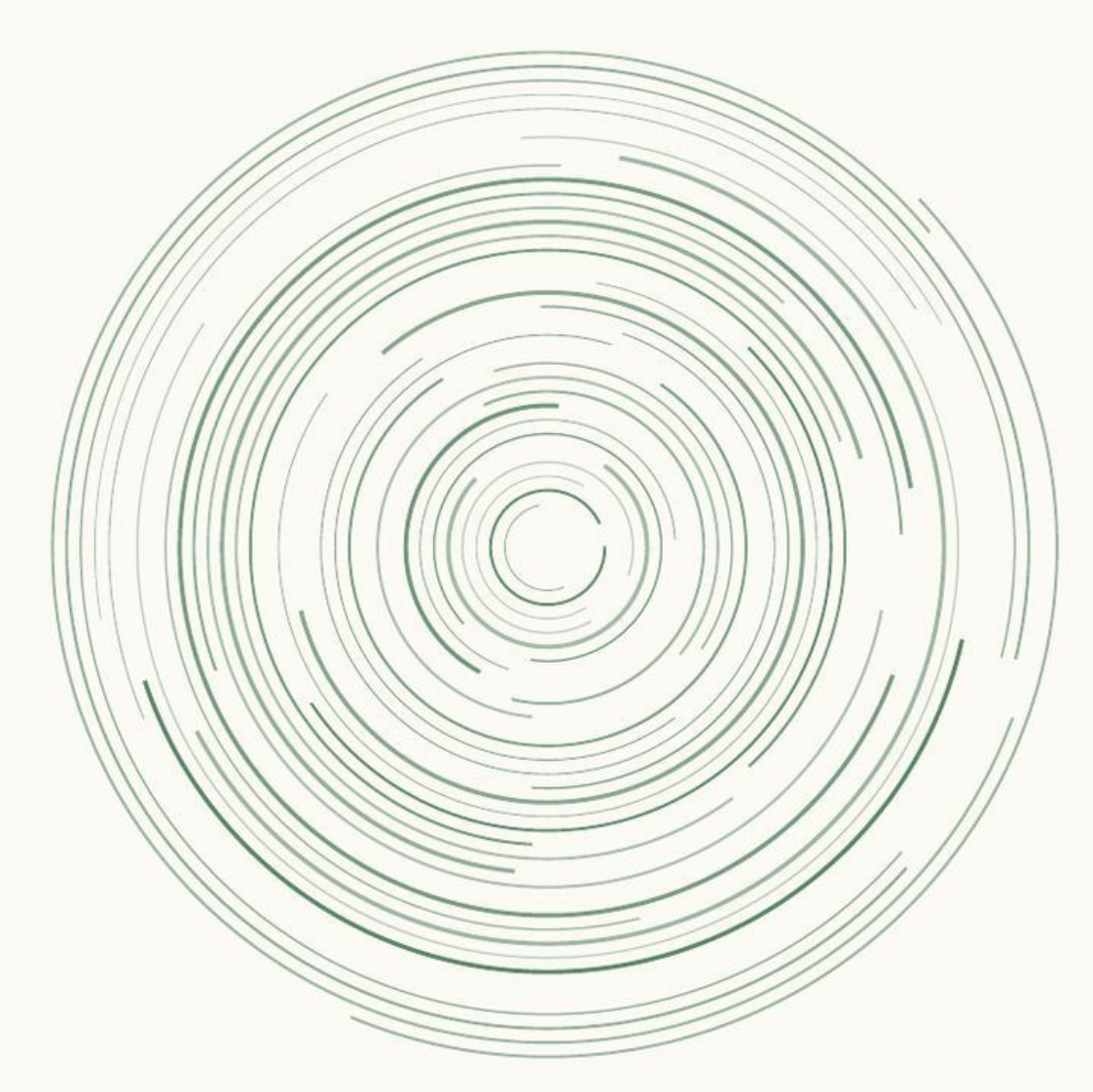


PLATE XVI

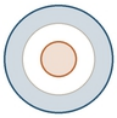
CHAPTER

15

Goodness and Gladness

Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself.

BARUCH SPINOZA, ETHICS, PART V (1677)



IN THE SECOND BOOK of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates' young companion Glaucon tells a story. A shepherd named Gyges, tending his flock, finds a gold ring in a chasm opened by an earthquake. Turning the ring on his finger, he discovers that it makes him invisible. He contrives to be sent to the palace as a messenger, seduces the queen, murders the king with her help, and seizes the throne.

Glaucon's challenge follows. Give such a ring to a just person and an unjust one, and watch: both will end up doing exactly the same things. People are just only because they fear being caught. And if you could be unjust without ever being caught, would that not be the happier life — all the rewards of injustice, none of the costs? The remaining eight books of the *Republic* are Socrates' attempt to answer. Justice, he argues, is the health of the soul; injustice is a sickness, and no one with a sick soul is truly happy, whatever their power.

It is one of the oldest questions in philosophy: does being good make us happy, or only better? Aristotle bet on convergence. Kant held that we should be good whether or not it made us happy, and hope that a just universe would eventually reward us. Modern research has a surprising amount to say.

Born to give

In 2012 the psychologists Lara Aknin, Kiley Hamlin and Elizabeth Dunn gave toddlers — children not yet two years old — a pile of treats, then introduced a puppet that "loved" treats. Researchers who did not know the purpose of the study rated the children's facial expressions as they received treats themselves, as they watched the experimenter give the puppet a treat, and as they gave the puppet one of their own treats. The toddlers were happier giving treats than receiving them, and happiest of all when they gave away treats from their own pile — when the giving was costly. Before children can speak in full sentences, giving seems to make them glad.

In adults, a large body of research tells a similar story. A 2018 meta-analysis by Oliver Scott Curry and colleagues, combining many experiments, found that performing acts of kindness reliably increases the well-being of the person performing them — a modest effect, but a consistent one. In one study by Sonja Lyubomirsky and colleagues, people asked to perform five acts of kindness a week benefited most when they did all five on a single day; spreading them thinly through the week had little effect. Kindness, like flow, seems to work best when it is enough to notice.

Before children can speak in full sentences, giving seems to make them glad.

The motive matters

Volunteering, too, is associated with greater well-being and even with longer life among older adults. But one study added a fascinating twist. Sara Konrath and colleagues followed a large group of older Americans and found that volunteers had lower mortality — but only if they volunteered for others' sake. Those who volunteered

mainly for their own benefit had mortality no different from those who did not volunteer at all. Kindness helps the giver, it seems, on the condition that it is not done to help the giver. We will meet this paradox in its full form in Chapter 17.

There is a related distinction between empathy and compassion. In research led by Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki, people trained to *feel with* others' suffering — empathy — experienced more distress. People trained in compassion — warm concern and the wish to help, as in the Buddhist practice of *karuṇā* — experienced more positive emotion and were more willing to help. Feeling others' pain is not, by itself, the virtue. Caring about it is.

Thank you

Few practices have been studied as intensively as gratitude.

THE EVIDENCE

Counting blessings

WHO AND WHEN Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough, 2003; Martin Seligman and colleagues, 2005.

WHAT THEY DID In the first study, people wrote down each week, for ten weeks, five things they were grateful for, five hassles, or five neutral events. In the second, participants tried several exercises, including writing and delivering a letter of thanks to someone who had never been properly thanked.

WHAT THEY FOUND The gratitude group felt better about their lives, were more optimistic and even exercised more. The gratitude visit produced the largest immediate boost in happiness of any exercise tested, though its effect faded within about a month; writing down three good things each night had smaller but longer-lasting effects.

THE CAVEAT Later meta-analyses suggest the effects of gratitude exercises are real but modest — closer to a gentle lift than a transformation.

Why does gratitude help? One reason is that it works directly against adaptation. To be grateful is to notice what we have — to drag it back from the background into which the hedonic treadmill

silently moves it. Another is that it strengthens relationships. In a series of studies, Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley asked people to write letters of gratitude and predict how the recipients would feel. Writers consistently underestimated how surprised and happy the recipients would be, and overestimated how awkward they would feel. Like the commuters who would not talk to strangers in Chapter 10, we hold back from expressions of warmth because we misjudge how welcome they will be.

The strengths of character

In 2004 Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman published an ambitious project: a classification of human virtues meant to be the positive counterpart of the psychiatric manuals that classify disorders. Surveying moral traditions from Aristotle and Confucius to the Bible, the Quran, Buddhist texts and Bushido, they identified six virtues that appeared almost everywhere — wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence — and twenty-four character strengths that expressed them, from curiosity and perseverance to kindness, fairness, gratitude, hope and humour.

When they examined which strengths were most closely linked to life satisfaction, a clear pattern appeared. The strongest links were with hope, zest, gratitude, love and curiosity — what the researchers called strengths of the heart — rather than with strengths of the head, such as love of learning. The strengths that connect us to others and to the future were the ones most closely tied to a satisfied life.

Forgiveness and elevation

Two more threads complete the picture. Forgiveness — not condoning a wrong, but letting go of the desire for revenge — has been studied in dozens of trials, and programmes that help people

forgive tend to reduce anger, anxiety and depression. And the psychologist Jonathan Haidt has described *moral elevation*: the warm, uplifting feeling people report when they witness someone else's goodness — a stranger's courage, an act of generosity. Elevation tends to make people want to be better themselves. Goodness, it seems, is contagious in a way that happiness may not be.

When you have done good and another has been helped, why look for a third thing besides — credit for the deed, or a return?

MARCUS AURELIUS, MEDITATIONS 7.73

So was Socrates right? Does goodness make us happy? The honest answer is: mostly, modestly and on certain conditions. Kindness, gratitude, compassion and forgiveness reliably lift well-being, from toddlers to the elderly, across cultures. The heart strengths are among the best predictors of a satisfied life. But the benefits depend on motive — goodness done for the sake of the glow tends to lose the glow — and goodness can be costly, sometimes very costly, in ways no study can capture. Gyges' ring has never been tested in a laboratory.

Spinoza's formula may be the best summary. Blessedness, he wrote, is not the reward of virtue but virtue itself. The gladness is not a payment for the goodness. It is what goodness feels like from the inside.



THE THREE HORIZONS

Goodness pays out on the near horizon, in the warm glow of giving and gratitude, and on the far horizon, through contribution to others' lives. It strengthens the story, too, through relationships and a sense of being a person one can respect. Its one rule is that the payout disappears when it becomes the point.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Choose one day this week to perform five acts of kindness, large or small. Record how you feel at the end of the day.
2. Write a gratitude letter to someone who has never been properly thanked. Before sending it, rate how you think they will feel from 0 to 10. If you can, deliver it in person.
3. Each night for two weeks, write down three things that went well and why. On the fifteenth night, read them all.

THREADS

The paradox that kindness helps only when it is not done for its benefits is generalized in Chapter 17. The liking gap of Chapter 10 reappears in the underestimation of gratitude. Kindness takes its place among the multi-horizon goods in Chapter 23.

INTERLUDE III

The First Frost

THE GARDEN DIALOGUES · AUTUMN



Late October. Bare stalks, a few stubborn marigolds, the smell of woodsmoke. Theodora sits on an upturned bucket, more slowly than she used to. Sam is digging a shallow trench along plot fourteen.

THEODORA Not so deep. Garlic wants to be tucked in, not buried. Five centimetres. Pointed end up.

SAM You plant it now? It's nearly winter.

THEODORA That is the point. It needs the cold. You put it in the ground when everything else is dying, and it sits there all winter, apparently doing nothing, and in June you dig up something that did not exist before.

Sam separates a bulb into cloves and begins pressing them into the soil.

SAM You're not digging today.

THEODORA No. My heart has been having opinions. The doctors say a valve is narrowing. They have offered me a procedure. I am thinking about it.

SAM (stopping) Thinking about it? Theodora—

THEODORA Plant. I said I am thinking. I did not say I am refusing. At seventy-eight one is entitled to think.

A long pause. Sam goes on planting, too carefully.

SAM I had bad news too. The big result from my lab — the one my supervisor built half his career on, the one I was hired to extend — we ran it again, properly. Larger sample, pre-registered. It didn't replicate. Nothing. The effect was noise.

THEODORA And how do you feel?

SAM Like the last three years were pointless. Like nothing I do matters. Some days I think I should leave science and get a job where I can at least see what I've made at the end of the week.

THEODORA You have just discovered that something widely believed was not true. You have made the world slightly less wrong. Is that nothing?

SAM Nobody gives you a medal for proving your boss wrong.

THEODORA Nobody gave Dorothea Brooke a medal either.

SAM Who?

THEODORA *Middlemarch*. You have not read it. You will. At the end George Eliot says that the good of the world depends partly on unhistoric acts, on people who lived faithfully a hidden life. Your failed replication is an unhistoric act. Some student, years from now, will not waste three years of her life because you did it. She will never know your name.

SAM That's … actually a bit devastating.

THEODORA It is supposed to be consoling. Perhaps it is both.

She reaches into her coat pocket and holds out a key on a loop of green string.

THEODORA The shed key for plot fourteen. In case I am in hospital for the procedure. Someone must water the overwintering things and keep Mr. Halloran out of my rhubarb.

SAM (not taking it) You said you were only thinking about it.

THEODORA I am thinking about it with a key in my hand. Take it, Doctor. Your hands are cold anyway; you need something to hold.

Sam takes the key. She finishes the row and pats the soil down with the flat of her palm.

SAM Twenty-four cloves.

THEODORA Did you count them for the data?

SAM (almost smiling) No. I counted them so I'd know how many to look for in June.

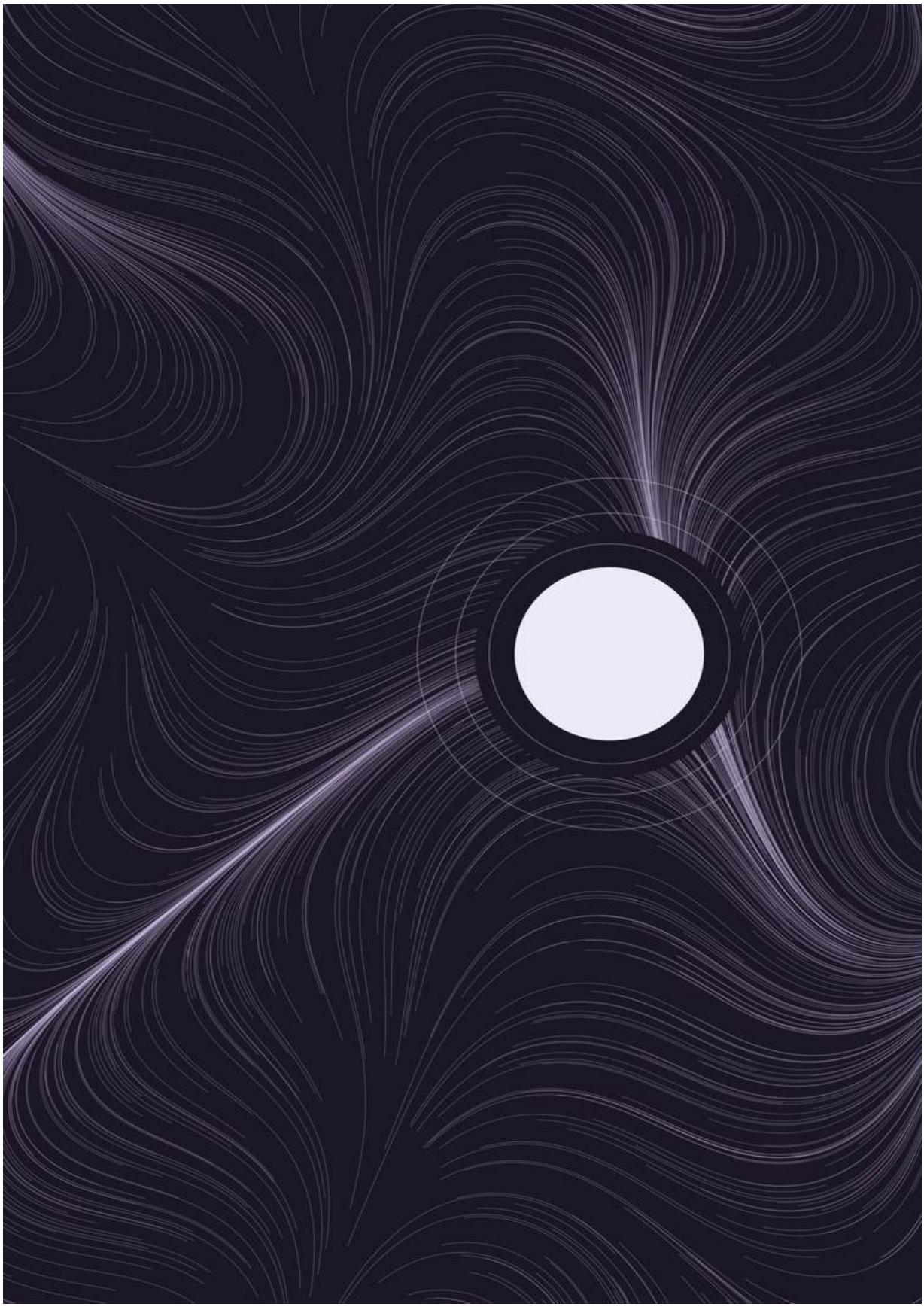
THEODORA Good. That is the right reason to count.

The light is going. Somewhere a bonfire crackles. Theodora closes her eyes and turns her face to the last of the sun.

THEODORA Do you know what the Stoics said to do on a cold evening like this? Imagine you will never see another. Not to be morbid. To see this one properly.

SAM Does it work?

THEODORA (eyes still closed) Look at the sky and tell me.



PART FOUR

The Shadow and the Paradox

Sorrow, striving, comparison and the shape of a mortal life

Any honest account of well-being must turn, eventually, towards the dark. Human lives contain grief, failure, envy, illness and death, and no philosophy or science worth having can pretend otherwise. The ancient schools were, above all, therapies for suffering; the modern science of well-being was born partly in reaction to a psychology that studied only illness, and it has sometimes swung too far the other way.

Part Four examines the shadow side: what sorrow is for, why pursuing happiness can drive it away, how comparison poisons contentment, and how the knowledge that we will die shapes the arc of a life. The surprising theme of these chapters is that the shadows are not simply enemies of a good life. They are part of its shape.

16 · The Uses of Sorrow
17 · The Paradox of Pursuit
18 · The Comparing Mind
19 · The Shape of a Life
Interlude IV: What Remains

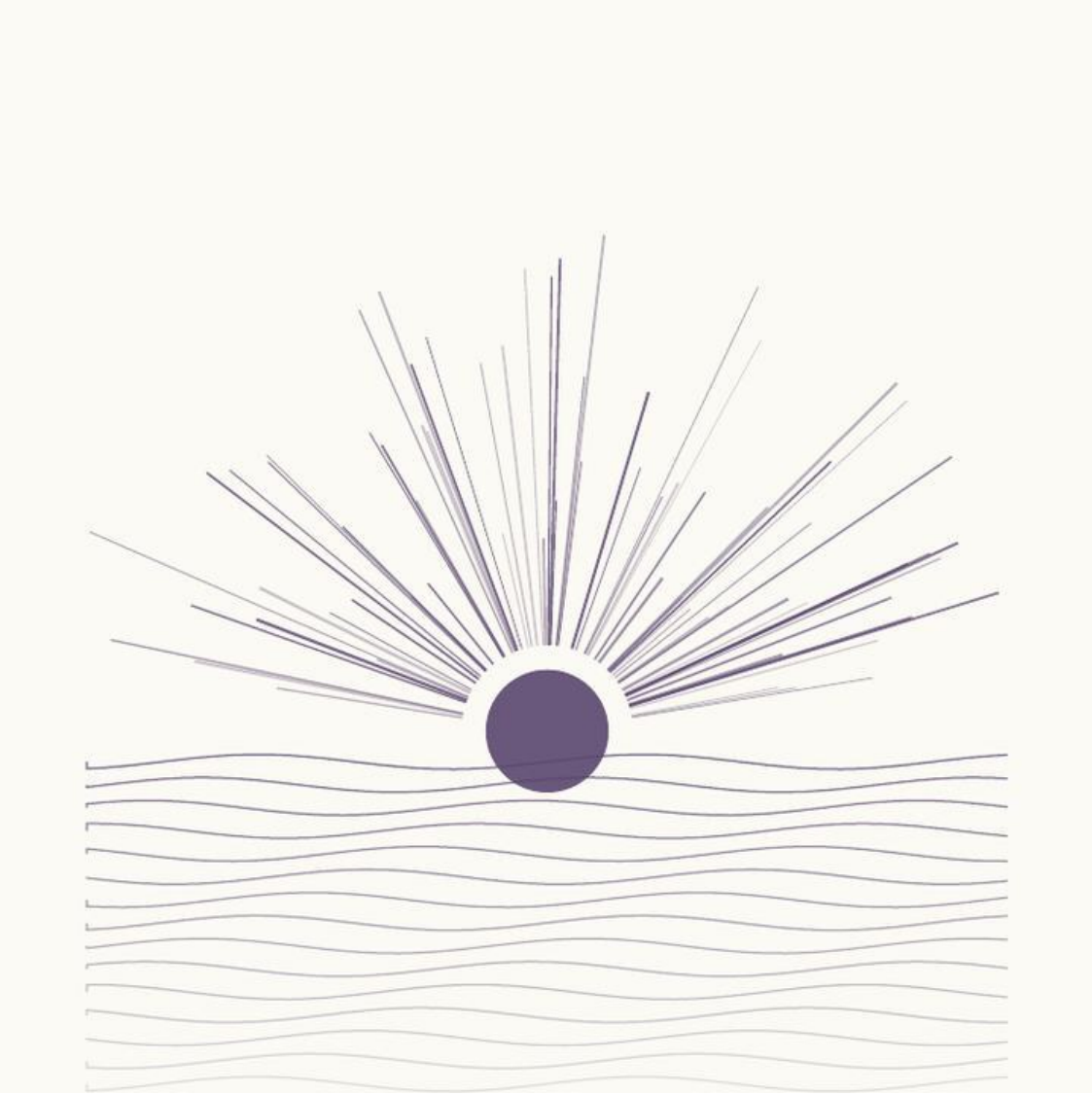


PLATE XVII

CHAPTER

16

The Uses of Sorrow

Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?

JOHN KEATS, LETTER OF APRIL 1819



IN THE WINTER OF 1818, the twenty-three-year-old poet John Keats nursed his younger brother Tom through the last stages of tuberculosis. Tom died in December. Keats, who had trained in medicine at Guy's Hospital, knew what the disease looked like, and may already have suspected he carried it himself. A few months later, in a long letter to his brother George and sister-in-law Georgiana, who had emigrated to America, he tried to make sense of a world so full of suffering.

People call the world a vale of tears, he wrote, from which we are to be redeemed by some arbitrary interposition of God and taken to heaven. What a little circumscribed straitened notion! Call the world, if you please, *the vale of Soul-making*. Intelligences, he suggested, are not yet souls; they become souls — individuals with identity — by passing through a world of pains and troubles. A heart, he wrote, must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways. Keats died in Rome two years later, at twenty-five. His idea has outlived him: that sorrow is not simply the opposite of a good life, but one of the materials from which a self is made.

What bad feelings are for

From an evolutionary point of view, unpleasant emotions are not malfunctions. They are tools. Fear prepares us to escape danger. Anger mobilizes us against injustice and signals that a boundary has been crossed. Guilt motivates repair. Anxiety focuses attention on problems that need solving. Sadness, perhaps the most mysterious, slows us down after a loss, prompts us to reconsider goals that have failed, and signals to others that we need support. The social psychologist Joseph Forgas has found that mild sadness can even make people more careful thinkers: less gullible, more attentive to detail, less prone to certain biases.

A life without these feelings would not be a happy life. It would be a dangerous and shallow one. And there is evidence that a rich emotional life — including its unpleasant parts — is itself a sign of health.

THE EVIDENCE

The emotional ecosystem

WHO AND WHEN Jordi Quoidbach and colleagues, 2014.

WHAT THEY DID Surveyed more than 37,000 people about how often they experienced a wide range of specific emotions, and calculated their *emodiversity* — the variety and relative abundance of emotions in their lives, borrowing a formula used by ecologists to measure biodiversity.

WHAT THEY FOUND People with greater emodiversity — positive and negative — reported less depression, independent of how much positive or negative emotion they experienced overall. Experiencing many different emotions seemed healthier than experiencing a few intensely.

THE CAVEAT The measures were self-reported and correlational, and later studies have produced mixed results. But the metaphor is apt: a healthy inner life may resemble a diverse ecosystem more than a monoculture of cheerfulness.

The second arrow, revisited

If sorrow is natural, what makes it harmful? The Buddha's answer, from Chapter 4, was the second arrow: the suffering we add to pain

by resisting it, dwelling on it and telling ourselves stories about it. Modern research points in the same direction.

In 2018 Brett Ford, Iris Mauss and colleagues studied people's habitual attitudes towards their own negative emotions in the laboratory, in daily diaries and over months. People who tended to *accept* their negative feelings — to let them be, without judging them as bad or trying to get rid of them — experienced fewer negative emotions in response to stress and had better psychological health months later. Acceptance did not make them wallow. It seemed to let the feelings pass through.

The opposite habit, *rumination* — repetitively chewing over one's distress and its causes — has been shown by the psychologist Susan Nolen-Hoeksema and many others to prolong and deepen depression. The difference between rumination and healthy reflection seems to lie partly in perspective. The psychologist Ethan Kross has found that when people reflect on painful experiences from a *distanced* perspective — imagining themselves as a fly on the wall, or even silently addressing themselves by their own name — they feel less distress and gain more insight than when they relive the experience from the inside. Marcus Aurelius, rising in imagination above the earth, was practising self-distancing.

Pain is unavoidable. The second arrow — resistance, rumination, the story we fire after it — is optional, or at least trainable.

Most people are resilient

For much of the twentieth century, clinicians assumed that almost everyone who suffered a major loss would need to go through a long and painful process of "grief work," and that those who seemed to cope well were in denial. In 2004 the psychologist George Bonanno

published a paper that challenged this view. Following people through bereavement and other potentially traumatic events, he and his colleagues found that the most common trajectory was not prolonged distress but *resilience*: a brief period of disruption followed by a return to healthy functioning. Others showed slower *recovery*. Smaller groups showed chronic distress or delayed reactions. After the attacks of 11 September 2001, studies of New Yorkers found that a majority showed a resilient pattern.

Resilience, Bonanno argued, is ordinary, not heroic. It does not mean feeling nothing; it means continuing to function and to feel joy alongside sorrow. And it seems to come from many sources: relationships, flexibility in coping, a degree of optimism, and sometimes, surprisingly, laughter. Widows and widowers who could genuinely laugh when talking about their late spouses, in one of his studies, tended to adjust better in the following years.

What does not kill us

What does not kill me makes me stronger, wrote Nietzsche. Is it true? The honest answer is: sometimes, a little, under some conditions.

In 2010 Mark Seery and colleagues surveyed a large national sample of Americans about the adverse events they had experienced in their lives — illness, bereavement, violence, disaster — and tracked their mental health over several years. People who had experienced *some* adversity had better outcomes than those who had experienced a great deal — but also better than those who had experienced *none*. A moderate dose of hardship seemed to build capacities for coping that a sheltered life did not. Aristotle's inverted U appears once more: too little adversity and too much both leave people more vulnerable than a middling amount.

Then there is *post-traumatic growth*, a term introduced by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in the 1990s to describe positive changes some people report after struggling with trauma:

greater appreciation of life, closer relationships, new possibilities, a sense of personal strength, spiritual change. Many survivors do report such changes, and their reports deserve respect. But careful studies have found that people's *perceptions* of growth often do not match measured changes from before to after the event. Growth may sometimes be a way of making meaning of suffering — a form of the remembering self's redemptive storytelling — rather than a literal transformation. That does not make it worthless. Stories matter. But it is no reason to welcome trauma, and the pressure to find a silver lining can become one more burden on people already suffering.

The magic number

Science, too, has had to learn humility about the shadows. In 2005 the psychologist Barbara Fredrickson and the management consultant Marcial Losada published a paper in *American Psychologist* claiming that human flourishing required a ratio of positive to negative emotions of at least 2.9013 to 1. The figure was derived from equations borrowed from fluid dynamics. The paper was cited thousands of times, and the "positivity ratio" became a staple of popular books and corporate training.

In 2013 an unlikely trio — Nicholas Brown, a mature part-time graduate student in London; Alan Sokal, the physicist famous for an earlier hoax exposing intellectual sloppiness; and the psychologist Harris Friedman — published a devastating critique. The mathematics, they showed, was nonsense: the equations had been misapplied and the precise ratio had no basis. The journal formally withdrew the modelling. Fredrickson acknowledged the problem while maintaining that, in general, more positive emotion relative to negative is beneficial — a much humbler claim.

The episode is worth remembering for two reasons. It shows science correcting itself, slowly and imperfectly, through the efforts of sceptics. And it shows the seductive appeal of a formula for happiness — a magic number that turns the vale of soul-making into

a spreadsheet. The evidence on emodiversity and acceptance suggests that a good life is not one that maximizes a ratio, but one with room for the whole weather of human feeling.

A CLOSER LOOK

When sorrow is something more

Sadness is part of life; depression is an illness. If low mood, loss of interest or pleasure, hopelessness, or changes in sleep and appetite persist for more than a couple of weeks, or if you have thoughts of harming yourself, please speak to a doctor or mental health professional, or contact a local crisis line. Depression is common and treatable, and seeking help is a sign of good sense, not weakness. None of the practices in this book is a substitute for care.

Call the world, if you please, the vale of Soul-making.

JOHN KEATS, LETTER OF APRIL 1819

Keats's vale of soul-making is not a justification of suffering. He did not think his brother's death was good. He was trying to say what a person might become by passing through such things — and the research, cautiously, agrees that people are more resilient than they expect, that sorrow accepted passes more easily than sorrow resisted, and that a life with room for every feeling is healthier than a life of enforced cheer.

THE THREE HORIZONS

Sorrow arrives on the near horizon, but its work is done on the middle one: grief, failure and fear are metabolized, slowly, into the story of who we are. Acceptance keeps the second arrow from piercing the moment; meaning-making determines whether hardship becomes contamination or redemption in the story.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. The next time a painful emotion arrives, try naming it precisely — not just "bad" but "disappointed," "ashamed," "lonely." Then say to yourself: *this is here, and I can let it be here.*
2. Practise distanced reflection: write about a current difficulty in the third person, using your own name. Compare how it feels with writing in the first person.
3. Make an inventory of past hardships you came through. Next to each, write one thing you learned or one person who helped you. Read the list when the next one comes.

THREADS

The second arrow comes from Chapter 4; self-distancing from Marcus Aurelius in Chapter 3; the inverted U from Aristotle in Chapter 2. Redemptive storytelling links to narrative identity in

Chapter 7 and to meaning in Chapter 14. Acceptance also prepares the ground for the next chapter's paradox: pursued too directly, happiness slips away.

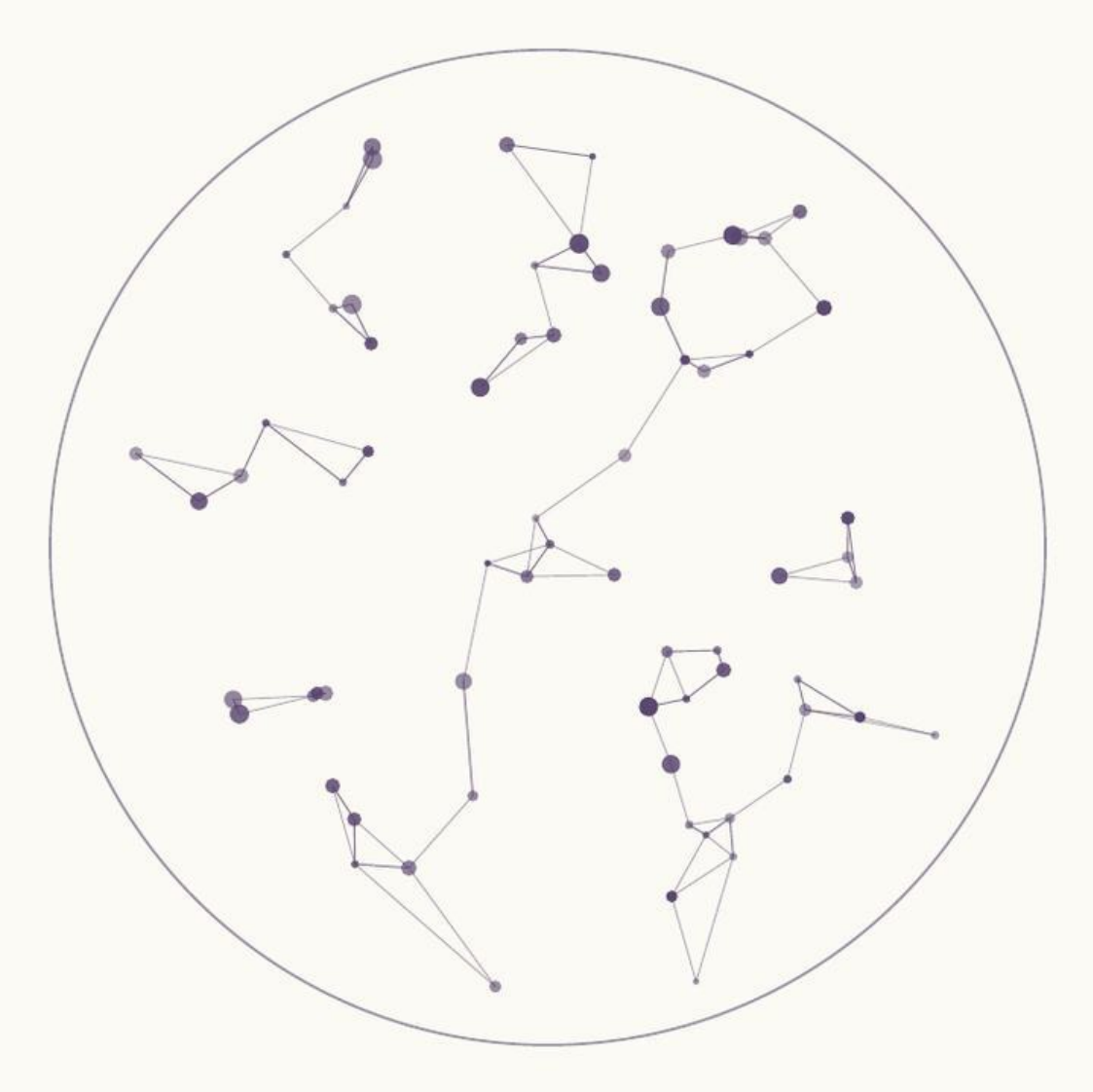


PLATE XVIII

CHAPTER

17

The Paradox of Pursuit

Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.

JOHN STUART MILL, AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1873)



A LINE OFTEN ATTRIBUTED to Nathaniel Hawthorne compares happiness to a butterfly: chase it and it stays just beyond your grasp, but sit quietly and it may come and land on you. Mill said something similar after his breakdown; Frankl, a century later, insisted that happiness cannot be pursued, only ensue. It is one of the most widely shared intuitions about the good life. It is also testable.

Valuing happiness can backfire

In 2011 the psychologist Iris Mauss and her colleagues asked a simple question: what happens to people who value happiness very highly? In one study, they measured how much women agreed with statements such as "how happy I am at any given moment says a lot about how worthwhile my life is." Among women living through relatively calm periods, those who valued happiness most were *less* happy and less satisfied with their lives, and more depressed.

In a second study, they manipulated the value of happiness directly. Some participants read a mock newspaper article extolling the importance of happiness; others read an article about something else. Then everyone watched a cheerful film. The people primed to value happiness felt *less* happy after the film — apparently because

they were disappointed that they did not feel happier. Their expectations had raised the bar, and the film failed to clear it.

> *The more people valued happiness, the more disappointed they were by their own feelings.*

Monitoring kills the mood

An earlier study by Jonathan Schooler, Dan Ariely and George Loewenstein had asked people to listen to a famously difficult piece of music, Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Some were told simply to listen. Others were told to try to make themselves feel as happy as possible while listening. The second group ended up less happy than the first. Trying to feel happy, and monitoring whether it was working, seemed to interfere with the experience itself. The same researchers surveyed people before and after New Year's Eve 1999, the much-hyped turn of the millennium. Those who had planned the most elaborate celebrations, with the highest expectations, were the most likely to be disappointed.

The finding has an important twist. In 2013 Yuna Ferguson and Kennon Sheldon repeated the music experiment with a cheerful piece — Aaron Copland's *Rodeo* — and found that people who tried to feel happier while listening *did* end up happier. The difference seems to lie in what one is doing. Effort to be happier can work when it is directed towards an activity that naturally supports happiness and when one is not constantly checking the result. It fails when it fights the activity or becomes a running audit of one's own feelings. Mill's warning was not that we should not seek happiness. It was that we should not keep asking whether we have found it.

How you pursue it matters

The most illuminating evidence comes from comparisons across cultures. In 2015 Brett Ford and colleagues measured how strongly people in the United States, Germany, Russia, Japan and Taiwan were motivated to pursue happiness. In the United States, a strong motivation to pursue happiness predicted *lower* well-being. In Russia and East Asia, it predicted *higher* well-being. The difference was explained by *how* people pursued it. Where happiness was mainly pursued socially — by investing in relationships, helping others, spending time with family — the pursuit worked. Where it was pursued as a private project of feeling good, it tended to backfire.

A large German study by Julia Rohrer and colleagues found the same thing within a single country. People asked to describe how they would try to become more satisfied with their lives listed strategies of many kinds. Those who mentioned socially engaged strategies — spending more time with friends and family, helping others — actually became more satisfied over the following year. Those who mentioned self-focused strategies, such as changing their job or their habits, did not. The road to happiness, it seems, often runs through other people — and the target is not the feeling, but the life that produces it.

The tyranny of the best

There is another way of pursuing too hard: insisting on the best possible choice. The economist Herbert Simon distinguished in the 1950s between *maximizing* — searching for the best possible option — and *satisficing* — searching until one finds an option that is good enough. In 2002 the psychologist Barry Schwartz and his colleagues found that people who tend to be maximizers report less happiness, less satisfaction, more regret and more depression than satisficers. In a later study of graduating students searching for jobs, maximizers landed jobs with starting salaries about a fifth higher than satisficers — and felt worse about them, more anxious, more

frustrated and more doubtful of their choices. They had done better and felt worse.

A related claim, that too much choice is paralysing, became famous through an experiment in which shoppers offered twenty-four kinds of jam were far less likely to buy than those offered six. Later analyses combining many studies found that the average effect of choice overload is close to zero; sometimes more choice helps, sometimes it hurts. The real problem is not choice itself but the demand to make the perfect choice — to treat each decision as a test of one's life.

The psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar named a closely related trap the *arrival fallacy*: the belief that when we reach a certain goal — the degree, the promotion, the house, the relationship — we will finally be happy. We arrive, the treadmill turns, and the happiness we expected to find waiting is not there. The organizational researchers Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, analysing thousands of daily diary entries from workers, found something that points in the opposite direction: of all the events that could make a workday good, the most powerful was simply *making progress* in meaningful work. Happiness lived not in arrival but in motion.

The labyrinth

There is an old distinction between a maze and a labyrinth. A maze is a puzzle: it has many paths, branching choices, dead ends, and a single correct route that must be found. A labyrinth has only one path. It winds back and forth, sometimes bringing you close to the centre and then sweeping you out to the edge again, but if you keep walking, you will arrive. There are no wrong turns. The only way to fail is to stop.

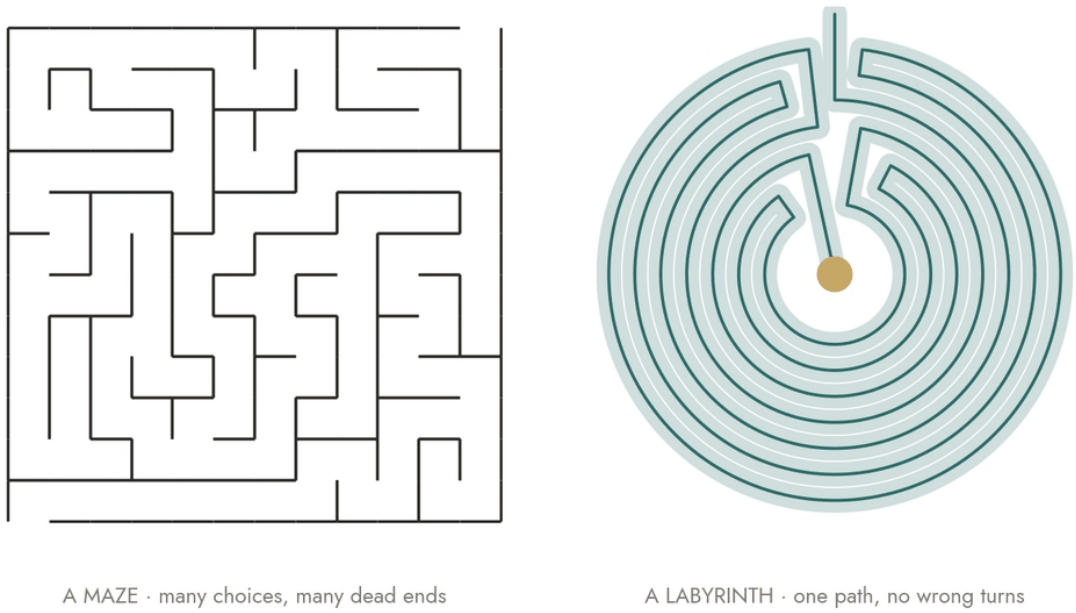


FIGURE 17.1 *A maze and a labyrinth. The first is a problem to be solved; the second is a path to be walked.*

Medieval cathedrals such as Chartres set labyrinths into their floors, and people walked them as a form of prayer or pilgrimage. The Latin phrase *solvitur ambulando* — it is solved by walking — captures their spirit. The labyrinth is the best image I know of the paradox of pursuit. If we treat happiness as a maze — a problem to be solved by finding the one right route — we will spend our lives anxious at every fork, convinced that we have taken a wrong turn. If we treat it as a labyrinth, we can stop worrying about the route and attend to the walking.

The Stoic archer of Chapter 3 understood this, aiming at shooting well rather than at hitting. The Daoists understood it with *wú wéi*, effortless action. Aristotle understood it when he said that pleasure completes activity rather than being its goal. All of them, in different words, said the same thing: aim at something worth doing, do it wholeheartedly, and let happiness take care of itself.

Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.

JOHN STUART MILL, AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1873)

The paradox of pursuit is not an argument for indifference. People who do nothing to improve their lives do not usually become happier. It is an argument about *direction*. The near horizon — how we feel right now — makes a terrible target and a wonderful by-product. Aim at the middle and far horizons, at a good life and at something larger than oneself, engage socially rather than privately, choose good enough over perfect, and walk.



THE THREE HORIZONS

The paradox arises when the near horizon becomes the target: monitoring moment-to-moment happiness corrodes it. The cure is to aim further — at activities, relationships and purposes — and let the moments be what they are. The middle horizon, too, has its trap: the arrival fallacy, in which the story is always about to begin.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. For one week, stop rating your happiness — no mood apps, no "am I happy?" checks. At the end of the week, notice whether you missed them.
2. Identify one area of life where you are maximizing — choosing a phone, planning a trip, editing an email — and deliberately satisfice. Define "good enough" in advance and stop when you reach it.
3. When you next want to feel better, choose a socially engaged strategy: call someone, help someone, invite someone. Compare the result with a solitary strategy.

THREADS

Mill's dictum completes the arc begun in the Prologue. The archer comes from Chapter 3, Cook Ding and wú wéi from Chapter 4, and

the conditional benefits of kindness from Chapter 15. The labyrinth becomes the emblem of Part Six and returns in the Epilogue.

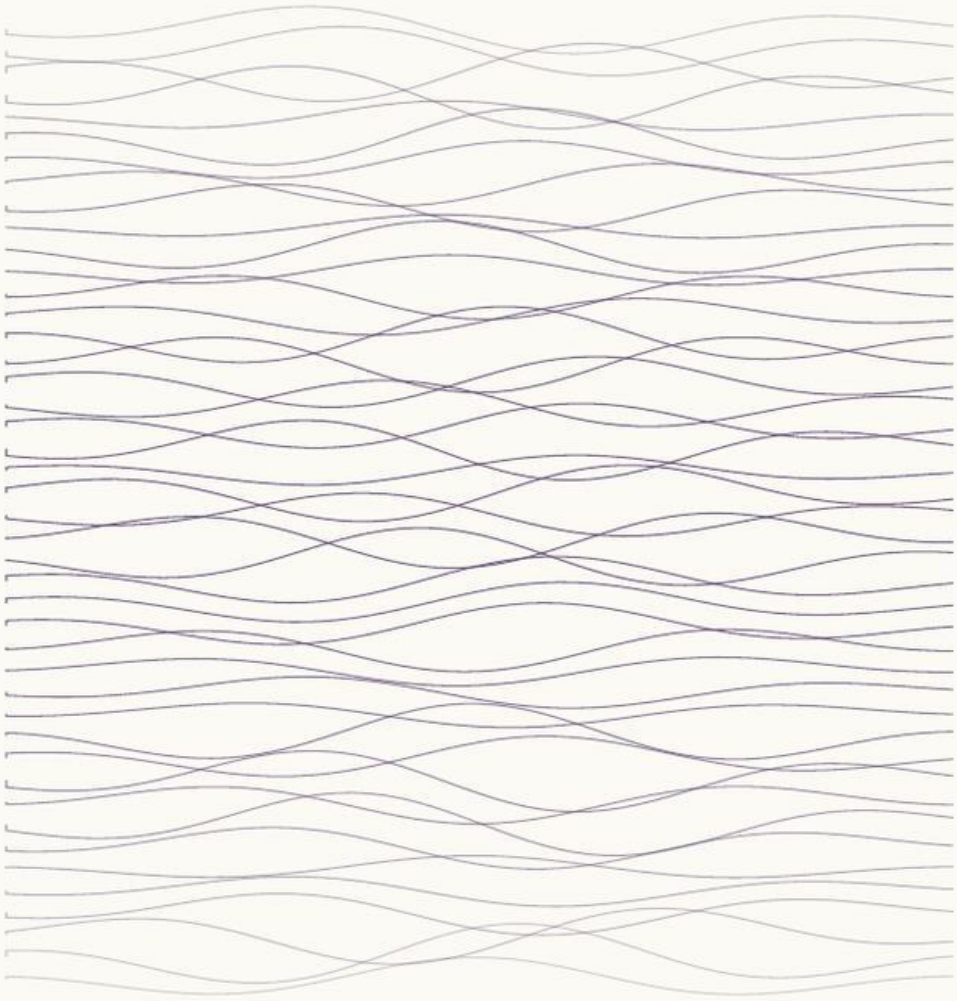


PLATE XIX

CHAPTER

18

The Comparing Mind

If we only wished to be happy, it would be easy; but we wish to be happier than others, and that is almost always difficult, because we believe others happier than they are.

MONTESQUIEU, PENSÉES



AT THE BARCELONA OLYMPICS in 1992, the psychologists Victoria Medvec, Scott Madey and Thomas Gilovich had a camera crew film the faces of medal winners at the end of their events and on the podium. Afterwards, students who knew nothing about sport rated how happy each athlete looked. The bronze medallists looked happier than the silver medallists.

Interviews revealed why. The silver medallists were thinking about what they had *almost* achieved: if only I had been a fraction faster, I would have won gold. The bronze medallists were thinking about what they had narrowly avoided: at least I won a medal. Their happiness depended not on their objective achievement — silver is better than bronze — but on what they compared it to.

The measuring stick

In 1954 the social psychologist Leon Festinger proposed that people have a basic drive to evaluate their abilities and opinions, and that when no objective standard is available, they do so by comparing themselves with others. *Social comparison theory* has since become

one of the most thoroughly studied ideas in psychology. We compare constantly, often without noticing: our incomes, our homes, our children, our bodies, our holidays, our careers. Comparisons with people who are better off — *upward* comparisons — can inspire, but more often they deflate. Comparisons with people worse off — *downward* — can comfort, but also breed complacency or contempt.

We saw in Chapter 11 that people's satisfaction with their incomes depends partly on what their neighbours earn. Researchers in Britain went further, finding that a person's *rank* in the income distribution of their reference group predicted their life satisfaction better than their absolute income did. The comparing mind cares less about what we have than about where we stand.

Status races

In 1899 the economist Thorstein Veblen coined the phrase *conspicuous consumption* to describe the spending of America's new rich, who bought goods not for their usefulness but to display their wealth and status. Later economists, such as Fred Hirsch and Robert Frank, described *positional goods*: goods whose value depends on how they compare with what others have. A larger house is valued partly because it is larger than other people's; an elite degree is valued partly because others lack it.

Positional competition has a cruel property. Like an arms race, it can leave everyone worse off. If everyone builds larger houses to keep up with their neighbours, no one's relative position improves, but everyone works longer hours and commutes further to pay for them. Frank called this an *expenditure cascade*: spending at the top raises the reference point for those just below, who raise it for those below them, all the way down. A society can get richer while its members feel no richer at all — which is one possible answer to Easterlin's paradox.

We do not want to be rich. We want to be richer than others — and we overestimate how happy those others are.

Envy and emulation

Aristotle, characteristically, distinguished two kinds of pain at another's good fortune. *Envy* is pain that another has something good, accompanied by the wish that they did not have it. *Emulation* is pain that we do not have it, accompanied by the wish to acquire it ourselves — and Aristotle thought emulation a good feeling, characteristic of good people, because it spurs us towards excellence. Modern psychologists have rediscovered the distinction as *malicious* and *benign* envy, and found that benign envy can indeed motivate self-improvement, whereas malicious envy motivates efforts to pull the other down.

The traditions of Part One offered antidotes. The Stoics pointed out that others' fortunes are not up to us and that their opinions of us are not ours to control. The Buddhists cultivated *muditā*, joy in the joy of others — the deliberate reversal of envy. Epicurus advised living unnoticed, *láthe biōsas*, away from the arena of status altogether.

The highlight reel

Montesquieu's observation in this chapter's epigraph — that we believe others to be happier than they are — has been confirmed experimentally. In a series of studies, Alexander Jordan and colleagues found that people systematically underestimate how often others experience negative emotions and overestimate how often they experience positive ones. Most of other people's sadness

happens in private; most of their joy happens in public. We compare our insides with their outsides.

Social media has turned this ancient tendency into an industry. Platforms present a curated stream of other people's best moments — holidays, promotions, perfect meals, beautiful children — and invite constant, often unconscious, comparison. The 2026 World Happiness Report devoted much of its attention to the effects of digital life on young people's well-being, and the question has become one of the most contested in the field.

THE EVIDENCE

Logging off

WHO AND WHEN Hunt Allcott, Luca Braghieri, Sarah Eichmeyer and Matthew Gentzkow, 2020; Melissa Hunt and colleagues, 2018.

WHAT THEY DID In the first study, paid a large group of American Facebook users to deactivate their accounts for four weeks before the 2018 midterm elections, comparing them with users who stayed on. In the second, asked students to limit their use of social media platforms to ten minutes each per day for three weeks.

WHAT THEY FOUND Deactivation freed up about an hour a day and produced small but significant improvements in self-reported well-being; afterwards, many participants used Facebook less. Limiting use reduced loneliness and depressive symptoms in the student study.

THE CAVEAT Effects were modest, and other large analyses have found the overall association between screen time and adolescent well-being to be very small. Researchers continue to argue about how much social media has contributed to declining youth well-being in some countries.

The debate is genuine. On one side, the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has argued that the shift to a phone-based childhood in the early 2010s helped cause a sharp rise in anxiety and depression among adolescents in several countries. On the other, researchers such as Amy Orben, Andrew Przybylski and Candice Odgers have argued that the overall associations are small — in one widely cited analysis, about the size of the association between adolescent well-being and eating potatoes — and that the causal evidence is weak. Both sides agree on some points: that how social media is used matters more than how long, that *passive* scrolling and

comparison seem worse than *active* connection with friends, and that heavy use crowding out sleep, exercise and face-to-face time is a problem. The Three Horizons suggest one way to think about it: a platform that fills the near horizon with stimulation while feeding the middle horizon a constant stream of other people's stories is likely to leave many users feeling that their own story falls short.

Comparing with ourselves

There is one comparison that tends to serve us well: with our own past. The psychologists Anne Wilson and Michael Ross found that people tend to see their past selves as worse than their present selves — sometimes unfairly disparaging who they used to be in order to feel that they have grown. The bias is not entirely healthy, but the underlying habit is. Measuring ourselves against who we were, rather than against who others seem to be, keeps the comparison within our control and turns it towards growth. It is, in a sense, Aristotle's emulation turned inward.

No one is happy who does not think himself so.

PUBLILIUS SYRUS, SENTENTIAE

The comparing mind cannot be switched off. It is part of how human beings, as social animals, work out where they stand. But it can be directed. We can choose whom we compare ourselves with, and how; we can turn envy into emulation and comparison into celebration; we can limit our exposure to curated highlight reels; and we can remember, whenever someone else's life looks perfect, Montesquieu's warning: others are not as happy as we believe them to be.

THE THREE HORIZONS

Comparison is the characteristic disease of the middle horizon. It judges our story not by its own lights but against other people's stories, which we see only from the outside, at their best. It barely touches the moment — a meal tastes the same whatever others are eating — until we start comparing it too.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Keep a comparison diary for a week. Each time you catch yourself comparing, note with whom, about what, and whether it left you deflated or inspired. Look for patterns.
2. Turn one envy into emulation: identify something you envy in someone else, and ask what single step would move you towards it.
3. Try a one-week experiment with your most comparison-heavy app: delete it from your phone, or limit it to ten minutes a day, and track your mood.

THREADS

Relative income came first in Chapter 11. Envy's antidote, muditā, comes from Chapter 4, and emulation from Aristotle. Social media

and the engineering of attention are taken further in Chapter 22. The Easterlin paradox returns at the scale of nations in Chapter 20.

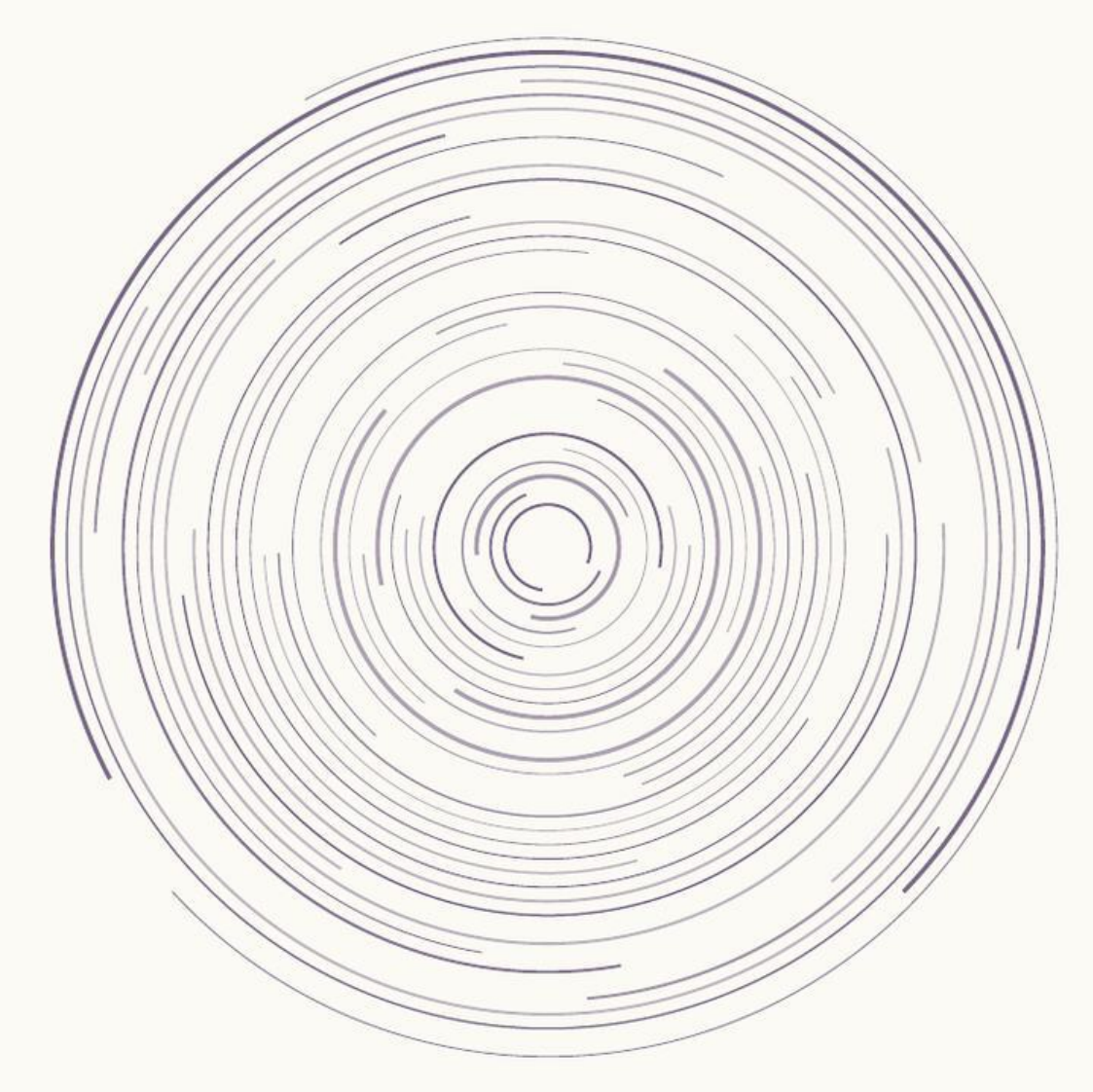


PLATE XX

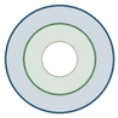
CHAPTER

19

The Shape of a Life

To philosophize is to learn to die.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, ESSAYS I.20 (1580)



AROUND THE YEAR 524, a Roman senator sat in a prison cell in Pavia awaiting execution. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius had been one of the most powerful men in the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy — consul, scholar, translator of Aristotle, master of offices at the court of King Theodoric. Accused of treason, he lost everything at once. In his cell he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, one of the most widely read books of the Middle Ages.

In it, Philosophy appears to him as a woman of great age and dignity and patiently argues him out of despair. At one point she lets Fortune speak for herself. I turn my wheel, Fortune says; I delight in raising the low to the top and bringing the high to the bottom. Climb up, if you like — but on condition that you do not think it an injury to come down when the rules of my game demand it.

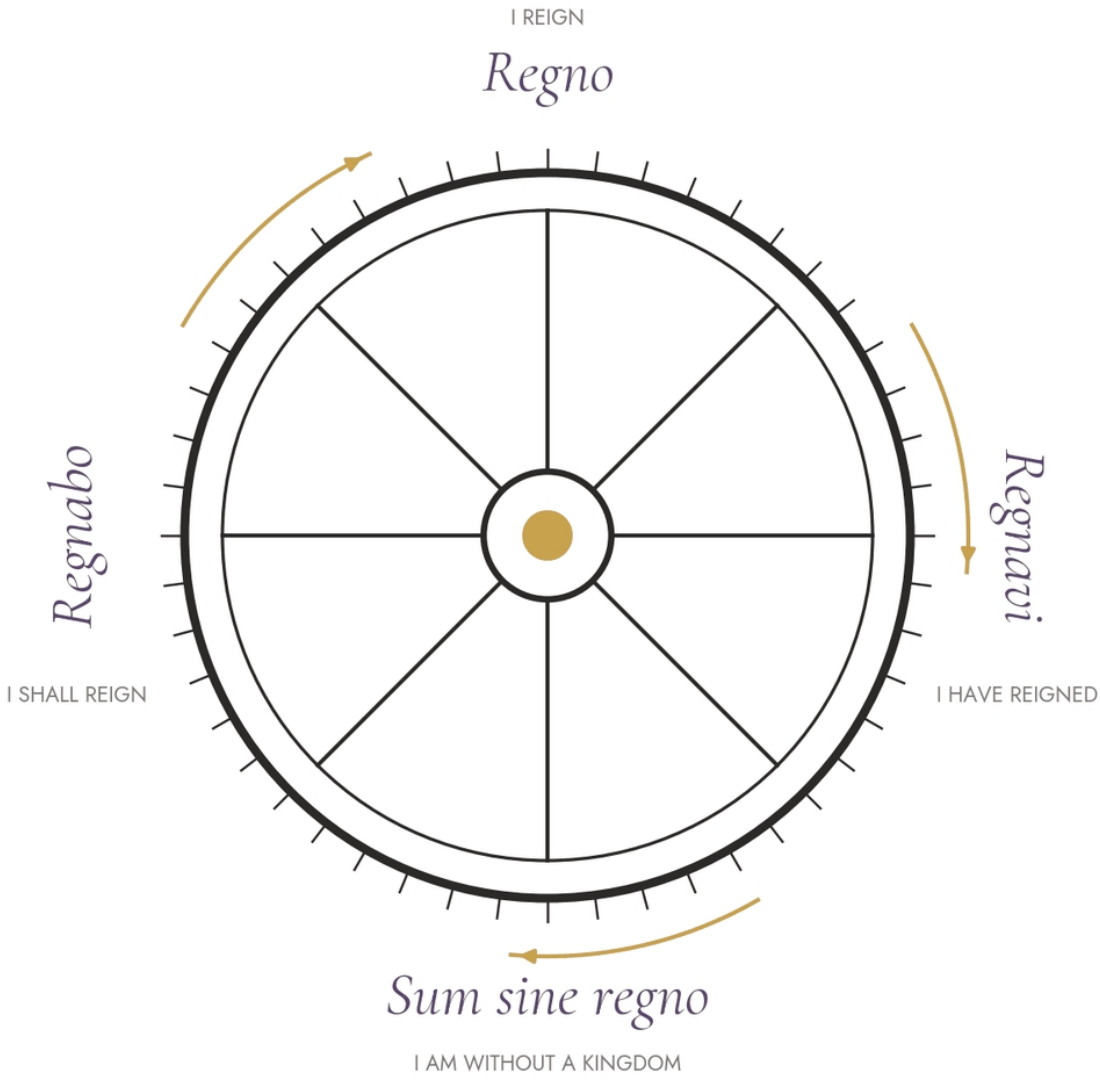


FIGURE 19.1 *The Wheel of Fortune as medieval artists drew it, with the four inscriptions found in manuscripts such as the Carmina Burana: I shall reign, I reign, I have reigned, I am without a kingdom.*

The Wheel of Fortune became one of the most common images of medieval Europe, carved into cathedrals and painted into manuscripts, usually with four figures around its rim: one rising, one crowned at the top, one falling, one crushed beneath. It is an image of the shape of a life. And it is a strangely appropriate introduction to one of the most intriguing findings of modern well-being research — that life satisfaction, too, seems to have a shape.

The U

In 2008 the economists David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald analysed survey data from around half a million randomly sampled people in the United States and Western Europe and reported that, holding other factors constant, well-being follows a U-shape across adult life. It is relatively high in early adulthood, declines to a low point in middle age — somewhere in the mid- to late forties — and then rises again into old age. Blanchflower later reported a similar pattern in well over a hundred countries. In 2012 a team of primatologists asked zookeepers to rate the well-being of more than five hundred chimpanzees and orangutans, and found a similar midlife dip in the apes.

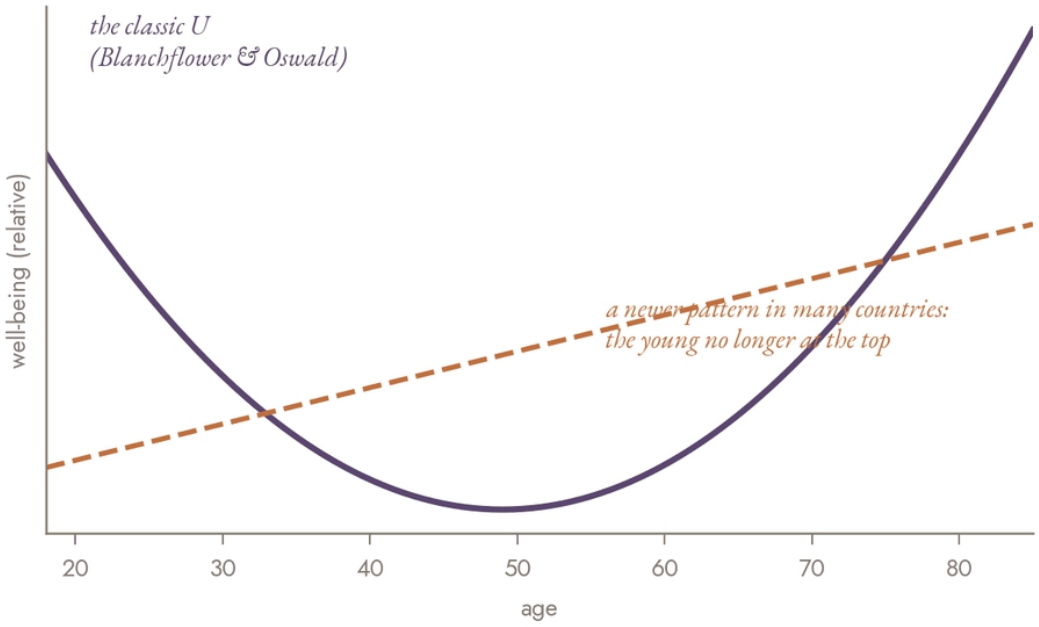


FIGURE 19.2 *Illustrative. The classic U-shape of well-being across adult life, and the newer pattern reported in many countries, in which young adults no longer start near the top.*

The U-curve has been vigorously debated. Its depth depends on which other factors are statistically held constant, and long-term studies following the same people do not always find it. But

something about middle age — the squeeze of responsibilities, the gap between youthful aspirations and actual achievements, the dawning awareness of limits — seems to weigh on many people, and something about later life seems to lighten the load.

The young are not all right

In the 2020s, however, the left side of the U began to change. The Global Flourishing Study, publishing its first results in 2025, found that in many countries — including the United States — young adults were now faring worse than older ones, so that flourishing tended to rise steadily with age rather than dipping in the middle. The traditional U survived in some countries but not in others. Researchers have proposed many explanations: rising costs of living, insecure work, loneliness, a youth mental health crisis, the effects of digital life. The 2026 World Happiness Report added a more hopeful note: in many countries where happiness had risen most over the past two decades, much of the gain came from younger generations. The shape of a life, it seems, is not fixed. It is being redrawn.

The wisdom of shrinking horizons

Why should well-being rise in later life, as bodies decline and friends die? The most influential answer comes from the psychologist Laura Carstensen of Stanford. Her *socioemotional selectivity theory* holds that people's goals depend on how much time they perceive themselves to have. When the future seems open-ended, people prioritize goals related to acquiring knowledge, expanding their horizons and meeting new people, even at an emotional cost. When time seems limited, they prioritize emotionally meaningful goals: deepening close relationships, savouring experiences, doing what matters most.

When time feels short, people stop collecting experiences and start savouring them.

Older adults, Carstensen and her colleagues found, tend to prune their social networks to the most rewarding relationships and to show a *positivity effect* — attending to and remembering positive information more than negative. In a study that followed people for over a decade with experience sampling, emotional well-being improved with age well into later life before levelling off. Crucially, the theory is about perceived time, not age. When young people face shortened horizons — through serious illness, or in the aftermath of disasters and epidemics — their preferences come to resemble those of the old. And when older people are asked to imagine that medical advances will give them many extra healthy years, their preferences come to resemble those of the young.

Other research suggests that some forms of wisdom grow with age. In studies by Igor Grossmann and colleagues, older adults reasoned more wisely about social conflicts — recognizing the limits of their knowledge, considering multiple perspectives, anticipating change. Confucius, at seventy, could follow his heart's desire without overstepping the line.

What we regret

As lives lengthen and look backward, regret becomes a central theme. In a series of studies, Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Medvec found a striking temporal pattern. In the short term, people regret their actions more than their inactions — the foolish thing they said, the bad investment. But over the long run, the pattern reverses: people regret the things they did *not* do — the education not pursued, the love not declared, the chance not taken. Later work suggested that the most enduring regrets involve failing to live up to one's *ideal* self, the person one hoped to become.

A nurse named Bronnie Ware, who cared for dying patients in Australia, wrote about the regrets she heard most often. Her account is anecdotal, not scientific, but it has resonated with millions of readers because it rings true: people wished that they had lived a life true to themselves rather than the life others expected; that they had not worked so hard; that they had expressed their feelings; that they had stayed in touch with their friends; and that they had let themselves be happier.

Learning to die

Philosophers have long argued that the awareness of death, rightly handled, does not darken life but clarifies it. Epicurus argued that death is nothing to us. His Roman follower Lucretius added the *symmetry argument*: we do not grieve for the eternity before we were born, so why grieve for the eternity after we die? Montaigne, who had once been thrown from his horse and nearly died, recorded that the experience of approaching death had been gentle, almost pleasant, and concluded that if you do not know how to die, you should not worry: nature will teach you on the spot.

Leo Tolstoy, whose own crisis we met in Chapter 14, wrote the most searching fiction about dying ever written. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) begins with the sentence that Ivan's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible. A successful judge, he has lived entirely by convention, seeking propriety and comfort. Dying, he is tormented less by pain than by the suspicion that his whole life has been wrong — and by the lies of everyone around him, who pretend he is merely ill. Only his young servant Gerasim, who cares for him with simple honesty and does not pretend, brings him comfort. Ivan's life had a successful story and no far horizon at all.

Research on reminders of mortality has produced mixed findings. Some studies inspired by the anthropologist Ernest Becker suggest that thinking about death makes people cling more tightly to their

worldviews and in-groups. But other work suggests that a calm awareness of mortality can encourage people to prioritize what matters — as Carstensen's theory would predict. In one study, college seniors who were reminded how little time remained before graduation made more effort to savour their final weeks, and were happier for it. Endings, as Chapter 7 showed, shape memories. The awareness of endings, it seems, can shape lives.

Do not act as if you had ten thousand years to live. While you live, while it is in your power, be good.

MARCUS AURELIUS, MEDITATIONS 4.17

The medieval Wheel of Fortune turned without regard to merit. The modern evidence is kinder: the shape of a life is not entirely in fortune's hands. Later life, for many, brings a sharper sense of what matters, warmer relationships and a greater capacity for contentment. What the young lose in open horizons, the old gain in focus. And the knowledge that we will die, faced squarely, can turn the near horizon from something we rush through into something we savour, and the far horizon from an abstraction into a question we can answer with our lives.



THE THREE HORIZONS

Ageing reshapes the horizons. The open future of youth favours the middle horizon — building a story. Shrinking time shifts attention to the near horizon of savouring and the far horizon of legacy and love. The regrets of the dying are almost all far-horizon regrets: about relationships, authenticity and the courage to live one's own life.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Imagine you have one year left, in good health. Write down how you would spend it. Then ask which of those things could begin this month.
2. Write two lists: regrets of action and regrets of inaction. Choose one inaction that is still possible, and take a first step.
3. Choose something you do regularly — a walk, a meal with someone, a seasonal ritual — and estimate how many more times you will do it. Let the number change how you do it next time.

THREADS

Solon's rule (Chapter 1) and the peak-end rule (Chapter 7) meet here at the scale of a lifetime. Epicurus on death comes from Chapter 3, Tolstoy from Chapter 14. The rising unhappiness of the young links to social comparison in Chapter 18 and to technology in Chapter 22.

INTERLUDE IV

What Remains

THE GARDEN DIALOGUES · WINTER

◎

January. A hospital room on the fourth floor, snow falling past the window onto the car park. Theodora is propped up on pillows, much thinner, an oxygen line under her nose. The procedure went badly; there have been complications. Sam sits by the bed with a paperback and a bag of clementines.

THEODORA You brought fruit. You have been reading about the dying.

SAM I brought clementines because you like clementines.

THEODORA Good answer. Peel me one. Slowly — I want the smell.

Sam peels. The room fills with the scent.

THEODORA What are you reading?

SAM Tolstoy. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. You told me to.

THEODORA I told you to read it in ten years. You are very literal for a scientist.

SAM Ivan's whole family lies to him. They pretend he's going to get better. And the only one who helps is the servant, Gerasim, because he doesn't pretend.

THEODORA Then be my Gerasim. The doctors say days, perhaps a week or two. My daughter arrives tomorrow from Lisbon. I am not frightened, if you are wondering. Epicurus was right about that

much: where death is, I will not be. I am frightened of the beans failing without me.

SAM (her voice catching) I'll do the beans.

THEODORA I know you will. That is why I gave you the key.

A pause. Snow.

SAM Can I ask you something unscientific?

THEODORA Those are the only interesting questions.

SAM Was it a good life? Yours. Measured however you like.

THEODORA (thinking for a long time) The moments — many good, some terrible, most ordinary. Bread, beans, students who finally understood a line of Homer, Kostas singing badly in the bath. The story — not the story I planned at twenty. I planned to be a great scholar. I became a good teacher, which is rarer. And the world …

SAM The far horizon.

THEODORA Do you know what I have decided the far horizon is? It is other people's near horizon, later. My students' students. My granddaughter. Mr. Halloran eating your yellow tomatoes. You, on Saturdays, in a garden, when I am not there.

Sam takes her hand. Theodora's fingers close around hers.

THEODORA Your Dr. Coan with his scanners and his electric shocks. He found the hand of someone you love calms the frightened brain, yes?

SAM Especially in good marriages.

THEODORA Then we shall be very scientific about this. (She smiles, eyes closing.) There is a notebook in my bag. Green cover. Eleven years of plot fourteen — what grew, what failed, what I was thinking about while it grew. It is badly organized and full of quotations. It is yours.

SAM Theodora—

THEODORA Do not make it into data. Read it in the garden. In spring.

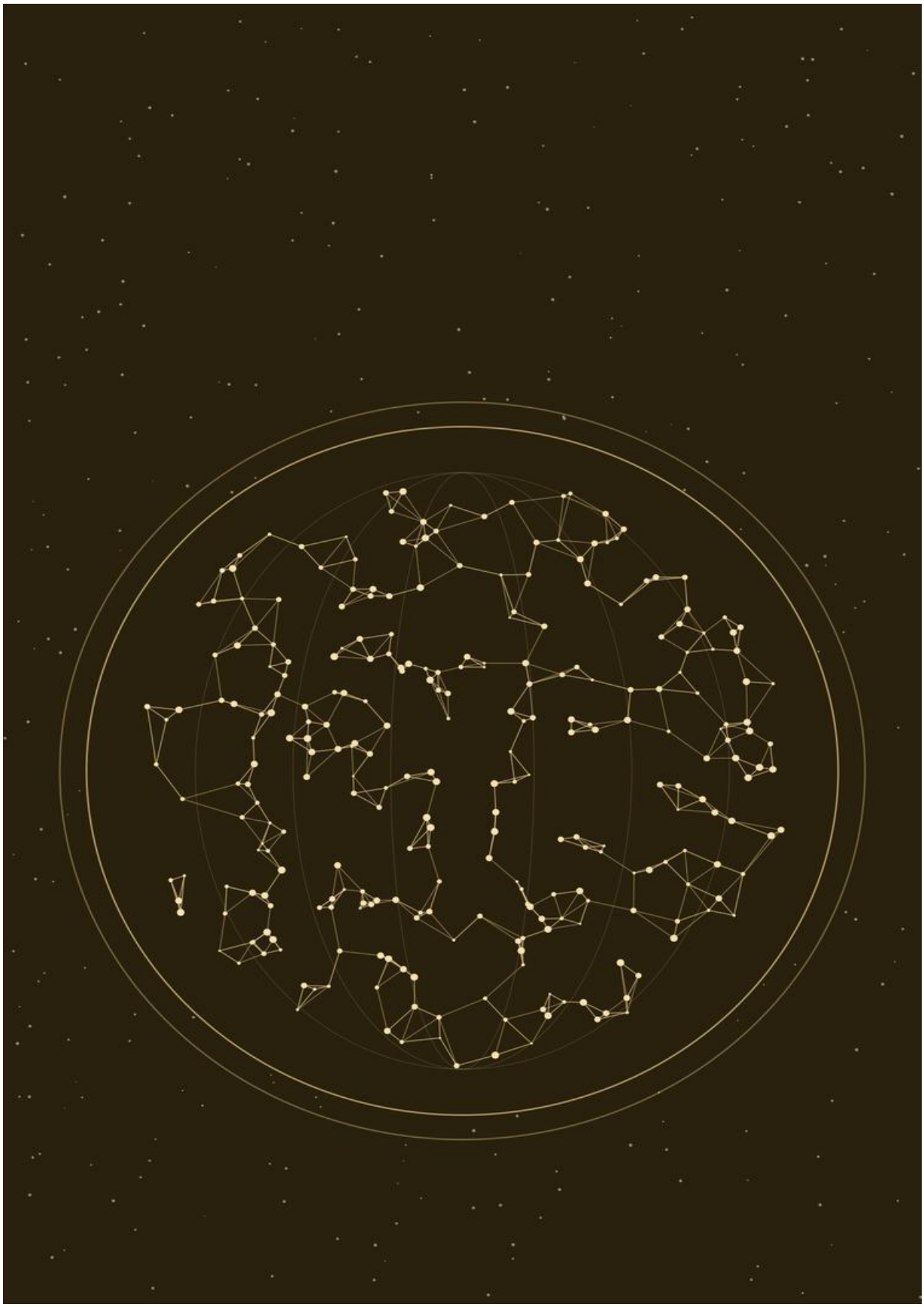
Silence, except for the oxygen and the snow. After a while Theodora speaks again, very quietly, eyes still closed.

THEODORA Solon said call no one happy until they are dead.

SAM I remember.

THEODORA I always thought it was a sad saying. It is not. It only means: wait until the whole story is in. (A breath.) It is nearly in, my dear. And I think you may call me lucky.

Sam sits holding her hand until the light outside turns blue, then dark, and the snow keeps falling.



PART FIVE

The Wider Circle

Nations, cultures and machines: well-being beyond the individual

No one flourishes alone, and no one flourishes in a vacuum. Every life is lived inside a society with laws and institutions, a culture with its own ideas of what a good life looks like, and — increasingly — an environment of technologies designed by other people for their own purposes.

Part Five widens the circle. It asks whether governments should measure and pursue happiness, and why some nations seem to do it better than others; how cultures shape not only how happy people are but what they *want* to feel; and what becomes of human well-being when Nozick's experience machine stops being a thought experiment and arrives in our pockets.

20 · The Happiness of Nations

21 · The Many Shapes of Happiness

22 · Well-Being in the Age of Machines

Interlude V: The Gardener's Notebook

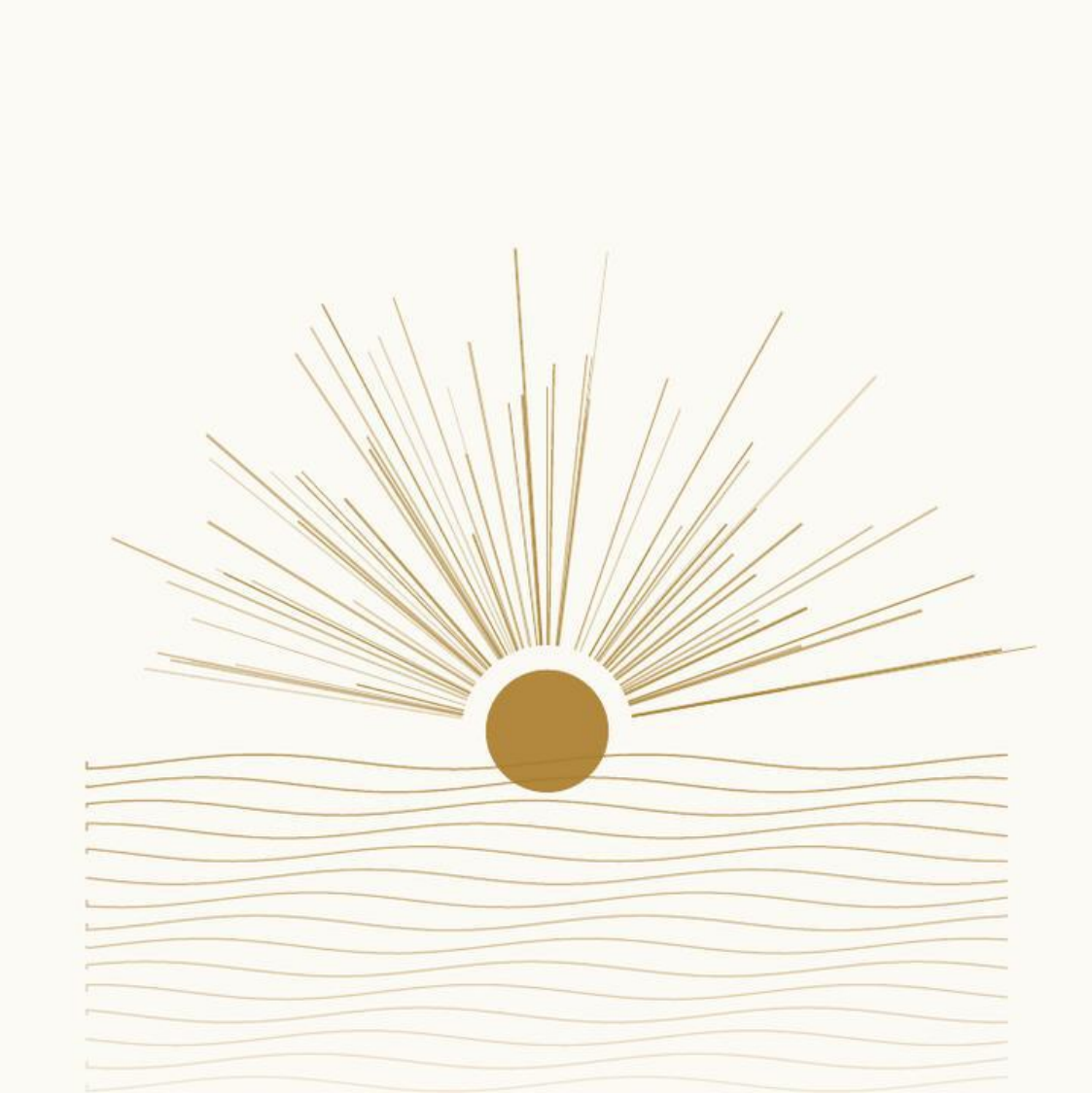


PLATE XXI

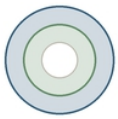
CHAPTER

20

The Happiness of Nations

The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only legitimate object of good government.

THOMAS JEFFERSON, 1809



ON 18 MARCH 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, campaigning for the presidency, spoke to students at the University of Kansas. America's gross national product, he told them, now exceeded eight hundred billion dollars a year. But it counted air pollution and cigarette advertising, ambulances to clear the highways of carnage, special locks for doors and jails for the people who broke them. It counted the destruction of forests and the production of weapons. And it did not count the health of children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play; the beauty of poetry or the strength of marriages; wit, courage, wisdom or compassion. It measured everything, he said, except that which makes life worthwhile. Less than three months later, Kennedy was dead.

He was not the first to make the point. Simon Kuznets, the economist who developed national income accounts for the United States government in the 1930s, had himself warned Congress that the welfare of a nation could hardly be inferred from a measure of national income. But for half a century after the Second World War, growth in national output was treated almost everywhere as the master measure of national success. Bentham's dream — that governments should aim at the greatest happiness of the greatest

number — had been quietly replaced by a proxy, and the proxy had become the goal.

The kingdom that measured happiness

The most famous challenge came from a small Himalayan kingdom. In the 1970s, Bhutan's young fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, is said to have declared that Gross National Happiness was more important than Gross Domestic Product. The phrase began as a philosophical stance, rooted in Buddhist ideas of the middle way, and grew into a system of government. Bhutan's 2008 constitution directs the state to promote the conditions that enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness, and the country developed an index with nine domains, including psychological well-being, health, education, time use, cultural resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and living standards. In 2011, at Bhutan's initiative, the United Nations adopted a resolution inviting countries to measure happiness; the following year it established 20 March as the International Day of Happiness.

Bhutan's experiment deserves admiration and scrutiny in equal measure. Its well-being policy coexisted, in the 1990s, with the expulsion of tens of thousands of Nepali-speaking citizens — a reminder that a government's language of happiness is no guarantee of justice. A national happiness index can measure many things; it cannot measure the people it excludes.

Beyond GDP

By the 2000s, the idea was spreading. In 2009 a commission led by the economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, convened by the French government, recommended that statistical systems shift their emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people's well-being, including how people experience

and evaluate their lives. The OECD launched its Better Life Index. In 2011 the United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics began asking tens of thousands of people four questions: how satisfied they are with their lives, how worthwhile they feel the things they do are, how happy they felt yesterday, and how anxious they felt yesterday. In 2019 New Zealand presented a "Wellbeing Budget," organizing spending priorities around measures of well-being.

The ONS questions are worth a second look, because they map almost perfectly onto the Three Horizons. *Satisfied with your life?* is the story. *Are the things you do worthwhile?* is the world. *Happy yesterday? Anxious yesterday?* are the moment. A statistics office, without any reference to Aristotle, had built an instrument for all three rings.

A statistics office, without any reference to Aristotle, had built an instrument for all three horizons.

What makes a country happy

The best-known effort to compare nations is the World Happiness Report, first published in 2012 by John Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffrey Sachs, and now produced by the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford with Gallup and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network. Each year, it ranks countries by the average of their citizens' answers to the Cantril ladder question — the middle horizon. And each year it tries to explain the differences.

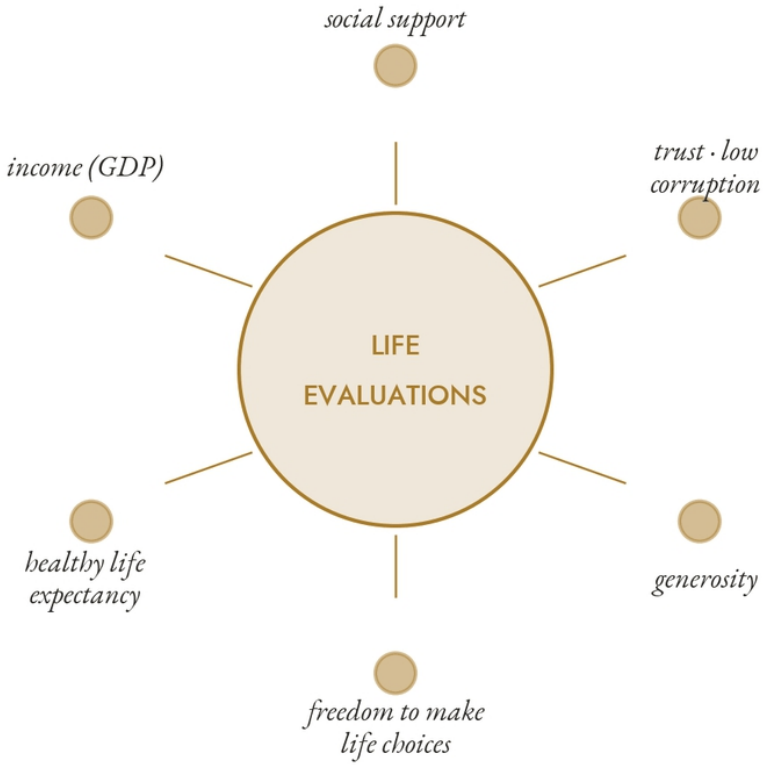


FIGURE 20.1 *The six national factors that the World Happiness Report uses to explain most of the differences between countries' average life evaluations.*

Six variables typically account for around three-quarters of the variation in national averages: income per person, social support (having someone to count on in times of trouble), healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and the absence of corruption. Notice how few of these are about money. Four of the six describe the quality of relationships and institutions: whether people can rely on each other and on the state. This helps explain the puzzle Richard Easterlin posed in 1974 (Chapter 11): as nations grow richer, income is only one pillar of six, and the others do not rise automatically with it.

In the 2026 report, as Chapter 6 noted, Finland ranked first for the ninth year in a row, followed by Iceland, Denmark and Costa Rica. Afghanistan, devastated by conflict and repression, ranked last of 147 countries. For the second consecutive year, no English-

speaking country made the top ten; the United States ranked 23rd and the United Kingdom 29th. Yet the long-run picture was more encouraging than the headlines suggested: of 136 countries with enough data, 79 had seen significant increases in average happiness since the early years of the Gallup World Poll, more than had seen declines. And the report found that people's belief in the kindness of others was more closely tied to their happiness than researchers had previously thought.

THE EVIDENCE

The wallet test

WHO AND WHEN Alain Cohn and colleagues, published in Science, 2019.

WHAT THEY DID "Lost" more than 17,000 wallets containing a business card, a key and varying amounts of money in 355 cities across 40 countries, handing them in at banks, hotels and offices and recording how many were returned to their owners.

WHAT THEY FOUND In most countries, wallets containing money were *more* likely to be returned than empty ones — and more money meant higher return rates. Return rates were highest in countries such as Switzerland, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden. Surveys show that people consistently underestimate how often their fellow citizens would return a wallet.

THE CAVEAT A single, specific form of honesty. But it captures something the happiness rankings keep finding: the happiest societies are those where people can trust one another — and most societies are more trustworthy than their members believe.

The Nordic puzzle

Why do the Nordic countries top the ranking so consistently? It is not the weather, the darkness of winter being hardly a selling point. Nor is it, as is sometimes claimed, a special national cheerfulness: Finns are famous for their reserve and are not, by most measures, the most emotionally exuberant people on earth. When Frank Martela and colleagues analysed the question for the 2020 World Happiness Report, they concluded that the Nordic advantage lay mainly in the quality of institutions: effective, trustworthy

governments, low corruption, a generous welfare state, and high levels of trust and freedom. Nordic citizens, in other words, have sturdy middle horizons: their life stories are protected by institutions that make it hard to fall very far.

The Global Flourishing Study, measuring the far horizon of meaning, relationships and character as well, tells a different story. Its top countries were Indonesia, Mexico and the Philippines — societies where incomes are lower and institutions weaker, but family, community and faith are strong — while wealthy, long-lived Japan came last. Neither ranking is the true one. A society can protect its citizens' stories while thinning out the relationships and meanings that fill the far horizon; another can be rich in connection and purpose while leaving its people exposed to misfortune. The ideal would be a society strong on every horizon, and no country has yet achieved it.

The WELLBY and its critics

Some economists now argue that governments should evaluate policies by their effects on well-being directly. Richard Layard and his colleagues have proposed a unit called the WELLBY — a one-point change in life satisfaction, on a scale from zero to ten, for one person for one year — so that the benefits of, say, mental health treatment, job training and green spaces can be compared on a common scale. Versions of this approach have entered official policy appraisal guidance in the United Kingdom.

There are serious objections. A government that aims at citizens' happiness can slide into paternalism, deciding for people what will make them happy. In *Brave New World* (1932), Aldous Huxley imagined a society that has solved unhappiness with conditioning and a pleasant drug, *soma*, and lost everything worth having along the way. The economist and philosopher Amartya Sen and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum have argued that the proper aim of policy is not happiness itself but *capabilities*: real freedoms for

people to do and be what they have reason to value. A capability approach protects people's right to choose their own good life, even a life that sacrifices momentary happiness for something they value more.

The Three Horizons suggest a partial answer. A soma state would score superbly on the near horizon and abysmally on the far one: no meaning, no freedom, no real relationships, no truth. Measuring all three horizons, rather than one, is a safeguard against Huxley's nightmare — and against Bentham's dream turning into it.

It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.

ROBERT F. KENNEDY, ON GDP (1968)

Jefferson wrote that the care of human life and happiness is the first and only legitimate object of good government. For most of the twentieth century, governments treated economic growth as the best available proxy for that object. The evidence of the past few decades suggests that growth matters, especially for poorer societies, but that trust, freedom, health, social support and generosity matter at least as much — and that these things, unlike income, cannot simply be bought. They must be built, slowly, by institutions and by citizens, one returned wallet at a time.



THE THREE HORIZONS

National policy works mainly on the middle and far horizons: it protects people's stories through security, health and freedom, and it strengthens or weakens the far horizon of trust, community and shared purpose. Governments can do little directly for the moment — and should be wary of trying.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Answer the four ONS questions for yourself, from 0 to 10: life satisfaction, worthwhile, happy yesterday, anxious yesterday. Repeat every month for a year.
2. Do one thing this week that builds trust in your community: return something, keep a promise to a stranger, help a neighbour without being asked.
3. List the public goods that support your well-being — parks, libraries, clean water, safe streets, healthcare. Write to someone responsible for one of them to say thank you.

THREADS

The Easterlin paradox and income come from Chapter 11; the ladder from Chapter 6; Bentham's dream from Chapter 5. Trust and generosity connect to Chapter 15. The divergence between rankings returns, as a matter of culture, in the next chapter.

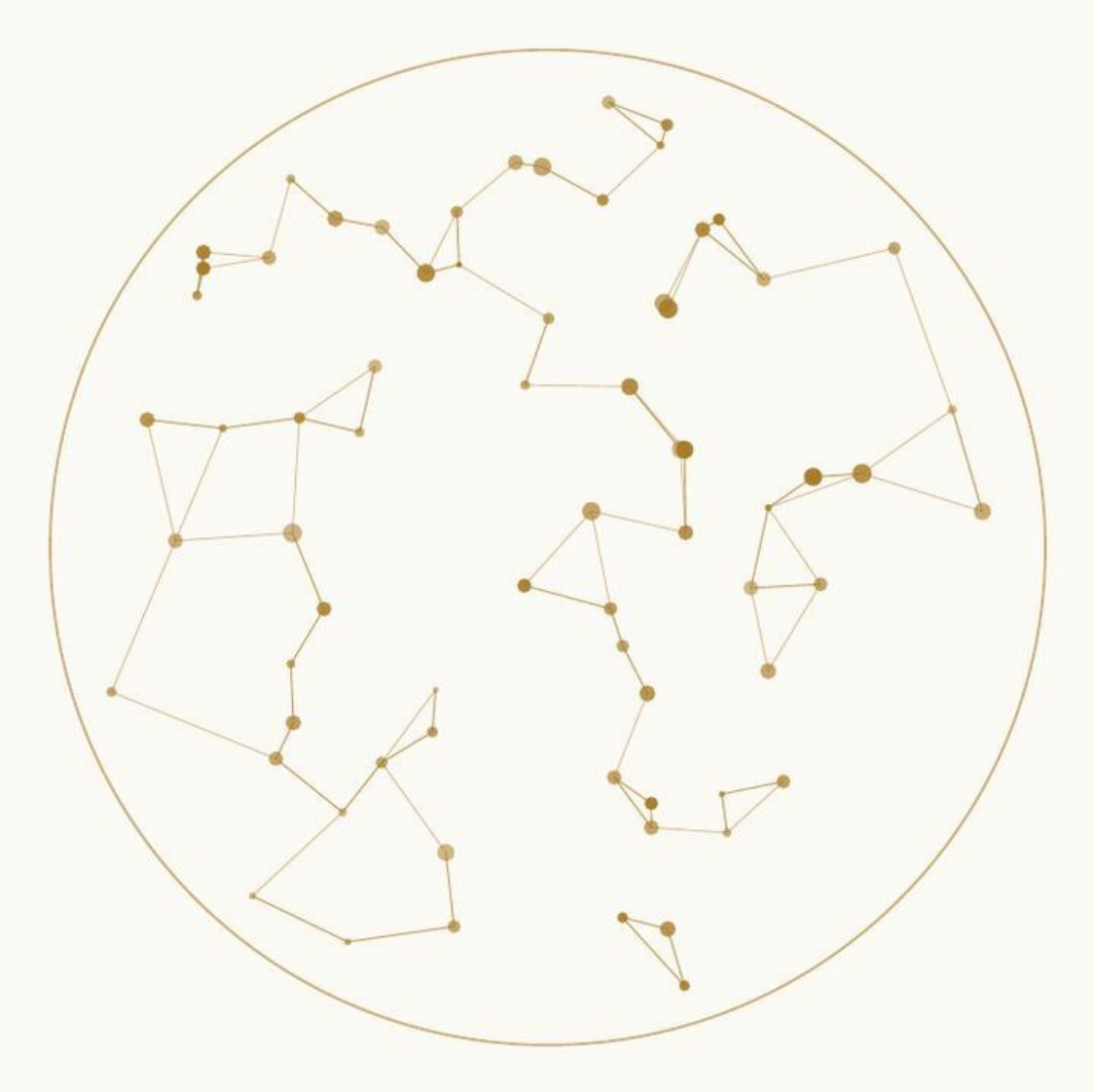


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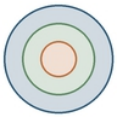
CHAPTER

21

The Many Shapes of Happiness

A person is a person through other persons.

NGUNI PROVERB: UMUNTU NGUMUNTU NGABANTU



IN THE MID-2000S THE psychologist Jeanne Tsai of Stanford noticed something about the smiles in American and Chinese children's books. In bestselling American storybooks, characters tended to smile more broadly and to engage in more exciting activities — running, jumping, shouting. In bestselling Taiwanese storybooks, smiles were gentler and activities calmer. When Tsai and her colleagues asked children which kind of smile they preferred, the preferences tracked the books.

Tsai's research led to a concept she called *ideal affect*: the feelings people *want* to feel, as distinct from the feelings they actually have. Her studies found that European Americans tend to value high-arousal positive states — excitement, enthusiasm, elation — more than people in East Asian cultures, who tend to value low-arousal positive states — calm, peacefulness, serenity — more. Classical Christian texts emphasize excited states more than classical Buddhist texts do. And people tend to choose activities, consumer products, even physicians, that match their ideal affect.



FIGURE 21.1 *The map of feelings, by pleasantness and arousal, with the regions of positive feeling that different cultures tend to idealize. After Jeanne Tsai and colleagues.*

Readers of Chapter 3 will notice a resemblance. Epicurus distinguished *kinetic* pleasures, the pleasures of motion and stimulation, from *katastematic* pleasure, the calm of a body free from pain and a mind free from disturbance — and argued that the calm kind was higher. In the language of modern psychology, Epicurus had an East Asian ideal affect. Two and a half thousand years ago, in a garden outside Athens, the cultural divide that Tsai measured was already being argued over.

What happiness means

The meanings attached to happiness differ too. When Yukiko Uchida and Shinobu Kitayama asked American and Japanese students to describe happiness, the Americans emphasized personal achievement and positive feelings. The Japanese more often described happiness in terms of social harmony — and more often mentioned its potential downsides, such as provoking envy or making a person complacent and inattentive to others.

In some cultures, people even show what researchers have called an *aversion to happiness*: a belief that too much happiness invites misfortune, provokes the envy of others or of fate, or is a sign of shallowness. The idea is ancient. Herodotus tells of Polycrates, tyrant of Samos, whose luck was so unbroken that his ally, the king of Egypt, warned him that the gods were jealous of such fortune and advised him to throw away the thing he valued most. Polycrates threw a precious ring into the sea. A few days later a fisherman brought him a magnificent fish — with the ring in its belly. The Egyptian king, hearing this, broke off the alliance, certain that a man so lucky would come to a terrible end. He did.

The self in the middle

Underlying many of these differences is the shape of the self. In a famous 1991 paper, Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama distinguished an *independent* self, common in Western cultures, understood as a bounded individual defined by personal attributes, from an *interdependent* self, common in East Asian and many other cultures, understood as fundamentally connected to others and defined by relationships and roles. Confucius would have recognized the second; so would the speakers of the Nguni languages of southern Africa, whose proverb gives this chapter its epigraph.

Ubuntu — the quality expressed in that proverb — became widely known through Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who described it as the

recognition that my humanity is caught up, inextricably bound up, in yours. In the Andes, the Kichwa concept of *sumak kawsay*, "good living," describes well-being as harmony within a community and with nature. Ecuador wrote it into its 2008 constitution, which also recognized rights for nature itself; Bolivia's 2009 constitution enshrined the related Aymara ideal of *suma qamaña*, living well together.

For an independent self, the far horizon begins somewhere out in the world. For an interdependent self, it begins at the family table.

The Three Horizons look different from inside each kind of self. For an independent self, the middle horizon — the personal story of achievement and self-expression — tends to dominate, and the far horizon lies somewhere out in the world. For an interdependent self, the boundaries blur: the story is a family's or a community's story, and the far horizon begins at the family table.

Words for good lives

Many languages contain words for kinds of well-being that others lack, and the past decade has seen a fashion for importing them.

The Danish *hygge* and the Dutch *gezelligheid* name a warm, convivial cosiness — candles, good food, unhurried company, the feeling of being safely inside together on a cold evening. They are arts of the near horizon, and their power lies in being shared. The Swedish *lagom* means "just the right amount": not too much, not too little — Aristotle's mean, turned into an everyday word. The Finnish *sisu* names a grim, quiet determination in the face of adversity, and it may say something about why Finns, who are not especially exuberant, rate their lives so highly: their national ideal of happiness

looks more like steady contentment than like joy. The Portuguese *saudade* names a bittersweet longing for something absent — a reminder that some cultures prize forms of melancholy that others try to cure. The Sanskrit *santosha*, contentment, is one of the observances of classical yoga. The Hebrew *shalom* means not merely the absence of conflict but wholeness.

The Japanese *ikigai* — roughly, "that which makes life worth living" — has had the strangest journey. In 1966 the psychiatrist Mieko Kamiya, who had worked with patients in a leprosy sanatorium, published an influential book on the subject, describing *ikigai* as something closer to a felt sense of life's worth, often found in small daily things and relationships. In the West, the word became attached to a Venn diagram combining what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs and what you can be paid for. The diagram was a Western invention, adapted in 2014 from an earlier Spanish diagram about purpose. It is a useful tool. It is not what *ikigai* meant to Kamiya, and the transformation of a gentle idea about everyday worth into a career-planning grid says something about the culture that did the transforming.

What is universal

Beneath the variety, some things seem to hold nearly everywhere. Social support predicts well-being in every region the World Happiness Report examines. Spending on others, as Chapter 11 showed, is associated with greater well-being in rich and poor countries alike. Research on self-determination theory has found that satisfying the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness predicts well-being across cultures as different as China, Russia, Turkey and the United States, although what autonomy looks like varies. Even toddlers, before culture has had much chance to shape them, seem glad to give.

The best summary may be that human beings everywhere need the same broad ingredients — security, connection, competence,

meaning — but cultures differ in how they combine them, which feelings they prize, and where they draw the boundaries of the self. The shapes of happiness are many. The materials are shared.

Whoever knows that enough is enough will always have enough.

LAOZI, DAODEJING 46

The danger, when we survey other cultures' ideas of the good life, is to treat them as products to be bought — a candle for hygge, a diagram for ikigai — rather than as whole ways of living, embedded in histories and relationships. The opportunity is to see our own assumptions more clearly. If you have always assumed that the best happiness is excited, individual and achieved, it is worth knowing that much of humanity has preferred happiness that is calm, shared and received.



THE THREE HORIZONS

Cultures differ in which horizon they foreground: the cosy arts of hygge and gezelligheid cultivate the moment; the individual achievement story dominates the middle horizon in many Western societies; ubuntu, sumak kawsay and ikigai reach towards the world of relationships and nature. Knowing your culture's emphasis shows you which horizon you may be neglecting.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Ask yourself which you would rather feel more often: excited or calm? Then notice which kind of activity fills your free time. Do they match?
2. Borrow one practice from another culture for a month — a weekly *gezellig* evening with friends, a *lagom* rule for one area of consumption, a daily moment of *santosha* — and observe what it changes.
3. Write a sentence about your own happiness using "we" instead of "I." Notice what it includes that the "I" version left out.

THREADS

Epicurus' two pleasures (Chapter 3) reappear here as cultural ideals, and his calm as the quiet of "liking" in Chapter 9. Herodotus returns from Chapter 1. The universality of giving links to Chapter 15. The interdependent self is the Confucian self of Chapter 4.

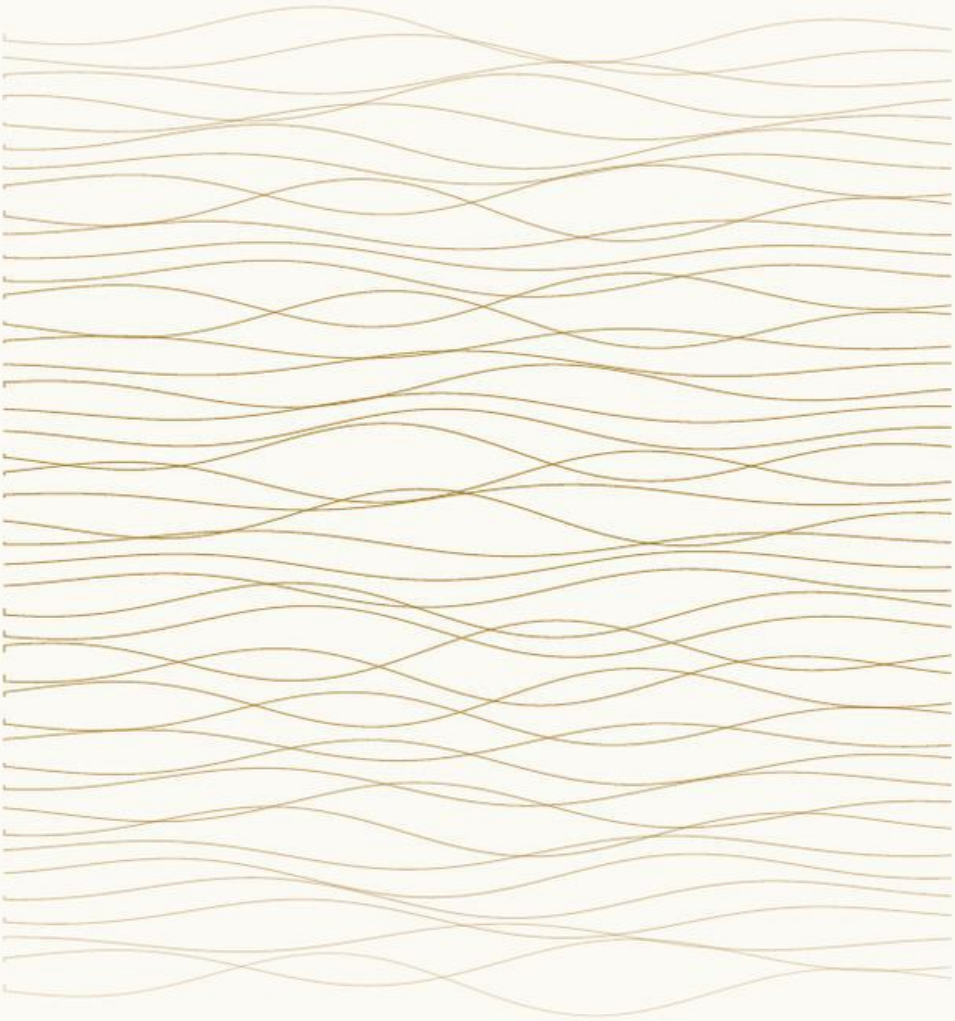


PLATE XXIII

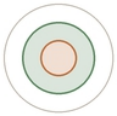
CHAPTER

22

Well-Being in the Age of Machines

Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, WALDEN (1854)



WHEN ROBERT NOZICK DESCRIBED the experience machine in 1974, he imagined a tank, electrodes and superduper neuropsychologists. It was a thought experiment designed to be impossible, so that it could isolate a single question: does anything matter to us besides how our lives feel from the inside?

Half a century later, no one floats in a tank. But billions of people carry devices engineered by some of the most talented people on earth to deliver a continuous stream of experiences — news, entertainment, social approval, games, and now conversations with artificial intelligences that can be warm, witty and endlessly attentive. Nozick's machine has not been built. Something stranger has: thousands of small machines, each offering a slice of the experience Nozick imagined, and each competing for the scarcest resource we have. Our attention.

The machine reconsidered

Before turning to the devices, it is worth revisiting the thought experiment, because experimental philosophers have found that our

intuitions about it are less solid than Nozick believed. In 2010 the philosopher Felipe De Brigard turned the scenario around. Suppose, he asked his participants, that you discover you are *already* in an experience machine, and have been for years; you are offered the chance to unplug and return to your real life. Would you? A substantial proportion of people chose to stay — especially if they were told that their real life was less pleasant than the simulated one. Further studies by Dan Weijers and others found similar effects.

The implication is uncomfortable. Part of our resistance to plugging in seems to come not from a deep commitment to reality but from *status quo bias* — a preference for whatever life we already have. That does not make Nozick wrong; intuitions are evidence, but noisy evidence. It does mean that we should not count on an instinctive love of reality to protect us from technologies that gradually replace it. The danger is not that we will choose a machine all at once. It is that we will slide into one a few minutes at a time.

A poverty of attention

In 1971 the economist Herbert Simon, the same thinker who coined the term *satisficing*, observed that a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention. In a world where information is abundant, attention becomes the scarce resource — and anything scarce becomes valuable, and anything valuable becomes something to compete for.

Much of the digital economy now runs on that competition. Many of the most successful technologies are funded by advertising, which means that their revenue depends on capturing as much of their users' time and attention as possible. To do so, designers have drawn, knowingly or not, on the psychology we met in Chapter 9. The behaviourist B. F. Skinner discovered decades ago that animals respond most persistently not to predictable rewards but to *variable* ones — rewards that come unpredictably, like a slot machine's payout. The pull-to-refresh gesture, the notification that may or may

not bring good news, the feed that may or may not contain something wonderful: these are variable reward schedules, and they are aimed squarely at the dopamine-driven wanting system — the large, robust system that produces craving without guaranteeing enjoyment.

Many technologies are optimized for wanting. Very few are optimized for liking — and almost none for meaning.

A technology optimized for engagement is optimized for the near horizon, and only for one part of it: the pull of wanting. It has no particular reason to care whether we enjoy the time we spend, whether that time adds up to a story we are glad of, or whether it connects us to anything beyond the screen. Sometimes it does all three. Often it does none.

The phone on the table

The effects can be measured in small, ordinary moments.

THE EVIDENCE

The phone at dinner

WHO AND WHEN Ryan Dwyer, Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth Dunn, 2018.

WHAT THEY DID Invited around three hundred people to have a meal at a restaurant with friends or family, randomly assigning some groups to keep their phones on the table and others to put them away.

WHAT THEY FOUND People who kept their phones accessible used them more, felt more distracted and enjoyed the meal less than those whose phones were put away. A companion study found similar effects across everyday social interactions.

THE CAVEAT The effects were modest — the meal was still pleasant. But they occurred in exactly the kind of moment, shared time with people we care about, that the evidence identifies as one of the richest sources of well-being.

In another experiment by Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth Dunn, people who were asked to check their email only three times a day for a week reported lower daily stress than when they checked it as often as they liked. The constant availability that technology makes possible does not simply add moments of connection; it fragments attention, and fragmented attention, as Chapter 13 showed, rarely flows.

None of this means that technology is bad for well-being. The same devices let grandparents see grandchildren across oceans, let isolated young people find communities of others like them, and deliver internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy that has been shown in many trials to reduce depression and anxiety. The question is never simply whether to use a technology but how, when and to what end — Thoreau's question about improved means to an unimproved end.

Companions made of words

The newest arrivals are conversational artificial intelligences — systems that can talk, listen, remember, comfort and joke. Some are designed explicitly as companions or friends. Early research is mixed

and preliminary. Some studies have found that brief conversations with AI companions can reduce people's momentary feelings of loneliness, at least in the short term. Others have found that the heaviest users of chatbots tend to report greater loneliness and emotional dependence, though it is unclear whether heavy use causes loneliness or lonely people use chatbots more. Researchers are only beginning to study these questions, and any confident conclusion would be premature.

The Three Horizons offer a way to think about them while the evidence accumulates. On the near horizon, a conversation with a well-designed machine can be genuinely pleasant, comforting or useful, much as a good book can be. On the middle horizon, it can help — as a tool for learning, reflecting, planning or practising difficult conversations. The far horizon is where the questions become hard. Aristotle's highest form of friendship was a relationship between two people who each wish the other good for their own sake, who are changed by one another, who need and are needed. Nozick's third reason for refusing the machine was that we want contact with reality, including real others who exist independently of our wishes. A technology that helps us reach other people, learn real things and do real good serves all three horizons. A technology that becomes a substitute for them may satisfy the moment while slowly starving the rest.

A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.

HERBERT A. SIMON (1971)

Designing for the horizons

Aristotle believed that character is formed by repeated action, and that a good city should be designed to make good habits easier. In the digital age, much of our environment is designed by others, for purposes of their own, and our habits are shaped accordingly. We become, in part, what our devices repeatedly invite us to do.

The practical response is not to abandon technology but to redesign our relationship with it, much as Epicurus redesigned his relationship with desire. A few principles emerge from the research. Add *friction* to the uses we regret — delete an app from the phone, log out after each use, keep the phone in another room at night — and remove friction from the uses we value. *Batch* rather than graze: check messages at set times. Protect sacred spaces — meals, conversations, the first and last hour of the day — from devices. Prefer *active* uses, such as messaging a friend or making something, to *passive* ones, such as scrolling. And periodically take a *sabbath*: a day, or part of one, free from screens. The Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel described the Sabbath as a palace in time — not a retreat from life but a space within it in which to attend to what matters.

The question technology poses is not new. It is the question of Part One, posed by new means: what do we want our lives to consist of? A device can make a moment richer or poorer, a story more coherent or more fragmented, a life more connected to the world or more enclosed in a simulation of it. The difference lies less in the device than in whether we use it — or it uses us — on behalf of our own horizons.

Engagement-driven technology is a near-horizon technology, built to capture the wanting system moment by moment. It can feed the middle horizon a distorting stream of other people's stories. Used deliberately, the same tools can serve all three horizons; used by default, they tend to crowd out the far one.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Run a two-week audit: each evening, list the three digital activities that took the most time, and rate each for how much you *enjoyed* it, how much it *mattered*, and how much it connected you to *people*.
2. Create one device-free sanctuary — the dinner table, the bedroom, the first hour of the morning — and keep it for a month.
3. Take a half-day screen sabbath once this month. Plan in advance what you will do with the time, and notice how the afternoon feels.

THREADS

The experience machine was introduced in Chapter 1. Wanting and prediction error come from Chapter 9, comparison and social media from Chapter 18, attention and flow from Chapter 13. Technology's place in a balanced life returns among the practices of Chapter 24.

INTERLUDE V

The Gardener's Notebook

THE GARDEN DIALOGUES · SPRING AGAIN

◎

April again. The garden is waking. Plot fourteen and plot fifteen have been joined into one: the fence between them is gone, and a single path runs through both. Sam sits on Theodora's upturned bucket, a green notebook open on her knees. Along the bed where she planted in October, a row of green shoots stands up from the soil.

She reads aloud, quietly, to no one.

SAM "April, eleven years ago. Broad beans in. Epicurus says the good is easy to get. Not if you are a broad bean in a cold April. Covered them with fleece. Felt like a mother."

She turns pages.

SAM "June. Slugs ate the lettuces. Seneca says we suffer more in imagination than in reality. The slugs did not suffer at all. I suffered for them both." … "August. K. would have been seventy today. Ate a tomato standing up, for him." … "March. A child asked me why I talk to the plants. I said: because they listen without interrupting. She said her grandfather was the same. I think that was a compliment."

Mr. Halloran comes along the path with his walking frame, stops, and looks at the shoots.

SAM Garlic. I planted twenty-four cloves in October. Twenty-three came up.

MR. HALLORAN: She'd have said not to mourn the one.

SAM She'd have said not to weigh the losses more than the harvest. It's written in here somewhere.

He nods, and moves on. Sam turns to the last pages of the notebook. The handwriting is shakier.

SAM "October. Garlic in with S. A good student. Too fond of numbers, but so was Pythagoras, and he is said to have believed that beans had souls, so there is hope for her."

She laughs out loud, then stops. On the inside of the back cover, in larger letters, three lines are written, with a small drawing of three circles, one inside the other.

SAM (reading slowly) "For S., when the plot is hers. The moment: *notice*. The story: *forgive*. The world: *plant*."

For a long time she does not move. Then she takes a pencil from her pocket, turns to the first empty page, and writes the date.

SAM (writing, half aloud) "April. Twenty-three garlic. One lost to the cold. Did not weigh anything today."

A girl of about seven appears at the edge of the plot — Mr. Halloran's granddaughter, holding a watering can almost as big as herself.

GIRL Grandad says you need help.

SAM (closing the notebook) Grandad is right. Do you know how to plant beans?

GIRL No.

SAM Neither did I, a year ago. Come here. There are many wrong ways to hold a spade. I'll show you a few.



PART SIX

The Art of Living

A synthesis, and a practice

The ancient schools did not think philosophy was finished when the argument was over. Philosophy was a way of life, practised daily, like music or medicine. The modern science of well-being, for all its sophistication, ends in the same place: with what a person actually does on an ordinary Tuesday.

Part Six gathers the threads. The first chapter assembles the Three Horizons into a full account of the good life — explaining why the evidence looks the way it does, where the common traps lie, and how the horizons can be brought into harmony. The second turns that account into practice, grading the best-known strategies by the strength of their evidence. Then the book ends where it began: in a garden.



23 · The Three Horizons: A Synthesis
24 · Practices: An Evidence-Graded Guide

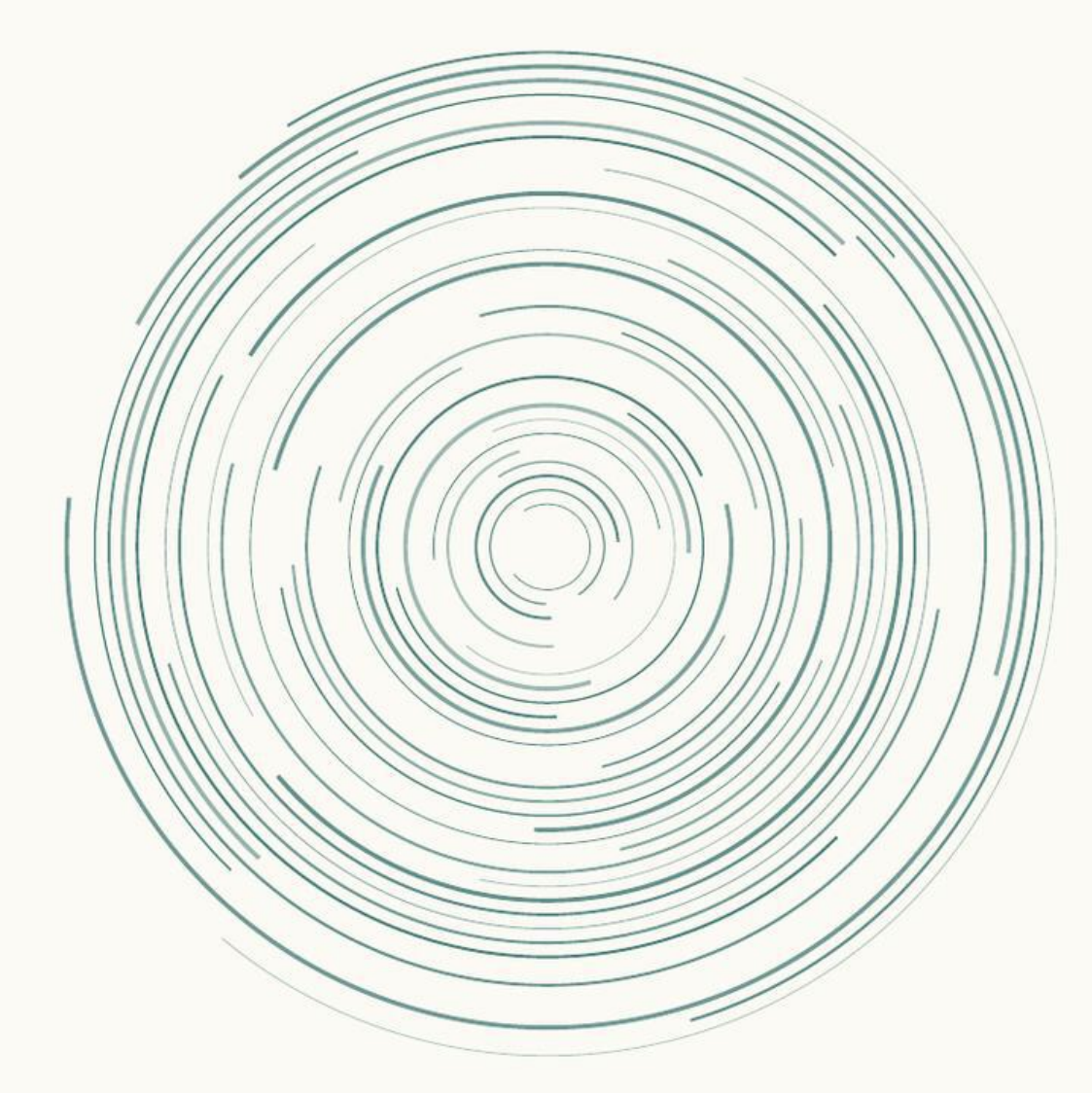


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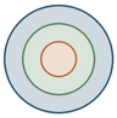
CHAPTER

23

The Three Horizons: A Synthesis

The whole is something besides the parts; it is not a mere heap.

ARISTOTLE, METAPHYSICS VIII.6



WE BEGAN WITH A young man who had been built to maximize happiness and could feel none. We have since walked through twenty-five centuries of philosophy and a century of science, and met a long procession of puzzles. Why did Mill collapse when everything in his life was going according to plan? Why did Tolstoy, at the height of his fame, hide a rope from himself? Why does Finland top one ranking and Indonesia another? Why do lottery winners become more satisfied with their lives without becoming happier in their days? Why do parents so often report that raising children is both exhausting and the most meaningful thing they have ever done? Why do relationships top every list?

This chapter proposes that these puzzles have a common answer, and that the answer is the map we have been carrying since the Prologue.

The map, in full

Well-being, on this account, is not one thing but three, each answering a different question about a life, each operating on a different timescale, each with its own philosophers, its own scientific measures, its own characteristic goods and its own characteristic traps.

	THE NEAR HORIZON	THE MIDDLE HORIZON	THE FAR HORIZON
The question	How does life feel?	How is life going?	What is life for?
Timescale	Seconds to hours	Years to decades	Generations
Philosophy	Hedonism: Epicurus, Bentham	Desire and life-plan theories	Virtue and objective goods: Aristotle, Confucius
Measured by	Experience sampling, daily affect	Life satisfaction, the Cantril ladder	Purpose, meaning, flourishing
Characteristic goods	Pleasure, calm, absorption, play	Progress, security, coherence, achievement	Love, contribution, meaning, awe, virtue
Characteristic trap	Craving and distraction	Comparison and the arrival fallacy	Burnout and self-neglect
Key practice	Notice	Forgive and reframe	Plant and give

The horizons are not rival theories. They are three distances at which a life can be seen. Each is real, each can be measured, and each can go well while the others go badly. That last fact is the key to most of the puzzles.

The three traps

Most of the ways people go wrong in pursuing a good life, I want to suggest, come from optimizing one horizon at the expense of the others.

The Hedonist's Trap is to live on the near horizon alone: to fill life with pleasant moments that add up to nothing. It is Bentham's push-pin, Kierkegaard's aesthete rotating his amusements like crops,

the evening lost to the scroll. It is the experience machine, entered a few minutes at a time. Its signature is pleasant days and empty years — and, because of the treadmill, the pleasant days themselves tend to fade.

The Achiever's Trap is to live on the middle horizon alone: to treat life as a story to be written and a ladder to be climbed. It is the arrival fallacy, the silver medallist's *almost*, the maximizer's better job and worse feelings, Ivan Ilyich's impeccable career. Its signature is an impressive story told by someone who cannot remember the last time a day felt good, and who suspects, late at night, that the story was not about anything.

The Martyr's Trap is to live on the far horizon alone: to give everything to a cause, a duty or other people while starving the self. It is the exploited calling of the zookeepers, the exhausted carer, the zealot for whom any means are justified by the end. And it is Mill at twenty, devoted to the improvement of mankind and unable to feel anything at all. Its signature is a meaningful life that is miserable to live, and that sooner or later stops being able to give.

The traps are not vices. They are virtues pursued on one horizon only.

What makes these traps so persistent is that each looks like wisdom from inside. The hedonist is right that moments matter. The achiever is right that a life needs direction. The martyr is right that some things are worth more than our comfort. Each has hold of a real good. The error lies not in what they value but in what they ignore.

Why the evidence looks the way it does

Now return to the findings of Part Three and ask a simple question of each ingredient: on which horizons does it pay out?

Money pays out mainly on the middle horizon. It secures the story, raises life evaluations and relieves the misery of want, but its effects on day-to-day feeling are smaller, and it has no particular connection to meaning. This is precisely the pattern found by Kahneman and Deaton, by the Swedish lottery study and by the long debate over Easterlin's paradox.

Pleasure pursued for its own sake pays out on the near horizon and fades under the treadmill.

Status pays out on the middle horizon — and only relative to others, which is why it so often costs as much as it gives.

But a small set of goods pays out on all three horizons at once. **Close relationships** make moments warmer, stories more satisfying and lives more meaningful. **Absorbing, useful work** produces flow in the moment, growth in the story and contribution to the world. **Kindness and generosity** bring a warm glow, strengthen the relationships that sustain the story and serve others directly. **Time in nature**, with its restoration and its awe, calms the moment and shrinks the self towards the far horizon. **Learning and creating**, **play and music**, and the shared rituals of **faith and community** do much the same.

These *multi-horizon goods* are exactly the goods that the evidence keeps placing at the top of its lists — and exactly the goods that the ancient philosophers kept recommending: friendship (Epicurus, Aristotle, Confucius), virtuous activity (Aristotle), compassion (the Buddha), learning (Confucius), effortless skill (Zhuangzi). The convergence between ancient wisdom and modern evidence is not a coincidence. Both were detecting the same thing: the goods that compound.

The parenting paradox, dissolved

Consider one of the most debated findings in the field. When Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues asked working women in Texas to reconstruct their previous day, episode by episode, taking care of their children ranked surprisingly low among their activities in how good it felt — below socializing, relaxing, eating and even cooking. Yet surveys consistently find that parents describe raising children as among the most meaningful parts of their lives, and reviews of the research suggest that whether parents are happier or less happy than non-parents depends heavily on circumstances: their age, money, partnership and the age of their children.

On a single scale of happiness, this looks like a paradox. On the Three Horizons, it is simply a description. Early parenting often costs heavily on the near horizon — sleep, freedom, calm. It is mixed on the middle horizon, disrupting careers and plans while adding a central chapter to the story. And it pays enormously on the far horizon, in love, purpose and a stake in the future. People are not confused when they say that parenting is both hard and wonderful. They are reporting accurately from different distances.

The moment: notice. The story: forgive. The world: plant.

FROM THEODORA'S NOTEBOOK, THE GARDEN DIALOGUES

Four moves towards harmony

If the goal is not to maximize one horizon but to bring all three into harmony, how is that done? Across the traditions and the evidence, four moves keep appearing.

Translate the far into the near. Turn values into daily practices, so that what matters most is lived in the moment rather than postponed. This is the genius of Confucian ritual, of Aristotle's habits, of the Stoic morning and evening exercises: they make the far horizon visible on an ordinary afternoon. A commitment to kindness becomes five acts on a Saturday; a commitment to family becomes a phone-free dinner.

Anchor the near in the middle. Give moments a place in the story. Savour them, reflect on them, tell them, write them down. The research on narrative identity and expressive writing suggests that experiences we make sense of become part of who we are, while experiences we merely consume evaporate.

Lift the middle towards the far. Connect your story to other people's. This is generativity, mentoring, contribution — and it is the finding of Chapter 17 in another form: happiness pursued through social engagement works, while happiness pursued as a private project tends to backfire.

Let the near be. Not every moment has to serve a story or a cause. Epicurus' calm, Zhuangzi's useless tree, Aristotle's leisure and the simple pleasure of an evening doing nothing in particular are not failures of ambition. They are part of the harmony. A life in which every hour must justify itself on a further horizon is just the Achiever's or the Martyr's trap in disguise.

Seasons and wisdom

The right balance among the horizons is not fixed. It changes with the seasons of a life. A student may rightly sacrifice some present comfort to build a future story; a new parent may live for a few years

mostly on the far horizon; an older person, as Laura Carstensen's research shows, may rightly shift towards savouring the moment and tending relationships. Aristotle would say that finding the right balance in each situation is the work of *phronēsis*, practical wisdom — the capacity to see what this moment, in this life, requires. No map can do that work for us. A good map can show us where we are.

And this, finally, is Aristotle's wager seen whole. In a well-ordered life, he bet, the horizons converge: doing good feels good, the moments add up to a good story, and the story is about something worth caring about. The evidence on flow, kindness and relationships suggests that the wager is often won. Not always, and not without luck — Solon was right about that. But often enough to live by.





THE THREE HORIZONS

The Three Horizons are not three goals but three distances. A good life is one in which they are in harmony: moments worth living, a story worth telling, and a connection to something worth serving. The surest way to that harmony runs through the multi-horizon goods — love, absorbing work, kindness, nature, learning — which is why both the ancients and the evidence keep recommending them.

THE LABORATORY OF ONE

1. Score yourself on each horizon from 0 to 10, and then write one sentence explaining each score. Which trap, if any, are you closest to?
2. List the five activities that fill most of your week. Mark which horizons each one pays out on. Look for one multi-horizon good you could add, and one single-horizon habit you could shrink.
3. Practise one of the four moves this week: translate a value into a daily act; anchor a good moment by writing it down; lift a personal goal by involving someone else; or let one evening simply be.

THREADS

Every earlier chapter feeds this one: the three theories (Chapter 1), the three measures (Chapter 6), the two selves (Chapter 7), the ingredients (Part Three), and the traps of pursuit and comparison (Chapters 17 and 18). The four moves are put into practice in Chapter 24.

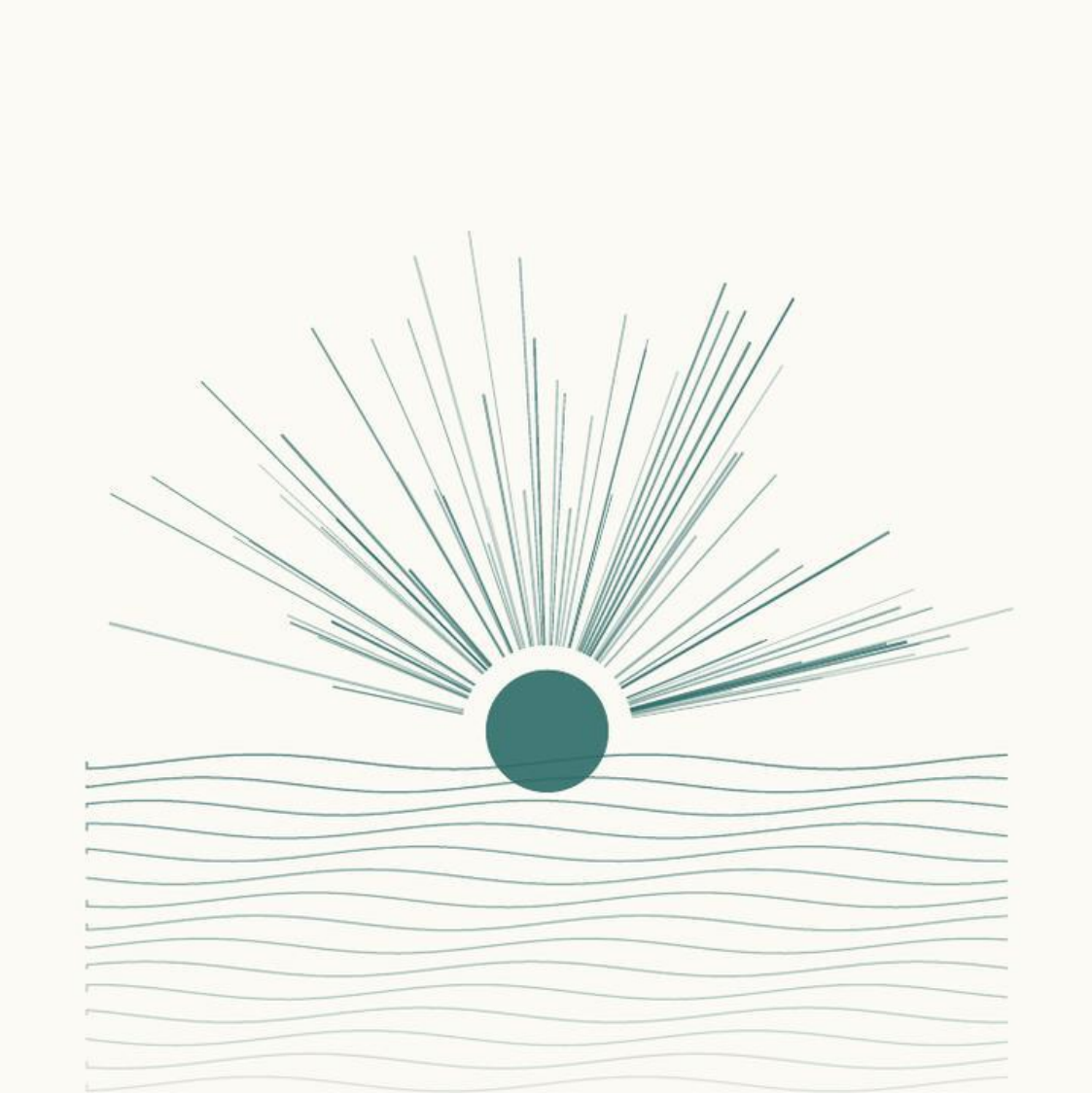


PLATE XXV

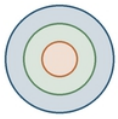
CHAPTER

24

Practices: An Evidence-Graded Guide

Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE (1829)



EVERY YEAR, BOOKS, ARTICLES and apps offer new techniques for becoming happier. Some are backed by solid evidence. Some rest on a single small study that has never been repeated. Some have been tested and found wanting. A reader deserves to know which is which.

How to read the evidence

Three cautions first. **Effects are usually modest.** Even the best-supported practices typically produce small to moderate improvements on average, and individual results vary widely. A practice that helps your friend enormously may do little for you, and the reverse. **Psychology has been through a replication crisis.** In 2015 a large collaboration attempted to repeat a hundred published psychology studies and succeeded in reproducing the original results in well under half. Research on positive psychology interventions has had its own reckoning: a 2019 meta-analysis by Carmela White and colleagues concluded that their effects were considerably smaller than earlier reviews had suggested, once small, flattering studies were accounted for. And a 2024 review by Dunigan Folk and Elizabeth Dunn found that surprisingly few of the

happiness strategies most often recommended in the media had been tested in large, pre-registered experiments. **What works depends on fit.** Practices that suit a person's values and circumstances, and that are chosen rather than imposed, tend to work better and last longer.

With those cautions, here is a guide to the strategies discussed in this book, graded by the strength of the evidence behind them, with the horizons each tends to serve. N, M and W stand for the near, middle and far horizons.

STRONG SUPPORT

Invest in close relationships STRONG · N · M · W
Schedule regular, unhurried time with your inner circle; respond actively to good news.

Move your body STRONG · N · M
Walk, run, lift or dance most days; aim for sessions that leave you pleasantly tired.

Protect sleep STRONG · N · M
Keep a regular schedule; treat insomnia with CBT-I rather than endurance.

Get help for depression and anxiety STRONG · N · M · W
Talk to a doctor or therapist; CBT and other therapies are well tested.

Relieve material hardship STRONG · M
For societies: reduce poverty. For individuals: build a small financial buffer.

MODERATE SUPPORT

Acts of kindness and giving MODERATE · N · W
Do several kind acts on one day each week; spend a little on others.

Gratitude practices MODERATE · N · M
Write three good things nightly, or a gratitude letter once a month.

Mindfulness-based programmes MODERATE · N
Try an eight-week course; MBCT helps prevent relapse in recurrent depression.

Time in nature MODERATE · N · W
Aim for about two hours a week, in any pattern.

Savouring and anticipation MODERATE · N · M
Slow down good moments; plan pleasures ahead and look forward to them.

Self-chosen, meaningful goals MODERATE · M · W
Pursue goals that express your values, not others' expectations.

PROMISING, STILL EMERGING

Awe walks PROMISING · N · W
Fifteen minutes a week, looking for something vast or intricate.

Expressive writing PROMISING · M
Write about a difficult experience for fifteen minutes on three or four days.

Best possible self PROMISING · M
Imagine and write about a future in which things have gone well.

Talking to strangers PROMISING · N · W
One genuine exchange a day with someone outside your circle.

Buying time PROMISING · N · M
Pay to outsource a disliked chore; protect free time.

Limiting passive social media PROMISING · N · M
Cap comparison-heavy apps; prefer messaging friends to scrolling.

Slow breathing PROMISING · N
Five minutes of slow, long exhalations, as in cyclic sighing.

Loving-kindness meditation PROMISING · N · W
Ten minutes of wishing others well, starting with someone easy to love.

OVERSOLD OR UNSUPPORTED

A 2.9 positivity ratio WITHDRAWN · —
The mathematics behind it was invalid; aim for emotional range instead.

The “40 per cent” happiness pie UNSUPPORTED · —
Genes are not destiny, but the pie’s precise slices were never measured.

Power posing for confidence WEAK · —
Hormonal effects failed to replicate; any benefit to feelings appears small.

Positive fantasies alone BACKFIRES · —
Pair the dream with the obstacle: picture the wish, then plan for what stands in the way.

Chasing the feeling BACKFIRES · —
Pursue activities and people, not happiness itself; stop monitoring it.

A few notes on the table. The strongest evidence belongs to what might be called the foundations — relationships, movement, sleep, treatment of illness, and freedom from want — and none of them is glamorous. The moderate tier is dominated by practices that work against adaptation (gratitude, savouring) or connect us to others (kindness, giving). The last tier is a cautionary tale: the most quotable claims of the happiness industry are disproportionately represented among the ones that failed. On the last row but one, the psychologist Gabriele Oettingen’s research is instructive: merely fantasizing about a desired future can sap the energy needed to achieve it, while *mental contrasting* — imagining the wish and then the obstacle, and planning how to meet it — helps people act.

A week on three horizons

Practices work best not as a checklist but as a rhythm. Here is one possible shape for a week, built from the four moves of Chapter 23. It is an example, not a prescription.

A CLOSER LOOK

A sample week

Daily: three minutes of attention to the present, morning and evening; a walk outside; a device-free meal; three good things written down before sleep. *(Notice: the near horizon.)*

Twice a week: an unhurried conversation with someone in your inner circle; a block of uninterrupted, absorbing work or play. *(Connect and absorb: all three horizons.)*

Weekly: a day with several acts of kindness; an awe walk; a short evening review of the week — what went well, what you would forgive yourself for, what you will do differently. *(Forgive: the middle horizon.)*

Monthly: a gratitude letter; a half-day screen sabbath; one act of service or contribution to something beyond yourself. *(Plant: the far horizon.)*

The thirty-day laboratory

Finally, here is a month-long experiment that brings together the Laboratories of One from earlier chapters. Treat it as research, not self-improvement. Keep a simple record — a few numbers and a sentence a day — and judge by what happens rather than by what you expect.

1. **Week one — Notice.** Rate each day 0–10 on the three horizons. Add five minutes of attention practice daily and protect your sleep. Simply observe what moves the numbers.
2. **Week two — Connect.** Each day, have one real conversation; once this week, do five kind acts on a single day; send one gratitude letter. Watch the near and far horizons.
3. **Week three — Absorb.** Protect a daily block of uninterrupted, challenging work or play. Note when you lose track of time. Watch the middle horizon.
4. **Week four — Plant.** Choose one thing you will do for someone or something beyond yourself, and begin it. Write your *why* in one sentence. At the end, read the whole month's record and decide which practices to keep.

We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS II.1

A month like this is an examination of your own life — conducted as the ancient schools conducted theirs, through practice, and as the scientists conduct theirs, through evidence. You are the only researcher with access to your own life, and the only philosopher who can live your answers.



THE THREE HORIZONS

The best-supported practices are, almost without exception, multi-horizon goods or the foundations that support all three horizons. The least-supported tend to target the near horizon directly — chasing the feeling — which is exactly where the paradox of pursuit predicts they will fail.

THREADS

Each practice in this chapter is drawn from an earlier one: relationships (Chapter 10), body (12), flow (13), meaning (14), kindness and gratitude (15), acceptance (16), the paradox of pursuit (17), comparison (18), savouring (19), technology (22). The four moves come from Chapter 23. The Epilogue returns to the garden.

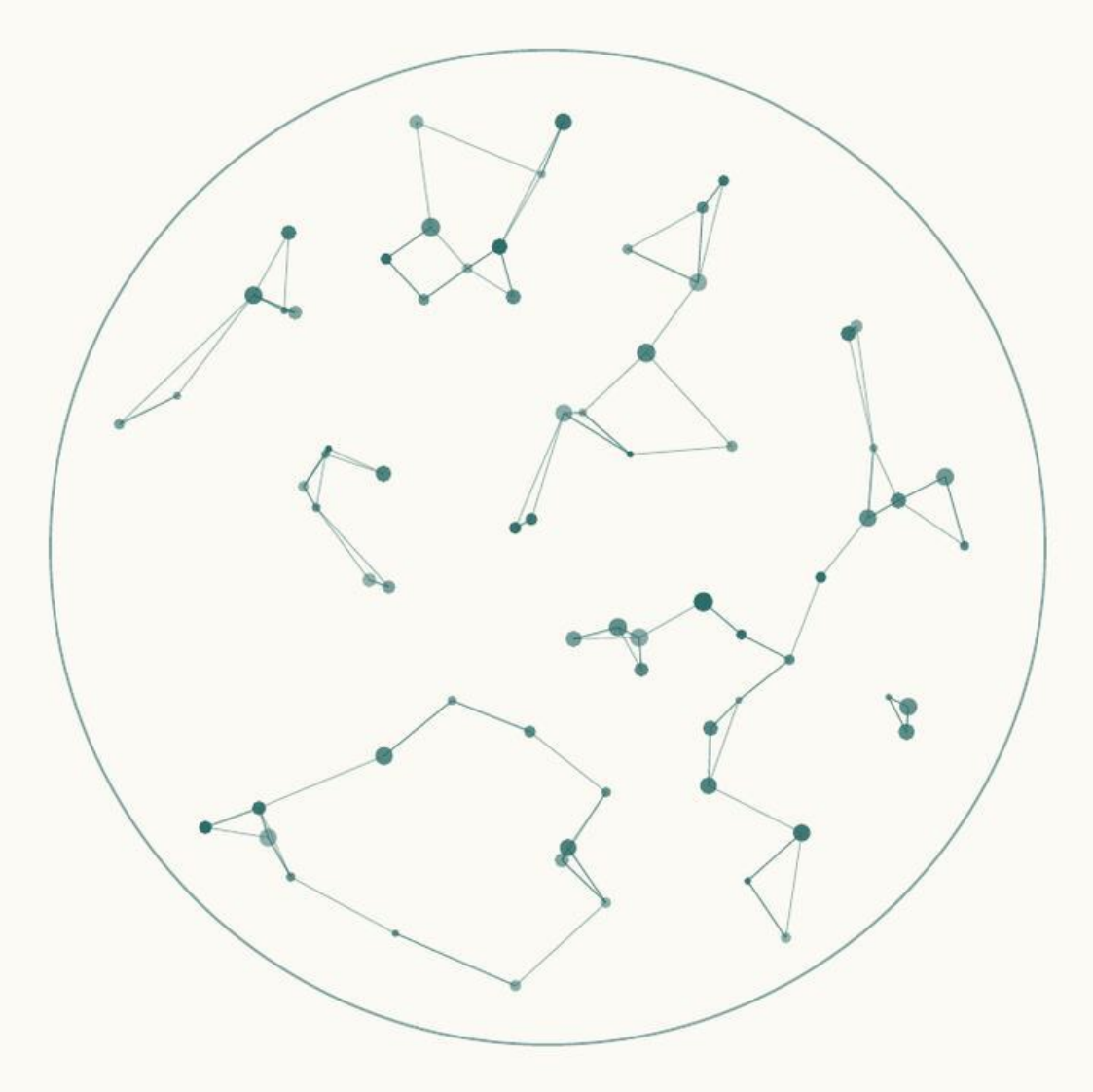


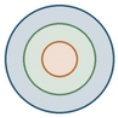
PLATE XXVI

EPILOGUE

Cultivate Our Garden

"That is well said," replied Candide, "but we must cultivate our garden."

VOLTAIRE, CANDIDE (1759)



ON THE MORNING OF 1 November 1755, All Saints' Day, an earthquake struck Lisbon while much of the city was at Mass. Churches collapsed on their congregations. Fires burned for days. A tsunami swept over the harbour. Tens of thousands died. Across Europe, the disaster shook a comfortable philosophical optimism — the view, associated with the philosopher Leibniz, that this is the best of all possible worlds, and that every evil serves some larger good.

Four years later, Voltaire published his answer: a short, savage, very funny novel called *Candide*. Its young hero is taught by his tutor, Dr. Pangloss, that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Then Candide is expelled from his home, conscripted, flogged, shipwrecked, caught in the Lisbon earthquake, nearly burned by the Inquisition, robbed, betrayed and separated from everyone he loves. Through it all, Pangloss keeps explaining why everything is for the best.

At the end, Candide and his battered companions settle on a small farm near Constantinople. They are bored and quarrelsome. Then they meet an old man sitting at his door in the evening air with his family. He has only twenty acres, which he works with his children, and he offers them fruit, sherbet and coffee from his own garden. Work, he tells them, keeps away three great evils: boredom, vice and need. Candide thinks about this all the way home. When Pangloss, one last time, begins to explain how all their sufferings were

necessary to bring them to this point, Candide interrupts him. That is well said, he replies, but we must cultivate our garden.

The meaning of a garden

Voltaire's last line has been read in many ways — as a retreat from the world, a counsel of quiet resignation, a shrug. I read it differently. Candide is not giving up on large questions; he has simply stopped expecting large answers to arrive from outside. Whatever the order of the universe, the good available to us is the good within reach: this soil, these people, this work, this evening. It is the same conclusion Epicurus reached in his garden two thousand years before, and the one Theodora reached in plot fourteen.

A garden is an almost perfect image of the Three Horizons. It is lived in the moment — the smell of tomato leaves, the feel of soil, the absorption of weeding on a warm afternoon. It has a story — the seasons, the slow accumulation of skill, the plans that fail and succeed, the years recorded in a notebook. And it reaches beyond the gardener: food given away, seeds saved, a plot handed on to someone who will plant things the first gardener never saw. Notice. Forgive. Plant.

The good available to us is the good within reach: this soil, these people, this work, this evening.

What we have learned

We began with a question that Croesus asked Solon and that every human being eventually asks: what makes a life go well? The answer this book has assembled is not a formula. But it is not nothing.

A life goes well on three horizons, and the horizons can come apart. The philosophers each saw one of them clearly; the scientists learned to measure all three; and the best of both traditions converge on a short list of goods that serve them together: other people, absorbing work, kindness, the body cared for, the natural world, learning and something to live for beyond oneself. Much of a life is luck, as the word *happiness* has always remembered. But more of it is practice than the pessimists believed, and more of it is shared than the individualists assumed.

The mind adapts to almost everything, so the goods that last are the ones that keep growing — relationships, skills, meanings. The brain wants more than it enjoys, so it is worth learning the difference. Memory is ruled by peaks and endings, so it is worth ending things well. Comparison corrodes the story, so it is worth choosing our measuring sticks. Sorrow is part of the shape of a life, and accepted, it passes. And happiness, aimed at directly, flies away; aimed beyond, it arrives by the way.

The examined life

Socrates, on trial for his life in 399 BCE, told the jury that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being. It is a stern sentence, and it can be misread as an instruction to think instead of live. But Socrates spent his days in the marketplace, talking with friends, attending festivals, serving in the army, loving his city. His examination was conducted in the middle of life, not above it.

The science of well-being has added something Socrates could not: the discovery that we are often wrong about what will make us happy, and that we can find out by paying attention to what actually happens. Philosophy asks what is worth wanting. Science checks what our wanting actually does. Each alone is incomplete. Together they make the examined life an experiment — one that each of us conducts, whether we know it or not, every day.

◎

At the end of his crisis, John Stuart Mill wrote that those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness: on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit followed not as a means but as itself an ideal end. *Aiming thus at something else,* he wrote, *they find happiness by the way*. He found it, in the end, in Wordsworth's plain poems about hills and memory and ordinary feeling, in a long partnership of minds with Harriet Taylor, and in work that served a world he would not live to see.

This book has been an attempt to walk a labyrinth: one path, winding from the oldest questions to the newest evidence, sometimes bringing us close to the centre and then sweeping us out to the edge again. If it has done its work, you will not need it any more. The path continues outside, on an ordinary morning, with the people you love and the work in front of you and the patch of earth you have been given.

Pick up the spade. There are many wrong ways to hold it. Begin anyway.

Il faut cultiver notre jardin.

VOLTAIRE, CANDIDE (1759)

Questions for Reflection



These questions are offered for private reflection, for journaling, or for discussion in reading groups and classrooms. There are no correct answers. The best ones will surprise you.

PART ONE: THE ANCIENT QUESTION

1 Which of the three classical theories — hedonism, desire-fulfilment or the objective list — comes closest to your instinctive view of what makes a life go well? What case would most challenge it?

2 Would you plug into Nozick's experience machine? What does your answer reveal about what you value?

3 Aristotle bet that excellence and enjoyment converge in a well-formed character. Where in your life has that bet paid off, and where has it failed?

4 Epicurus managed his desires; the Stoics managed their judgments. Which strategy comes more naturally to you, and which do you need more?

5 Where do you notice the "second arrow" — suffering added to pain by resistance, rumination or dread?

6 Nietzsche asked whether you could will your life to recur forever, exactly as it is. What would need to change for your answer to be yes?

PART TWO: THE MEASURE OF A LIFE

1 If you rated your life today on the near, middle and far horizons, how would the three scores differ? What explains the gaps between them?

2 Think of an experience you remember fondly that was difficult at the time. What does it teach you about the remembering self?

3 Which good things in your life have faded through adaptation, and which have kept their power? What distinguishes them?

4 When have you confused wanting with liking — pursuing something hard, only to find it gave little pleasure?

5 How does knowing that heritability is not destiny change the way you think about your own temperament?

PART THREE: THE INGREDIENTS OF A GOOD LIFE

1 Who is in your inner circle of five? What would it take to strengthen those bonds this year?

2 If money buys the story more reliably than the moment, how might you spend differently?

3 Which bodily foundation — sleep, movement, nature or breath — most needs your attention right now?

4 Do you experience your work as a job, a career or a calling? What small act of job crafting could move it towards the third?

5 Applying Susan Wolf's test, which of your commitments combine genuine love with genuine worth?

6 When has an act of kindness lifted your own spirits, and when has it felt hollow? What made the difference?

PART FOUR: THE SHADOW AND THE PARADOX

1 Which of your emotions do you resist most? What might happen if you let it be?

2 In which areas of life are you maximizing when satisficing would serve you better?

3 Whom do you compare yourself with most often? Is that comparison closer to envy or to emulation?

4 Which regrets of inaction are still within your power to address?

5 How would your priorities shift if you knew your time was short — and what stops you shifting them now?

PART FIVE: THE WIDER CIRCLE

1 Which of the six national factors — income, social support, health, freedom, generosity and trust — most shapes your own well-being?

2 Would you rather feel excited or calm more often? Where do you think that preference came from?

3 Which word for a good life from another culture speaks most to you, and why?

4 Which of your digital habits serve your three horizons, and which serve someone else's metrics?

PART SIX: THE ART OF LIVING

1 Which of the three traps — the Hedonist's, the Achiever's or the Martyr's — are you closest to?

2 Which multi-horizon goods are already present in your week, and which one could you add?

3 Which of the four moves — translate, anchor, lift, let be — would most improve your life this month?

4 What would Theodora's three words, *notice, forgive, plant*, ask of you this week?

A Timeline of the Good Life

◎

Twenty-five centuries of the question, from Solon's warning to the most recent data. Dates before the common era are often approximate.

c. 560 BCE Solon warns Croesus to call no one happy until they are dead, as Herodotus later tells the story.

c. 500 BCE Confucius teaches in the state of Lu that learning, friendship and humaneness bring joy.

c. 450 BCE The Buddha's teaching names craving as the root of suffering and sets out the Middle Way.

399 BCE On trial for his life, Socrates declares that the unexamined life is not worth living.

c. 335 BCE Aristotle founds the Lyceum; the *Nicomachean Ethics* defines eudaimonia as excellent activity over a complete life.

c. 306 BCE Epicurus opens the Garden in Athens, a community devoted to tranquil pleasure and friendship.

c. 300 BCE Zeno begins teaching at the Painted Porch; Stoicism is born. The *Zhuangzi* records Cook Ding and the happy fish.

c. 50 BCE Lucretius carries Epicurus into Latin verse in *On the Nature of Things*.

c. 65 CE Seneca writes his *Letters to Lucilius*.

c. 175 Marcus Aurelius writes the private notes we call the *Meditations*.

c. 400 Augustine's *Confessions*: our heart is restless until it rests in God.

c. 524 Awaiting execution, Boethius writes *The Consolation of Philosophy*, with its Wheel of Fortune.

1265–1274 Thomas Aquinas distinguishes the imperfect happiness of this life from perfect beatitude.

1417 A lost manuscript of Lucretius is rediscovered in a German monastery.

1580 Montaigne publishes the first edition of his *Essays*.

1677 Spinoza's *Ethics*: blessedness is not the reward of virtue but virtue itself.

1759 Voltaire's *Candide* ends with the cultivation of a garden; Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* explores the search for happiness.

1776 The pursuit of happiness enters the American Declaration of Independence.

1789 Bentham proposes the greatest happiness principle and a calculus of pleasure.

1818 Schopenhauer describes life as a pendulum between pain and boredom.

1819 Keats calls the world "the vale of Soul-making."

1826 John Stuart Mill's mental crisis; poetry helps him recover.

1863 Mill's *Utilitarianism* distinguishes higher and lower pleasures.

1882 Nietzsche proposes the eternal recurrence; Tolstoy writes *A Confession*.

1902 William James contrasts the healthy-minded with the sick soul.

1938 The Harvard Study of Adult Development begins.

1946 Viktor Frankl publishes the book later known in English as *Man's Search for Meaning*.

1954 Olds and Milner discover brain stimulation reward in rats.

1965 Hadley Cantril introduces the self-anchoring ladder.

1970s Bhutan's fourth king declares Gross National Happiness more important than Gross Domestic Product.

1971 Brickman and Campbell describe the "hedonic treadmill."

1974 Easterlin's paradox; Nozick's experience machine.

1975 Csikszentmihalyi's *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* introduces flow.

1984 Diener names and reviews the field of subjective well-being; Parfit sorts theories of well-being into three families.

1989 Carol Ryff proposes six dimensions of psychological well-being.

1996 The colonoscopy study reveals the peak-end rule in medicine; Lykken and Tellegen publish their twin study of happiness.

1997 Schultz, Dayan and Montague identify dopamine as a reward prediction-error signal.

1998 Martin Seligman calls for a positive psychology.

2008 Bhutan's constitution enshrines Gross National Happiness; Ecuador's enshrines *sumak kawsay*.

2010 Kahneman and Deaton on income and well-being; Killingsworth and Gilbert on the wandering mind.

2011 The United Kingdom begins official measurement of national well-being.

2012 The first World Happiness Report; the United Nations establishes the International Day of Happiness.

2013 The mathematics of the "positivity ratio" is debunked.

2019 New Zealand presents a Wellbeing Budget.

2023 An adversarial collaboration resolves the debate over income and feelings.

2025 First results of the Global Flourishing Study; the WHO Commission on Social Connection reports on loneliness.

2026 Finland tops the World Happiness Report for the ninth year running.

Glossary



Adaptation (hedonic) — The tendency for emotional reactions to repeated or lasting circumstances to fade back towards a baseline. Strong for many pleasures, weaker for noise, commuting, loneliness and unemployment.

Affective forecasting — Predicting how future events will make us feel. People tend to overestimate the intensity and duration of their reactions (the *impact bias*).

Amor fati — "Love of fate": Nietzsche's term, echoing the Stoics, for wholeheartedly affirming one's life as it is.

Aponia and ataraxia — For Epicurus, the absence of bodily pain and of mental disturbance; together, the highest and most stable pleasure.

Arrival fallacy — The belief that reaching a particular goal will bring lasting happiness.

Awe — The emotion of encountering something vast that exceeds current understanding. It tends to shrink the sense of self and increase generosity.

Cantril ladder — A survey question asking people to rate their lives from 0 (worst possible) to 10 (best possible); the basis of the World Happiness Report.

Capabilities approach — The view, associated with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, that policy should expand people's real freedoms to do and be what they value.

Capitalization — Sharing good news with others. Responding to it actively and constructively strengthens relationships.

Default mode network — Brain regions most active when the mind is not focused on an external task; associated with self-referential thought and mind-wandering.

Dichotomy of control — The Stoic distinction between what is up to us (judgments, intentions, actions) and what is not (outcomes, others, fortune).

Doctrine of the mean — Aristotle's view that each virtue lies between a vice of deficiency and one of excess, relative to the person and situation.

Dukkha — In Buddhism, the unsatisfactoriness or suffering that marks conditioned existence; the first noble truth.

Emodiversity — The variety and relative abundance of emotions a person experiences, by analogy with biodiversity.

Eudaimonia — Greek for living well or flourishing; for Aristotle, excellent rational activity over a complete life.

Experience machine — Robert Nozick's thought experiment about plugging into a device that provides any experiences one wishes.

Experience sampling — A research method in which people report what they are doing and feeling at random moments in daily life.

Experiencing self / remembering self — Kahneman's distinction between the self that lives each moment and the self that evaluates and remembers experiences.

Flourishing — Broadly, living well in many domains at once: feeling good, functioning well, and having meaning, relationships and character.

Flow — A state of complete absorption in an activity whose challenge matches one's skill; described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

Focusing illusion — Overestimating the importance of whatever aspect of life one is thinking about at the moment.

Generativity — Erik Erikson's term for concern with guiding and contributing to the next generation.

Gross National Happiness — Bhutan's development philosophy and index, measuring nine domains of well-being.

Heritability — The proportion of variation in a trait within a population that is associated with genetic variation. It does not describe what can change.

Ideal affect — The feelings people want to feel, which vary across cultures (for example, excitement versus calm).

Liking and wanting — The distinction, from Kent Berridge's research, between the brain's systems for pleasure (liking) and for motivation and craving (wanting).

Maximizing and satisficing — Seeking the best possible option versus seeking an option that is good enough. Maximizers tend to be less satisfied.

Muditā — Sympathetic joy: delight in others' happiness, one of the four Buddhist boundless states.

Multi-horizon good — In this book, a good that pays out on the near, middle and far horizons at once — for example, close relationships.

Peak-end rule — The tendency to evaluate an experience by its most intense moment and its end, largely neglecting its duration.

Positional good — A good valued partly for how it compares with what others have.

Prediction error — The difference between expected and actual reward; signalled by dopamine neurons and central to learning and adaptation.

Premeditatio malorum — The Stoic exercise of imagining possible misfortunes in advance.

Prudential value — What is good *for* a person, as distinct from what is morally good or good for the world.

Rumination — Repetitive, passive dwelling on distress and its causes; a risk factor for depression.

Self-determination theory — The theory that well-being depends on satisfying the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Set point — A characteristic baseline level of well-being to which people tend to return; now understood to be movable.

Socioemotional selectivity theory — Laura Carstensen's theory that when time feels limited, people prioritize emotionally meaningful goals.

Subjective well-being — The scientific term for people's evaluations of their lives together with their positive and negative feelings.

Taṇhā — "Thirst": craving, which the Buddha identified as the cause of suffering.

The Three Horizons — This book's framework: the near horizon of the moment (how life feels), the middle horizon of the story (how life goes), and the far horizon of the world (what life means).

WELLBY — A wellbeing-adjusted life year: one point of life satisfaction, on a 0–10 scale, for one person for one year.

Wú wéi — Daoist "effortless action": acting in harmony with the nature of things.

Notes & Sources



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Index



Numbers refer to chapters and link to the first mention in each. P = Prologue, E = Epilogue, Int. = Interlude.

A

affective forecasting 7
amor fati 3, 5
Aristotle P, 1, 2, 4, Int. I, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19
ataraxia 3
awe 12, 14, 23

B

Baumeister, Roy 14
Bentham, Jeremy P, 1, 5, 20, 23
Berridge, Kent 9
Bhutan 20
Blanchflower, David 19
Boethius 19
Bonanno, George 16
Brickman, Philip 8
Buddha, the P, 4, 5, 9, 16, 23
Buddhism 4, 9, 12, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21
buen vivir 21

C

calling (work as) 1, 13, 23
Camus, Albert P, 5, 14
Cantril ladder 6, 11, 20
Carstensen, Laura 19, 23
character strengths 15
Confucius 4, 10, 15, 19, 21, 23
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly 4, 6, 13

D

Daoism 4, 17
Davidson, Richard 9
Day Reconstruction Method 6
default mode network 9
Diener, Ed P, 2, 6, 8, 10
doctrine of the mean 2
dopamine 5, 9, 22
dukkha 4
Dunbar, Robin 10
Dunn, Elizabeth 10, 11, 15, 22, 24

E

Easterlin paradox 11
Easterlin, Richard 11, 18, 20, 23
emodiversity 16
Epictetus 3
Epicurus P, 1, 3, 4, Int. I, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 18, 19, Int. IV, 21, 22, Int. V
Epley, Nicholas 10, 15
Erikson, Erik 6, 14
eudaimonia 1, 2
exercise 3, 10, 12, 13, 18, 23
experience machine 1, 22, 23
experience sampling P, Int. I, 6, 19
experiencing self 7, Int. II

F

Festinger, Leon 18
Finland 6, 20, 21, 23
flourishing P, 2, 4, 6, 14, 16, 19, 20
flow (optimal experience) P, 2, 4, 7, 13, 14, 15, 23
focusing illusion 7
Frankl, Viktor 5, Int. II, 14, 17
Fredrickson, Barbara 7, 16
friendship 1, 2, 3, 10, 13, 22, 23

G

Garden Dialogues P, Int. I, Int. III, Int. IV, E
Gilbert, Daniel 7

Gilovich, Thomas 11, 18, 19
Global Flourishing Study P, 6, 14, 19, 20
gratitude 15, 24
Gross National Happiness 20

H

Hadot, Pierre 3
happiness pie 8
Harvard Study of Adult Development 10
hedonic adaptation 3, 5, Int. I, 8, 9, 15
hedonism P, 1, 5, 6, 23
heritability 8
hygge 21

I

ideal affect 21
ikigai 21
income and well-being P, 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 18, 20

J

job crafting 13

K

Kahneman, Daniel 6, 7, Int. II, 11, 23
Kamiya, Mieko 21
Kant, Immanuel 5, 15
Keats, John 16
Keltner, Dacher 12
Kierkegaard, Søren 5, 23
Killingsworth, Matthew 11
kindness P, 2, 4, 15, 20, 23, 24, E

L

labyrinth 17, E
Laozi 4
life satisfaction 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 15, 18, 19, 20
loneliness P, 5, 8, 10, 12, 14, 19, 22
lottery winners 8, 9, 11, 23
Lucas, Richard 2, 8

luck 1, Int. IV, 21, 23, E
Lyubomirsky, Sonja 8, 15

M

Marcus Aurelius 3, 12, 14, 16
Mauss, Iris 16, 17
meaning in life 14, 23
meditation 3, 9, 12, 14
Mill, John Stuart P, 5, 6, 14, 17, 23, E
mind-wandering 11
mindfulness 4, 9, 12
Montaigne, Michel de 19

N

nature and green space P, 20, 23
Nietzsche, Friedrich 3, 5, 12, 16
Nozick, Robert 1, 22
Nussbaum, Martha 20

P

paradox of choice P, 17, 22, 23
Parfit, Derek 1
peak-end rule 7
Pennebaker, James 7
PERMA 6
Plato 12, 15
positivity ratio 16
post-traumatic growth 16
premeditatio malorum 3
prosocial spending 21
purpose 2, 6

R

regret 17, 19, 22
remembering self 7, 9, Int. II, 14, 16
replication crisis 12, Int. III, 24
resilience 16, 20
Ryff, Carol 2, 6

S

savouring 9, 11, 19, 23, 24
Schopenhauer, Arthur 5, Int. I, 8, 9
second arrow 4, 16
self-determination theory 6, 21
Seligman, Martin P, 6, 10, 15
Sen, Amartya 20
Seneca 3, 11, Int. V
set point 8
Sisyphus 5, 14
sleep 7, Int. II, 10, 12, 18, 23, 24
social comparison 11, 18
social media 18
socioemotional selectivity 19
Socrates 5, 15, E
Solon and Croesus 1, 2, 7, Int. IV, 23, E
status 13, 18, 22, 23
Stoicism P, 3, 4, Int. III, 17, 18, 23
subjective well-being P, 6

T

Thoreau, Henry David 22
Three Horizons, the P, 6, 10, 13, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, E
Tolstoy, Leo 14, 19, Int. IV, 23
trust 6, 20
Tsai, Jeanne 21
twin studies 8

U

U-curve of age 19
ubuntu 21

V

Vaillant, George 10
VanderWeele, Tyler 6
virtue P, 1, 2, 3, 5, Int. I, 6, 12, 15
Voltaire E

W

Waldinger, Robert 10
wanting and liking 9
WELLBY 20
Wheel of Fortune 19
Wolf, Susan 1, 14
Wordsworth, William P, 5, E
World Happiness Report P, 6, 18, 19, 20, 21
Wrzesniewski, Amy 13

Z

Zhuangzi 4, Int. I, 6, 13, 23