CrossMark

Satisfiers Require Moral Constraints

Steven Suranovic[1]

Abstract This paper counters Etzioni's claim that "Happiness is the Wrong Metric" by arguing that some single metric must be conceived of – call it happiness, or something else - to make choices between dissimilar sources of value, such as the between simple consumption (eg. going to a movie) and a moral choice (eg. visiting a sick friend). However, due to uncertainty about both one's own preferences and about how to measure and compare different sources of value, individuals inevitably become moral wrestlers, even in their search for happiness. The paper then argues that individual pursuit of happiness is appropriate only under the added constraint that people follow a subset of moral principles that are normally encouraged by the major religions; namely do not kill or injure others, do not lie or cheat and always fulfill promises. Pursuit of individual happiness, subject to moral constraints, can leave individuals free to choose their own unique path to self-affirmation.

Keywords Morality · Ethics · Economics · Uncertainty · Human well-being

We all have felt the pleasure of eating a meal, watching a good movie, sharing a conversation with a friend, playing a game, and feeling proud of a charitable act. We have all felt the discomfort of hunger and cold, the pain of an illness, the anger at someone who betrays us, and the guilt of not doing something our mother asked of us. Nonetheless, despite our own experience with these feelings and the recognition that every human being experiences similar feelings, we simply cannot satisfactorily measure the magnitudes and accumulated value of these feelings, nor can we reliably compare the magnitude of one person's feelings with those of another. This is a fundamental problem that has plagued all inquiry into the human condition, past and present; there simply is no objective, scientific metric that we can use to track the well being of individuals.[1]

At best, we have only greatly imperfect measures. Surveys about happiness often ask respondents to rate their own happiness of an event on a hypothetical scale, say, from 0–7 in which 0 represents the most unfavorable feeling and 7 the most favorable. But what are we measuring on the scale? Can we say that a 4 is twice as favorable as a 2? And how could we possibly compare Jim's 6 to Nancy's 5 on the scale?

Economics solves the value measurement problem in a partial and imperfect way. It is relatively easy to measure the exchange value of goods and services that are produced in an economy. It is also quite clear that the consumption of goods and services contributes to individual happiness. Furthermore, since an individual's claim on goods and services is directly related to their money income, one can use income as a proxy for individual well-being. Across an entire economy we can determine the average well being by measuring GDP per capita.

Introductory economics texts always point out that GDP per capita is an imperfect measure. Not only does it miss important aspects of well-being, such as health, environmental factors, or individual capabilities etc., but it is even imperfect as a measurement of objective well-being from the consumption of goods and services itself. It would be more appropriate to measure the value of goods and services "in use" (use-value) rather than the value "in exchange" (exchange-value), but there is no easy way to measure use-values.

[1] See Gilbert, D. (2006). *Stumbling on Happiness*. London: Harper Perennial.

✉ Steven Suranovic
smsuran@gwu.edu

1   ESIA, George Washington University, 1957 E St NW, Suite 502, Washington, DC 20052, USA

Nevertheless, the fact that GDP per capita is measureable, and can be used to make international comparisons if one so desires, is why the measure has risen to such prominence. Its prominence in turn has inspired a belief among some that wealth or income maximization is everything that matters. This is borne out by the undue influence that GDP growth rates, wage rates and household income levels have in most discussions about national policy.

Attempts have been made to identify more effective metrics. Bhutan's use of its Gross National Happiness index is a case in point.[2] The UN's Sustainable Development Solutions Network has published two World Happiness Reports that rank countries using a more comprehensive measure of aggregate well-being.[3] These and other attempts demonstrate growing recognition that there is too much emphasis being placed on partial measures of human happiness. However, any proposed alternative will suffer from the complaint that it invariably measures value from the vantage points of the index creators who determine both what additional measures are deemed important enough to include and what weights to assign each of these measures. This all but guarantees that measuring human happiness will always be contentious.

In Amitai Etzioni's article "Happiness is the Wrong Metric, " he suggests that happiness has received an inordinate amount of attention and that it is inadequate as a guide for advancing human well being. He suggests that in a time of declining economic growth and a rapid loss of jobs we will need to rely on something more than the pursuit of happiness. He suggests that we recognize the value inherent in affirmation, that by leading a moral life within a community and satisfying one's self esteem one may achieve a higher goal of self-actualization.

Etzioni worries about the obsession with material consumption and continued attempts to promote human happiness via increases in national income. He suggests that companies pursuing profit typically use persuasion to manipulate consumer preferences to buy their products so much so that we cannot trust the consumer choice to be his or her own. It would be better, he suggests, to use persuasion to counter those negative effects with an encouragement to reduce the obsession with material consumption and establish a culture promoting the capping of income and the realization of affirming behavior.

In his article, he distinguishes between two meta conceptions of human nature; satisfiers and moral wrestlers. The satisfier conception assumes that an individual is self-centered and seeks to promote individual happiness. Extensions of this view may expand the meaning of happiness, he says, to include other desires such as happiness derived from one's children or from moral acts, but he suggests

that service to the public good has been cashed in. In contrast, moral wrestlers are those who are conflicted between the pursuit of happiness and the fulfillment of moral values.

In my view these two conceptions should be merged into one because the exercise of doing so forces one to contend with many complexities of value. Although separating them may highlight important distinctions between different sources of well-being and is a valid modeling approach, merging them together into a single metric is necessary whenever confronted with a choice between moral actions and the self-interested pursuit of happiness. In addition both modeling approaches can lead to similar conclusions albeit with some disagreement about detailed policy suggestions.

Making Choice About Happiness

Whether happiness is the right or wrong metric depends on how broadly or narrowly one wishes to define happiness.[4] Defined narrowly, one might restrict happiness to individual well being derived solely from the consumption of goods and services. As suggested above, under this definition, most people would conclude that happiness isn't everything. Although traditional economic models focus only on the exchange economy, many newer models have been adapted to consider additional sources of individual utility, thereby expanding the scope of individual happiness. Gary Becker, the 1992 Nobel prize winner, was notable for attempts to use the economic assumptions of rationality and utility maximization to describe social choices including family organization, crime, and the choice to use addictive substances, to name just a few.[5]

One important reason to envision one value metric for life decisions is that everyone is forced at one time or another to make choices that involve comparisons of seemingly unlike qualities. If these two aspects of life were mutually exclusive and never conflicted with each other, then we could pursue each independently, but such is not the case. In making a binary choice between two unlike sources of value, a person is forced to convert to a common metric, even if that conversion is imperfect and troubling. Indeed, it is the imperfection and uncertainty individuals have about their own measurement that can account for the phenomenon of moral wrestling.

Let's look in some detail at an individual choosing between a normal consumption good and a moral commitment using Etzioni's choice query, namely, should I go to a movie or visit a sick friend. Seeing a movie is a common service that is traded in a market and which generates positive feelings.

---

[2] http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/
[3] http://unsdsn.org/resources/publications/world-happiness-report-2013/

[4] See MacKerron, G. (2012). Happiness economics from 35 000 feet. *Journal of Economic Surveys*, *26*(4), 705–735.
[5] See Sandmo, A. (1993). Gary Becker's contributions to economics. *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, *95*(1), 7–23.

However, I may also feel that I should go see my sick friend at the hospital instead. Etzioni argues that visiting a sick friend is a moral obligation and that it is quite likely to cause me discomfort or even pain to see my friend in his condition. Nevertheless I may choose this activity for the evening because I feel I "should" do so.

Etzioni argues that the moral value is different from the consumption value of a standard service. Of course, the moral choice here is an activity that is not traded in a market. It carries no market value. The fact that I may choose it even though I know it will be unpleasant may suggest that I am not choosing in a way to maximize my positive feelings and thus, that happiness is not everything.

Economists might deal with this issue by asking how much money a person would accept in order to change their moral choice. This approach is unsettling to many because it seeks to monetize moral activity. However, in this case it should be viewed merely as an attempt to convert complex moral feelings to a common metric so that a comparison can be made. Regardless of which metric is imagined, in some way individuals clearly do wrestle with decisions like this, and it can be instructive to contemplate what individuals think about to make these unlike activities comparable.

Note first that both choices, going to a movie or visiting a friend, has multiple effects that must be considered. Either choice will generate a stream of feelings for the individual extended over time because he will think about it before and afterwards. If the individual were to choose the movie, then the movie itself will generate positive feelings, assuming he likes the movie. However it will also induce a secondary feeling in this situation. The individual may suffer from the feelings of guilt because all the time while watching the movie the individual may feel bad about not visiting his sick friend. (more later about the source of the guilt.) In contrast, if the individual chooses to visit his friend let's assume he will suffer bad feelings from facing the illness of the friend. However, this will be coupled with good feelings caused by offering the friend some comfort. In addition, visiting the friend engenders no guilty feelings to consider.

Suppose visiting the sick friend yields great discomfort and net negative feelings. This doesn't mean that a happiness-seeking individual wouldn't choose the visit. The reason is because if the negative feelings of guilt induced by not visiting the friend are substantially larger than the happy feelings caused by seeing the movie, the net effect may be substantially negative, even more negative then the net negative feeling caused by the visit. Indeed, this is why it would be natural for a person in this situation to say, "I won't be able to enjoy the movie under these circumstances."

Under these assumptions, the choice for the individual involves weighing two choices, both of which yield net negative feelings. Choosing to visit the sick friend would occur if its net effects hurt less than going to the movie.

Of course, watching the movie might be chosen over visiting the sick friend if the expected values were different. For example, suppose the movie in question is the latest Star Wars premiere. Suppose further that the individual has been waiting for years to see this movie. In this case seeing the movie on opening night will generate much higher than usual happiness, quite possibly more than enough to offset the negative feelings of guilt. The individual might consider this a "good excuse" not to visit the sick friend. He may even contend that the sick friend would fully understand why he could not visit on this night.

Wrestling over which choice to make arises in part because the individual is struggling to make two unlike feelings comparable to each other and that means trying to measure them both along a common metric. However, the wrestling also occurs because the choice is fraught with great uncertainty. It is worth highlighting this because it helps us to understand why the decision can be so difficult.

Choice Under Uncertainty

Although economic models generally assume that people know their preferences, this is only a good assumption for regularly purchased items and habitual behaviors. People are unfamiliar with many other types of products that are purchased infrequently and thus may not know how to rank order these items for themselves. Infrequently faced moral problems represent another category of choices over which individuals may not know what to choose. In some instances the moral choices are matter of fact. For example most people do not steal items when they shop at a department store. This might be largely because people have weighed the effects of getting caught shoplifting and have decided it is not in their best interest to do so. In other circumstances, as when large amounts of money are discovered with no clear owner, or when items can be taken with no chance of being caught, people often become conflicted between morality and self-interest.

This is one source of moral dilemmas. People sometimes anguish over choices because they don't know themselves what is their preferred ordering. This occurs in part because it is hard to convert different sources of utility into like units to compare. To evaluate whether to visit a sick friend or go to a movie, I need to estimate how much happiness will accrue from a movie that I haven't yet seen. I must also guess how guilty I will feel about not visiting my friend and for how long the guilt will last. Also, how much happier will my friend feel with the visit and how will it make me feel? The feelings caused by either choice must be largely guessed. I won't know the true values until the choice is made and the action is taken.

One's ability to estimate the magnitude of these feelings will depend on past experience. If at some earlier time you

didn't go visit a sick friend, or didn't fulfill a similar moral obligation, then you would have learned how guilty it made you feel. However, because every occasion has different circumstances, uncertainty rarely disappears because two events are never perfectly comparable.

Great uncertainty over choices may also inspire people to play mixed strategies over time; that means sometimes choose the moral action and sometimes not. When I choose the moral action I will feel less guilty, but I also know that sometimes when I act morally while others do not, they may gain an advantage over me. For example if I am truthful in my business but my competitors are not, then they will gain while I lose. Knowing this, sometimes I may be dishonest because I know so many others are cheating. I will feel guilty about cheating, but at least I can say I don't let others gain an advantage over me.

The mixed strategy may help one feel better about oneself than a pure strategy because one can select memories about past actions that always put one in a favorable light. For example, remembering your moral choices will remind you that you are generally a good person, whereas, remembering your immoral choices at other times will remind you that you cannot be taken advantage of.

Sources of Preferences

Mixed strategies, especially when younger, can facilitate learning about one's preferences. We learn about our preferences mostly through experience. Consumption of products teaches us the intensity of our likes and dislikes. We also learn from family and friends, from advertising, and from social media.

In addition, individual preferences can be said to change over time because the utility value of the same item changes. The simplest case is that of diminishing marginal utility. If I buy 5 chocolate bars and eat them all at once, then the first bar will give greater utility than the fifth bar. However, if I spread out the consumption over five days then each bar may give equal utility. Because the utility obtained from eating the chocolate bar depends on the circumstances, preferences regarding that choice will also depend on the circumstances.

In another example of changing preferences, consider the happiness obtained by drinking a cup of coffee in a café. If the coffee is consumed first thing in the morning, it may give greater happiness than if consumed later in the day; morning coffee is considered more necessary for some. Also, if the coffee is consumed together with a friend over a long conversation then it may provide even greater utility. The same cup of coffee will generate different levels of happiness to the same person depending on the circumstances surrounding consumption.

When considering a moral choice, introducing the effects of guilt into the decision calculus of a satisfier not only expands the domain of happiness but also inspires an inquiry into the sources of guilt. Moral behavior, or moral preferences, are taught to us (and expected of us) by parents, teachers, ministers, relatives, friends etc. We learn that failure to abide by social rules may disappoint our guardians and lead to punishment. Failure to abide may also result in sin, or loss of God's favor in some systems of belief. There is enormous pressure on individuals to conform to the expectations of the group they are a part of and thus whenever a choice is considered that violates those expectations a person is inclined to feel badly about it.[6]

But values are formed differently in different people. Some are taught strong moral religious values or have strong social pressures to conform. Some people develop a strong desire to please their superiors, while others prefer to resist authority. Some people learn in the presence of moral leaders who teach them to be good to their neighbors while others learn from swindlers, thieves and killers.

Pursuing Happiness With Moral Constraints

Herein lies a key dilemma. Although everyone may engage in a similar quest to maximize their own happiness as defined subjectively from their own vantage point, each person's evaluative metric will have been shaped and fashioned from a lifetime of teachings and personal experiences. What are we to think about individuals who have not acquired the same feelings of guilt or moral opprobrium as others? What if a group of people decides that their well-being is best enhanced by engaging in armed struggle and killing all who believe in a different God? It seems clear that reasonable observers must object to these choices as a violation of the more general good. What is best for the group must sometimes win out over what is best for an individual from that individual's perspective.

In classic utilitarianism the rule to maximize the summation of utilities across all individuals may be sufficient to rule out acceptance of those who would satisfy their own desires by diminishing the well being of others. Kant's categorical imperative might also rule out such behavior since it is inappropriate to think that killing others should be a universal law. Many other approaches have been taken to address this issue as well, but what unites them all is the need for a set of rules or constraints on the behavior of individuals.

In other words it is necessary to accept a basic morality, or be constrained within a set of ethical behaviors before we can set people free to pursue their own happiness in the way they see fit. Basic morality is the precondition needed to prevent the cashing in of the public good by satisfiers.

[6] Berns, G. S., Chappelow, J., Zink, C. F., Pagnoni, G., Martin-Skurski, M. E., & Richards, J. (2005). Neurobiological correlates of social conformity and independence during mental rotation. *Biological psychiatry*, *58*(3), 245–253.

The basic set of rules is fairly straightforward. For example, do not hurt others. Do not steal from others. Do not lie. Fulfill your promises to others. Be considerate of others. Do not interfere in others' actions that do not affect you. These form the basis for most moral teachings around the world. Young people everywhere are taught these principles and there have developed strong social pressures and public institutions to encourage conformity to these behaviors.[7]

The reason to promote these values is because they enable a social system that works for the greater good. A set of rules such as this is sufficient to enable a free and just market economy to thrive and provide freedom for individuals to pursue their own version of happiness.[8] It is also sufficient to rule out the egregious examples of individuals that might find their own happiness only by diminishing the happiness of others.

Further Implications

In this essay I have pushed the satisfier model of happiness to the point of an inconsistency only to conclude that a set of ethical or moral principles is necessary to keep it intact. In contrast, in recognizing inconsistencies in the pursuit of happiness, Etzioni chooses to throw out the happiness metric in favor of the pursuit of moral principles and self-affirmation. However, while these two different approaches may lead to a similar emphasis on moral values they have slightly different implications.

For example, one of Etzioni's conclusions is to promote a culture of the capping of incomes so that people may learn to find fulfillment through other means, which he argues may become a necessity if economic growth worldwide continues at its recent tepid pace. In contrast, in the model that I present, capping incomes is not necessary. A person may decide that his own fulfillment is best realized by maximizing his own income. This would be just if achieved under the ethical constraints previously described. The reason is that if a person makes money solely by producing goods or services for others, while not engaging in theft, deception, or monopolization, or by causing external effects upon others, then through his actions he will have created benefit for others as well as for himself. His actions would be win-win and thus would help promote the well being of others in his community.

If we can constrain individuals to act within this set of ethical or moral constraints, then people would be free to pursue whatever form of happiness that helps them to realize their full potential. For some this may mean doing good for others by producing and selling material goods and services. For others, it may mean volunteering to help those in need in the community. For some it may mean promoting activities that help foster a sense of community. But for others it may mean withdrawing from community to live an ascetic life.

I imagine that this is what John Rawls has in mind when he talks about an overlapping consensus.[9] Beyond a set of minimum ethical or moral constraints that all agree on, different groups can remain free to add constraints in whatever way they see fit. Thus, some communities may choose to be religious and others not. Some may ascribe to vegetarianism while others may choose to eat meat. Some may choose to live in a way that reduces their carbon footprint while others may choose otherwise.

Of course peoples preferences will remain malleable. People will continue to be uncertain what will provide the good life for themselves. Different groups will vie for support and groups will continue to contest with each other what constitutes a good life.

Measuring what provides happiness, or fulfillment, or self-affirmation will remain elusive as much to the individuals themself as to the researchers trying to track well being. Perhaps it is best to leave the discovery of fulfillment and affirmation to the individuals to determine for themselves. What researchers should do instead is help to define the moral constraints, or rules of the game, along with suitable methods to enforce such behavior.

Steven Suranovic is an associate professor of economics and international affairs at the George Washington University (GW) in Washington, DC. His research focuses on fairness in international trade, the ethics of markets, and behavioral economics. His book *A Moderate Compromise: Economic Policy Choice in an Era of Globalization* offers a critique of current methods to evaluate and choose policies and suggests a simple, principled, and moderate alternative.

[7] Suranovic, S. (2010). *A Moderate Compromise: Economic Policy Choice in an Era of Globalization*. Palgrave Macmillan.

[8] Suranovic, S (2015), "Market Ethics with Trade in an Edgeworth Box," GWU Institute for International Economic Policy Working paper 2015–21.

[9] Rawls, J. (2005). *Political liberalism*. Columbia University Press.