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BOOK REVIEW

Happiness – Concept, Measurement and Promotion, Yew-Kwang Ng, Springer, 2022, v + 183 pages.
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One of my first encounters with a work of philosophy was John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism.* I found it greatly inspiring. Mill's utilitarianism involves an attention to those suffering, but has a positive outlook at the same time. When I developed in my studies, I was quite surprised to find that, while this may be changing these days, in both economics and philosophy, utilitarianism has few adherents. Interestingly, this is mostly for different reasons. Following Robbins (1932), economists abandoned the idea that we should think of the human good in terms of psychological properties, such as pleasure or happiness. Measuring these properties appeared impossible, or at least, not sufficiently scientific. Philosophers, on the other hand, were concerned about the reduction of all value to happiness, and to pleasure in particular. Robert Nozick's (1974) well-known thought experiment of the experience machine – a machine in which someone could have the experience of doing wonderful things without *actually* doing them – convinced many that pleasure (and happiness) is not all that there is to living a good life. Moreover, should we really aim to maximize welfare? A racist society built on the labours of a small racial minority could be maximizing its overall happiness, but is surely morally abhorrent. Or so the argument typically goes. Defenders of utilitarianism have become rare, in both fields, though there are of course influential utilitarian philosophers, such as Peter Singer, and various common practices in applied cost–benefit analysis keep an apparent utilitarian flare.

Now utilitarianism is back. In particular the effective altruism movement has attracted much enthusiasm, evidenced by the Time Magazine cover of August 2022 for instance, dedicated to the effective altruists. The relationship between effective altruism and utilitarianism, and utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer in particular, is strong. In addition to this, we also find a new enthusiasm for research on happiness in economics and psychology, a research programme that often takes on a utilitarian flavour (Kahneman *et al.* 1997; Veenhoven 2004).

Kew-Kwang Ng, however, was a utilitarian before it was cool. He is among the small group of thinkers who have been resisting the forceful pushes against utilitarianism for decades. Ng has, throughout his career, played a remarkable role in a variety of discussions about many different facets of utilitarianism. Writing in both economics and philosophy journals, he has contributed to utilitarian thought, and defended it unapologetically. *Happiness – Concept, Measurement, and Promotion* is a concise, but systematic defence of utilitarianism, and an insightful discussion of its implications. It contains 16 chapters that can,

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more or less, be read separately. The chapters range from a defence of happiness as the only good (Chapter 5) to a plea for a wider application of deep brain stimulation for fighting depression and making us happier in general (Chapter 12). It provides an overview of the latest research on the causal relationships between happiness and age (Chapter 9), money (Chapter 7), and a variety of other factors under our control (Chapters 10 and 11). It provides a defence of pleasure-based conceptions of happiness over life-satisfaction views (Chapter 4) and a critical, but optimistic discussion of the measurability of happiness (Chapter 6). The final chapter (16) is an argument for including animals in the utilitarian matrix, and there is even an appendix briefly discussing Ng's solution to Derek Parfit's repugnant conclusion (to give away the answer: the repugnant conclusion is not so repugnant after all, discussed in Ng 1989).

The book has much to commend it: it is clear, and Ng presents his views compellingly. The book is truly interdisciplinary, engaging with Rawls and Kant on the one hand, and presenting a wide-ranging empirical literature on the other hand. Ng is also not shy to include funny personal anecdotes to illustrate and defend his positions (we learn that Ng has managed to do just as many push-ups each morning as the years he has lived, which is impressive if we consider that his first academic article was published in 1965!). But Ng also uses fairly controversial evolutionary psychological explanations in the illustration of his ideas, building on supposed essential differences between men and women, frequently involving sexual behaviour. This detracts from the merits of the book, and is an unnecessary addition to what the book does have to offer.

More substantive issues arise from the fact that the book has ambitious aims: it defends a utilitarian theory of the good and the right, a hedonic theory of welfare (though avoids the term 'hedonic'), discusses the methodology of measuring welfare, presents an Environmentally Responsible Happy Nation Index (Switzerland and Denmark win), presents Ng's take on the current state of the evidence on a wide variety of scientific questions, and defends some controversial implications of his view. At the same time, the book is quite short (at 183 pages). This inevitably will leave some readers unsatisfied. To look at some issues in more detail, I will focus on three questions in particular.

1. Is pleasure the only good?

While Mill's *Utilitarianism* has been influential, his proof that happiness (as pleasure) is the only good is not typically seen as entirely successful. Ng's Chapter 5 takes on a similar aim, though he also acknowledges that the idea that happiness is the only good is not something that can be proven conclusively. Ng understands happiness hedonically, in terms of pleasure and pain, and sees pleasure and pain as affective states,[1] which he describes as 'nice feelings' and 'bad feelings' respectively. To most philosophers, the idea that pleasure is valuable is not so controversial (though perhaps not all pleasure, all

[1]Ng engages with Haybron (2007), but unfortunately does not engage with Haybron's other work, in which he stresses the importance of the differences between hedonic and affective properties (e.g. Haybron 2005, 2008).

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the time, see Nussbaum 2008). Ng takes this as a starting point. His argument for why pleasure is the *only* good goes in, what Ng calls, a number of steps.[2] The crucial steps are these:[3]

> Step 1: In an isolated world of no affective sentients [sentient beings], nothing is of any normative significance.
> Step 2: Other things being equal, it is undesirable to inflict pain/unhappiness; it is desirable/valuable to have happiness.
> Step 3: If something is of normative significance, it must ultimately speaking be due to some effects on the enjoyment of happiness or the suffering of pain/unhappiness (43–44).

Step 3, I take it, is supposed to follow from the first two steps. These steps appear similar to Mill's, who roughly argued that everyone will see happiness as something good, and that all other goods appear to affect happiness, and consequently, all derive their value from happiness (Mill 1871: Ch. 4). However, Ng adds something important: the first step. It appears extremely plausible that there is a categorical difference of value between sentient and non-sentient beings. Sentient beings are welfare subjects, non-sentient beings are not. A world without any sentient being may indeed be void of value. If so, sentience is of tremendous importance. Once it appears, a life can become valuable to the individual living that life. But does it follow from this that *only* our affective consciousness matters? While I am sympathetic to this reasoning, it does not strictly speaking follow (van der Deijl 2021; Lin 2021). Our sentience may be a necessary condition for welfare, but this does not mean only our conscious experiences are valuable. To see this, we can think of a parallel in aesthetic value. Visuals may be necessary for a film to be good (or to be a film at all). Without visuals, there can be no good film, but with visuals, a film can be good. However, from this, it does not follow that *only* visuals matter in evaluating the aesthetic value of a film. The usage of the voice of the actors as well as the soundtrack of a film also play a role in its aesthetic value. The Good may be like this: while sentience is necessary, as soon as there are sentient creatures their desire-satisfaction, friendships, and knowledge may become intrinsically valuable to their life as well.

Perhaps this is nit-picky. Ng acknowledges that he does not provide a conclusive proof. And in fact, I am quite sympathetic to the view that the significance of sentience provides a strong case for the experience requirement, the idea that for something to benefit us, it must enter our experience (see van der Deijl 2021). However, even if we go along with this, why should it only be pleasure (and pain) that matter? Is the value of a friendship truly limited to the pleasure it provides, or does the experience of a mutual bond of care add something of

[2]Ng's discussion here leaves the precise status of these steps open to some interpretation. I read these steps as follows: step 1 and 2 are premises for step 3, the conclusion. As I discuss below, however, step 3 does not follow precisely from step 1 and 2.

[3]The remainder of the steps aim to show that other goods may still exist if we adopt this principle, but only in a derivative sense (other goods lead to happiness), and that some moral principles do not abide by the utilitarian standard.

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value as well? On this issue, Ng does not offer much. He may respond that this question is ill-posed. The experience of such a mutual bond is a "nice feeling" and hence counts as pleasure, but it seems implausibly reductive to say that all that is good about the experience of friendship is this nice feeling.[4] It is at least not trivially true.

Seeing pleasure as the only good has much appeal: it is a simple and concise theory that is able to explain almost anything we consider valuable. Perhaps that is sufficient reason to adopt it. Yet, as many economists and philosophers have moved away from this idea, it would have been worthwhile to make the case for this idea as strong as possible. It is a shame that Ng spends so few words on his defence of this idea.

2. Does morality require that we maximize happiness?

Ng's Chapter 5 also includes a critique of Rawls (and, in fact, of Kant), whose second principle is not only absurd according to Ng, but obviously so (54). Rawls' second principle states that in just societies primary goods are distributed on the basis of fair equality of opportunity, and on the basis of the difference principle: differences in advantage should be to the advantage to the least advantage in society. Ng makes a familiar point in response: if we can create massive welfare gains for some individuals at minor costs to the worst off, we should still do it. Consequently, Rawls' difference principle is false. QED.

Rawls is clear, however, that his difference principle is not about those types of questions, as he would agree with Ng that such application would be implausible (Rawls 1971: 157). The principle is intended for the design of institutions in a just society, against a backdrop of other principles. Nevertheless, it may appear that Ng's argument against the difference principle is still a good argument for utilitarianism: if we should not sacrifice all for the worst off, it seems more plausible we should maximize the good. However, typically, arguments such as Ng's have led many to adopt prioritarian views, according to which all and only differences in welfare matter, but they matter more the worse off individuals are (Parfit 1998). Ng unfortunately does not engage with such views. To him, the idea that the good should be maximized is almost trivial:

> since utility/welfare is the ultimate objective one is presumably maximizing, it is not rational not to maximize expected utility/welfare. (55)

But this is a non-sequitur. Even if welfare is the only good for individuals, it is not irrational to think it matters morally how this is welfare is distributed among different individuals. Especially in light of the prominence of prioritarian views, it is unfortunate that Ng has neglected engaging with such positions. The rationale for these positions may provide some of the strongest reasons to deviate from utilitarian maximization for those who find its consequentialism so appealing. Ng now presents us with a false choice between maximization and maximin.

[4]See for instance van der Deijl (2019; though cf. Crisp 2021).

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3. Is happiness measurable?

The question of whether happiness (or other psychological properties) is measurable can be interpreted in at least two common ways. A first is whether the concept of happiness is a quantitative concept at all, and if so, whether it has an ordinal or cardinal structure. A second asks to what extent methods available to us lead to reliable judgments about this concept (see Rossi 2014). The latter depends on the former, but these are two separate questions.

Economists have generally been sceptical about the cardinal measurability of happiness (or utility more generally) in both respects. Ng plausibly shows that their scepticism about the first question has been based on the wrong reasons. According to Ng, part of the reasoning has been that because one can derive demand functions from ordinal orderings of utility, cardinal utility is unnecessary. As thinking in terms of cardinal utility also requires more demanding assumptions, Occam's razor demands that we abandon the idea. However, Ng also shows that taking the idea seriously that welfare has no cardinal structure leads to fairly absurd conclusions. Eternal agony is worse than sitting by your desk writing and being bitten by an ant, which is worse than merely sitting by your desk writing. However, it should be clear that eternal agony is a lot worse than the second option, than the second is to the third. Thinking about wellbeing in ordinal terms, however, implicitly assumes a cardinal structure.

So far so good, but how do actual measures of happiness fare with respect to the second question. Such measures are typically based on questions along the lines of: 'how happy are you, all things considered?' Ng builds extensively on such measures, but acknowledges that they are not perfect (63). Some things can be improved: for instance, one can use a scale with an explicit 'neutral' point (which Ng takes to lie around point 5 on a 0–10 scale), rather than using Likert scales or measures from 0–10 that do not have an explicit neutral point. Also, Ng believes life satisfaction questions are particularly prone to unreliable measurements, and in particular, to scale shifts, when our aspirations over the years change: 'This is so because 'satisfaction' is more a concept of relative gratification in relation to the aspiration level. Happiness and subjective well-being are less so, though not completely' (36). It is not entirely clear where this difference comes from, though, of course, he may be right.

Ng argues we can use Edgeworth's idea of a 'just perceptible increment of happiness' to improve measures. In fact, he sketches a way to do so that he argues is cardinal and interpersonally comparable across time and between cultures, and is based on preferences for particular differences (Chapter 6). While his defence of these claims is quite quick, it provides an interesting possible exploratory route for happiness researchers.

4. Should you read this book?

According to Ng, a sufficient reason to buy his book is the invaluable insight that while life gets less happy at first, it only gets happier after your thirties (Chapter 9): 'when you are at your low, you will know that this is only the low point in life, and the future will be much better ... This is certainly worth many thousands of times

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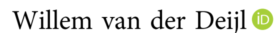
the cost of reading this book." (92). This is certainly a comforting idea (I am 32). But this is certainly not the only reason to read the book.

Ng is a remarkable figure in a tremendously important field of study. His work is truly interdisciplinary. This is a rare and admirable feat. Besides the questions this review has focused on, his later chapters provide an excellent and fascinating overview of the empirical literature on a wide variety of important questions about happiness. The book is often entertaining to read, and concise. This inevitably comes at a cost: not all the ideas are as well worked out as they could have been, and some critical readers may find some of the arguments wanting. Nevertheless, the book provides an interesting contemporary defence of utilitarian thought and its applications. It acknowledges weaknesses of current methods, while not allowing the perfect to become the enemy of the good. Its discussion provides a good overview of controversies and fields of research. This makes the book an excellent starting point for those with an interest in happiness economics. The book provides extensive reference lists of much of the relevant literature. I also recommend the book for anyone working in related fields who is not yet fully familiar with Ng's work, as his original thinking is interesting in its own right. All in all, this book provides an excellent starting point for further discovery.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