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**BORMANS, LEO (ED.),
THE WORLD BOOK OF HAPPINESS,
BUFFALO, NY, FIREFLY LTD., 2011,
349P.**

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The three greatest philosophical questions of the past 3,000 years have undoubtedly been *What is the meaning of life?*, *What is the secret of longevity?*, and *What is happiness?* But many would argue that the third question answers the first two. Over the past 25 years — which have witnessed the fall of communism, the creation of micro unhappiness in the form of random terrorism, and the generation of mass horror through macro-events of natural disaster -- there has been an intensification of interest in defining happiness and understanding its causes. Humans have also come to realize that raising the level of happiness in the world has always been, and should remain, the ultimate goal of all physical and social sciences; with leadership provided notably by medicine, psychiatry, and (yes) economics. This is why the *World Book of Happiness* should be required reading for all students and practitioners of economics.

PLACE OF THIS BOOK IN THE LITERATURE

In face of this need for understanding happiness, the goal of the book is to seek the “*secret of optimism*,” and how it can be learned (p.7). To do so, its editor Leo Bormans contacted prominent experts in the field from the 50 different countries he himself had visited and asked them each to write a maximum of 1000 words on the subject of happiness. He specified that he was looking for

1. Insights based upon empirical research that translates information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom.
2. Discussion of the happiness, not just of the individual but also of groups, organizations, and countries
3. A global vision based on the cross-fertilization of ideas, and
4. Texts written in everyday language. The tone and methodology of the book are therefore qualitative, except for one entry based on the World Database of Happiness.

Under these criteria, the objective of this volume was to unite the “*knowledge and wisdom of one hundred happiness professors from around the world*” (p. 3)

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE BOOK

The book more than meets that objective. A full 102 entries of from one to 8 pages have been contributed by experts in happiness in eleven academic disciplines: economics, education, environmental studies, management, medicine, philosophy, political science, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, and statistics. The experts come from 47 countries ranging from Algeria to Australia, Bhutan to Canada, China to the Czech Republic, Denmark to India, Iran to Mexico, and Thailand¹ to the USA. The major cultural blocs of the world (English-speaking, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Eastern European, Western European, Scandinavian, Slavic, East and Southeast Asian, and South Asian) are therefore also present. Unfortunately, however, these are not proportional to their share of the world population and only 29 of the 102 chapters were written by women.

The chapter entries of the book are included in what could only be called a random order, with no apparent grouping by country, discipline or gender. For example, the entries from South Africa are to be found in positions 34, 54, and 96; while those from Mexico are 18, 26, and 62. Meanwhile, the three psychiatry chapters are found in positions 13, 26, and 96; while the 21 economics chapters occupy such positions as 2, 30, 58, and 101. The greatest number of chapters is in psychology (38), but here again they are not to be found in consecutive order.

This shuffling of content by discipline, country origin, and gender must clearly be intentional. The implicit goal seems to be to prevent the reader from reading only one section on the discipline or geographic region of his/her choice; and to force the reader to undertake a more complete personal synthesis through a process of induction or a “bottom-up” approach. The opposite approach would have been to present a theoretical framework from which a set of hypotheses about happiness would have been deduced; and to order the chapters in the most convenient way for evaluating those hypotheses. But the field of happiness studies has for centuries been dominated by this “top-down,” arcane, “prescriptive,” and “duty”-oriented writing of philosophers (p.5). So this book is designed instead to simulate a dialogue among equals, and to provide bottom-up, accessible, descriptive recommendations for living.

Instead of quantitative methods, all but one article use close logical argumentation, descriptive case studies, and summary statements about happiness to arrive at 3-4 main points enumerated at the end of each contribution. Although the volume does not explicitly ask questions or test hypotheses, the implicit questions come readily to mind: what is happiness; what makes people happy; do authors from different genders, disciplines, cultures, and GDP levels per capita agree on the same fundamental themes, etc.

I wish to cite one example from the book that does, however, employ quantitative analysis, that entitled “*What we know*” by Ruut Veenhoven, a Dutch professor of sociology and chief architect and interpreter of the World Database of Happiness. Veenhoven estimates the following happiness (NOT utility) function:

Happiness = .69 *Affluence* + .63 *Economic freedom* + .58 *Modern urbanisation* + .56 *Modern schooling* + .53 *Political freedom* + .50 *Civil rights* + .49 *Tolerance of minorities* + .41 *Personal freedom* + .29 *Migration%* — .69 *Corruption* — .21 *Gender inequality* — .08 *Income inequality*.

¹ There are two entries for Thailand.

Veenhoven concludes that a person's happiness is determined by a combination of life chances, flow of experience, and conscious evaluation, with the result that happy people are better endowed intellectually than the unhappy. This includes mental health, sociability, physical health, internal control, extraversion, conscientiousness and lust acceptance. It is interesting to see that many elements of the King's sufficiency economy are also present in Veenhoven's conclusions on happiness even though this was obviously not the goal of his research: *Ethics* is reflected by conscientiousness, gender equality, reduction of corruption, and tolerance of minorities; *knowledge* by modern schooling and intellectual endowment; *self-immunization* by mental and physical health and extraversion; *reasonableness* by personal freedom and internal control; *sufficiency* by lowering income inequality within an adequate level of affluence; and *balance* by the positive signs on immigration, urbanization, political freedom and civil rights.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE BOOK

At this point in a typical book report, I would normally be reporting the conclusions from the book; but in this case, there quite simply are none. The synthesis of the 102 chapters, the recurrent themes that seem to predominate, the degree of consensus or non-consensus among the authors — all this is entirely left up to the reader. This is at once the greatest weakness of the book and its greatest strength. Readers are actively called upon to take responsibility for understanding, selecting, and testing in their own lives the hundreds of partial answers to the quest for happiness. To help in this quest, a section called "The Keys" summarizes the 3-5 main points at the end of each chapter. The book is also beautifully produced, with lovely photos from around the world, so that the reader is drawn to spend time reflecting on each chapter.

But there are weaknesses as well. The first is that there is no conceptual framework presented in the book, either as a diagram or in words. Thus, the very strength of the book (invitation to find out for yourself) is also its greatest weakness (an opportunity for constructive synthesis has been lost). The editor obviously wishes for the chapters to speak for themselves, and for the reader to take principal responsibility for inducing the major conclusions. However, a little help from the editor in this direction would have aided those readers with less time or creative inclination at their disposal. It would also have been fascinating to juxtapose a summary of the most frequent conclusions against Maslow's needs hierarchy, the King of Thailand's sufficiency Economy philosophy, or some other conceptual framework based on the different types of happiness humans can feel and the various sources and principles which best lead to that happiness.

The second weakness is that no effort has been given to making a statistical or non-statistical synthesis of the viewpoints presented in the book. Do the authors agree or disagree on the meaning and causes of happiness? This omission is all the more damaging because of the under-representation of women, low-income countries, Asia, the Slavic countries, and the mid-East on the one hand; and the over-representation of English-speaking and Western European authors (some 60% of the total) on the other.

As one possible way to correct these two weaknesses, it would have been useful to organize and count the frequency of the 3-5 Keys of each essay according to some known system for assessing human needs (e.g. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy) or promoting collective well-being (e.g. King Bhumipol of Thailand's Sufficiency Economy philosophy). Unfortunately, this was not done. As we read through chapter after chapter

of the book, the concept of self-immunization (and its various synonyms and applications) seems to be the most frequent dimension we encounter from the King's philosophy; indeed it is mentioned on average approximately two times per chapter! This could become one's primary focal point for the application of the King's philosophy in one's daily life. Self-immunization is followed in frequency by reasonableness (about once per chapter), ethics, moderation, balance, and knowledge (about once in every 8 chapters).

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WHO SHOULD READ THE BOOK

Despite these omissions, this book is important for all economists -- whether professors, researchers, students, theoreticians, or empirical practitioners. The ultimate but sometimes forgotten goal of economics has always been to help promote broad human happiness. This is what Jeremy Bentham termed "*the greatest happiness of the greatest number*". Similarly, the great macroeconomist J.M. Keynes wrote that "*depriving a whole nation [post-war Germany] of happiness should be abhorrent and detestable.*" Adam Smith himself included physical health and moral rectitude in his definition of happiness: "*What can be added to the happiness of a man who is in health, out of debt, and has a clear conscience?*" We are beginning to see that narrow "utility" as employed by modern mathematical economists has lost much of the broader spirit of Bentham, Mill and other "utilitarians"; and that we should really be estimating a happiness function rather than the utility function.

Moreover, there has been a tendency on the part of many academics from other disciplines, and even the general population, to denigrate economics as cold, ego-centric, capitalist, conspiratorial, and profit-maximizing. It is important therefore for economists to immunize themselves against such attacks with a vision of economics "with a human face" (not to mention a heart and a soul). Reassuringly, these more human facets are clearly present in the 20% of the chapters in this volume written by economists.

The second obvious clientele for this book is happiness researchers, including those delving into the King's philosophy. Happiness economics has become a branch of economics in its own right over the past 20 years, to such an extent that Ben Bernanke, Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve gave a commencement address in 2010 on happiness economics! More and more space is being devoted to the relationship between income, work, and possessions and our subjective well-being. This is calling forth new paradigms in, and expansions of, economics to update and enliven the marketplace for ideas in universities and public debate.

The third clientele for this book is policy makers within government and non-governmental organizations. Happiness is largely dependent upon an individual's genetically determined "*set point*," as well as the wisdom and experiences accumulated throughout his or her lifetime. But many of the determinants of happiness go far beyond our personal understanding or control. They require community-based or government policies at the meso- and macro-economic levels. It is therefore important that the goals of such policy reflect a lucid understanding of the importance of subjective well-being, and the exact factors that can be seen to increase it within a given society. This book should therefore be required reading for public and community administrators at all levels.

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Finally, this is also an extremely important book for anyone who seeks to become happier, which basically means all of us. It could be profitably read and meditated upon at the pace of one 1000-word essay per day. At this rate, the serious student of the book could pass through the entire set of chapters in 102 days, or 3.5 times per year, with increasing insight, comprehension and personal synthesis with each round. I invite all of us to do that.

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