



An Interview with Dan Haybron

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Interview by
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1. What got you interested in wellbeing research?

The immediate trigger was encountering the literature on irrationality by folks like Kahneman and Tversky, along with the fascinating studies on the instability of wellbeing judgments by Schwartz, Strack and others, and finally the subjective wellbeing research being done by Ed Diener and many others. All this stuff was obviously important, somehow. The question was exactly *how* it was important. How does this work bear on traditional views about happiness and wellbeing, and living well more broadly? Not really knowing where it would lead me, but convinced it was worth pursuing, I followed my instincts and wound up with a dissertation on it.

From a longer-term perspective, it was really these sorts of issues that got me into philosophy in the first place. I grew up moving between radically different environments—an American suburb and an island village—and observing how different our quality of life was, and even our personalities. I became convinced at a pretty early age—maybe ten, eleven—that our way of life is basically insane. (By “our” I mean the dominant way of life in the United States, among other places.) When the film *Koyaanisqatsi*, a Hopi title meaning “life out of balance,” came out I thought, “well, there you go.” It pretty well summed up the way I’d felt for a good time.

In college, I set out to study anthropology or political science to think about what a smarter civilization might look like. But the really interesting questions turned out to be philosophical, and so I studied philosophy, forgetting until some time in graduate school what had gotten me into it in the first place.

I never really framed my concerns in terms of happiness, but my graduate studies got me thinking that was a pretty large part of the picture: we are pursuing happiness in an immensely inefficient, ineffective, unbalanced and destructive way, and we’d better rethink the way we’re going about it if we wish to survive, much less be happy.

Lately I’ve been thinking that *meaning* is another large part of what got me into this business. The sorts of offbeat places that have inspired me, like that island, the remote corners of Northern California, or New Orleans, hold a deep appeal for a lot of people quite apart from whether people are really happier there: there’s something that seems very real, and human, about such places. You feel like you’re really connecting with things of genuine worth—other people, nature, music, human excellence. Now while this sense of meaning seems important in itself, I think it’s also a major contributor to happiness: it’s hard to be very happy if you don’t have any firm sense of connecting with value in your life.



2. What do you take "wellbeing" to mean?

I use the term in the standard philosophical sense, as a rough synonym for flourishing, eudaimonia, or welfare: a term for doing well, or having your life go well for you. It's about what benefits us, makes us better off. Many people use "happiness" for this notion, which does fit with some contemporary English uses. But most happiness research today, and most popular discussions in the media, reserve "happiness" for a narrower, purely psychological notion.

That's how I understand the *concept* or *meaning* of "wellbeing". As for my substantive conception of wellbeing—that is, what actually constitutes a benefit for a person—I incline toward a eudaimonistic theory along very roughly Millian lines. On this sort of view, wellbeing consists in self-fulfilment. This in turn consists in the fulfilment of both our rational and emotional natures: succeeding in relation to the commitments that shape one's identity, and being authentically happy, respectively. (And happiness in turn I understand as emotional wellbeing, basically the opposite of anxiety and depression.) I'd probably add, as secondary components of wellbeing, health and pleasure: fulfilments of our bodily and animal natures.

I'm presently trying to come up with something a little more definitive, but the job is pretty hard and I'm not certain any single notion of wellbeing can do all the necessary work. A huge problem is figuring out how to say anything plausible about the value of pleasure that coheres with a credible account of the other things that seem to matter. Pleasure's value just seems so unlike that of anything else. It's almost enough to make one a hedonist.

3. Why is wellbeing research important?

First, it's essential to understanding who we are. Second, those of us affluent enough to read things like this have way more than enough resources to achieve a high quality of life, and yet we arguably aren't doing such a hot job of it. We need to figure out how to live more sensibly. Third, and most importantly, we need to figure out how all of us can achieve a reasonable level of wellbeing efficiently, without laying waste to the planet.

4. What is the most important wellbeing-related finding to date?

In my view, that some distinctly unaffluent peoples enjoy in many ways a very high quality of life. Robert Biswas-Diener et al. did a terrific study of the Maasai, Inughuit and Amish suggesting as much, and a number of not-so-wealthy Latin American countries consistently do very well in studies of wellbeing. Actually, hard data on the question are pretty thin, both because of a lack of research on the question—not many studies of subjective wellbeing among hunter-gatherers!—and because we don't know how reliable the measures are across different cultures. So I'm not sure this is so much a "finding" as a fairly obvious point to anyone acquainted with a moderately wide range of human societies. I mean, Socrates was poor by today's standards, but no one doubts that he had a pretty good life. Be that as it may, it helps a lot to have any data at all on the question, and the "obvious point" is nonetheless easily forgotten.

In general, the study of "positive outliers" like these is extremely important for understanding (a) what human beings actually need to flourish and (b) what sorts of social arrangements can succeed at promoting human wellbeing. The point isn't to become hunter-gatherers, subsistence farmers, fishermen or whatever. (Though it might be good to know something about quality of life in such communities when choosing development policies for them and sending them off to work in sweatshops.) In fact a great part of the value of studying

radically different social forms is precisely *because* they're so far removed from our own situation. The greater the variation in our research populations, the better we'll understand which variables fundamentally matter for human beings, as opposed to those that simply reflect contemporary living arrangements among the Western middle class.

Of course, we might also get a few ideas about our own lifeways from studying other cultures, even if living very much like them is out of the question. I don't want to live like a hunter-gatherer, but I look at the things some hunter societies seem to have going for them, like raising children in a profoundly supportive and secure social environment. And I think maybe this tells us something about what people need, since a lot of those kids seem to be quite happy and healthy, though they live at pretty much the zero point of what we call development. (Yes, they're much more likely to die prematurely; the point is just that their lives have something going for them.) And maybe, in light of that, some of our own communities start looking more desirable. Parts of Charleston or Copenhagen or even St. Louis, for instance, where homes may not sport huge lawns or basement movie theaters but people enjoy a lot more affection and social support. And maybe don't care so much about the theaters, because they've got someone to talk to.

In general, not to study wellbeing across a wide range of human societies is simply crazy—rather like the recent healthcare debate in the United States, which transpired with essentially no attention paid to the example of basically every other civilized country on the planet. We had a treasure trove of information about different ways of making healthcare accessible to all, and mostly ignored it. Wellbeing research today is, it seems to me, making a similar mistake, though there are some notable exceptions, like the Biswas-Diener et al. study.

5. What is the most important application of wellbeing research to our lives?

It is plain that individuals can do many things to make themselves happier, and I've learned a good deal from Stoic and Buddhist thought, among others, about how individuals can reduce the unpleasantness in their lives. But the most important action, I think, is at the collective, social, and environmental level: how happy we are depends strongly on how we live, and our lifestyles in turn depend largely on the prevailing way of life in our communities. Relationships are crucial for wellbeing; but you can't just *make* people give you rewarding social interactions. You need cooperative friends and a functioning community for that. A reasonable pace of life is also important; but again, that's not something you decide entirely on your own. We don't make up the work week on our own, and we don't decide how much time we're expected to spend schlepping our kids around to activities invented to substitute for the fact that they don't have any friends to play with in the neighborhood.

6. What is the most important wellbeing-related finding from your research?

I'm a philosopher, so I don't have "findings" so much as "stuff I make up." But among the things of that sort, I suppose my arguments for the importance of emotional wellbeing—happiness, in my view—and the surprising unimportance of life satisfaction seem like pretty plausible candidates. (I don't doubt the significance of how people see their lives going for them; I just think life satisfaction is a deeply problematic gauge of that.) I'd be delighted if empirical researchers were to start measuring emotional wellbeing in a more serious way, and if they developed better ways of assessing how people see their lives going than global life satisfaction reports, which I think are useful but often very misleading.

7. What are you working on right now?

A book on wellbeing policy and another on philosophical theories of wellbeing and the good life. I'm hoping to soon delve into the neuroscience of affect so I can develop my account of happiness in greater detail. I'm also doing some empirical work on lay thinking about happiness and wellbeing; that would give me some genuine "findings" to talk about. Finally, I'm just finishing up a semipopular introduction to happiness for Oxford, and since I accidentally wrote an extra book's worth of material for that, I expect to follow it with another one on the collective, sustainable pursuit of happiness.

8. What do you think the next big thing in wellbeing research will be?

Three things come to mind. First, improving measures of wellbeing, including burying once and for all primitive instruments like simply asking people "how happy are you?" as serious measures of wellbeing. (That question in particular is best avoided, since it's a *paradigm* of ambiguity, and different participants will think you're after different kinds of information. As well, single-item measures require people to sum up a huge amount of information on the spot, and so are easily skewed by various biases.) I'm especially hopeful that wellbeing researchers will employ more sophisticated instruments for assessing emotional wellbeing, including tools drawn from the vast mental health literature.

Second, a more vigorous engagement with crosscultural issues, both for the reasons noted earlier and because they can help sharpen the limitations of current measures, hopefully encouraging the development of better ones. As well, a huge proportion of human intellectual and cultural diversity is disappearing almost overnight, between things like the introduction of television, globalization, and now climate change. We need to learn what we can about different ways of life and different ways of thinking about the human condition before we're left with little more than college kids and minor variations on the theme to study.

Third, I see a growing appreciation of the importance of context for human wellbeing: the pursuit of happiness is not mainly an individual affair, but depends heavily on the local culture and physical environment, and other contextual influences. It's much like diet: there's a reason, or rather a blizzard of reasons, why a Missourian is much more likely to be obese than an Italian. The latter live in an environment that makes healthy eating come naturally, while we Missourians live in a place that makes good health a constant battle of willpower. Yes, one can be happy, or skinny, just about anyplace. But it's going to be a lot harder in some places than others, and we need to figure out how to make the places we live friendlier to wellbeing.

9. What are the main benefits of interdisciplinary research on wellbeing?

Wellbeing spans just about every domain of human life, implicating our biology and physical environs as well, not to mention both our individual and societal conditions and choices. And it is an emotionally charged subject demanding clarity of thought, though our concepts for dealing with it are impoverished, hazy and confused. There's no single discipline with natural authority over the subject: we need to bring the resources of perhaps *most* academic fields to bear on it. And we need broadly educated, interdisciplinary thinkers, Renaissance women and men, to do it. As we appear to be unravelling the planetary ecosystem in our present pursuit of happiness, there may be few more pressing demands for the academy than to undertake the interdisciplinary study of wellbeing. Or we could spend—how many billions?—to build another particle accelerator so physicists can get a peek at the next turtle down. ("More turtles!

We need a bigger machine!") Not to knock physics—my father was a physicist, and I love reading about the field—but I think our research funding priorities are seriously out of whack.

10. What would the ideal census question on wellbeing be and why?

I'm not sure I could pick a single question for all countries, since the most pressing wellbeing concerns vary. Stress is a big problem in the US, but maybe not so much in some poorer countries where lots of people may have too little to do. In general, I'd want a question that bypasses people's defense mechanisms, offering a socially acceptable way of dispensing negative information where it exists. And that information should be relatively diagnostic of people's general emotional condition. Looking at the US and Western Europe, for instance, we might check for level of agreement with some improbably positive statement, like: "Most of the time, I feel relaxed and carefree." There's no shame in admitting you're not carefree—compare saying you're unhappy—so participants might be more willing to put themselves lower on the scale.

I also like that this sort of question doesn't tempt us to leap to rash conclusions about whether people are doing well or not. This is a big problem with most life satisfaction and happiness instruments: if we hear that people say they're "happy" or "satisfied," it's fairly natural to infer that they're happy, and probably doing well. But rarely do the measures give us any sound basis for drawing such inferences. What the measures are good for, at present, is telling us who's doing *better or worse* in weighty respects, which is the most important information anyway. But for now, we don't really have reliable ways of determining whether or not people are actually *happy*, or thriving or doing well. So beware studies purporting to show that some proportion of people are happy. Absent some very questionable assumptions, they probably have no idea.

11. Is there anything else you would like to comment on?

Earlier I mentioned my youthful views about the less than sane character of mainstream living. Some folks might have been a little puzzled about that, so it may be worth clarifying what I had in mind. This is roughly how "mainland" living, as we called it, seemed to me: you pass your childhood in institutions, your adulthood in servitude; you do as you're told. It is a life of busyness, constant motion. Head down, much of your threescore and ten passes you by without your even noticing it, still less remembering it. Most of this scurrying about is concerned with trivial, made-up issues, like collecting stuff you don't need, and more stuff to store it in. You spend the majority of your time in the company of strangers, and social intercourse largely takes the form of sanitized quasi-commercial transactions. (You wouldn't dare poke fun at your interlocutor's botched haircut.) You see friends once or twice a week, rounding up. You compensate by further focusing your attentions on the aforementioned collection of stuff. You are stressed, tense, and worry a lot, as you recognize once a year when plopping down on the beach for your week-long vacation. Well, you sort of recognize it, but since you've never known relaxation you don't realize that you never really did decompress, even on holiday. It doesn't help that so many of your waking hours are spent amidst varying degrees of ugliness, almost wholly deprived of the beauty and satisfactions of the natural world. You don't suffer, exactly, but neither do you get much joy or fulfilment out of living. For the most part, you're just passing through.

I'm painting with a very broad brush, of course, but that's more or less how I saw it. And still sort of do, though I've softened a bit on these things, given that all ways of life involve tradeoffs, and it isn't clear how much we can have the many blessings of modern life without

the negatives. While I've focused on the negatives here, the positives have always been pretty apparent too. You have to be pretty lucky just to have the luxury of arguing about this stuff, and that I certainly am. Every society has its own litany of problems you could recite, and suburban life sure beats grinding poverty.

So what concerns me is not that we have terrible lives; we don't. It's the sheer waste. We're the richest people who ever lived and we can't even pay the bills, much less build ourselves decent communities and workplaces, or do something for our poorer neighbors so they don't expire for stupid reasons like diarrhoea. Really, how much more do we need? Couldn't we do a little better? The fact that things were a lot worse a couple hundred years ago—probably not one of the better times to be alive, incidentally—doesn't inspire me very much.

For some reason any criticism of our way of doing things, any suggestion that good ideas might be found among people who don't own a lot of dishwashers, tends to elicit charges of soft-minded romanticism, as if one wants to dismantle civilization and return to some imagined Eden. I don't really get that. We're not the best *in every way*, are we? So why not leave off the triumphalist posturing and get down to thinking about how we might improve, and what we might learn from others? Even some of those who live a bit further down on the Dishwasher Index. Yes we're wonderful, and it's good to remind ourselves of that once in a while. But we're also kind of crazy.

At any rate, all the things I described a moment ago are optional: there are places where life is nothing like that. And it's hard to believe that loneliness and hypertension are unavoidable byproducts of antibiotics, furnaces, and the Beatles. So I've been interested in how we can combine the best features of some very different ways of living. Among other things.

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