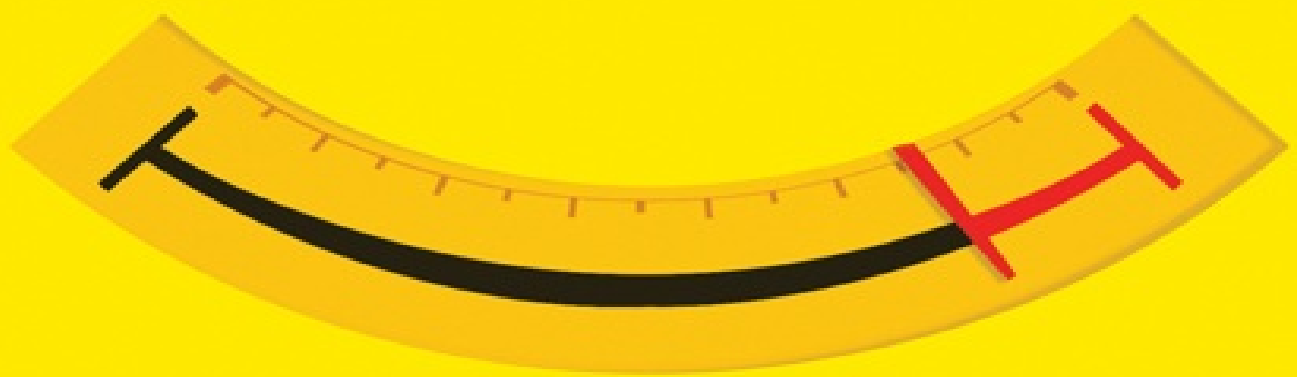


The HAPPINESS INDUSTRY



*How the Government and
Big Business Sold Us Well-Being*

WILLIAM DAVIES

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Since the World Economic Forum (WEF) was founded in 1971, its annual meeting in Davos has served as a useful indicator of the global economic zeitgeist. These conferences, which last a few days in late January, bring together corporate executives, senior politicians, representatives of NGOs and a sprinkling of concerned celebrities to address the main issues confronting the global economy and the decision-makers tasked with looking after it.

In the 1970s, when the WEF was still known as the 'European Management Forum', its main concern was slumping productivity growth in Europe. In the 1980s, it became preoccupied with market deregulation. In the 1990s, innovation and the internet came to the fore, and by the early 2000s, with the global economy humming, it began to admit a range of more 'social' concerns alongside the obvious post-9/11 security anxiety. For the five years after the banking meltdown of 2008, Davos meetings were primarily concerned with how to get the old show back on the road.

At the 2014 meeting, rubbing shoulders with the billionaires, pop stars and presidents was a less likely attendee: a Buddhist monk. Every morning, before the conference proceedings began, delegates had the opportunity to meditate with the monk and learn relaxation techniques. 'You are not the slave of your thoughts', the man in red and yellow robes, clutching an iPad, informed his audience. 'One way is to just gaze at them ... like a shepherd sitting above a meadow watching the sheep'.¹ A few hundred thoughts of stock portfolios and illicit gifts for secretaries back home most likely meandered their way across the mental pastures of his audience.

True to their competitive business principles, the Davos organizers had not just gone for any monk. This was a truly elite monk, a French former biologist named Matthieu Ricard, a minor celebrity in his own right, who acts as French translator to the Dalai Lama and gives TED Talks on the topic of happiness. This is a subject he is uniquely qualified to speak on, thanks to his reputation as the 'happiest man in the world'. For a number of years, Ricard participated in a neuroscientific study at the University of Wisconsin, to try and understand how different levels of happiness are inscribed and visible in the brain. Requiring 256 sensors to be attached to the head for three hours at a time, these studies typically place the research subject on a scale between miserable (+0.3) and ecstatic (-0.3). Ricard scored a -0.45. The researchers had never encountered anything like it. Today, Ricard keeps a copy of the neuroscientists' score chart on his laptop, with his name proudly displayed as the happiest.²

Ricard's presence at the 2014 Davos meeting was indicative of a more general shift in emphasis from previous years. The forum was awash with talk of 'mindfulness', a relaxation technique formed out of a combination of positive psychology, Buddhism, cognitive behavioural therapy and neuroscience. In total, twenty-five sessions at the 2014 conference focused on questions related to wellness, in a mental and physical sense, more than double the number of 2008.³

Sessions such as 'Rewiring the Brain' introduced attendees to the latest techniques through which the functioning of the brain could be improved. 'Health Is Wealth' explored the ways in which greater well-being could be converted into a more familiar form of capital. Given the unique opportunity of having so many of the world's senior decision-makers in one place, it is no surprise that this was also the scene of considerable marketing displays, by companies selling devices, apps and advice aimed at supporting more 'mindful' and less stressful lifestyles.

So far so mindful. But the conference went further than just talk. Every delegate was given

gadget which attached to the body, providing constant updates to the wearer's smartphone to assess the health of his recent activity. If the wearer is not walking enough, or sleeping enough, the evaluation is relayed back to the user. Davos attendees were able to glean new insights into the lifestyles and wellness. Beyond that, they were getting a glimpse of a future in which all behaviour is assessable in terms of its impact upon mind and body. Forms of knowledge that could traditionally be accrued only within a specialized institution, such as a laboratory or hospital, would be collected by individuals who wandered around Davos for the four days of the conference.

This is what now preoccupies our global elites. Happiness, in its various guises, is no longer some pleasant add-on to the more important business of making money, or some new age concern for those with enough time to sit around baking their own bread. As a measurable, visible, improvable entity, it has now penetrated the citadel of global economic management. If the World Economic Forum is any guide, and it has always tended to be in the past, the future of successful capitalism depends on our ability to combat stress, misery and illness, and put relaxation, happiness and wellness in their place. Techniques, measures and technologies are now available to achieve this, and they are permeating the workplace, the high street, the home and the human body.

This agenda extends well beyond the reaches of Swiss mountaintops and has in truth been gradually seducing policy-makers and managers for some years. A number of official statistical agencies around the world, including those of the United States, Britain, France and Australia, now publish regular reports on levels of 'national well-being'. Individual cities, such as Santa Monica in California, have invested in their own localized versions of this.⁴ The positive psychology movement disseminates techniques and slogans through which people might improve their happiness in everyday life, often by learning to block out unhelpful thoughts and memories. The idea that some of these methods might be added to the curriculum of schools, so as to train children in happiness, has already been trialled.⁵

A growing number of corporations employ 'chief happiness officers', while Google has an in-house 'jolly good fellow' to spread mindfulness and empathy.⁶ Specialist happiness consultants advise employers on how to cheer up their employees, the unemployed on how to restore their enthusiasm for work, and – in one case in London – those being forcibly displaced from their homes on how to move on emotionally.⁷

Science is advancing rapidly in support of this agenda. Neuroscientists identify how happiness and unhappiness are physically inscribed in the brain, as the researchers in Wisconsin did with Matthieu Ricard, and seek out neural explanations for why singing and greenery seem to improve our mental well-being. They claim to have found the precise parts of the brain which generate positive and negative emotions, including an area that provokes 'bliss' when stimulated, and a 'pain dimmer switch'.⁸ Innovation within the experimental 'quantified self' movement sees individuals carrying out personalized 'mood tracking', through diaries and smartphone apps.⁹ As the statistical evidence in this area accumulates, so the field of 'happiness economics' grows to take advantage of all this new data, building up a careful picture of which regions, lifestyles, forms of employment or types of consumption generate the greatest mental well-being.

Our hopes are being strategically channelled into this quest for happiness, in an objectively measurable, administered sense. Questions of mood, which were once deemed 'subjective', are now answered using objective data. At the same time, this science of well-being has become tangled up with economic and medical expertise. As happiness studies become more interdisciplinary, claims about minds, brains, bodies and economic activity morph into one another, without much attention to the philosophical problems involved. A single index of general human optimization looms into view. What is clear is that those with the technologies to produce the facts of happiness are in positions

considerable influence, and that the powerful are being seduced further by the promises of the technologies.

Is it possible to be against happiness? Philosophers can argue as to whether or not this is a plausible position to take. Aristotle understood happiness as the ultimate purpose of human beings, though in a rich and ethical sense of the term. Not everyone would agree with this. 'Man does not strive for happiness', wrote Friedrich Nietzsche, '*only the Englishman* does that.'¹⁰ As positive psychology and happiness measurement have permeated our political and economic culture since the 1990s, there has been a growing unease with the way in which notions of happiness and well-being have been adopted by policy-makers and managers. The risk is that this science ends up blaming – and medicating – individuals for their own misery, and ignores the context that has contributed to it.

This book shares much of that disquiet. There are surely ample political and material problems to deal with right now, before we divert quite so much attention towards the mental and neurological conditions through which we individually experience them. There is also a sense that when the doyens of the World Economic Forum seize an agenda with so much gusto, there is at least some cause for suspicion. The mood-tracking technologies, sentiment analysis algorithms and stress-busting meditation techniques are put to work in the service of certain political and economic interests. They are not simply gifted to us for our own Aristotelian flourishing. Positive psychology, which repeats the mantra that happiness is a personal 'choice', is as a result largely unable to provide the exit from consumerism and egocentricity that its gurus sense many people are seeking.

But this is only one element in the critique to be developed here. One of the ways in which happiness science operates ideologically is to present itself as radically new, ushering in a fresh start through which the pains, politics and contradictions of the past can be overcome. In the early twentieth century, the vehicle for this promise is the brain. 'In the past, we had no clue about what makes people happy – but now we *know*', is how the offer is made. A hard science of subjective affect is available to us, which we would be crazy not to put to work via management, medicine, self-help, marketing and behaviour change policies.

What if this psychological exuberance had, in fact, been with us for the past two hundred years? What if the current science of happiness is simply the latest iteration of an ongoing project which assumes the relationship between mind and world is amenable to mathematical scrutiny? That is one thing which this book aims to show. Repeatedly, from the time of the French Revolution to the present (and accelerating in the late nineteenth century), a particular scientific utopia has been sold: complex questions of morality and politics will be solvable with an adequate science of human feelings. How those feelings are scientifically classified will obviously vary. At times they are 'emotional', at other times 'neural', 'attitudinal' or 'physiological'. But a pattern emerges, nevertheless, in which a science of subjective feeling is offered as the ultimate way of working out how to act, both morally and politically.

The spirit of this agenda originates with the Enlightenment. But those who have exploited it best are those with an interest in social control, very often for private profit. That unfortunate contradiction accounts for the precise ways in which the happiness industry advances. In criticizing the science of happiness, I do not wish to denigrate the ethical value of happiness as such, less still to trivialize the pain of those who suffer from chronic unhappiness, or depression, and may understandably seek help in new techniques of behavioural or cognitive management. The target is the entangling of hope and joy within infrastructures of measurement, surveillance and government.

Such political and historical concerns open up a number of other propositions. Maybe the scientific view of the mind, as a mechanical or organic object, with its own behaviours and sicknesses

to be monitored and measured, is not so much the solution to our ills, but among the deeper cultural causes. Arguably, we are *already* the product of various overlapping, sometimes contradictory efforts to observe our feelings and behaviours. Advertisers, human resource managers, government and pharmaceutical companies have been watching, incentivizing, prodding, optimizing and pre-empting us psychologically since the late nineteenth century. Maybe what we need right now is not more of a better science of happiness or behaviour, but less, or at least different. How likely is it that, in two hundred years' time, historians will look back at the early twenty-first century and say, 'Ah, yes, *this* was when the truth about human happiness was finally revealed'? And if it is unlikely, then why do we perpetuate this kind of talk, other than because it is useful to the powerful?

Does this mean that the current explosion of political and business interest in happiness is just a rhetorical fad? Will it dissipate, once we've rediscovered the impossibility of reducing ethical and political questions to numerical calculations? Not quite. There are two significant reasons why the science of happiness has suddenly become so prominent in the early twenty-first century, but they are sociological in nature. As such, they are never directly addressed by the psychologists, managers, economists and neuroscientists who advance this science.

The first concerns the nature of capitalism. One of the attendees at the 2014 Davos meeting made a remark that contained far more truth than he probably realized: 'We created our own problem that we are now trying to solve'.¹¹ He was talking specifically about how 24/7 working practices and always-on digital devices had made senior managers so stressed that they were now having to meditate to cope with the consequences. However, the same diagnosis could be extended to the culture of post-industrial capitalism more broadly.

Since the 1960s, Western economies have been afflicted by an acute problem in which they depend more and more on our psychological and emotional engagement (be it with work, with brands, with our own health and well-being) while finding it increasingly hard to sustain this. Forms of private life disengagement, often manifest as depression and psychosomatic illnesses, do not only register in the suffering experienced by the individual; they are increasingly problematic for policy-makers and managers, becoming accounted for economically. Yet evidence from social epidemiology paints a worrying picture of how unhappiness and depression are concentrated in highly unequal societies, with strongly materialist, competitive values.¹² Workplaces put a growing emphasis on community and psychological commitment, but against longer-term economic trends towards atomization and insecurity. We have an economic model which mitigates against precisely the psychological attributes it depends upon.

In this more general and historical sense, then, governments and businesses 'created the problem that they are now trying to solve'. Happiness science has achieved the influence it has because it promises to provide the longed-for solution. First of all, happiness economists are able to put a monetary price on the problem of misery and alienation. The opinion-polling company Gallup, for example, has estimated that unhappiness of employees costs the US economy \$500 billion a year in lost productivity, lost tax receipts and health-care costs.¹³ This allows our emotions and well-being to be brought within broader calculations of economic efficiency. Positive psychology and associated techniques then play a key role in helping to restore people's energy and drive. The hope is that a fundamental flaw in our current political economy may be surmounted, without confronting any serious political-economic questions. Psychology is very often how societies avoid looking in the mirror.

The second structural reason for the surging interest in happiness is somewhat more disturbing and concerns technology. Until relatively recently, most scientific attempts to know or manipulate

how someone else was feeling occurred within formally identifiable institutions, such as psychology laboratories, hospitals, workplaces, focus groups, or some such. This is no longer the case. In June 2014, Facebook published an academic paper containing details of how it had successfully altered the moods of hundreds of thousands of its users' moods, by manipulating their news feeds.¹⁴ There was an outcry that this had been done in a clandestine fashion. But as the dust settled, the anger turned to anxiety: would Facebook bother to publish such a paper in future, or just get on with the experiment anyway and keep the results to themselves?

Monitoring our mood and feelings is becoming a function of our physical environment. In 2011 British Airways trialled a 'happiness blanket', which represents passenger contentment through neural monitoring. As the passenger becomes more relaxed, the blanket turns from red to blue, indicating to the airline staff that they are being well looked after. A range of consumer technologies are now on the market for measuring and analysing well-being, from wristwatches, to smartphones, to Vessyl, a 'smart' cup which monitors your liquid intake in terms of its health effects.

One of the foundational neoliberal arguments in favour of the market was that it served as a vast sensory device, capturing millions of individual desires, opinions and values, and converting them into prices.¹⁵ It is possible that we are on the cusp of a new post-neoliberal era in which the market is no longer the primary tool for this capture of mass sentiment. Once happiness-monitoring tools flood our everyday lives, other ways of quantifying feelings in real time are emerging that can extend even further into our lives than markets.

Liberal concerns about privacy have traditionally seen it as something which needs to be balanced against security. But today, we have to confront the fact that a considerable amount of surveillance occurs to increase our health, happiness, satisfaction or sensory pleasures. Regardless of the motivation behind this, if we believe that there are limits to how much of our lives should be expertly administered, then there must also be limits to how much psychological and physical positivity we should aim for. Any critique of ubiquitous surveillance must now include a critique of the maximization of well-being, even at the risk of being less healthy, happy and wealthy.

To understand these trends as historical and sociological does not in itself indicate how they might be resisted or averted. But it does have one great liberating benefit: of diverting our critical attention outward upon the world, and not inward upon our feelings, brains or behaviour. It is often said that depression is 'anger turned inwards'. In many ways, happiness science is 'critique turned inwards' despite all of the appeals by positive psychologists to 'notice' the world around us. The relentless fascination with quantities of subjective feeling can only possibly divert critical attention away from broader political and economic problems. Rather than seek to alter our feelings, now would be a good time to take what we've turned inwards, and attempt to direct it back out again. One way to start would be by turning a skeptical eye upon the history of happiness measurement itself.

Knowing How You Feel

Jeremy Bentham was sitting in Harper's Coffee Shop in Holborn, London, when he shouted, 'Eureka'. The prompt was not some intellectual inspiration from within, as it had been when Archimedes immortalized the exclamation from his bath, but a passage from a book, *Essay on Government*, by the English religious reformer and scientist Joseph Priestley. The passage was this:

The good and happiness of the members, that is, the majority of the members, of any state, is the great standard by which everything relating to that state must finally be determined.

Bentham was eighteen years old and the year was 1766. Over the next sixty years, he took Priestley's insight and converted it into an extensive and hugely influential doctrine of government called utilitarianism. This is the theory stating that the right action is whichever one produces the maximum happiness for the population overall.

There is something telling about the fact that Bentham's 'eureka' moment was not a matter of great intellectual originality. Nor did he ever claim to be much of a philosophical pioneer. In addition to Priestley's influence, Bentham was content to admit that much of his account of human nature and motivation was lifted from the Scottish philosopher David Hume.¹ He had little interest in producing new theories or weighty philosophical tomes, and never took much enjoyment in writing. As far as Bentham was concerned, there was a limit to what any idea or text could hope to achieve when it came to the political or social improvement of mankind. Merely believing that 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' should be the goal of politics and ethics was of little consequence, unless a set of instruments, techniques and methods could be designed to turn this belief into the founding principle of government.

Rather than as an abstract thinker, Bentham is best understood as half philosopher and half technician, and from this various contradictions followed. He was an intellectual with a classical English distaste for intellectualism. A legal theorist, who believed that much of what law rested on was simple nonsense. An Enlightenment optimist and modernizer, who scoffed at any notion of inherent human rights or freedoms. And an advocate for hedonism, who insisted that every pleasure be neurotically accounted for. Reports of his personality vary wildly, with some discovering a man of great warmth and humility, and others one who was vain and dismissive.

Bentham's relationship with his father caused him considerable misery. He was a weak, shy and often unhappy child, and appears to have been bullied into the status of a child prodigy by his father who insisted on teaching him Latin and Greek from the age of five. He attended Westminster School but was made miserable by being the smallest boy there. Aged twelve, Bentham went to Oxford where he was drawn towards chemistry and biology. If anything, he was even less happy at university than at school. He established a small chemistry laboratory in his room and felt a strong affinity for the natural sciences, which he pursued throughout his teens. With a less domineering father, there would no doubt have provided him with the intellectual satisfaction that his mathematical mind was seeking. But his father was a lawyer and insisted his son follow in his footsteps in order to earn a decent income. Under duress, he became a barrister in London's Lincoln's Inn.

Practising law did not make Bentham happy, and nor did the continued influence of his father. His shyness made him dread having to stand up and speak in court. Perhaps he still longed for his homemade chemistry laboratory. He certainly pined for emotional and sexual intimacy, but when he fell in love in his early twenties, yet again his father stood in his way, vetoing the relationship on the basis that the woman in question wasn't rich enough. In this conflict between love and money, the measurable thwarted the immeasurable. Later in life, Bentham would be an outspoken advocate for sexual freedoms, including the tolerance of homosexuality, which he saw as an inevitable component of the maximization of human pleasure.²

His career, as it developed from his arrival at Lincoln's Inn, was always a compromise, between the professional and moral injunctions imposed by his father, and the scientific and political urges that drove him from within. The law would indeed become the field in which he made his name, but never as his father intended. Instead, he set about criticizing law, ridiculing its language, demanding more rational alternatives and designing policies and instruments through which government could finally escape the philosophical nonsense of abstract moral principles. This stance did not make him rich, and Bentham ended up financially dependent on a stipend from his father, whose disappointment in his failed barrister son never lifted.

There were times when Bentham the technician overshadowed Bentham the philosopher. During the 1790s his activities were those of what we might now associate with a public sector management consultant. He spent much of this period designing exotic schemes and technologies, which he believed could improve the efficiency and rationality of the state. He wrote to the Home Office suggesting that the various departments of government be linked up by a set of 'conversation tubes' for better communication. He drew up plans for what he termed a 'fridgarium', to keep food fresh. And he wrote to the Bank of England with the blueprint for a printing device that would produce unforgeable bank notes.

This engineer's vocation was integral to his vision of a more rational form of politics. It drove many of his more famous policy proposals, such as the 'Panopticon' prison, which was very nearly signed into English law during the 1790s before falling by the wayside. During the late 1770s Bentham began to write on the topic of punishment, specifically because punishment seemed to offer a rational means of influencing human behaviour, if it could target the natural psychological propensity to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. This was never a merely academic or theoretical issue, and very little of this writing was published until several years later. His goal was always to achieve reform of public policy. But this did require a little deeper thinking about the nature of human psychology.

The science of happiness

Bentham was a fierce critic of the legal establishment, but he was scarcely much more sympathetic to the radical and revolutionary movements which were erupting elsewhere. Confronted by the political claims of the French and American revolutionaries, Bentham was scornful. 'Natural rights is simple nonsense', he declared, 'natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense – nonsense upon stilts.'³ When radical philosophers such as Thomas Paine appealed to such ideas, they were making the identical mistake that monarchs or religious leaders made when they claimed some divine magical sanction for their actions: they were talking about something which had no tangible existence.

Bentham's alternative was to ground political and legal decision-making in hard, empirical data. In that respect, he was the inventor of what has since come to be known as 'evidence-based policymaking', the idea that government interventions can be cleansed of any moral or ideological

principles, and be guided purely by facts and figures. Whenever a policy is evaluated for its measurable outcomes, or assessed for its efficiency using cost-benefit analysis, Bentham's influence is present.

The great advances of the natural sciences, as he saw it, derived from the ability to avoid the meaningless use of language. Politics and the law had to learn this lesson. In Bentham's view, every noun either refers to something 'real' or something 'fictitious' – but we often fail to notice the difference. Words such as 'goodness', 'duty', 'existence', 'mind', 'right', 'wrong', 'authority' or 'cause' might mean something to us, and they have come to dominate philosophical discourse. But, far Bentham was concerned, there is nothing which these words actually refer to. 'The more abstract the proposition is', he argued, 'the more liable is it to involve a fallacy.'⁴ The problem is that we often mistake such propositions for reality.

By contrast, the language of natural science is organized in relation to physical, tangible things to which each word is attached to. But how would government or law be organized in this fashion? It is one thing for a chemist to attach names to specific compounds, but it is quite another for a judge or government official to be quite so disciplined in their use of words. In any case, what are the physical, tangible things which make up politics? If politics is no longer to concern itself with abstract problems such as 'justice' or 'divine right', what will it concern itself with instead?

Bentham's answer was happiness, thereby assuming that this entity was rooted in something 'real'. But how? In what sense is the term 'happiness' any less fictitious than, say, 'virtue'? To answer this Bentham fell back on a form of naturalistic assertion. 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure', and that just happens to be a fact. Happiness itself may not be an objective, physical phenomenon, but it occurs as a result of various sources of pleasure, which have a firm, physiological basis.

Unlike many other things that arise in our minds, happiness is prompted by something real, something objective. It reminds us that we are biological and physical beings, with urges and fears not unlike other animals. We can be scientific about happiness in a way that we simply can't about virtually any other philosophical category. If such a science could be pursued, it would provide governments with an entirely new basis on which to design policies and laws, so as to improve the welfare of mankind in the only realistic or rational sense.

It's possible to spot elements of Bentham's own life experiences in this psychological theory of politics. Its premise was a tragic one, which spoke of its author's own unhappiness: the one thing which all human beings hold in common is their capacity to suffer. Optimism could only lie in a wholesale reorientation of the state, towards the relief of suffering and the promotion of pleasure. Bentham was known to be unusually empathetic, often to a fault. His sensitive nature made him highly attuned to the unhappiness of others. One of the great virtues of utilitarianism, as a moral philosophy, is this empathetic dimension, its belief that we should take all others' welfare as seriously as our own. Given that humans are not the only species that suffers, many utilitarians also extend this to animals.

With a better understanding of what motivates human psychology, policy-makers might be able to divert human activity towards the greatest happiness of all. The question of punishment captured so much of Bentham's time and energy because it appeared to be the most effective tool in the possession of lawmakers when it came to steering individual activity in the optimal direction. 'The business of government is to promote the happiness of society, by punishing and rewarding', he argued.⁶ The free market, of which Bentham was an unabashed supporter, would largely take care of the reward part of this 'business'; the state would take responsibility for the former part. To inflict pain on people, either via their bodies or their minds, was to bring politics into the realm of tangible reality, and to leave the world of linguistic illusions behind. As a vision of Enlightenment optimism,

goes, Bentham's had a darker edge than most.

Bentham's emphasis upon the brute reality of physical pain and his distrust of language can be seen as mutually reinforcing. The cultural historian Joanna Bourke has highlighted the fraught relationship between language and pain since the eighteenth century.⁷ Either pain seems to defy description altogether, or it has been treated as a taboo subject to be experienced silently. There is a long history of viewing sufferers, especially those of suspicious character, as exaggerating or wrongly describing pain. This assumes, as Bentham did, that there is an objective reality about pain which could be represented if only words or sufferers were better equipped to do so. This opens the way for experts to grasp or describe that reality, given the sufferer himself cannot, and for numbers to represent such feelings on the assumption that words cannot.

The science of happiness was therefore a critical component in achieving a rational form of politics and law. It could be used to divert behaviour towards goals that would be best for everyone. And as government became more scientific, so it would be able to predict how different interventions influenced individual choices. This is not 'happiness' in some ethereal or metaphysical sense, and certainly not in any ethical sense, as Aristotle had understood it. It was happiness in the sense of physical occurrence within the human body. Contemporary neuroscience, which consummates the reduction of psychology to biological processes, would have looked to Bentham like the answer to a lot of our political and moral questions. Conversely, a great deal of contemporary scientific interest in the brain and behaviour has strongly Benthamite presuppositions.

This is well illustrated by one neuroscientific study published by a group of researchers at Cornell in 2014. Claiming to breach the 'last frontier' of neuroscience, namely the secrets of our inner feelings, the researchers argued that they had unlocked the 'code' through which the human brain deals with all different pleasures and pains. As the lead author explained:

It appears that the human brain generates a special code for the entire valence spectrum of pleasant-to-unpleasant, good-to-bad feelings, which can be read like a 'neural valence meter' in which the leaning of a population of neurons in one direction equals positive feeling and the leaning in the other direction equals negative feeling.⁸

This description of how pleasure and pain operate physically is more or less what Bentham had already assumed, posing questions as to how successfully neuroscience can ever hope to escape its protagonists' cultural presuppositions. For scientists armed with measuring devices to discover that the same bodily organ is also armed with measuring devices sounds like a coincidence to say the least.

The study touches upon one of the great controversies of utilitarianism, of whether diverse types of human experience can all be located on a single scale. The Cornell neuroscientists clearly believe that they can: 'If you and I derive similar pleasure from sipping a fine wine or watching the sun set, our results suggest it is because we share similar fine-grained patterns of activity in the orbitofrontal cortex'. This is a relatively innocent remark when it is fine wine or sunsets that are at stake. But when profound experiences of love or artistic beauty are rendered equivalent to baser experiences, such as drug taking or shopping, the claim that all pleasures are computed in the orbitofrontal cortex in the same way becomes more problematic.

Philosophers refer to this argument, that all pleasures and pains can be located on a single scale, as 'monism'. Bentham was the monist par excellence.⁹ He couldn't deny that we speak of different varieties of happiness and contentment using different words, but the objective underpinning of all these forms was always the same – that is, physical pleasure. We naturally seek 'benefit, advantage, pleasure, good or happiness, all of which ultimately comes to the same thing'.¹⁰ Likewise, suffering

rooted in the physical experience of pain, represents an entity that varies in quantity, but not quality.

Once we accept that there is a single, ultimate and physical sensation underlying all 'good' and 'bad' experiences and actions, then it follows that this sensation varies only in terms of quantity. Bentham never conducted any scientific research on the question but proposed a psychological model detailing the different ways in which pleasure could vary in quantity. In his most famous statement on the topic, 'Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation', he offered seven of these, most of which were easy to conceive of in quantitative terms.¹¹ 'Duration' of pleasure was one relatively obvious quantitative category. 'Certainty' of future pleasure is something that we would now see as amenable to mathematical risk modelling. 'Extent' of the population affected by an action is another simple quantitative yardstick.

The main scientific stumbling block for Bentham's entire enterprise was one category of variation, in particular, namely 'intensity'. How could a scientist, legislator, punisher or policy-maker know how to intensify a particular pleasure or pain? Of course one might draw on one's own experience through introspection, but that is scarcely a very scientific approach. Or one might ask people to report on their experiences using their own words. But then wouldn't utilitarianism be drawn back into the hands of mirrors that is philosophical language, the 'tyranny of sounds' through which we describe what it is like to be human? Measuring the intensity of different pleasures and pains was the technical task on which the Benthamite project would stand or fall.

How to measure?

The eighteenth century was a time of great inventiveness in the creation of measurement tools. The thermometer was invented in 1724, the sextant (which measures angles between any visible objects, such as stars) in 1757, and the marine chronometer in 1761. The introduction of new measuring tools and standards was one of the first achievements of the French revolutionaries in the 1790s. This involved the commissioning of an original platinum metre, the famous *mètre des archives*, which was placed in a vault in the National Archives in Paris.

The need for reliable standardized measures cut to the heart of the Enlightenment, whose high point coincided with the first half of Bentham's career. As Immanuel Kant defined it in 1784, Enlightenment meant mankind escaping its 'self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another'.¹² Unlike their predecessors, who would allow religious and political authorities to dictate truth from falsehood, right from wrong, the 'mature' and Enlightened citizen would draw on nothing but his own judgement. The motto of Enlightenment, Kant suggested, was *sapere aude* – dare to know. The critical individual mind was the only authoritative barometer of truth. But for this reason, it was equally important that everybody was using the same yardsticks of comparison, or the whole project would collapse into a relativist babble of subjective perspectives.

Bentham hoped to cast a similarly scientific, sceptical eye over the workings of political punishment and law. In place of unquestioned beliefs about justice or common values, Bentham insisted that we should know what will make people happier, and to treat every person's feelings as of equal value. He knew precisely how to frame the scientific question – does this policy, law or punishment create more or less pleasure across society as a whole?

But what type of measuring tool was available to gather the answers? It's all very well feeling empathetic to the suffering of others, as Bentham undoubtedly did, but without a standard through which different pleasures and pains can be compared, the utilitarian is exercising guesswork. On the other hand, surely the very nature of pleasant or painful sensations is that they are subjective. The

search for a common measure of happiness is fraught with difficulty.

Despite being critical to the viability of his political project, Bentham dedicated surprisingly little attention to this problem. Occasionally, he suggested that the 'greatest happiness' principle of political judgement was just that, a principle, which could never realistically be converted into quantitative science. But given the appeal to hard empirical reality that is threaded through Bentham's psychology, and his scathing remarks about all forms of philosophical abstraction, one has to take seriously the sense in which he did intend to rebuild politics and law on technical forms of measurement and calculation. If happiness were the only human good on which it is possible to speak scientifically, then it would be strange if we didn't then pursue it using scientific methods. So we return to the problem: How is the intensity of a pleasant or unpleasant feeling to be measured? How does utility manifest itself in such a way that it can be grasped by measurement?

Bentham suggests only two tentative answers to this question, neither of which he pursued in any practical or experimental way. Both involved the identification of proxies for happiness, rather than the claim that feelings themselves could be grasped. But in each case, he unwittingly hinted towards vast zones of scientific enquiry which would later be explored by psychologists, marketers, policy-makers, doctors, psychiatrists, human resources experts, social media analysts, economists, neuroscientists and individuals themselves.

The first of Bentham's answers was that the human pulse rate might provide the indicator of pleasure that could be used to solve the measurement problem.¹³ He wasn't particularly taken with this idea himself, but he recognized that the body offered certain measurable symptoms of what the mind was experiencing. As happiness is ultimately an assemblage of pleasant feeling, the notion that one might be able to discover happiness levels via the body is not so surprising. In everyday life, we intuitively understand this, in how we read another's facial expression or body language. A science of such signs might therefore be possible. Pulse rate would appear to offer the possibility of a hard quantitative science of well-being that transcends culture. Words can deceive, but our heart rate does not.

Bentham's second answer, on which he was far keener, was that money might be used. If two different goods can command an identical monetary price, then it can be assumed that they generate the same quantity of utility for the purchaser. By making this claim, Bentham was well ahead of his time. Economists would only catch up with this analysis some thirty years after his death, but since Bentham was interested in what governments could do to influence general public happiness, rather than what occurred in market transactions between private individuals, he had little concern with pursuing this idea as an economist. Nevertheless, by putting out there the idea that money might have some privileged relationship to our inner experience, beyond the capabilities of nearly any other measuring instrument, Bentham set the stage for the entangling of psychological research and capitalism that would shape the business practices of the twentieth century.

These were and remain the options: money or the body. Economics or physiology. Payment or diagnosis. If politics were to become scientific and emancipated from abstract nonsense, it is through economics, physiology or some combination of the two that the project would be realized. When the iPhone 6 was released in September 2014, its two major innovations were quite telling: one app which monitors bodily activity, and another which can be used for in-store payments. Whenever experts seek to witness our shopping habits, our brains or our stress levels, they are contributing to the project that Bentham had mapped out. The status of money in this science is intriguing. While political and moral concepts are attacked as empty, nonsensical abstractions, somehow the language of pounds and pence is viewed as having some firm and natural relationship to our inner feelings. The exceptional status attributed to economics from the late nineteenth century onwards, as closer to a natural science than

social one, is one legacy of this worldview.

~~The problem of measurement may seem like a nerdish matter of scientific methodology. Surely we all know what Bentham was getting at when he said that government should pursue the greatest happiness of all. Do we really need to get fixated on the details of how to calculate this? Of course, we can allow Bentham the status of a philosopher and ignore his inventive and technical aspirations. We can look at how utilitarianism works in the abstract, by playing analytical games in the philosophy seminar room.~~

It is not clear that Bentham would have been very happy with such a legacy. And it is less clear that this is what his most important legacy has actually been. The technical, calculative methodological problems of Benthamism, in various guises, are arguably the most transformative of how they have come to structure our political, economic, medical and personal lives. For this reason, whether happiness is to be indicated via the body (such as through pulse rate) or via money may prove to be of the utmost importance for how utilitarianism has actually set about constructing the world around us. However, any systematic attempt to construct quantitative measures of sensation would not begin until a few years after Bentham's death in 1832.

Weight-lifting in Leipzig

On 22 October 1850, a second 'eureka' moment took place, this time in Leipzig, Germany. Gustav Fechner, a theologian-cum-physicist who had recently emerged from a protracted nervous breakdown, suddenly realized that the mind-body problem, which preoccupied so many German philosophers, might be solvable through mathematics. He recorded the date of this breakthrough in his diary.

The relationship of the mind to the physical world, including the body, is the foundational problem of modern philosophy. René Descartes' doubt about the reality of the physical world, combined with his certainty of his own existence, established a dualism between the realm of thought and that of physical things. Dualism is an unwieldy philosophical position to hold, which always runs the risk of reductionism in one direction or the other. Either the entire world might get reduced to an effect of the thinking mind (idealism), or thinking can be reduced to a merely physical occurrence, subject to natural forces (empiricism), rather as Bentham had assumed. Various Enlightenment thinkers grappled with this, most notably Kant, who believed he had avoided either fate by systematically distinguishing matters of scientific knowledge from matters of moral and philosophical principle. The human mind was, for Kant, something which fell firmly into the latter category, rendering any scientific study of the psyche impossible.

Fechner was a dualist, but of a peculiar sort. His ideas were formed by a highly eclectic intellectual background, which put him in an unusual position with respect to traditional philosophical problems. Fechner was the son of a pastor, who (like Bentham's father) taught him Latin when he was a small child. He registered to study medicine at the University of Leipzig, but took the opportunity while there to attend lectures in botany, zoology, physics and chemistry. At the same time, he was exposed to many of the excesses of German idealist philosophy, including Schelling's philosophy of nature, romanticism and Hegel. Early in his academic career, he carried out experiments with electricity, while also getting drawn into theological debates about the nature of the soul. The separate domains that we now know as 'science' and 'philosophy' remained entangled in the German universities of the 1830s.

Nowadays, Fechner might well be described as a new age thinker. His genius was to find a way of bringing his disparate intellectual interests together, remaining a philosopher and a scientist, a metaphysician and a physician. In the process, he brought questions of the mind (which Kant had

stipulated lay beyond the realms of knowledge) into the purview of science. For this reason, Fechner represents one of the key figures in the development of what we now know as psychology.

In what way would mathematics be helpful in solving the mind–body problem? The answer derived from Fechner’s engagement with physics. The principle of the ‘conservation of energy’ had been formulated by a number of German physicists over the course of the 1840s, with transformative implications for the understanding of basic matter. This stated that energy is indestructible: it can be altered in its form, but not its quantity. If heat turns into light, or coal into heat, so the principle stated, then we can assume that a single quantity of energy has been conserved along the way. This might be seen as another variant of monism. In the context of the industrial revolution, this discovery was a source of tremendous optimism that there was no limit to how efficient technology could become.

The power of mathematics to explain all forms of change was greatly increased as a result of this breakthrough in physics. An underlying quantitative stability had been unearthed. Fechner’s innovation was to extend this same principle to questions that had previously resided in the terrain of philosophy. If the physicists were right, then even the mind could be included in this mathematical framework. What is interesting about Fechner’s breakthrough was that it didn’t simply propose a form of biological reductionism. He was adamantly not suggesting that the mind was constituted by physical matter, but that ‘the will, the thought, the whole mind may be as free as it may be, yet it will be able to exercise its freedom only by means of, not counter to, the general laws of kinetic energy’. Energy, as Fechner understood it, traversed the border between mind and body, obeying laws of mathematics as it did so.

The doctrine that Fechner proposed, known as ‘psychophysics’, argued that mind and matter are separate entities but must nevertheless have some stable, mathematical relationship to one another. In certain respects, Fechner’s theory of psychology was similar to Bentham’s. He too was convinced that people pursued pleasure, although less as a matter of natural cause and effect and more as a matter of spontaneous libidinous desire. (He coined the term ‘pleasure principle’, which Sigmund Freud later adopted.)¹⁶

Fechner distinguished himself from Bentham’s English empiricism in two respects. First, the philosophy held no threat for him. Words such as ‘soul’, ‘mind’, ‘freedom’ or ‘God’ referred to real things, albeit not in any physical or measurable sense. This was evidence of Hegel’s influence. The philosophical innovation of psychophysics was to suggest that these entities could become known via the physical body in certain ways. The conservation of energy, as it passed between physical and non-physical realms, meant that philosophical ideas must sit in some stable mathematical relation to material and bodily things.

Fechner was therefore a dualist, in the sense that he maintained a belief in two parallel realms, one of philosophical ideas, the other of scientific facts. What distinguished him from philosophical dualists, such as Descartes and Kant, was a somewhat mystical belief that the two were in some mathematical harmony. Industrial metaphors were helpful here, which speaks of the economic context in which he was working. A steam engine involves intangible forces at work within a physical entity; likewise, a human being must be understood as an alliance of the immaterial mind and the material body.¹⁷

Secondly, Fechner was intent on discovering how this mathematical relation actually worked in practice. From 1855, he set about this with a series of arcane experiments, in which he lifted objects of subtly different weights, to test how changes in physical weight correlated to changes in subjective sensation. If I lift two very similarly weighted objects, precisely how big must the difference between them be before I can tell for sure which is the heaviest? The unit of measurement that Fechner introduced to assess this was what he referred to as a ‘just noticeable difference’.

Alternatively, if I am already holding a weight of one size, how much additional sensation does it cause me if someone adds another weight of half that size? Does it alter the sensation by half again (one might expect), or by less than that? Once the relationship between psychic and physical realms was properly measured, the questions of philosophy would be scientifically answerable. The scale of ambition that drove psychophysics was vast, even if the experiments which it rested on were comparatively primitive.

Bentham may have designed various schemes and policies, blueprints for prisons, proposals for 'conversation tubes', and so on, but he had never set to work upon the human body itself or tackled the problem of measurement beyond his theoretical speculations about pulse rate and money. English philosophers tended to be biased towards privileging the physical, sensible world of things over the metaphysical world of ideas – but they maintained this bias from the comfort of their armchairs. It is interesting that it was Fechner – the idealist, mystical, romantic – who really dragged metaphysics down to earth, by probing the body, measuring sensations, conducting experiments.

Precisely because he didn't simply presume that the physical was prior to the psychological (Bentham did), he needed to set about testing how one related to the other. This wasn't a theory stating whether mental processes were really driven by biological ones, or vice versa. It was the opening up of a new field of scientific enquiry, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, would be populated by psychologists, economists and a nascent industry of management consultants. The quantitative approach to economic psychology in which theories of mind would be replaced by scales and measures, and which Bentham had merely speculated about, was now being assembled. The idea that individual feelings and behaviour might be amenable to expert adjustment was also now a technical, mechanical possibility.

A democracy of bodies

In the age of the fMRI scanner, it has become increasingly common to speak of what our brains are 'doing', 'wanting' or 'feeling'. In many situations, this is represented as a more profound statement of intent than anything which we could report verbally. A 2005 article published by the Oxford neuroscientist Irene Tracey is titled 'Taking the Narrative Out of Pain'.¹⁸ The marketing guru Martin Lindstrom, who has studied the brains of thousands of consumers using fMRI, has built his career on the notion that 'people lie, but brains don't'.¹⁹ In the less high-tech reaches of mental management such as mindfulness training, people are taught to notice what their minds and feelings are doing in the present moment, as a way of alleviating anxiety. Meditation helps them to observe and accept these silent processes.

This poses a number of questions. How can some particular part of our bodies or selves possess its own voice, and how can experts claim to know what it is saying? Underlying these types of claims are some of the arguments and techniques that were first introduced by Bentham and Fechner. First and foremost is the distrust of language as a medium of representation. Bentham's fear of the 'tyranny of words' casts doubt on the capacity of individuals to adequately express themselves. To be sure, Bentham recognized that each person was the best judge of her own private pleasures and happiness in her own life. But for the purposes of a public politics, some other means of knowing what was good for people needed inventing.

Variants of mind-reading technology are invented only to get around the apparent problem that language is inadequate to communicate feelings, desires and values. Whether that technology involves money and prices, or measurements targeted at the human body (such as pulse, sweat or fatigue monitors), the science of our inner sensations seeks forms of truth that might eventually bypass

speech altogether. One of the most striking cases of this ideal in action was reported in 2014, with the news that scientists had successfully achieved ‘telepathic’ brain-to-brain communication for the first time, using EEG neuroscanners. The final destination of such developments is a form of silent democracy, peopled only by mute physical bodies. Bentham had little idea of how extensive the measurement of pleasure and pain would become, while Fechner was limited to running experiments on his own body rather than anyone else’s. But taken to their logical conclusions, the work of these two polymaths points to a society in which experts and authorities are able to divine what is good for us without our voices being heard.

Something important is lost along the way. In the monistic worldview of Bentham and Fechner, experiences differ in terms of their quantity, sitting on a scale between extreme pleasure and extreme pain. One thing that this necessarily discounts is the possibility that human beings may have their own considered reasons to be happy or unhappy, which may be just as important as the feelings themselves. In order to credit individuals with ‘critiques’ or ‘judgments’ or ‘demands’ (or, for that matter, with ‘gratitude’ or ‘acclaim’), we have to recognize that they possess authority to speak for their own thoughts and bodies. This means understanding the difference between, say, ‘despair’ and ‘sadness’, and the ability of the person using those terms to do so deliberately and meaningfully. Were, for instance, someone to describe themselves as ‘angry’, a response focused on making them feel better might entirely miss the point of what they were saying. It might even be deemed insulting. Were someone to be unhappy about the fact that income inequality in Britain and the United States has reached levels not seen since the 1920s, the advice – as given by some happiness economists – that one is best off not knowing what other people earn would seem like a form of hopelessness.²⁰ In this monistic world, there is merely sentiment, experiences of pleasure and pain that fluctuate silently inside the head, with symptoms that are discernable to the expert eye.

This has profound implications for the nature of political and moral authority. The rationally enlightened society imagined by Bentham was one in which all institutions were designed in such a way that they were perfectly attuned to the vagaries of human psychology. The job of governing modern, liberal society comes to appear as the confrontation between two types of material thing. On the one side, there is the mechanics of the mind, governed by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, which is no more deniable than the need to eat or sleep. And on the other, there are various material forces designed to influence that psychology. Monetary incentives, social reputation, physical punishment and confinement, aesthetic seductions, rules and regulations, and so on, serve no purpose unless they are geared towards the calculations of the individual.

In this society, political authority lies with those who are most expert to measure and manage individuals. There is no reason why administration of this nature should be handled by the state directly, as so many neoliberal regimes have more recently discovered. Anticipating Thatcherism and welfare nearly two centuries beforehand, one of Bentham’s policy recommendations was for the state to establish a National Charity Company (a joint stock company, modelled on the East India Company), which would alleviate poverty by employing hundreds of thousands of people in privately managed ‘industry houses’.²¹ His proposal for the Panopticon also included a recommendation for private firms to build and run the prisons, with a license provided by the state. Not content with reconceiving the very basis of legal authority, Jeremy Bentham can be viewed as the godfather of public sector outsourcing.

Fechner pointed the way to a more intimate micromanagement of individuals. In representing the relationship between mind and world as a numerical ratio, he implicitly offered two alternative ways of improving the human lot. If a certain physical context (such as work or poverty) is causing pain, one progressive route would involve changing that context. But another equivalent would be to focus

on changing the way in which it is experienced. Many of the experts who followed in Fechner's footsteps were psychiatrists, therapists and analysts, whose critical eye was turned upon the subject having the feelings, rather than the object that seemed to be causing them. If lifting weights becomes too painful, you're faced with a choice: reduce the size of the weight, or pay less attention to the pain. In the early twenty-first century, there is a growing body of experts in 'resilience' training, mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy whose advice is to opt for the latter strategy.

The job of intervening, to alter the psychological calculations and feelings of individuals, can be distributed across various types of institution and expert.²² We classify some as 'medical' or 'managerial', others as 'educational' or 'penal'. But really, these terms are just further abstractions and fictions. All that matters is how effectively they administer their task, of offering the carrots and sticks which alter human activity and experience for the better.

The (in)visibility of happiness

In 2013, the Cheltenham Literature Festival in Britain introduced an innovative form of evaluation in an effort to capture the value that it delivered to its attendees. Using a technology developed by the company Qualia, it set up cameras all around the site to track the smiles on the faces of visitors as they wandered around. Computers were taught to interpret these smiles and to convert them into a form of value. This was a more high-tech version of an experiment undertaken in the town of Phillip, Australia, which carried out an experiment in happiness measurement by stationing researchers around the streets who sought to record how much smiling they witnessed on the faces of those around them. A 'smiles per hour' value was produced from one day to the next.

Qualia's technology is still clumsy; a computer's ability to tell an 'authentic' smile from a 'inauthentic' one is not nearly as good as a human's. However the science of smiling is advancing rapidly in various directions, both psychological and physiological. The physical practice of smiling has been shown to accelerate recovery from illness.²³ The experience of seeing smiling faces has been shown to lower aggression.²⁴ Experiments show that 'real' smiles achieve different emotional and behavioural responses from 'social' smiles.²⁵

A smile is another potential indicator of (and influence on) what is going on under the surface, along with pulse rate, use of money or a 'just noticeable difference' between two weights. To these, a long list of recently developed measures could be added, from the 'smart' watches developed by Apple and Google to monitor stress, to psychometric affect questionnaires used to assess depression. These are all means of rendering subjective experience tangible and visible, and therefore comparable. Like the sonar technologies which are used to map the ocean floor from sea level, these tools aim to mine the depths of our feelings and bring them out into the daylight for all to see.

Yet there is a perpetual uneasiness about this project. With something as important as happiness, no measure ever seems quite adequate to the philosophical importance of the matter. We are generally content to accept that the map of the ocean floor is not the same as the ocean floor itself, but merely a representation with various advantages and disadvantages. But with happiness, there always remains a frustration. The sense that quantified smiles, heart rate, money and 'just noticeable differences' miss something crucial about the nature of emotional experience is overwhelming. A smile may indeed reveal something of the person – but surely not as a scientific representation.

Let's consider again the foundation of Bentham's political science. 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure'. By making this claim, Bentham hoped to strip out abstract, unscientific bases for political programmes. But in what sense is his claim

about 'nature' really any less metaphysical? Since when did nature involve erecting 'sovereign masters' over certain species? That sounds suspiciously like metaphysics after all. No matter how scientific his portrait of motivation may claim to be, in its epic generality it is guilty of the same abstraction that Bentham deplored in philosophy. And if it weren't, then the notion of happiness as the ultimate purpose of government would not be able to hold.

Here's the paradox. If happiness is granted its grand, philosophical and moral status as 'sovereign master', we might agree that this is ultimately what life is all about. But then how could such an entity ever be measured scientifically? Whereas if happiness is anchored firmly in the physical, sensory experience of pleasure and pain, who is to say that such a mundane matter carries any fundamental or political importance? It becomes just a grey mushy process inside our brains. To often, the utilitarian route out of this dilemma is simply to duck it altogether. As the influential British economist and positive psychology advocate Lord Richard Layard writes, 'If we are asked why happiness matters we can give no further external reason. It just obviously does matter.'²⁶ Is happiness measurement really a way of resolving moral and philosophical debate? Or is it actually a way of silencing it? Once the technocrats are in charge, it is too late to raise any questions of intrinsic meaning or collective purpose.

Happiness science is a science like no other, because it is always reaching beyond a mere object. What it grasps for is something meaningful, but it grasps for it via tools and measures that are too cold to adequately capture that meaning. Fechner's bizarre efforts to access transcendent truths via weight-lifting have become an exemplar of how psychological management works today. Neurological, physiological and behavioural monitoring devices are clamped together with meditation practices and pop existentialism. The philosophical deficit in the science of happiness is dealt with by importing ideas from Buddhism and new age religions. Somewhere in between the quantitative science and the spiritualism sits happiness.

The cultural effect of this is that certain indicators and measures of happiness take on a moral luminosity of their own. While happiness itself may remain invisible, a smile or a diagnosis of positive health acquires a sort of iconic value. The material symptom or indicator becomes a doorway into some inner being, granting it a magical quality. When Bentham idly wondered whether pulse rate or money might be the best measure of utility, he could scarcely have imagined the industries that would develop dedicated to asserting and reinforcing the authority of particular indicators to represent our inner feelings. Among these, no indicator has acquired a greater authority than money, an object that straddles the abstract and the material like no other.

The Price of Pleasure

The accident and emergency unit of the Royal London Hospital in East London is never the most salubrious of environments. But on a Saturday night, it turns into a cross between a warzone and a Hammer horror movie. Drunk people stumble around, bruised and beaten from bar brawls. Ambulance staff and police officers compete for access to suspected drink-drivers. The fear or grief on the faces of visiting family members is the most disturbing sight of all.

It was into such a scene that my wife and I arrived with our screaming daughter when she was less than a year old. We actually had no idea if there was anything wrong with her or not. That's the problem with babies: they won't tell you. The question perennially asked by doctors of parents with babies – 'But does she seem OK in herself?' – is another way of saying, 'Trust your instinct.' On this occasion, she'd woken up at an unusual time and was screaming in a way we'd never heard before, coupled with a rash and a temperature. She really didn't seem 'OK in herself'.

Amid the predictable chaos of the waiting area at 2 a.m., I noticed three young men who appeared to be plotting something with urgency. They were clustered around a form, onto which one of them was writing details in consultation with the other two. They pointed at parts of it, advising him on what to write, checking with each other for agreement before encouraging him further. He scribbled away while his two friends appeared to debate what he should do next, occasionally looking up to check if they were being watched. There was a great deal of nodding and pointing, as if some plan were being hatched. This went on for about twenty minutes or so, while our by now infuriatingly cheerful daughter was enjoying playing with some NHS leaflets.

After a while, a nurse came out and called the name of the young man who was filling in the form. The effect this had on him surprised me. His shoulders drooped, his face went into a grimace and he very, very slowly got to his feet, while his two friends suddenly became a picture of concern and pity. As he inched towards the nurse clutching his form, he held his head angled sharply down to one side and supported his neck, to suggest that he was now suffering a great deal. He walked slowly and apparently – painfully towards the nurse, who led him off to a treatment area. After he'd gone, his two friends cheered right up and returned to their furtive discussions.

The young man had clearly suffered a neck injury. Or at least, he had clearly experienced some mishap that could have caused a neck injury. Whatever had happened, it had resulted in slightly more enthusiasm among the three young men than one would normally associate with accidents in emergencies. From where I was sitting, this was an obvious case of an insurance scam being plotted and immediately felt angry that these time-wasters were holding us up, quite apart from the apparent fraud going on. No doubt a car accident had occurred, and one of them had then immediately recognized an opportunity to make some money. The only question was whether the 'injured' party could get through the necessary medical examination without fluffing his lines.

Maybe my reaction was grossly unfair. Maybe it wasn't. As with babies, so for whiplash: there is no possible way of knowing. Whiplash is a curious type of medical phenomenon for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the term itself technically refers to an event that has befallen the sufferer, and not to the medical condition as such. Thus, if someone has experienced sudden straining of the neck muscles, which often occurs with rear-end car collisions, it makes sense to say that she has 'suffered whiplash'.

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