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Why Isn’t America Happier?

**Introduction: Happiness and the United States**

Happiness has long been pursued as a goal in life. The champion of positive psychology, Ed Diener, defines happiness as, “experiencing life satisfaction and frequent joy while only infrequently experiencing unpleasant emotions” (Bok). Adam Smith defines happiness as, “the tranquil enjoyment of pleasure” (Rasmussen). Smith’s definition is built around the idea that people achieve happiness by completing tasks that gain them warranted approbation (praise). However, this approbation must be enjoyed serenely in order to bring happiness. Robert Nesse contends that, “an excessive pursuit of happiness is likely to lead to frustration and unhappiness because happiness is not an attainable goal, but a state that emerges when an individual is making good progress towards their life goals” (Nesse). What about justice? Without proper justice to guarantee each individual the goods necessary to progress towards his or her life plan, happiness is unattainable. Thus, happiness may be required to a certain extent in order to guarantee justice within a society. That being said, it is necessary to understand that happiness is different for each individual based on what his or her rational life plan is. Life plans will always differ from person to person.

The United States is currently ranked 14th out of 155 countries on the Gallup World Poll’s happiness survey. According to Gallup, only 57 percent of Americans report themselves as thriving. Another 40 percent report that they are struggling and 3 percent report they are actually suffering. These characteristics are used to determine happiness; thus, it is evident that with only slightly more than half of the country thriving, America is not as happy as it should or could be. For many, the ‘American Dream’ (opportunity to achieve success and affluence through one’s hard work and determination) seems to be nonexistent or at least fading quickly. This is in large part reflected in the statistic that nearly half of Americans do not view themselves as thriving or successful, despite the fact that it is one of the wealthiest countries in the world today. Denmark was ranked the happiest country in the world by this same poll with 82 percent of its people reporting that they were thriving and only 1 percent suffering (Levy). The disparity between the world’s happiest country and its 14th happiest country is apparent.

The current United States population is vastly diverse and home to around 312.8 million people, with a new person being added every 17 seconds due to the birth and immigration rates (Schlesinger). America is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, boasting a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of $48,442 (World Bank). The U.S. has an overall GDP of 15.094 billion dollars while the world’s top four happiest countries have significantly lower GDPs; Denmark-333 billion dollars, Finland-266 billion dollars, Norway-486 billion, Sweden-538 billion dollars (“Gross Domestic…”). Also, the purchasing power parity GDP of the United States is the second highest in the world at 15.29 billion dollars (United States. Central Intelligence Agency). Although these countries have significantly lower GDPs they are still ranked much higher than the U.S. in happiness. Based upon this data it is reasonable to believe that the United States should be much higher in overall subjective wellbeing than it currently is. Since we assume that wealth and GDP should bring happiness then the reason that the United States is ranked 14th in average subjective well-being, instead of in the top five, is because of its deviation from the Rawlsian conception of justice.

**Happiness and Government Influence**

Happiness has been broken down into two main forms: daily happiness and overall life-satisfaction or subjective well-being as it is more commonly referred to. Daily happiness is a function of having more positive experiences that conjure joy than negative experiences that conjure sadness or anger in a given day. Life-satisfaction is a judgment about one’s life as a whole. It is entirely possible for someone to view themselves as having more joy than negative emotions on a daily basis, but having a low life-satisfaction because, for example, he or she has not realized his or her life plan. For example, Americans ranked themselves on average as 7.3 out of 10 on the daily happiness scale and yet only 57 percent were ranked as thriving based upon their answers (Levy). This demonstrates how people can have some daily happiness, but have relatively low life satisfaction. Thus, making public policies based on happiness would be somewhat difficult due to this difference.

Is there anything that the government of the United States can do to help bring more of its citizens into the realm of the thriving? The extent to which the government can help depends on its involvement in the lives of its citizens. There is an age-old debate that continues to live on today about the extent to which a government should be involved in citizens’ lives. Some, like Thomas Jefferson, have taken the stance that the best, happiest, and most just societies are those that incur the least amount of interference from their governments. Others take the opposite position; government control is needed to establish justice in a free market society. John Rawls is a philosopher who believes the latter is true (Moore). He has two principles of justice and the first, equal liberty principle, is the most important. This is evident in his presentation of the second principle, the difference principle. The difference principle is the idea that in a society we should maximize the expectations or prospects of the least advantaged (Rawls). It is hard to say with absolute conviction that the reason America ranks outside of the top five on this list is solely due to the happiness of the least advantaged.

Political philosophers such as Rawls and Plato have maintained the idea that justice and happiness are indeed related, meaning that when justice is present a certain level should follow. In his book, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls formulates a conception of justice and asserts that if it is followed, then happiness should ensue as a result of justice. It will be made possible as more people will have the goods necessary to pursue their rational life plans. Since America has nearly as many citizens who view themselves as struggling or suffering (unhappy) as it does those who are thriving (happy), it can be inferred that America is deviating significantly from the Rawlsian conception in some ways.

**Rawlsian Justice**

It is necessary to define Rawls’ conception of justice, justice as fairness as he frequently refers to it in his book, in order to determine if the low level of happiness in America is related to its lack of Rawlsian justice. The detailed description of the previously mentioned difference principle is this: if every person were put behind a “veil of ignorance” where they did not know there position in society or its benefits, then they would seek a set of principles that would maximize the expectations of the least well-off. The veil is used to avoid biases of natural and social conditions such as, endowment and intelligence. It is unjust to allow peoples’ fate to be determined by these morally arbitrary elements. His theory then revolves around two main principles. The first of which indicates everyone must have an equal right to basic political liberties. “Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (Rawls).

This second principle brings up the idea of equality of opportunity in part (b) of its espousal. Equality of opportunity for the Classic Liberal is the idea that everyone should have a right to realize the same position so long as they have the proper training, knowledge, work ethic, and ability to do the job. Rawls believes that this idea is unjust because it allows for natural and social contingencies to determine people’s fate─the degree of justice and happiness they can attain by inequalities which do not work to improve the prospects of the least advantaged. It is necessary then for the government to intervene and make sure that everyone has the same opportunity to gain said training and knowledge in order to achieve the office that they desire (Moore). If it cannot be said that each person has this individual right, then the system remains disordered until it is so.

Another major theory in Rawls’ conception is the principle of efficiency. The principle of efficiency is the idea that, “a configuration is efficient whenever it is impossible to change it so as to make some persons better off without at the same time making other persons worse off” (Rawls). A society needs to be efficient in order to be just. Rights and duties of the society must be rationed out so that they cannot be changed in order to benefit some and not others. If at any time someone is willing to swap what they have with another, then the system is inefficient (Rawls). This is so because each person should get a share of goods so that he or she can meet their expectations just as well as another.

**America: The Current Situation**

The most troublesome statistic about the country is the unemployment rate. The U.S. was hit hard by the financial crisis of 2008 and is still struggling to recover from the recession. As of October 2012 the United States still had an unemployment rate of 7.9 percent (United States. Department of Labor). For Rawls this is a manifestation of disorder in our current society. To make matters worse, the country has only mediocre rankings across the board on the 2012 Legatum Prosperity Index (a global assessment of how wealth and wellbeing contribute to prosperity). The country ranks 10th overall in “Governance”. Initially this appears good; however, only 42.1 percent of the people are happy with the government’s effort to address poverty (“The 2012 Legatum Prosperity Index TM”). Such dissatisfaction with socioeconomic programs only increases the problem.

As far as the U.S. economy is concerned, it ranks 20th on the Legatum Index. According to the index, only 47.5 percent of Americans have confidence in their financial institutions. A lack of trust in government may be a major issue when dealing with social justice. The country also ranks 12th for “Entrepreneurship and Opportunity” and 14th in “Personal Freedom”. In all of these categories, including happiness, the U.S. is behind the most Rawlsian society today. Therefore, it is necessary for us to determine why and in what ways in order to fix the problem (“The 2012 Legatum Prosperity Index TM”).

**American Disparity in Income Distribution**

A large determinant of Rawlsian justice is the income distribution within a country. The United States is one of the most unequal on this front. Due to the idea that the expectations of the least well-off in society are to be maximized, an important indicator of this is the percentage of income and wealth that those in the bottom quintile of society receive. Rawls believes that the government in a just society should have a transfer branch of government that is responsible for ensuring that everyone has the social minimum of primary goods (Rawls).



Figure 1

As evidenced by the U.S. Census Bureau in Figure 1, the lowest quintile of people in the United States only receives 3.3 percent of the total income. The highest quintile receives over 50 percent of the total income (“Social and Economic…”) This large disparity clearly depicts the United States’ deviation from Rawls’ difference principle before taxes and transfers. Economic and social inequality is elevated in the U.S. and visibly unjust, according to Rawls. In a country where the difference principle is instantiated the share of income after transfer payments and taxes should go up instead of declining. The Gini inequality index before taxes and transfers is approximately .52. After taxes and transfers (SSI, Medicare, Medicaid, Welfare, etc.) are taken into account the index is still .43. Therefore, taxes and transfer payments are not doing enough to significantly right the ship of inequality in the United States (Domhoff).

A result of the large injustice in the distribution of income that follows is that a large proportion of society is left unhappy. Those in the bottom 40 percent of the distribution are even found to be the unhappiest when the income distribution is at its most unequal levels (Sobczak). The difference principle is meant to not only maximize the expectations of the least well-off, but also to increase the levels of happiness for everyone. Rawls contends that inequality is preferable to perfect equality so long as the inequality would make the least well-off representative man in society better off than strict equality. Therefore, the inequality in the United States needs shifting so that it betters the least well-off more so. This can be done through progressive taxation and income transfers.

Another crucial indicator used to determine the level of inequality in a country is the Gini index. Countries are ranked from 1-100 on this scale with 1 being the most equal and 100 being the most unequal. The U.S. has a Gini score of 45 (United States. Central Intelligence Agency). This relatively high Gini rating further demonstrates the high level of inequality within the country. The level of inequality in the United States also deviates from Rawls’ principle of efficiency. Since those in quintile one through four are individually earning such small percentages of the income in the country, they are constantly left wanting for more. According to Rawls, a system can only be efficient if people are not willing to swap what they have for what others have. It is obvious that those in the bottom quintile, and subsequently the others below the top, desire to swap goods with those in the top quintile. Proof of this can be seen in areas affected by the recent Hurricane Sandy. Immediately after the power was lost, people began to loot businesses and homes. This is a pronounced illustration of people in the bottom quintiles desire to acquire the goods of those in the top quintile and a first form of deviation from the Rawlsian conception.

**Spending: Health Care and Social Programs**

Rawls believes that inequality can be countered by a government through other means. For instance, the happiest and most Rawlsian country in the world (Denmark) offsets its income inequality not only with income redistribution but also with social programs and health care. Spending on social programs would be crucial for the U.S. in maximizing expectations; however, this is simply not the case. The U.S. ranks last of OECD countries in spending on social programs. Only 7.2 percent of GDP is spent on social programs that are designed to enhance the prospects of the bottom quintile (Medieros). On the contrary, Denmark spent 30.8 percent of its GDP on social programs in 2007 (Moore). The U.S. could learn a valuable lesson from the Danes in this regard.

Health care is another potential way for the U.S. to compensate for its income inequality. The U.S. currently ranks 2nd on the Legatum Index for health care. It spends 17.6 percent of its GDP on health care (“Accounting for…”). This is the highest percent of GDP spent on health care by any country in the world. Once again this initially seems good, but upon further examination falters. It is essential to break down health care expenditure between the public and private sectors. The U.S. government only accounted for 47 percent of total health care expenditure in 2008. This leaves the other 53 percent to the private sector. With such a large amount of the total health care expense being paid by individuals, it may be impossible for those in the bottom quintile to afford health care. In many instances this is the case as the U.S. has somewhere between 40 and 50 million without health insurance and likely without adequate health care. With unemployment rates so high, it may only worsen with the over enrollment of Medicare and Medicaid. One positive note is that the wealthiest and insured receive some of the best health care in the world. That being said, the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare as it is more commonly known, may provide a solution to this problem. It is estimated that the government will assume responsibility for more than 50 percent of health care expenditure once this plan goes into full effect (“U.S. Public…”). This newly structured health care system will help the United States to gravitate back towards the Rawlsian conception; the current situation is a second deviation from Rawls.

**Fair Equality of Opportunity**

Equality of opportunity deals with the positions of society being open to all, and government interference ensuring that they are so. One way for natural and social biases to rear their ugly heads is through education. It is completely possible that someone could be born with the intellectual capacity to become the next Bill Gates, but if he is not warranted access to the proper education that potential may never be realized. Thus, it is absolutely necessary that everyone in society receive an equal opportunity education in order to guarantee everyone, regardless of income quintile, a fair chance. In fact, he suggests that those born into disadvantaged homes receive compensatory education such as preschool and beyond. “One means of doing this might include lifelong public funding, wherein everyone has access to a decent primary and secondary education from early on, and from then on, those who qualify, regardless of income, may be educated” (Moore).

While this proposal may be true in Denmark, it is not the case in the United States. Here public education is only guaranteed from Kindergarten through high school. Even though this education is certain for all citizens, it is not necessarily of equal value. Many families, especially those in the top quintile, send their children to privately funded schools that offer a better education than publicly funded ones. Also, public schools are funded with tax dollars. As a result, the amount of money that a school receives will depend mainly on the amount of people within its particular district and the amount of money that they make. Poorer areas will have poorly funded schools, fewer teachers, and typically fewer opportunities offered after graduation. Another major issue arises when talking about post-secondary education. Many of those same parents in the top quintile who send their children to private high schools also send their students to the best colleges and university that their money can buy. It is important to emphasize the phrase “that money can buy”. Private, four-year college in the U.S. is very expensive and not an option for many families in the lower quintiles. It is becoming increasingly difficult for families, even in the middle-class, to send their children to college. A college education is the key to many positions in the U.S. society today. The market for those without a college degree has shrunk to an almost invisible size. Consequently, education prospects are not equal and the U.S. deviates from the fair equality of opportunity in this regard.

Oligarchy in the United States is also a large threat to fair equality of opportunity. An oligarchy can be defined as rule by the rich. An oligarch is someone who controls a large amount of the wealth in society, and can quickly convert that into political power. This does not necessarily need to be a large class of people because they can use their money to employ thousands of others to advocate their wants and needs. The top quintile in society receives 50.2 percent of its entire income. This furthers the idea that it does not have to be a particularly large group of citizens, and this concentration is indicative of oligarchy. The top 1/10 of 1 percent of people in society have an average income of $5,556,963 which translates to an individual power index of 190.7. The bottom 90 percent have an average income of $29,143 and an individual power index of 1.0. A large inequality has been created in political power in the United States by the income distribution. Also, the top 1 percent of people in society hold 34 percent of its total wealth while the bottom 40 percent holds a miniscule 0.2 percent of the wealth. The wealthiest people in society are being allowed to control the policies that they wish while drowning out the opinions of those at the bottom (Winters and Page).One particular example of this may be seen in the area of tax increases (e.g. estate tax). Tax increases have been kept at bay by the wealthy because of the adverse effects it would have on them.

This has been done in two major ways: electoral impact and opinion shaping. Jeffery Winters and Benjamin Page contend that taking a pro-wealthy stance in elections gain rather than lose votes for a politician seeking office (electoral impact). Additionally, oligarchs put together informational campaigns that allow them to mislead people about what politicians are doing and about what sorts of policies will actually benefit those at the bottom of society—opinion shaping (Winters and Page).It is these factors that are allowing the United States to be run by an oligarchy and thus jeopardizing the fair equality of opportunity when it comes to Rawls’ first principle of exercising basic political liberties. If those on the bottom are allowed to be ignored in the political realm, then they are being denied the basic rights which this society is supposed to guarantee from the minute that a person is born. Rawls stresses that great inequalities in wealth can undermine the fair or equal worth of liberty through domination of the media. He firmly believes that this can be corrected by public funding of elections (Rawls).

**Happiness Research**

Since 50 percent of happiness is determined by genetics, it is necessary for a society to balance the other 50 percent and provide an equal chance for all to be subjectively happy (Nesse). In a just society, people in all classes should have a package of primary goods that would allow them to effectively pursue a rational-life plan.A person can be considered happy when he or she is in pursuit of a rational-life plan under promising circumstances and they are making sufficient progress towards this plan. The plan is met only if primary goods are provided for, because without them no plan can be successful. It is also necessary that a person making progress towards his or her plan be reasonably certain that their success will continue; hence, leading them to the completion of their plan (Rawls).

A “happy society is wealthy, has a subjective sense of freedom, trust, and social support” (Oishi). Nations that have more public and common goods are happier. These public and common goods are provided for better by progressive taxation. Progressive taxation increases happiness, and countries with more of it ranked higher in subjective well-being on Gallup’s World Poll. GDP spending does not increase subjective well-being; however, the mean level of happiness can be increased by the redistribution of wealth by way of progressive taxation and provision of public goods (Oishi). Other happiness research has shown that marriage, social relationships, employment, perceived health, religion, and quality of government are important factors in determining happiness (Bok).

Benjamin Radcliffe contends that the two most salient factors of determining an individual’s well-being are social welfare policies and employment in a market. Politics favoring social welfare improve people’s happiness because it alleviates inequality. State interference is needed in order to counter people’s dependency on the market to provide for their primary goods at all times. Rawls would concur with this statement. Welfare states improve happiness by guaranteeing everyone the same quality of rights that the best-off in society are allowed to enjoy at all times (Radcliff). One way this is to be done is with a fair division of labor. The division of labor needs to be absent of a caste system in order to be just (unaffected by morally arbitrary factors). This is to keep people from being disqualified from certain positions in society solely based upon where they start out in life. Education should promote everyone to improve and develop the skills that they want, not limited by ascribed status (Young). These things are necessary in order to guarantee fair equality of opportunity when getting a job in the market, which will lead to primary goods being acquired and eventually happiness.

**Deviations Lead to Dissatisfaction**

America’s average level of happiness is comparatively lower than one might expect, based on the wealth of the country, because of its deviations from the Rawlsian conception and happiness research of stunted lives. Large inequalities in income and wealth allow for widespread feelings of envy, anguish, and inferiority among those of the least well-off in society. This leads to outbreaks of hostility and resentment between the classes as evidenced by the looting after Hurricane Sandy. Negative emotions like these on a daily basis lead to unhappiness in the Diener sense. This unjust distribution correspondingly allows for an oligarchy to exist, which denies those at the bottom a fair value of their political liberty (Rawls). They are allowed to be drowned out by those with the most money. Just because they are allowed to vote does not mean that they are given equal consideration by politicians in determining what policies to enact.

As a result, the lack of social support for those at the bottom leads to an unjust distribution of primary goods. It is almost impossible to move America towards a social welfare state where everyone will receive primary goods or a state of higher progressive taxation when the rich are being favored in politics. Because those at the bottom are not receiving all of the primary goods necessary they are not able to make progress towards, or achieve, a rational life-plan. While this is not possible, Rawls wants to move beyond social welfare to a property-owning democracy where ownership of income producing wealth is widespread (Rawls). This is absolutely necessary for someone to realize objective well-being as is meant by Rawls. Those in the bottom quintiles of society are left with low levels of self-esteem and presumably high levels of unhappiness because of the static level of progressive taxation in the U.S. For years the oligarchy has been allowed to fight off a progressive taxation system that would benefit those at the bottom through its influence. This leads to a lack of trust in the government as evidenced and a lower quality of government.

The market of the United States, or the division of labor within society as it is sometimes referred to by Rawls, similarly causes dissatisfaction. Education is not set up so that it gives everyone a fair chance to acquire the skills and knowledge that they want for a particular position in society. Those with the most money in society go to the best schools and subsequently get the best jobs. The entire system is operating mainly around ascribed status. Rawls’ believes that ascribed status is a morally arbitrary factor and it is unjust to let the system continue this way. Without a fair equality of opportunity those on the bottom are once again left unsatisfied and presumably unhappy.

**Conclusion**

Overall, America is not an unhappy place and that is not the contention that I have tried to make in this paper. America is actually the 14th happiest country in the world. However, while GDP alone does not give a country the potential to be happy it is clear that the U.S. has the potential to be a much happier society. Given the Rawlsian conception of justice and the various different definitions of happiness it is easy to ascertain that America ranks as low as fourteenth on the list because of how far it deviates from Rawls. No country will ever fully be able to satisfy Rawls’ conceptions because of the hypothetical nature at which they are arrived. Regardless, the happiest society should be able to get as close to Rawls’ ideal society as possible. Political Scientist Emily Moore has contended that a society (Denmark) has already come very close. Happiness researchers have also found independent qualities that contribute more to a country’s subjective well-being. The United States needs to adhere more closely to some of these policies and give more assistance to the least well-off in society in order to increase subjective well-being in the future and draw nearer to Rawls’ conception. Each of the deviations of the United States from Rawls is a failure of the society to maximize the expectations of the least well-off in society. It is then safe to adopt the idea that most, if not all, of the unhappiness in the U.S. comes directly from the least well-off in society and the fact that they cannot achieve a rational life-plan under the current system.

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