The Futile Pursuit of Happiness

Required Reading

Learning Outcomes and Connections to Course Outcomes
After completing this lesson, you will be able to:

- Define and explain the following terms: miswanting, affective forecasting, impact bias, adaptation, psychological immune system, hot states / cold states, and the empathy gap
- Describe the ways in which money does matter, and doesn’t matter, for human happiness (as indicated by survey data, not opinion)
- Compare Plato’s story from the Symposium to our current understanding of adaptation
- Provide examples of activities to which we do no adapt
- Evaluate the political implications of the science of “miswanting.”

Main Topics
- Why Do We Always Get It Wrong? Why Don’t We Know We Get It Wrong?
- An Ancient Version of Adaptation
- Can Money Buy Happiness?
- Non-Futile Pursuits
Thinking Critically

A four-year-old child begs his mother for ice cream. He cries, he pleads, he bargains, he promises the most outrageous things (“I’ll make my bed without asking forever!”), and all because he is convinced in this moment that nothing—nothing—on this earth could possibly be as good as two scoops of Oreo crumble in a cone. And still—still—his mother says no.

Is she cruel? Is she heartless? Does she forget her own childhood so completely? No, she simply knows something that her son is too young to remember or understand: he is, unfortunately, lactose intolerant. So while it is true that he would enjoy the ice cream, briefly, it would doom him to hours of intestinal agony.

The child’s desire is perfectly understandable, but he is wrong in his prediction about how happy he would be if he acted on his desire. To use a term invented by Daniel Gilbert, whose ideas feature prominently in this week’s reading, the child is simply “miswanting.” He wants the wrong things, because he doesn’t know which things will actually make him the happiest.
We can all smile at the naivety of a young child like this, but unfortunately, we are not *that* different. Sure, the things we want change as we grow up; though that desire for ice cream never quite goes away, it competes in an adult heart with the desire for a new car, a new house, a new lover, or a new bank balance. But whatever the desire, it always involves a *prediction*. In each case, we are betting that this is the kind of thing that would make us happiest. If Gilbert and the other researchers discussed in “The Futile Pursuit of Happiness” are right, we aren’t much better at this than four-year-old children.

Before you begin this reading, there are two things you can do that will help you to get the most out of it.

1. **Your Happiness**

   This is a simple exercise. Take just a moment —don’t over-think it —and write down five or six things that you think would make you happiest over the next few years. These could be things you would love to own, or they might be things you’d love to do, or have happen to you; just write whatever first comes to mind. Then, as you read the essay, put a small check mark in the margin beside any of your “desires” if Gertner says something to indicate that this is the sort of desire that *really does* lead to increased happiness. And perhaps, give yourself a pat on the back too. But, put an X in the margin whenever and wherever the opposite occurs. And be prepared to write a lot of X’s!

2. **Definitions**

   As you read, fill in definitions for the terms listed below. Sometimes these are given in the text itself; other times, you will need to produce a definition by thinking about how the term is used in context. Most of these terms have overlapping meanings, which makes it pretty easy to know in general what Gertner is talking about, but you can also get overwhelmed by just how many “technical terms” there are in this one essay. A simple table should help you to stay on top of it all, so that you can spend you time thinking about what these ideas might *mean* for you, rather than struggling to remember the differences between each of the various terms.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>MEANING</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Miswanting</td>
<td>Wanting the wrong things because our predictions about what will make us happy are incorrect</td>
<td>Spending my money on a larger TV, rather than on time out with friends or family</td>
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<td>Affective Forecasting</td>
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<td>Impact Bias</td>
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<td>Psychological Immune System</td>
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<td>Hot States / Cold States</td>
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<td>Empathy Gap</td>
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Why do we always get it wrong? Why don't we know we get it wrong?

As you now know from reading the article, we are all terrible at “affective forecasting.” In spite of the fact that we make dozens and dozens of decisions every day, based on nothing other than our best guesses about what will make us happiest, we still get it wrong more often than we get it right. Practice, in this case, doesn’t make perfect.

A Matter of Perspective

When we were five, we wildly over-estimated how happy we would be with our birthday presents (half of which were abandoned within the first week), but we were just as wrong about a cell-phone at 15, a car at 25, a house at 40, or retiring to Florida at 70. Nor were we better at affective forecasting when it came to the bad stuff. The visit to the dentist wasn’t nearly as traumatic as we had imagined when we were children, or at least, we bounced back faster than we would have guessed, and we also recovered from divorce or separation that at one point seemed like the permanent end of all joy. The impact bias consistently makes us feel that events will have an effect on us that is more intense and long lasting than it actually turns out to be, whether these are good or bad events.

Thinking Critically

But this immediately raises several questions. To begin, why are we like this? What possible value can there be in being consistently wrong about happiness, when that is —for many people at least —the thing that they care about more than anything else in life? It would
seem like this is the most important thing to get right, and yet, we almost always get it wrong. Second, why don’t we learn? After our 10,000th basically identical error (“whoops! Looks like I anticipated this being a bigger deal than it turned out to be — again!”), why can’t we seem to take the impact bias into account when we are making our 10,001st prediction? When you stop to think about it, our predicament is almost comically bad: we get things wrong, we’re always wrong in the same way, we never seem to get better at it, and we’re not even able to recognize this staggeringly obvious fact about ourselves! Why should it be like this?

Having read Gertner’s essay, you know that at least one big part of the explanation for all of this has to do with adaptation. Our brains are designed to pay a great deal of attention to anything new happening in our immediate environment, but not to be too concerned about anything that remains unchanging. You almost certainly felt your socks pressing up against your toes and lightly squeezing your ankles when you first put them on this morning, but you likely haven’t noticed them since then. But if your socks were to magically disappear quite suddenly, you would most definitely notice the change! If the room you’re in is smelly, you no doubt noticed this when you first entered it, but if you’ve been settled in reading your computer screen for an hour now, you likely long since stopped noticing the odour. You adapted. And yet, the smallest change in that smell will instantly register in your conscious mind. If someone on the far side of the room begins to peel an orange, you’re going to know it.

Thinking Critically

But why is your brain so jumpy, so nervous, so distractible? Why can’t it “live in the moment,” as all the self-help books tell us we should do? At bottom, the explanation is that your brain was not really designed for life in the 21st century. It isn’t that you have a bad brain; it’s just that it’s much better suited to life in the late Pleistocene era, where in a certain sense, it still thinks you live. For the vast majority of the time in which our big-brained ancestors were evolving—from, say 5 million until 50 thousand years ago—the world was a very dangerous place for humans. The proto-humans of that time who “lived in
the moment” very likely died in the moment too! It was enormously helpful then to hear every distant twig-snapping under some predator’s foot, and notice every shifting shadow in the tall grass, even if that meant that you could never stay fully absorbed in the pleasures of your dinner.

Those who survived in that era were those whose brains were capable of a very rapid shift in priorities. They needed their owners to get out of the trees or out of the caves in order to search for food or sex, and so they flooded their hosts with powerful desires for these things, and the promise of pleasure should the desires be achieved. But there is really no survival advantage in continuing to feel pleasure in eating or having sex for hours at a time; actually, it would be bad for survival, since you would be less aware of dangers in your environment if you were totally absorbed in pleasure. Thus, the best design for a brain would be for it to provide just enough pleasure to get us to do those survival-helping activities, but then to reign in the pleasure quite rapidly.

Now, the world isn’t nearly so dangerous and uncertain anymore, and it would be great if we could tell our brains to relax and enjoy the pleasant things in life that are now so readily available to us. But evolution is a slow process. To you and I, saying that things have been much safer and more secure for thousands of years now sounds like quite a lot; to evolution, you might as well be saying “yesterday.” We still have the same basic brain machinery that made sense in a world that is long gone, and that machinery programmed us for rapid adaptation to most sources of pleasure.

Modern science has made great advances in understanding the processes in our brains that lead us to desire specific things, and then to adapt to them once we have them. The most significant role is played by a chemical called dopamine, which you may have heard about if you have ever read anything about addiction. However, while this chemical understanding of the relationship between desire, pleasure, and adaptation is distinctly modern, the basic insight into how the three are connected is as old as Plato, the philosopher who you encountered at the start of this course in unit one.
An Ancient Version of Adaptation

In a book called *Symposium*, Plato tells a fable about the origin of love. Watch the following video for an overview of this fable.

*Disclaimer: Please be advised. This video contains illustrations of nudity and content of a sexual nature.*

I understand and choose to watch the video.

I understand and opt to instead read an overview.

Imagine, he says, that our distant ancestors were quite different from us. They had four legs, four arms, and two different faces, one looking in each direction. Things were initially just great for these creatures (with so many limbs, they could perform spectacular cartwheels!), but as always seems to happen in these origin stories, they made a terrible mistake. They offended the great god Zeus. As a punishment, Zeus ordered that they all be cut in half (conveniently doubling the number of his worshippers).

But something went wrong with Zeus’ plan, something he hadn’t anticipated. Once these previously whole beings had been split into two pieces, there was nothing that they wanted more in life than to find their “other half,” and to cling to that person as tightly as possible. It was as if they were trying desperately to achieve the impossible: to become whole again. The problem this created for Zeus was that everyone was slowly starving to death. Since they literally desired nothing more than to remain as close as possible to their “second self,” they wouldn’t hunt, wouldn’t garden, wouldn’t do anything but hold each other close. For Zeus, that was a disaster; instead of doubling his number of worshippers, he might lose them all!

His solution was drastic, and would have far-reaching consequences for human life; he invented sex. Tweaking the design of these early humans, he added a bit here, and took away a bit there, in a way that simultaneously provided these people more and less than they had before. Now, when they came together with their other halves, they could get much closer to that desire to be “one flesh” than when all they could do was to hold each other tight. And, it would feel great when they did so; lots and lots of pleasure! But, it would also be temporary. Rather than wanting
to stay close forever and ever, they would find that fairly shortly after they had done this new “sex thing,” they would become restless, and the pleasure would fade, and their minds would turn once more to other things. Other, *important* things, like finding dinner, or making sacrifices to Zeus!

The story is a myth, and Plato knew it as well as we do. What he was trying to do with it was to communicate a set of truths about human *psychology*, not about human evolution. And yet, as different as an ancient myth is from the language of contemporary psychology, Plato is getting at exactly the same sort of thing here as are Gilbert, Lowenstein, and the other modern scientists discussed in Gertner’s essay. Whether it is mythical circle people desiring sexual intercourse because they feel it is the way that they will become whole again, or a child contemplating ice cream, we see that desires always promise more happiness than they can deliver, and whatever pleasures they *do* provide, soon fade away then fade away. But we also get a hint from Plato about *why* happiness would be like that. If we ever found that thing, or person, or experience, that made us *perfectly* happy, we would lose our motivation to do anything else at all. We would cling to it desperately, and though we would have a smile on our faces as it happened, we would slowly die.
Can Money Buy Happiness?

At some point in your life, someone or other has told you with great solemnity and the wisdom of the ages that “money can’t buy happiness.” Maybe it was after you applied for a well-paid job, but didn’t get it. Maybe it was when an inheritance you had counted on turned out to have a few less zeros in it than you had expected. Or maybe it was after watching an interview with a celebrity showing off their Hollywood mansion or waving their gold chains at the camera. Maybe it even provided some comfort when you heard it. But if you’re like most of us, you were privately unsure about whether this was really true. Maybe it’s just something that we wish was true.

Given that we are all so interested in money (even saying “I don’t care about money” is often a kind of interest), it is not surprising that economists and psychologists have studied the connection between wealth and happiness extensively. Individual studies each produce slightly different results, but an overall patter has emerged quite clearly by now. However, the facts of the matter aren’t likely to please anyone. One group —let’s call them the Romantics —want very much to believe that money had no connection at all to happiness (“because true happiness comes from inside”). Better yet, they would like the connection to be negative, such that the rich were actually less happy than the poor. Their minds full of images of smiling villagers in far off lands, living on next to nothing, they compare this to the sour faces of CEOs, the stressed-out look of the bankers and lawyers they see walking down Bay Street, and the sullen, pouting stare expressions on the faces of pop star millionaires, and conclude that money is the root of all unhappiness, if not of all evil.

Unfortunately, they are wrong.
The other group — let’s call them the Cynical Realists — is sure that money does make people happier, and they find the Romantics faintly ridiculous. What could be more obvious, these wised-up individuals think: getting the stuff you want makes you happy, but you need money to get the stuff, so more money means more happiness. To say anything else is just “sour grapes” — pretending that you didn’t really want something after you discover you can’t get it. But, the “Realists” are also wrong.

Where the Romantics go wrong is in underestimating the massive impact that poverty has on happiness. Those far away villagers may be as happy as anyone, even living on fairly little, but only if they have enough to eat, and don’t live with the constant threat of violence. When we look at how the average person responds, it is absolutely clear that we have a much, much harder time being happy when our fundamental needs, such as food and security, are not met.

That much seems obvious, but there is another kind of poverty that might be more relevant in a place like Canada, and that is relative poverty. Our expectations of what we need in life are formed by us looking at what others have. Think about the sort of things that middle-class Canadians take for granted: a laptop, a cell phone, a place to live where they have at least one room entirely to themselves, access to a car, wireless, enough clothes that they don’t have to wear the same thing more than once a week, and enough left over to dine out occasionally. When this what most people around you have, then having none of these things makes you relatively poor. In some parts of the world, hardly anyone has these things, and their absence doesn’t affect anyone’s happiness. But that is precisely because no one has these things. Whatever the social standard is in any given place in the world, we are all exquisitely sensitive to the feeling that we are at the bottom of the ladder, and it tends to make us miserable 🙁.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF HAPPINESS IN 2013
A Matter of Perspective

As if to confirm this point, economists Sara Sonick and David Hemenway asked subjects in an experiment to rate the attractiveness of a variety of opportunities, such as the following:

[1]

<table>
<thead>
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<th>JOB A</th>
<th>JOB B</th>
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<tr>
<td>You earn $50,000 annually, while others around you earn $25,000.</td>
<td>You earn $100,000 annually, while others around you earn $200,000.</td>
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Astonishingly, about half of subjects preferred the first job to the second, even though it pays only half as much! Taking things a step further, the psychologist Paul Bloom discovered that the same preference is already present in children as young as four. He asked children in an experiment to choose between two different distributions of some stickers that they liked. In one distribution, the child would be offered a single sticker, knowing that another child would also receive a single sticker. In the other distribution, the child would get two stickers, but would have to live with the knowledge that another child would be given three. Younger children especially (who may not have learned that this is “bad behaviour”), the 1/1 division was quite a popular choice, even though it meant getting only half as much. Better to have less, but to have more than others![2]

All of this looks very bad for the Romantics, but there is error enough for both sides of this debate. The mistake that the Cynical Realists make is connected to exactly the same disturbing fact about human psychology that Sonick, Hemenway, and Bloom exposed with their experiments. It is true that the rich tend to be *slightly* happier than the middle class, but *most* of this effect can be traced directly to the pleasure we derive from having more than others. Moreover, the effect is actually quite small. If more money really did produce more happiness, then we would expect billionaires to be, on average, much happier than those earning $100K a year, and they are only slightly happier. Once you are out of poverty (either absolute or relative poverty), an extra 50 thousand or an extra 50 million will have very little impact on your happiness. You adapt just as quickly to a yacht as a flat screen TV, or a new pair of shoes. For most people, all it takes is about six months before none of these things provide us with pleasure anymore.

**Thinking Critically**

There is one last error that the Cynical Realists make when they relate happiness to wealth. Noticing that the wealthy tend to be, on average, slightly happier than the middle class, they assume that the extra money must be *causing* the extra happiness. But what if the
connection runs in the opposite direction? What if people who are happier tend, on
average, to make slightly more money than those who are less happy?

Few of us notice this idea on our own, but once someone has pointed it out, it just seems
obvious! Imagine you are the boss of a growing company, and it is time to promote someone
from your staff to the important “regional manager” position. You’ve narrowed the list
down to two candidates, each with stellar references and recommendations, but during the
interviews, one of the two seems really cheerful while the other is a bit flat. Who do you
promote? Obviously, the happy one! Now if you imagine that this sort of decision is
happening over and over again throughout the world, it becomes obvious that the
wealthiest people are likely to be amongst the happiest people. But it isn’t the extra money
that is making them happier; it is the extra happiness that is making them more money!
Non-futile Pursuits

As intriguing as all of this research is, many people find it a little depressing as well. Maybe there is some small degree of comfort in knowing that getting rich wouldn't likely make you any happier than you already are, but at the same time, you might be a bit put off by the “fatalism” in Gertner's discussion. He seems to be saying that nothing matters as much as we think it will, and we will adapt to nearly everything much faster than we anticipate. It’s hard to avoid wondering, if this is true, why we even try to make our lives better than they currently are.

One response to this concern is to insist that life might be “about” something other than individual happiness. Several of the other readings in this unit describe ways of thinking about life that are less obsessively concerned with happiness, and which might provide richer, deeper ways of experiencing the world. Growth, self-development, meaning and purpose, service to others, love, spirituality, and beauty all matter to a great number of people; sometimes, entire cultures have organized themselves around one or another of these values. And yet, none of them are merely a “means to get to happiness” —at least, not for those who take these values seriously.

But even when we keep our lens very narrowly focused on happiness, there is a great deal that we can do to improve our lot in life. The key is to identify those sorts of things to which we never really do adapt, and to pursue these things with zeal.
At the top of the list are, of course, human relationships. We never fully adapt to other people; they are always surprising. When a relationship is destructive, that’s a terrible thing, as some of you know all too well; family members, friends, and lovers can always find new ways to hurt us deeply, and we never seem to get used to that feeling. But when such relationships are healthy, they are an ongoing source of pleasure and satisfaction in life, for exactly the same reason. We don’t “adapt” to human beings the way we adapt to televisions or running shoes.

The other important source of pleasure to which we don’t seem to adapt is something that has been called a “flow state.” The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihayli (a wonderful name, pronounced “cheeks-sent-me-high”!) is responsible for generating much of our understanding of this phenomenon. As he describes it, we are in a state of flow whenever we are engaged in an activity that has each of the following characteristics:

- **Attention**
  it must be an activity that engages your complete attention

- **Challenge**
  it must be near the limits of our ability, but not at that limit or beyond it

- **Feedback**
  it must be the sort of activity where you get “in-the-moment” feedback on how well you are performing

- **The Whole Mind**
  it must involve both conscious thinking, and a set of skills or abilities that have become automatic and unconscious through practice
A Matter of Perspective

If you are a musician, you know this state well, and likely go out of your way to seek it. If the technical demands of the music you are playing are high enough, it will be require and reward your complete attention (though as we all know, there’s a fine line here; one step more difficult than this and the process becomes frustrating and stressful instead of engrossing). Musical performance also provides instant feedback; especially after you have trained for some time, you notice every wrong note, just as you notice when you’ve handled a tricky passage well. And finally, the performance relies quite largely on the body of automatic skills.

There is no possibility for “flow” when you are first learning your instrument, and thinking all the time about where to put your fingers, but with enough practice, all of this becomes unconscious, a matter of what we call “muscle memory.” The fact that this much of what you are doing has become automatic simply frees up your conscious mind to attend to other matters, such as anticipating an upcoming passage, reconsidering your tempo, or deciding whether or not to add an improvisation at a particular point. Your conscious and unconscious self are working cooperatively towards a common goal here.

Whether it is through music, sport, some kinds of exercise, or a host of other activities, flow states are immensely satisfying. In Csikszentmihalyi’s original studies, people rated “flow” as more pleasurable than chocolate; in fact, it came in third overall, just behind eating and sex, but with the added advantage over those two that it can last for hours at a time. If you are searching for a way to “beat” the iron law of adaptation, which causes so many of our pleasures to fade away all too soon, this is certainly a good place to look.
Summary

So what difference should these ideas make in our lives, and how should we feel about them? The first question is somewhat easier. The very clear, strong implication of all of this research is that we are fools to invest our money in material things, as if these were the most reliable providers of pleasure. While each of us likely have a small number of possessions that continue to provide us with pleasure, long after we acquired them, the vast majority of what we own that once made us happy is, by now, just so much extra “stuff” cluttering up our apartments. It is much wiser to use your money in the service of relationships. And once you are out of poverty, chasing after wealth is a highly inefficient use of your time and resources, if your goal is happiness. Instead, try to find a job that either allows in itself for states of flow, or, leaves you with enough free time and energy that you can pursue a flow-producing hobby in your off-hours.

But how should you feel about the ideas in Gertner’s essay? Many of us find we have two, opposing reactions. On the one hand, it is always interesting to learn new things about how one’s own mind works, and it is reassuring to learn that everyone goes through the same things. Without an understanding of the impact bias and adaptation, we are prey to dozens of groundless worries and concerns. We might think that we are “missing out” on something in life, and that others are enjoying themselves more fully. After all, we keep buying things, or doing things that seem pretty good at first (though not as great as we had expected), but then the pleasure these things provide dissipates quite quickly. When we compare this experience to the glowing smiles we see on our friends’ Facebook pages, or their ecstatic stories about how much
they love their new job, new car, or new music, it's hard not to feel sometimes that we must be “wired wrong” where pleasure is concerned. In this light, the work of Gilbert and the others is reassuring. We’re not so strange after all; pleasure fades for everyone.

On the other hand, the ideas in Gertner’s essay can be depressing. Are we doomed to keep chasing after pleasures, only to find that they evaporate on contact? Is happiness a mirage in the distance, always just a little further out of reach?

How you choose to feel is, of course, up to you. But as you sort out your own response, it might be helpful to consider Daniel Gilbert’s response to his own research. When asked if he would like to remove all affective forecasting errors, such as the impact bias, Gilbert says:

The benefits of not making this error would seem to be that you get a little more happiness... When choosing between two jobs, you wouldn’t sweat as much because you’d say: “You know, I’ll be happy in both. I’ll adapt to either circumstance pretty well, so there’s no use in killing myself for the next week.” But maybe our caricatures of the future—these overinflated assessments of how good or bad things will be—maybe it’s these illusory assessments that keep us moving in one direction over the other. Maybe we don't want a society of people who shrug and say, “It won’t really make a difference.” [page 11]

Additional Resources


  (http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic620591.files/Indices_of_Wellbeing/HSPH.pdf)


References

  http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic620591.files/Indices_of_Wellbeing/HSPH.pdf