Happiness and the Point of Uncertain Returns

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**Linear Happiness**

Scientific approaches sometimes geo over-focused on single right answers and laws that apply regardless of specific situations. As such they have problems with things that suddenly become discontinuous – places where suddenly the laws that worked up to that point no longer apply. Perhaps the best analogy here is that of a phase change, such as when a material changes from a liquid to a gas. Behavior in one phase is dramatically different than it is in another.

Happiness is something than appears to undergo a kind of a phase shift. It starts out linearly correlated to other things, then suddenly becomes non-linear and individualistic. Let’s look at what I mean by that.

**The linear phase of Happiness**

Happiness is pretty straightforward in its early manifestations vis-à-vis many different things. Although not a perfect correlation, in general at lower levels the more money you have, the more freedom you have, the more choices you have, the more close personal connections with others you have, and a host of other things seem directly related to your happiness. Having more of these things will very likely result in more happiness. In this range the simple rule is : MORE IS BETTER.

**Uh-oh**

The problem (for some scientists at least) is that all of these things reach a point where suddenly more is NOT better – or, more accurately, more is not necessarily better and may in fact be worse. From a scientific viewpoint this seems odd -- why does the correlation suddenly stop? Worse, the correlation doesn’t stop at the same place for everyone, but at a differently quantifiable place from one person to another.

A phase shift?

The idea of a phase shift might offer some solace – except that the new phase does not seem to respond to any clear scientific laws whatsoever, but be overwhelmingly influenced by unpredictable individual factors. It appears arbitrary, capricious, and chaotic – from a non-individualist perspective.

Many books regarding happiness bog down over this issue. They do not regard this shift as a good thing. It defies the goals of prediction, messing up marketing, economics, and other disciplines that rely on accurate outcome-predicting.

Let’s look at it more closely

**Getting specific?**

Is this sudden change a bad thing? Let’s consider an examples and see if that helps clarify this.

**Money and Happiness**

First, that of money and happiness. The general rule seems to be that happiness increases as your income increases up to the point where your income covers all of your needs plus a little bit more. BUT consider how that statement is both precise and vague. We can all imagine what that condition might look at for us – it seems fairly precise – but what about for others? What does this mean for someone in a war zone? In a third world country? In a high cost of living city? And what do we define as “needs”? Is that just what it takes to survive? Is education a need? Is either the toy a child has to have or the dress a teenager must get experienced as a “need?”

And what about the concept of having “a little more than you need?” Is that an amount? A percentage? A feeling?

We know what the concept means but it defies quantitative definition (like, in fact, a lot of other psychological/human concepts).

**Other similar examples**

Consider also the issue of how many choices you have. Clearly, most people who feel they have no choices or highly limited choices would likely feel unhappy with that situation. (For some, as in a Submissive in an S and M relationship, having no choices is liberating and pleasurable.) As our options/choices increase we have more ability to match a situation with a more appropriate or helpful choice, which generally results in feeling more in control, more satisfied, and happier.

At some point, however -- some distinct but not globally quantifiable point – having more choices no longer is clearly a benefit. Now more choices can lead to unhappiness – How do I choose the best one? How do I deal with my responsibility in dealing with all these choices? How do I not feel overwhelmed? But they also can be good – “Great, it comes in the color green I most like.” “All the schools I applied to accepted me!” etc.

Still more factors

 It’s important to note that we’re also talking about a time-dependent situation-dependent moving target. Getting into all the schools you applied to can make you very happy at first, then create unhappiness – but which one do I commit to? I was happy to have the extra income, but it led me to buy some new things and now my “needs” have gotten bigger and the extra income I see as making things worse.

If you’re looking for consistency here, you have a monumental task in front of you, if not an impossible one.

YET, the overall statement still hold: You will most likely experience more4 happiness the more XXXX (money, choices, etc.) you have up to the point where you have a little more X than you perceive you need.

**So what do we do with this?**

One approach would be to go ahead and continue to get more than you need, not because you expect it to make you happier but because 1) it could and 2) if it makes you unhappier you can get rid of it. Alternately you could decide that once you reach the point of uncertain returns you should stop trying for more in that arena and go on to another one where you have still not gotten to that level.. Given all the things that can go into having more happiness, that might keep you occupied for quite some time,

Remember, happiness doesn’t TOP OUT at the point of uncertain returns, it just becomes not generally predictable. You may well be able to become happier, you just no longer have a pretty sure thing to bet on that works well for almost everyone. You need to accept the uncertainty and focus in on your specific and individual self and circumstances.

You may decide that where you are is good enough – that the extra effort isn’t justified by the extra risk. You may decide that reaching this point is instead reaching a minimum – the point everyone can reach for without thinking too much about their own uniqueness. Going beyond is accepting the challenge and reward of being unique.

Which is the right path? Your path is your right path.

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