

## **GOOD QUESTION, NICE ANSWER, BUT WHY WITHOUT HAPPINESS?**

**Review of “How Much is Enough?; Money and the Good Life”  
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### *Abstract*

*In their book "How much is enough?" Robert and Edward Skidelsky observe that philosophers and societies have always been critical about greed and insatiability. The pursuit of money and possessions was always subordinated to higher ideals, which were associated with views on 'the good life'. This subordination led to standards about appropriateness and enoughness. This morality is gone. Dominant economic thinking accepts greed and insatiability as guiding principles. The needs of people are supposed to be unlimited and economic growth is supposed to create more well-being automatically. The Skidelskys reject this theory. They believe this theory has led to a rat-race in rich countries with adverse effects. They present an interesting proposal: let us make a list of things that are necessary for the good life, and together also sufficient. They think of features like health, safety, harmony with nature and leisure. Their list is acceptable, but such lists are always somewhat arbitrary and can easily lead to paternalism. Such dangers are smaller if subjective happiness is added. It is, however, fascinating and reassuring that the specific proposals of the Skidelskys contribute to more individual freedom. A basic income in particular creates more freedom to stay out of the rat-race, or to participate less intensively.*

### **Morality, greed and insatiability**

The Skidelskys present a history of the moral status of greed and insatiability. Aristotle felt that the good life must be based on a good character and the possession of a limited number of necessary goods. He had no problems with the exchange of goods, but was afraid that buying property, with no purpose other than making a profit, would make human activities subordinate to greed and insatiability.

Such reservations have been set aside, in particular by the development of economics. Nowadays economists consider the satisfaction of wants as the ultimate goal, whatever the character of those wants. They make no distinction between superficial wants and real needs, or between use- and exchange value. All of these notions have been replaced by the concept of 'utility'. This is a purely descriptive concept, only indicating that people want something and not what they need or should want. Because of this theory there are no more countervailing arguments against the neo-liberal ideology of boundless self-interest. Modern capitalism has stimulated greed by putting pressure on people to consume, using continuous advertising, encouraging status competition, and by a hostile attitude towards any idea that some level of wealth might be sufficient.

### **What we need, as a minimum and as a maximum!**

The Skidelskys want to introduce some morality again, as a brake on greed and insatiability. They want to do so by defining 'the good life', or in other words: by making a list of features required for such a life, and together sufficient. Those features must meet four conditions: (1) they should be universal, or acceptable in all cultures; (2) they must be valuable as such, and not only because they are important for something else; (3) they must have their own

character and dynamics; (4) they must be necessary for people to function properly. Eventually they choose features such as health, security, harmony with nature, and leisure.

The Skidelskys reject happiness as a feature of 'the good life'. They believe that happiness of individuals is not comparable, because people apply different standards in their assessment of happiness. Just like Johns and Ormerod (2007), they see no clear relation between happiness and important social developments. Their main concern is that happiness can be morally dubious; people can be happy as a result of indifference about the fate of others. With regard to the matters on their list the Skidelskys come up with a critical assessment of recent developments in rich nations, such as in Great Britain. After 1974 life expectancy went up by seven years, but with more drugs and stress. Security diminished through unemployment and the replacement of fixed jobs by temporary jobs. The agricultural diversity decreased and watching television became dominant as a surrogate for active leisure.

The Skidelskys present some specific proposals for change: a reduction of income inequality, a basic income for everyone, more power to employees against employers, a reduction in working time, and a reduction in commercial advertising and competitive consumption.

### **Put happiness on the list!**

The list of the Skidelskys is exciting and useful, but can easily lead to arbitrariness and paternalism. Both dangers are unpleasant and the combination can be disastrous. Adding subjective happiness to the list can reduce these risks. Happiness is nowadays defined as the appreciation of people of their own life. This *subjective* happiness is independent of the appreciation or assessment of other people. The study of subjective happiness reveals that adults, regardless of their culture, think about their own life regularly, and that they are perfectly capable to answer questions about their appreciation (Veenhoven, 2010). This makes it relatively easy to study subjective happiness. Researchers also discovered that people all over the world value happiness as something important (Diener & Oishi, 2004). Furthermore happiness has significant positive effects on health and functioning in general (Veenhoven, 2012). Happy people are also more likely to help other people and to promote the public interest (Guyen, 2011). These results make it clear that happiness is fit to be put on the Skidelskys' list: it is universal, it is appreciated, has its own dynamics, and without happiness people function badly.

Research findings also make it clear that the Skidelskys are too pessimistic about the comparability of happiness. It is true that people apply different standards in their appreciation of their life. In theory this can make individual happiness incomparable, but this does not happen in reality. Differences in average happiness can be explained quite well by differences in actual living conditions. A good fit between those circumstances, and what people need in general, is apparently a dominant factor for subjective happiness. Nor is it the case that average happiness in countries is insensitive to important social developments (Inglehart c.s., 2008; Ott, 2012, Chapter 6). It is a complication, however, that many people adopt a positive attitude towards their life. This is understandable because a positive attitude can work as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. The implication is, however, that a reasonable score for subjective happiness can go hand in hand with the existence of serious problems. Another implication is that substantial differences in living conditions occasionally produce small differences in happiness only. There is always a relation between those conditions and happiness, but sometimes less 'proportional' than expected.

It is correct that happiness can be immoral, e.g. if it is based on indifference or on a way of life with negative consequences for the happiness of others. It is conceivable for instance that the high average happiness in rich countries is based on a way of life that is detrimental to the average happiness in poor countries, or to the happiness of future generations. None of

this implies that happiness is not part of a good life or not an appropriate goal, but merely that it needs to be considered from a broad perspective. If one wants to consider happiness as a goal, then one obviously has to do so critically and carefully.

The objections of the Skidelskys against happiness are not convincing in view of these conclusions. Adding happiness to their list can reduce the dangers of arbitrariness and paternalism. In promoting happiness people can take into account results of empirical research. And subjective happiness is, additionally, about the appreciation of life *by the people themselves*. This means that the dangers of arbitrariness and paternalism are relatively small. That is a major advantage, especially in multicultural societies with difficult discussions about standards and values.

### **Insatiability: human nature or social organization?**

Also in their analysis of insatiability the Skidelskys could have spent more attention to available results of research. On that point there are at least two important conclusions from psychology, as described by Maslov and Ryan and Deci (2000).

- a. Security, which includes physical safety, is one of the most basic human needs.
- b. People always need new challenges to be able to use and to develop their genetic potential.

The first conclusion is important because it provides an explanation of the high level of stress in rich countries, as observed by the Skidelskys. That level is indeed high and can be a consequence of job insecurity (Ott, 2012, Chapter 12). It is not a calamity to earn little, or less than one would prefer, but job insecurity is serious since unemployment can lead to a complete loss of income, with very negative psychological and social consequences. This also explains that people continue to strive for personal wealth. Personal wealth reduces the vulnerability in the event of unemployment or illness. This relates not only to the vulnerability of the people themselves, but also to the vulnerability of their partners and children.

The second conclusion is also important. People always need challenges, but it is crucial to recognise that there are more challenges than a paid job or making some profit. People can also find challenges in social situations and personal commitments or ambitions. It is not a matter of human nature if people prioritize money, regardless of their individual circumstances, but a matter of social organization. If we want to slow down the rat-race, or if we want to make it more optional to participate, then we should reduce the importance of personal wealth for security. Only then people will get more individual freedom to develop their own personal way of life. It is fascinating and reassuring that the proposals of the Skidelskys are very effective in this respect. A basic income in particular creates more freedom to stay out of the rat-race, or to participate less intensively. It also reduces stress as a consequence of job insecurity.

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