

# Happiness and Harm

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# THE GHOSTBUSTERS FIRE HOUSE



## THE “HONEYMOON” PHASE



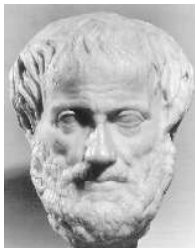
# THE GOAL OF HAPPINESS



Happiness is the only desirable end in itself. All other things are desirable as means to this end.



Happiness is the end to which all people aim.



Happiness is the central purpose of human life and a goal in itself.



## Happiness is...

*“There is no principle by which to determine with complete certainty what would make one truly happy.” (Kant)*

In other words:

**We all aim to be happy, but we do not thereby will the same means to that end.**

In still other words:

**We engage in ‘hedonic forecasting’.**

# HAVING IT ALL

Imagine that all of your preferences and desires are satisfied.

*How long will it take for you to expand your horizons, become more ambitious, and find yourself with as many unsatisfied desires as you had before?*



# Adaptation. Theory



Our history has accustomed us to certain levels of stimulation, and our judgments about current level of happiness **depend on whether it exceeds or falls short of what we are used to.**

## TWO CHARACTERISTICS

### **Contrast:**

We contrast new experiences with current circumstances.

Peak experiences lessen the impact of ordinary pleasures.

### **Habituation:**

We get used to things.

Reduces the value of new pleasures.

# COMPARATIVE WELL-BEING

Three scenarios

1. Everyone is equally well off.
2. Everyone is equally well off *except one person is better off.*
3. Everyone is equally well off *except one person is worse off.*

Which group is overall worse (objectively speaking)?

In which group do people feel most satisfied?

In which group do people feel least satisfied?





## RELATIVE DEPRIVATION



The **perception of a disparity** between one's situation and that of others.

We can change absolute deprivation without changing relative deprivation.

Arguably, relative deprivation is **more significant** in determining human quality of life.

*Can we increase well-being by increasing spending power?*

Will people who have an extreme stroke of good fortune be generally happier than people who have not been dealt good fortune?



# LOTTERY WINNERS AND ADAPTATION

**Winning results in an upward shift in our “baseline”  
– we adapt!**

\$50 million makes new pleasures available.

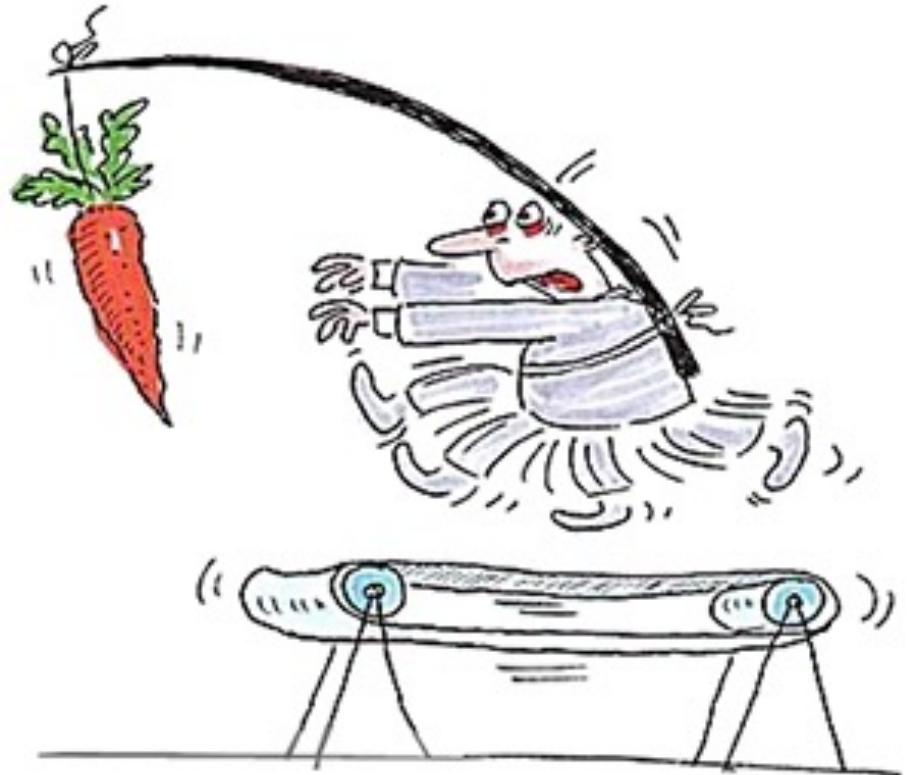
But ordinary experiences are now less enjoyable  
(**contrast**).

The thrill of winning wears off and we get used to our  
new circumstances (**habituation**).

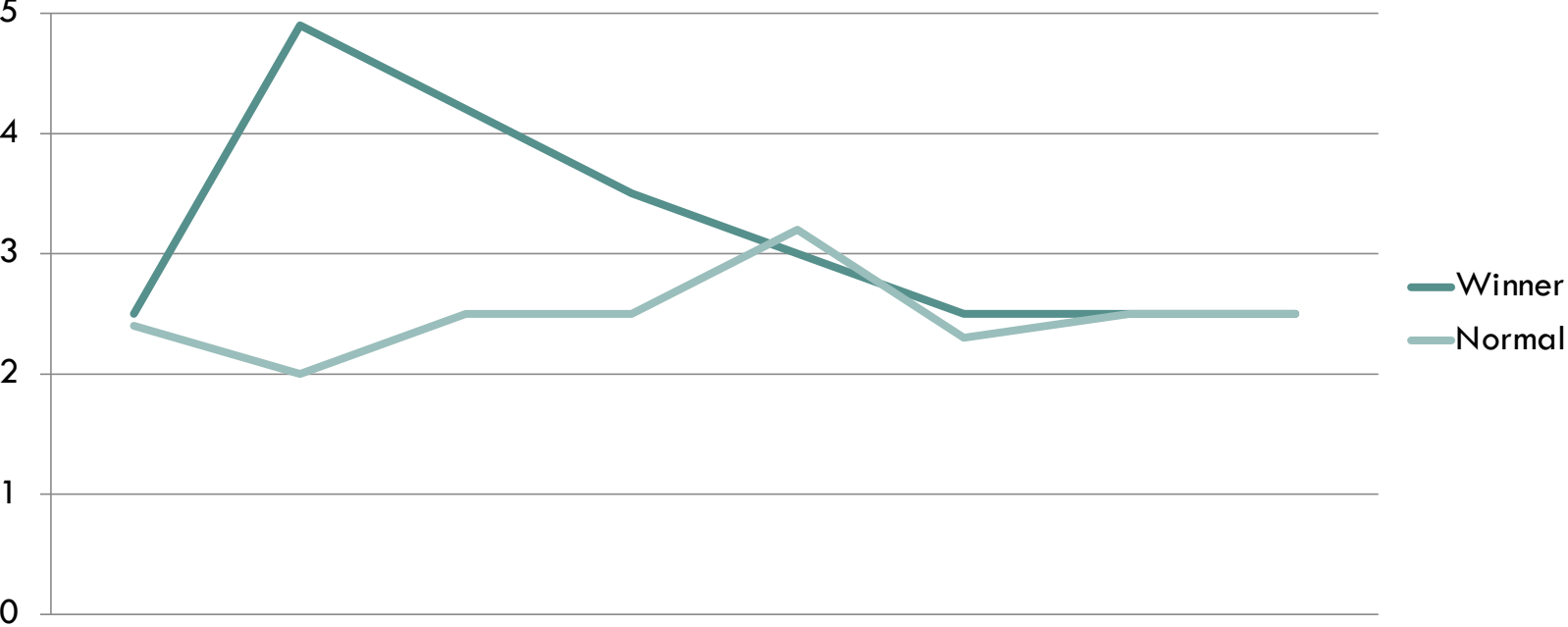
## THE HEDONIC TREADMILL

Things are judge by the extent to which they depart from a **baseline of past experience.**

But positive events are **absorbed into the new baseline.**



# HAPPINESS LEVELS



## EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

Winners rated everyday activities as *less pleasurable* than the control group.

- e.g., talking with a friend, watching TV, eating breakfast.

Winners and control group were *equally happy now*.

- Accident victims were less happy (4.0 vs. 3.0).
- But they were still above the midpoint!





## NOSTALGIA EFFECT

Accident victims recalled their past as happier.

Winners: 3.7

Control: 3.3

**Victims: 4.4 (!)**

# WHY AREN'T LOTTERY WINNERS HAPPIER?

Some alternative explanations:

- Winning causes stress.
- Creates new problems.
- Friends who don't want to ask for money shun the winner because they don't want to appear to want money.

**BUT THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE OF THIS.**





# RAPID RECALIBRATION



Winners: they won less than 1.5 years ago.



Accident victims: happened less than a year ago.

## ADDITIONAL DATA

Inhabitants of poorer cities or countries are not less happy than inhabitants of wealthier nations.

Happiness has not risen in the US after WWII even though overall income has risen.

We want to be better off **than others**, not just better off.



## ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS?

Is it pointless to pursue wealth?

Is adaptation theory just about money?



*California*



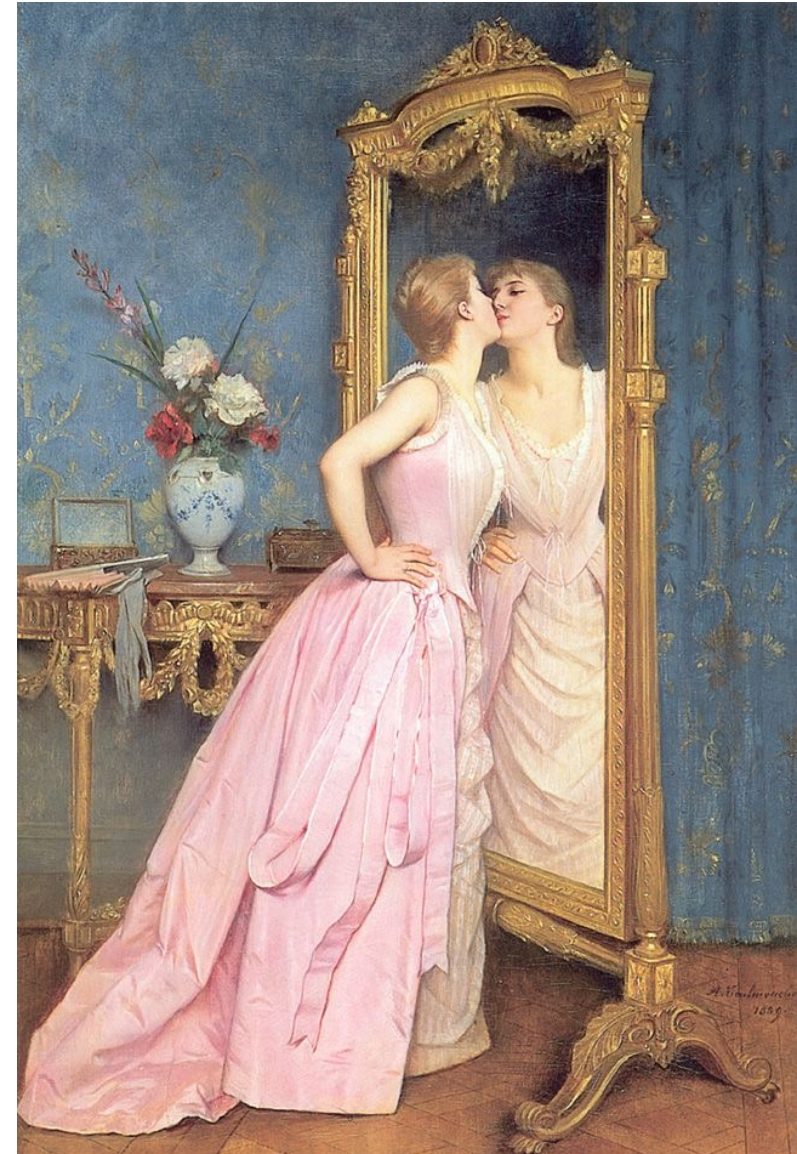
# AGING



65+ years old have average levels of happiness comparable to teens and 20 y/o.

## HOTTER AND HAPPIER?

Physical attractiveness correlated **at very low levels** with reports of happiness or well being.



# IS HAPPINESS RELATIVE?

Two senses of 'relative':

## **Person Relative**

What makes me happy isn't what makes you happy.

## **Parameter Relative**

What makes me happy now isn't going to continue making me happy.

## IS THERE AN ABSOLUTE BASELINE?

Perhaps happiness is 'relative' **only above a certain standard**, but we cannot drop below a certain minimum?

A recent study shows that \$75,000+ makes little difference.

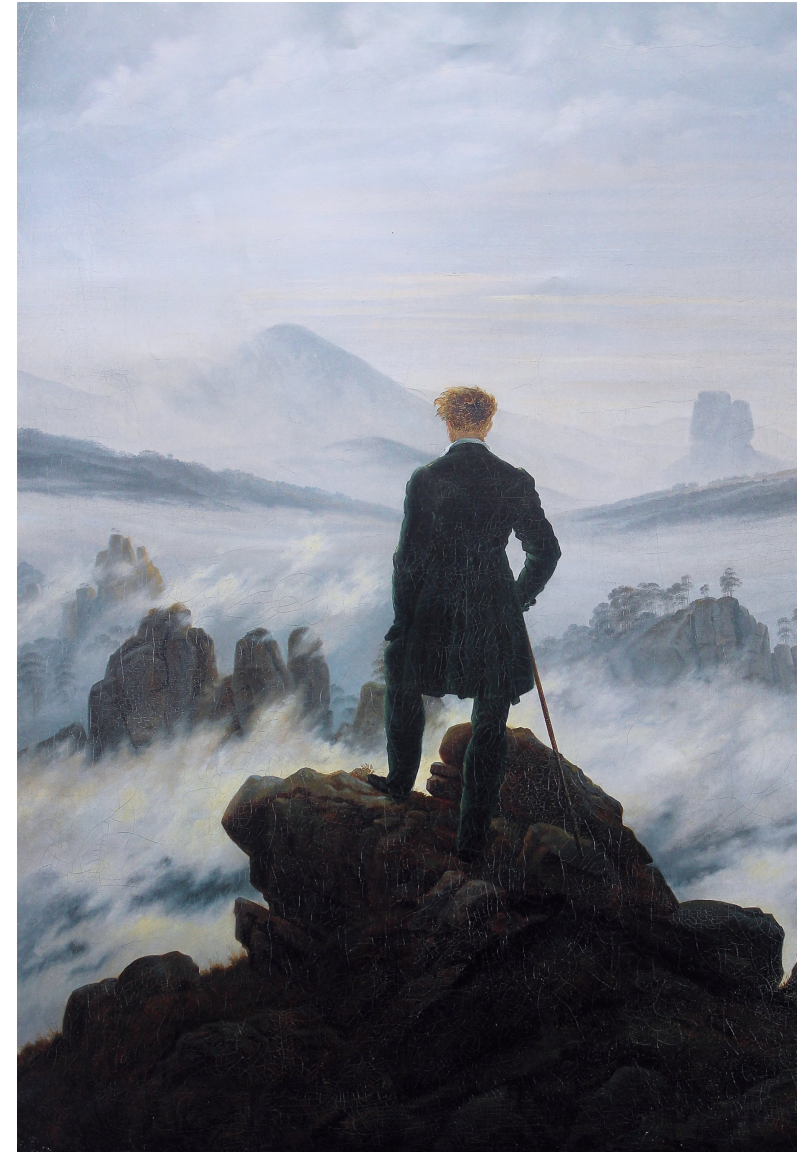




# THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS?

**If adaptation theory is true, how should we structure our lives? What should our goals be?**

- How to maintain flourishing relationships?
- How to be happy in our careers and other pursuits?
- How can we be happier overall?



# IS HAPPINESS ALL THAT MATTERS?

## **Truth?**

- Sham marriage and sham friendships

## **Morality?**

- Two worlds with identical levels of happiness and misery, but in one everyone is virtuous and the other vicious.

## **Higher pleasures?**

- Better Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

A person is sitting in a wheelchair on a beach. The person is wearing blue jeans and brown shoes. The wheelchair is silver and has large wheels. The background is a bright, hazy beach scene with the ocean and sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

## THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT BAD NEWS

**The same principle holds in reverse!**

- **Habituation** erodes the impact of the accident.
- A **contrast** effect that enhances mundane pleasures.

# EXCEPTIONS



# HOW TO BE HAPPIER?



## THE NEED FOR 'SHOCK' THERAPY

Dan Moller writes,

“It appears to be difficult permanently to raise or lower people’s levels of happiness **provided there are not continual “shocks,”** and provided a certain threshold has been reached. This view is supported by the finding that, when it comes to events (as opposed to persistent states, like being clinically depressed), almost nothing that happens to us has a significant impact on happiness beyond three months or so.” (*Love and Death*, p. 306)