

WHAT BRINGS US HAPPINESS? A NEW APPROACH IN ECONOMICS WHICH CONSIDERS THE WISDOM OF PROVERBS AND RELIGIONS

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Abstract I consider the strengths and weaknesses of the neoclassical paradigm in economics and also of the more recent, empirical approach taken by economists working on the question of what makes us happy. As an alternative approach, I propose that, to guide us in our discovery of how to be happy, we take into account the wisdom that mankind has accumulated over time and which is captured in proverbs and religions around the world. In exploring this approach, I list and explain the proverbs on happiness found in The Prentice-Hall Encyclopaedia of World Proverbs; I find that that they are consistent across cultures, and that they are consistent with Christianity and with Buddhism. I then consider proverbs about wealth and find that wealth is generally portrayed in a negative light. As before, I find that these proverbs are on the whole consistent across cultures, and that they are consistent with Buddhism and with Christianity. Finally, I ask what the implications of this wisdom are for policy, in particular for sustainable development and for the meaning and the measurement of progress. The paper includes a questionnaire for participants to fill in to help me assess the usefulness of this approach.

Keywords: happiness, proverbs, religions, economics, wealth

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1. Introduction – Why a new approach?

For the last sixty years or so, the dominant paradigm in economics, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, has been to regard happiness, as captured by the notion of utility, as being determined fundamentally by wealth. The higher the wealth, the higher the utility. The human capital model, where agents standing at the start of their working lives maximize lifetime income, is probably the best example of this paradigm.

Agents, as they are called, are only concerned with their own interest, and seek only material gains. Looking back, it is amazing that this paradigm has become dominant: it ignores the religious tradition of the West, Christianity, the insights of other disciplines like psychology, anthropology and psychology, and popular wisdom as to what makes us happy. The paradigm can be seen at work in ordinary people's lives: up to the 1960's, I am told, it was common to find whole neighbourhoods in London where people did not lock up their houses; today, this sort of behaviour is unheard of. It is not my objective here to try to explain why this happened, though this is an important question. Instead, I will concentrate on the recent evolution in economics, in particular how economists approach the question of happiness.

Discontent with the dominant paradigm is reflected in the fact that today in the UK, when we teach macroeconomics to our first year undergraduate students, we discuss how tight the link between well-being and GDP is, finding plenty of reasons as to why this link is not tight (see, for example, the popular textbook by John Sloman (2006)). However, having discussed these limitations, and having agreed upon them, we then proceed to ignore them! How amazing. I think that there are two reasons why we do so: firstly, because it is easy and convenient - we follow the textbook and do not have to disagree with anyone; secondly, because there is not really a satisfying, alternative textbook. To create such a textbook is, I believe, necessary².

As a reaction to the dominant paradigm, a new branch of economics has emerged in recent years with explicitly considers the link between economics and happiness. The fundamental criticism that these authors direct at the dominant paradigm is that the paradigm simply assumes that wealth makes us happy. At a slightly deeper level, they

² If there are colleagues who would like to participate in the writing of such a textbook, I'd be interested in speaking with them.

criticize the supporters of the dominant paradigm for assuming that they know what makes people happy. Instead, their approach is simply to ask people what it is that makes them happy. This approach is powerful and gives people the chance to express their views as to what makes them happy. A famous result that emerges from this literature is that a higher income is associated with higher declared levels of happiness, but only up to a certain level of income, after which income stops being a determinant of happiness. This could be because, having satisfied certain material needs for which income is necessary, people can concentrate on other things which make them happy. Another well established result is that the quality of relationships like friendship and family are important determinants of happiness.

The new economics of happiness approach has yielded significant insights. However, it has its limitations. First, it has the methodological limitation of comparing ratings by different people, sometimes of different ethnic groups, thus breaking the classic axiom of Non-Comparability of Interpersonal Utility. Though some have tried to resolve this problem (see Ng (1997)), it remains a thorn in the side of the approach because, I think, is part of the nature of the approach. Another limitation of the approach is that what people say in questionnaires may well be different from what they actually do, in which case one is left in doubt as to whether the respondent's stated intention or his actual behaviour reflect his or her true aspirations. For example, I may say that income is less important to me than family, but then I choose a very well-paid job which prevents me from spending time with my family. Thirdly, when making policy recommendations based on people's responses in questionnaires, the assumption that researchers make is that people know what is good for them. But is this necessarily true? Those of us who have gone through experiences which have changed the way we look at reality and what we consider to be important for our happiness would claim that we don't necessarily know what is good for us, and that we need guidance to discover what truly makes us happy, for example in the form of wise elders.

In the light of the limitations of both the dominant paradigm and of the approach embodied in the new economics of happiness, I propose another approach. This approach is to consider the wealth of knowledge and wisdom that mankind has accumulated over the course of history and which is found in proverbs and religions,

among other sources (for example children's stories). To disregard these sources of knowledge, as many economists do, is to throw away a precious jewel which time and experience have polished. There is widespread support for this view across people of different cultures. Furthermore, in Christianity³, and I suspect in Buddhism too, this approach is consistent with science. Indeed, according to the Catholic Church, faith and reason can never contradict each other. The downside of this approach is that, when there appears to be a dispute between what different proverbs say or different religions say it is often not obvious how to resolve it, so that the approach loses its applicability. However, it is the objective of this exploratory paper to show that there is a core of agreement between religions (and between proverbs).

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, we consider proverbs about happiness from around the world, assessing how consistent they are between cultures and with Buddhism and Christianity. In section 3, we repeat this exercise for proverbs about wealth. In section 4, I consider the implications of the approach I am proposing for sustainable development. In section 5, I consider the implications for the meaning and measurement of progress. In section 6, we draw some conclusions. The Appendix is a questionnaire for conference participants to help me assess the usefulness of the approach.

2. Proverbs about happiness from around the world

Wolfgang Mieder, linguist and author of the Prentice-Hall Encyclopaedia of World Proverbs (1986), says that proverbs are “small pieces of wisdom that have been handed down from generation to generation and that continue to be applicable in our modern technological age. Proverbs [...] have currency among the people because they contain a generally accepted insight, observation, and wisdom.” He goes on to say that proverbs have a universal appeal which transcends cultural, societal, intellectual, professional and ethnic barriers. Furthermore, “proverbs contain a basic philosophy of life or world view, which [...] shows that common people around the world believe in mankind's desire to live and good and decent life. [...] there appears

³ This is true in Catholicism, though I am not sure to what extent it can be said about Protestantism, which has adherents who interpret the Bible more literally than Catholics.

to be a certain pragmatic optimism in the majority of proverbs. They seem to say that “there is nothing new under the sun” and that “hope springs eternal”⁴. Finally proverbs use “wit, colourful language, imagery”, and often come in rhymes (which translations rarely retain) for strength of impact and for ease of memorizing. They command authority because of the wisdom they contain and which the recipients of the proverb recognize to an extent which varies from person to person. Finally, proverbs are versatile in so far as they can be applied to a wide range of discussions, and, by definition, are resilient to changes in circumstances.

Weber, Hsee and Sokolwska (1998) find evidence that long-standing cultural values, concerns and norms are reflected in a culture’s collective records and products like proverbs, which “store and transmit cultural wisdom”. According to one of their findings, participants agree that Chinese proverbs provide greater risk-taking advice than American proverbs regardless of the nationality of the respondent (American, Chinese from the PRC or German). Thus, the authors conclude, perceptions of proverbs are consistent with the finding that Chinese from the PRC are more risk-seeking than Americans when it comes to financial (i.e. material) risk (as opposed to social or relational risk). For our purposes, this result is useful in so far as proverbs appear to be good indicators of cultural attitudes.

I now present all the proverbs listed under “happiness” and “happy” which are found in the Prentice-Hall Encyclopaedia of World Proverbs. I have organized them in categories for ease of understanding; the reader is welcome to re-allocate them as he or she best sees fit (the number shown is that which appears in the Prentice-Hall Encyclopaedia) and to offer his or her own interpretations. I offer some comments and explanations of the proverbs, and indicate to what extent they are consistent with Christianity and Buddhism⁴. Being a Christian, I am more familiar with Christian than with Buddhist texts, so I hope that readers will excuse my limitations of knowledge, help me fill gaps in understanding, and correct misunderstandings. For reasons of time and space limitations I restrict myself to two religions; it would be

⁴ I chose Christianity because I am a Christian, and Buddhism because the conference at which this paper is presented is in Bangkok. Also, I believe that these two religions have in common a strong sense of responsibility towards all human beings and nature as a whole.

useful in future work to consider the other main religions, namely Judaism, Islam and Hinduism.

One may object that the information contained in proverbs is not resilient to changes in circumstances, that is, that proverbs come and go. I am not aware of any study that considers the longevity of proverbs. However, I can respond by saying that I do not believe that human nature has changed over time; rather, I believe that we have the same needs and desires as our forefathers many generations ago⁵. If proverbs are a response to these needs and desires, then there is good reason to believe that proverbs, too, have remained fundamentally unchanged over time. By “fundamentally”, I mean that their form may have changed, but not their essence. There is a process of selection whereby only those proverbs the content of which is not circumstance-specific pass the test of time and survive⁶.

A) THE UNIVERSAL CHARACTER OF HAPPINESS

7171. Happiness is desired by all (Indian/Tamil)

7181. Better be happy than wise (English/European)

I think that the first proverb is fairly self-evident and needs no further comment. The second proverb is unusual in the sense that it appears to contradict the message found in all religions that happiness and wisdom coincide. However, I suspect that the word wise here refers to intellectual, philosophical knowledge disconnected from intuition and emotion, hence cold and unable to bring happiness. Also, there could be an issue of the translation not faithfully respecting the original.

⁵ This is why we can read a story from a culture different from our own, written hundreds of years ago, and find it of relevance to our lives.

⁶ Some may think that we are living through extraordinary times of technological change characterized by the diffusion of information technology (computers, the internet, etc.). However, the technological changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution are no smaller than the ones we face today. Those changes did not make irrelevant the wisdom incorporated in proverbs and religions.

B) THE PAINFUL ROAD TO HAPPINESS

7169. For finding happiness one must walk till he be wearied (Turkish)

7176. Nobody reaps happiness without first undergoing hardships (Philippino)

Happiness can only be attained if one has realized what makes him or her happy. Often this involves going through the painful process of unmasking one's true self⁷, removing false concepts as to what makes us happy, or what Keating (1999) calls false programmes for happiness. The Dalai Lama speaks of delusion and false attachments. These affect everyone, to different degrees, and an early stage in the spiritual path consists in realizing that one suffers from such delusion. The link with Christianity and Buddhism here is very tight.

C) THE PRACTISE OF VIRTUE AS A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR HAPPINESS

7177. That is happiness which springs from virtue (Indian/Tamil)

7182. Happy is he that chastens himself (English/European)

7184. Happy is he that knows his follies in his youth (English/European)

The well-known civilizations of the past in what is now Europe, namely the Greeks and the Romans, were aware of the need to practise virtue in order to be happy⁸. So are Christians; for example, St. Thomas Aquinas states that happiness is secured through virtue and that it is a good attained by man's own will. The need for virtue in Buddhism is reflected in the eight ways to clarity (Bancroft (1984)), which include a number of "right" attitudes including right thinking, right speech and right action.

In the second proverb, the word "chasten" can be interpreted as "be humble". The word humility comes from the word humus, meaning soil, reflecting the need to recognize that our knowledge and wisdom are, in a sense, very limited. All spiritual

⁷ Many would agree that the most caring people we find on our journey in life are those who have suffered most and who are therefore most able to empathize with the sufferings of other people.

⁸ The recognition of this need seems to be re-gaining ground in our times; see for example the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.

traditions see humility as a virtue. In Buddhism, humility is one of the ten sacred qualities attributed to the Buddha of Compassion and is a sign of ego transcendence. For a Christian, his or her humility is greater the greater is his or her recognition that he or she sins. This recognition is a gift from God and leads to one's understanding that he or she is not better than other people (non-judgement).

D) WHERE DOES HAPPINESS BEGIN?

7170. Happiness begins where ambitions ends (Hungarian)

In both and Christianity and Buddhism, a disciple undergoes a process of purification from being ego-centred to being other- or God-centred. As I understand it, it is in this sense that the proverb calls for personal ambition to come to an end. The America Indians have a similar proverb: wisdom comes only when you stop looking for it and start living the life the Creator intended for you.

E) WHAT MAKES US HAPPY?

7180. True happiness consists in making others happy (Indian/Tamil)

7183. Happy is he that is happy in his children (English/European)

The first proverb coincides with both Christianity and Buddhism. In Christianity, St Paul quotes Jesus, who says "There is more happiness in giving than in receiving" (Acts of the Apostles). The closest economists have come to adopting this view is in the Neapolitan School of thought, which thrived in the 18th century in Southern Italy, and which had in Antonio Genovesi (1713-1769) its leading exponent. Genovesi said "It is a law of the universe that one cannot make oneself happy without making others happy" (quoted in Bruni and Zamagni (2004), page 84). In Buddhism, the Dalai Lama (1994) states that "As human beings we all want to be happy and free from misery. [...] Love and compassion, as sense of universal responsibility are the sources of peace and happiness".

The second proverb can be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition: “Sons are a gift from the Lord, like arrows in the hands of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth, happy the man who has his quiver full of them, he will not fear when enemies arrive” (Psalm 126/127). It also found in Chinese culture: “Do not seek for gold, jade, and suchlike valuables; rather desire that each of your descendants be virtuous” (Chiang (1961), page 258).

F) THE IMMATERIAL NATURE OF HAPPINESS

7168. All happiness is in the mind (English/European)

7185. He is not happy that knows not himself happy (English/European)

The first proverb says that material considerations play no role in bringing happiness. This is broadly consistent with Christianity: in one of the Gospels, a young man asks Jesus what he must do to follow him, in addition to obeying the ten commandments; Jesus tells him to sell everything, causing the young man to become sad, presumably because of his attachment to wealth. Many saints, like St Francis, chose to rid themselves of their possessions to follow Christ fully. This is found in Buddhism, too; indeed, this proverb strikes me as entirely consistent with Buddhism.

The second proverb indicates that man’s psychology can be very complex. From a Christian perspective, to be happy is to be “in the right place”, consistently with the etymology of the English word happy. Thus, if one does not know that he or she is in the right place, this being the place which God intends him to have, he cannot be happy. I am curious to know how a Buddhist would interpret this proverb; I suspect the answer is that, to experience the happiness which people naturally have within them, they need to bring that happiness to a level of consciousness, so that the proverb is consistent with Buddhism, too.

G) ON MANAGING AND GUARDING ONE’S HAPPINESS

7173. Happiness is not a horse, you cannot harness it (Russian)

7172. Happiness is guarded by bold warriors (Indian/Hindi)

7178. There is no happiness without jealousy (Russian)

The first proverb indicates that the pursuit of happiness is, in a sense, futile: to attain happiness, one needs to focus on the source of happiness, rather than happiness itself. There is a similar proverb (of unknown origin) that says the following: happiness is like a cat chasing its tail: the more the cat pursues it, the more it escapes him; but when the cat gets himself busy doing other things, the tail follows him wherever he goes.

The second proverb tells us that happiness requires dedication to be maintained. It can be easily lost. In Christianity, regular prayer is essential for one to be happy.

Similarly, In Buddhism I suspect that the ingrained practise of meditation is essential.

I am unclear about the meaning of the final proverb. From a Christian perspective, perhaps the logic is that, since there is no happiness without love (see proverb 7180 above), and since there is no love without jealousy (God himself being jealous when he observes his beloved people indulging in idolatry such as pursuing prestige), it follows that there is no happiness without jealousy⁹.

H) ON LOSING ONE'S HAPPINESS

7174. He that talks much of his happiness, summons grief (English/European)

7175. If you have happiness, don't use it all up (Chinese)

7179. Too much happiness ends in sorrow (Philippino)

I must admit that I find these proverbs a bit obscure. One interpretation consistent with my experience is as follows. If I blab about my happiness in a futile and time-wasting manner, as the first proverb says, the happiness which I have goes away. Once a close Korean Buddhist friend of mine told me that to speak silly things is to go against one of their "commandments" and is thus a "sin". This applies to Christians as

⁹ Hopefully there will be a Russian at the conference who can shed some light on this Russian proverb!

well. The second and third proverbs again urge moderation when in a state of happiness.

In summary, our brief exploration of proverbs from around the world would appear to suggest that different cultures are to a large extent in agreement over various issues surrounding the question of happiness. They are also largely in agreement with both Christianity and Buddhism.

It would be interesting to compare how many of the issues that occur in the above proverbs (such as the need for virtue, the importance of helping others, etc.) are included in questionnaires set by economists working on happiness. This would be a way of establishing how similar are the results of the empirical method used by economists working on happiness and those of the approach based on wisdom which I am suggesting.

3. Proverbs about wealth from around the world

In this section, I ask to what extent proverbs from around the world portray material (i.e. financial) wealth in a positive light. We then compare the answer to this question with that offered by Christianity and Buddhism.

Figure 1: How is wealth portrayed in proverbs?

Scale: from -2 to 2, with 2 = very positively, 0 = neutral and -2 = very negatively

Ref.	Proverb	Rating
17122	A man's wealth is his enemy (English/European)	-2
17123	Bear wealth; poverty will bear itself (English/European)	-1
17124	By labour comes wealth (African/Yoruba)	1
17125	Great wealth and content seldom live together (English/European)	-2
17126	Great wealth, great care (Dutch)	-2
17127	Great wealth will marry off even an old woman (Yiddish)	0
17128	He that marries for wealth sells his liberty (English/European)	-1
17129	If there is wealth, there is joy (Philippino)	2
17130	Ill-begotten wealth and illicit pleasure are both bad (Indian/Tamil)	-1
17131	In wealth beware of woe (English/European)	-2
17132	Inherited wealth has no blessing (African/Swahili)	-1

17133	It will do no good to have wealth that you won't use (Malagasy)	0
17134	Little avails wealth, where there is no health (English/European)	-1
17135	Much wealth brings many enemies (African/Swahili)	-2
17136	The best wealth is health (Welsh)	-1
17137	The greatest wealth is contentment with a little (English/European)	-2
17138	The rich man's wealth is enjoyed by crafty tradesmen (Greek)	-1
17139	The rich man's wealth swallows the morsel of the poor (Rumanian)	-2
17140	The unjustly acquired wealth never reaches the third generation (Serbian/Croatian)	-1
17141	The wealth which enslaves the owner is not wealth (African/Swahili)	-1
17142	There is no wealth where there are no children (Africa/Jabo)	-2
17143	There is no wealth without pouring out one purse into another (Serbian/Croatian)	-2
17144	Wealth and content are not always bedfellows (American)	-1
17145	Wealth and happiness, like smoke, vanish (Philippino)	-2
17146	Wealth can be concealed, but not poverty (Finnish)	-1
17147	Wealth can be sought, but reputation never (Philippino)	0
17148	Wealth counts not so much as good will nor as knowledge and pleasant speech (Greek)	-1
17149	Wealth is a fine thing, but to find an heir is not easy (African/Ashanti)	1
17150	Wealth is best known by want (English/European)	0
17151	Wealth is cautious (Greek)	1
17152	Wealth is an enemy to health (English/European)	-2
17153	Wealth is invited, but poverty invites itself (African/Shona)	0
17154	Wealth is like a pool: as soon as you dig a channel, it all runs out (Rumanian)	-1
17155	Wealth is like a rheum, it falls on the weaker parts (English/European)	2
17156	Wealth is like smoke (African/Fulani)	-2
17157	Wealth is not his who has it, but his who enjoys it (English/European)	0
17158	Wealth is not picked up like lice (African/Bemba)	-1
17159	Wealth is of no use to the dead (Philippino)	-1
17160	Wealth is short-lived (African/Jabo)	-1
17161	Wealth is the poison of pleasure and the root of sorrows (Indian/Hindi)	-2
17162	Wealth makes wit waver (English/European)	-1
17163	Wealth makes worship (English/European)	-2
17164	Wealth may be bequeathed to the children but it never reaches the grandchildren (Greek)	-1
17165	Wealth will not keep death away (Welsh)	-1
17166	Wealth without learning is like beauty without chastity (Indian/Tamil)	-1
17167	When there is wealth, there is power (Indian/Tamil)	1
17168	When you have wealth and fame, even strangers gather round; in times of poverty and lowliness, even relatives depart from you (Japanese)	-1
17169	Where wealth is established it is difficult for friendship to find a place (Russian)	-2
17170	Where wealth is, there sorrow is (Indian, Hindi)	-2
17171	Where wealth, there friends (English/European?)	-1
17172	Who seeks for wealth without previous wealth is like him who carries water in a sieve(Egypt)	-1
Average		-0.92
Mode		-1
Median		-1

The figures above are my own and of course they will vary from individual to individual; in the questionnaire which I intend to circulate at the conference, I ask participants for their view on this issue. The table above indicates that wealth is, on average, portrayed in a negative light in proverbs from around the world. It also suggests that, with some possible exceptions, there is general agreement among cultures as to the effects of wealth.

This attitude towards wealth is consistent with both Christianity and Buddhism: pursuit of and attachment to wealth is seen negatively, as it gets in the way of helping others. In Christianity, “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven”. Furthermore, “one cannot serve both God and money”, and in “serving one will not serve the other”.

This conclusion confirms the conclusion reached by economists’ studies of happiness, that is, that income does not bring happiness beyond a certain level of income. Since income and wealth are positively correlated, the content of the proverbs (and of Buddhism and Christianity) and the empirical evidence coincide. Here therefore is an example where the approach adopted by economists studying happiness and the approach which considers wisdom as reflected in proverbs/religions coincide.

4. Implications for sustainable development

What do proverbs and religions have to say about sustainable development? From what emerges in my exploratory research, it would seem to be quite a lot. Below, I present a number of proverbs (various sources), starting with two American Indian proverbs¹⁰.

When we show our respect for other living things, they respond with respect for us
(American Indian proverb)

¹⁰ Source: www.quoteland.com

Take only what you need and leave the land as you found it (American Indian)

When a man moves away from nature his heart becomes hard (American Indian)
American Indians have a deep appreciation for man's link with mother Earth. They consider nature to be a gift from the gods, as a consequence of which it should be revered and treated with respect at all times¹¹. This respect is most visible in the first proverb. The second proverb is in sharp contrast with how the land is exploited in many parts nowadays; it is radical in the sense that not only should the land not be used to generate a surplus, even if it is a surplus consistent with sustainable development, rather it should only be used to satisfy man's material needs. The third proverb serves as a warning, since in urbanized societies people tend to have very limited contact with nature.

Let us now consider three Asian proverbs¹²:

The sea begins in the mountains (Asian)

The wealth of the sea belongs to the living, the dead and the yet unborn (Asian)

Our struggle is for the future: ours and that of the fish (Asian)

The first proverb is a wonderfully succinct depiction of the tight inter-connectedness of the whole of nature: what we do to the mountain affects the sea. The second proverb eloquently describes how the produce of the sea is, from the point of view of justice, everyone's; indeed it is not only of our generation, but of those to come too. Notice how similar this statement is to the original, landmark definition of sustainable development presented by the World Commission on Environment and Development' (the Brundtland Commission): "Development that meets the needs of the present

¹¹ The story of Moby Dick can be used to illustrate this point. When Captain Ahab attacks the whale for the first time, he loses his leg; when he does so a second time, his ship is sunk and he dies. Captain Ahab received a warning that his life would be jeopardized if he pursued the whale, but paid no attention to it and paid the price.

¹² Kurien (1998) says that these proverbs can be found in different parts of Asia.

without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The final proverb is a witty way of saying that the future of humanity’s food stock is intrinsically linked with the future of humanity itself.

It is natural for Christians and Buddhists alike to identify with these proverbs. In Christianity, man, because of his great intelligence, is master of the Earth and a consequence he is responsible for it; he is the Earth’s steward. In Buddhism, meditating on the inter-connectedness of the universe should awaken in us a sense of responsibility towards the universe as a whole. We thus have a core wisdom that we can build on as we think about how best to help people achieve their potential while at the same time protecting the environment.

5. Implications for the meaning and measurement of progress

One of the most significant proverbs that we came across in section 3 was under the heading “what makes us happy?”. That proverb was “True happiness consists in making others happy”. We saw that this is a central belief in both Christianity and Buddhism. In connection with this piece of wisdom, I would like to report a quote from Mother Teresa of Calcutta, since I think that it can be of great help to all of us in the modern world and to economists in particular: “We will be judged not on the quantity of work we put in, but by the quantity of love that we put in our work”. By love, Christians mean to wish and to work for the well-being of others.

Why is this quote by Mother Teresa potentially so useful? Because the modern world, particularly in the so-called developed countries, places too great a focus on quantity, efficiency and competition. First year university students in the UK and in the USA taking economics are taught that competition is the key to efficiency, that is, the greatest possible quantity produced. By focusing on efficiency as the aim, we implicitly tell our students that this is what ultimately matters in economics. We also teach them to see competition as essential to the pursuit of efficiency, the ultimate goal. This focus shapes their mentality for the rest of their studies, and, I am convinced, even beyond.

Now, efficiency is good and it does matter. We want to produce abundant food cheaply and at low cost to feed those who have too little to eat. But is that what economics is all about? Competition, too, can be healthy, look for example at sports. But do we really believe that competition is the key to economic success? Should efficiency and competition be the foundation stones of economics and of our society in general? I do not think so.

The wisdom contained in the proverbs that we saw previously, and in Buddhism and Christianity, suggests that the foundation stone is the quality of our relationships with one another, and with the rest of the natural world. In her quote, Mother Teresa is saying that we should not focus on the quantity of the things we produce, or on the number of hours of work we put in, but on the love that is in our work and in all our actions. This, I believe, is the meaning of progress. If we were to accept this, we would have a progressive paradigm shift. How could we measure this progress?

The paradigm shift would imply less emphasis on production of material goods and more on relational goods, consistently with the findings of economists doing empirical work on the determinants of happiness. Such a shift in emphasis would be consistent with what the aforementioned proverbs say about happiness and wealth, and with Christianity and Buddhism. The extent to which we draw on the planet's resources would decline, in line with sustainable development. A reduced work-load would imply more time spent with family and friends, which is measurable, and a lower level of stress, which too is measurable¹³. Some might argue that lower GDP growth may result in higher unemployment. However, this criticism does not take into account that the paradigm shift would affect firms' objectives: rather than employees being an instrument to maximize profits, firms would seek to maximize employees' (and other stakeholders') well-being subject to the constraint that profits be non-negative. Such an emphasis on employees' well-being implies that, in the face of lower demand, firms would be willing to sacrifice a slice of profits rather than dismiss

¹³ The shift towards relational goods and closer community ties is likely to have positive repercussions for critical variables like the suicide, abortion and homicide rates.

workers¹⁴. Employees' satisfaction levels can be assessed with questionnaires, and the elasticity of employment in response to shifts in demand can be measured, too¹⁵.

Finally, how would the paradigm shift affect the study of economics? As a result of economic agents displaying increased altruism, and thus taking into account the externalities caused by their actions, the market outcome would approach the social optimum more frequently, reducing the need for government intervention. There is a growing literature in this field; see, for example, *The Handbook of the Economics of Giving, Altruism and Reciprocity* (2006), edited by Kolm and Ythier. I expect that, with the market outcome approaching the social optimum more frequently, researchers' attention would shift away from how to achieve the social optimum, towards discussing exactly what sort of social optimum we wish to achieve. Indeed, this is already happening, as reflected in the rise of many indicators of well-being which are alternatives to GDP growth alone, such as the GPI¹⁶.

6. Conclusion

With the rise of modern technology, and the need to join forces at a global level to combat the problems of terrorism and environmental damage, we inhabitants of the world are increasingly discovering about each other's values, attitudes and preferences. In spite of our differences, we are united by a common objective, happiness. This paper has attempted to show that we are also united by a core set of values, reflected in proverbs and religions. We can build on these values to find agreements on the important issues which we face in our times.

Specifically, this paper has suggested a new approach to the study of happiness by economists, which takes into consideration the wisdom which mankind has accumulated over time and which is found in proverbs and religions. In particular, I have considered Christianity and Buddhism. I then applied this approach to the

¹⁴ It would be useful to formally study the macroeconomic implications of a change in emphasis away from profits maximization and toward employee retention, with a view to establishing the exact consequences for employment.

¹⁵ Clearly this measure is only meaningful if employers can dismiss workers but choose not to, i.e. if legal restrictions on dismissing workers are weak.

¹⁶ This conference itself reflects a shift in emphasis which, it seems to me, is gradually gaining ground.

question of sustainable development and to the question of how progress can be defined and measured. I hope to have shown that this is a potentially very beneficial approach. I do not see it so much as a substitute for those approaches that are already being used, such as asking people what makes them happy, but rather as a potent aid in understanding what makes us happy.

To help me understand how useful the approach I am recommending is, I have drawn up a questionnaire for the conference participants to kindly fill in. I am hoping that the responses will help me in deciding how to pursue this line of research. As far as considering the large number of proverbs and popular sayings in the world is concerned, I am aware that I have only started to scratch the surface of the barrel. Furthermore, I regard it as a prerogative to take into account the contributions of the other main religions, namely Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. Only by doing so will the approach I am proposing truly embrace the whole of humanity and hence deserve to be called global.

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APPENDIX - A questionnaire for conference participants

*** I WOULD BE GRATEFUL if you could take a few minutes to help me by filling in the questionnaire below. ***

What is your reaction to the approach proposed in this paper?

What are the good features of the approach?

What are the bad features of the approach?

Please rate the following:

	Very good	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
Quality of the content					
Clarity of presentation					
Choice of proverbs					
Treatment of Buddhism					
Treatment of Christianity					
Relevance to conference					
Relevance to your work					

Do you recommend that I pursue this line of research? Please circle: YES NO

How much do you agree with the following proverbs about happiness?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Happiness is desired by all					
Better happy than wise					
For finding happiness one must walk till he be wearied					
Nobody reaps happiness without first undergoing hardships					
Happiness begins where ambitions ends					
That is happiness which springs from virtue					
Happy is he that chastens himself					
Happy is he that knows his follies in his youth					
True happiness consists in making others happy					
Happy is he that is happy in his children					
All happiness is in the mind					
He is not happy that knows not himself happy					
Happiness is not a horse, you cannot harness it					
Happiness is guarded by bold warriors					
There is no happiness without jealousy					
He that talks much of his happiness, summons grief					
If you have happiness, don't use it all up					
Too much happiness ends in sorrow					

What is your line of work?

Are you a male or female? (Please circle) MALE FEMALE

How old are you? _____

What is your religion, if any? _____

Finally, please indicate how, in your view, wealth is portrayed in the proverbs below:

Scale: from -2 to 2, with 2=very positively, 0=neutral and -2=very negatively

Proverb	Rating
A man's wealth is his enemy	
Bear wealth; poverty will bear itself	
By labour comes wealth	
Great wealth and content seldom live together	
Great wealth, great care	
Great wealth will marry off even an old woman	
He that marries for wealth sells his liberty	
If there is wealth, there is joy	
Ill-begotten wealth and illicit pleasure are both bad	
In wealth beware of woe	
Inherited wealth has no blessing	
It will do no good to have wealth that you won't use	
Little avails wealth, where there is no health	
Much wealth brings many enemies	
The best wealth is health	
The greatest wealth is contentment with a little	
The rich man's wealth is enjoyed by crafty tradesmen	
The rich man's wealth swallows the morsel of the poor	
The unjustly acquired wealth never reaches the third generation	
The wealth which enslaves the owner is not wealth	
There is no wealth where there are no children	
There is no wealth without pouring out one purse into another	
Wealth and content are not always bedfellows	
Wealth and happiness, like smoke, vanish	
Wealth can be concealed, but not poverty	
Wealth can be sought, but reputation never	
Wealth counts not so much as good will nor as knowledge and pleasant speech	
Wealth is a fine thing, but to find an heir is not easy	
Wealth is best known by want	
Wealth is cautious	
Wealth is an enemy to health	
Wealth is invited, but poverty invites itself	
Wealth is like a pool: as soon as you dig a channel, it all runs out	

Wealth is like a rheum, it falls on the weaker parts	
Wealth is like smoke	
Wealth is not his who has it, but his who enjoys it	
Wealth is not picked up like lice	
Wealth is of no use to the dead	
Wealth is short-lived	
Wealth is the poison of pleasure and the root of sorrows	
Wealth makes wit waver	
Wealth makes worship	
Wealth may be bequeathed to the children but it never reaches the grandchildren	
Wealth will not keep death away	
Wealth without learning is like beauty without chastity	
When there is wealth, there is power	
When you have wealth and fame, even strangers gather round; in times of poverty and lowliness, even relatives depart from you	
Where wealth is established it is difficult for friendship to find a place	
Where wealth is, there sorrow is	
Where wealth, there friends	
Who seeks for wealth without previous wealth is like him who carries water in a sieve	

*** THANK YOU ***