

# A global history of happiness

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**Abstract:** Happiness is an increasingly prominent topic of interest across numerous academic fields. However, the literature can sometimes imply it is predominantly a modern concern. Relatedly, critics have argued that contemporary scholarship on happiness is Western-centric, yet in so doing can appear to suggest that happiness is mainly a Western preoccupation. However, taking an expansive view of happiness – defining it broadly as a desirable mental experience – one can appreciate that versions of this phenomenon have been of interest to humans across cultures and throughout history. To articulate this perspective, this paper offers a brief overview of 14 different eras, spanning a range of global regions, in each case highlighting concepts and concerns that bear some close resemblance to happiness. In so doing, the paper encourages a deeper and more inclusive understanding of this vital topic.

**Keywords:** happiness; wellbeing; history; cross-cultural

## 1. Introduction

In the modern era, arguably few phenomena are as valued or sought after as happiness. Indeed, variants of this state have been a prominent human concern throughout recorded history. Of course, most cultures did not call the experience in question ‘happiness.’ This term only emerged in English in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century – preceded by the adjective ‘happy’ in the late 14<sup>th</sup> – both of which implied being lucky and favoured by fortune (McMahon, 2006). Such meanings are reflected in their etymological roots in the Old Norse *hap*, which similarly underpins terms like happenstance. It was then not until around the 1590s that happiness began to take on its current character of generically signifying – on our expansive reading of the concept – a desirable mental experience. Thus, ‘happiness’ is a relatively modern creation, and an English language one at that.

However, one could argue that most – perhaps even all – human cultures appear to have taken some interest in psychological states resembling those broadly denoted by the term happiness. But one would not necessarily appreciate this point from reading much of the contemporary scholarship on this topic. Some of the literature gives the impression that happiness is mainly or even exclusively a *modern* concern (Ahmed, 2007). Relatedly, critics have argued that modern scholarship on happiness is Western-centric, influenced in particular by the values and traditions of the United States (Becker & Marecek, 2008), and in so doing can also imply that happiness is mainly a *Western* preoccupation. While these critiques have their merit, this paper proposes we ought not to take those lines of thought too far, and that psychological states which are at least *somewhat* comparable to modern notions of happiness have been of interest throughout global history.

To that end, the paper offers a brief overview of ideas relating to happiness – and wellbeing

more broadly – from 14 historical eras, from all corners of the globe. In so doing, we are heeding the recent call from Muthukrishna et al. (2021) to understand and approach psychology as a “historical science,” in which “traces of past human cognition accessible through historical texts and artifacts can serve as a valuable, and almost completely unutilized, source of psychological data” (p.717). The ideas featured here vary in how close they are to some modern conceptions of happiness (such as hedonic states of positive affect). However, if one takes an expansive enough view of the topic – as we do, as elucidated in an expansive definition of happiness discussed in the next section – then all the ideas below are at least somewhat relevant. As such, to contextualise and ground the narrative, we shall briefly review how the term happiness tends to be deployed in contemporary scientific discourse. This will set the parameters for the discussion, and indicate the wide scope of the psychological terrain that may be relevant here. We will then touch upon 13 previous eras, beginning at the dawn of civilisation and culminating in the modern age.

## **2. Scientific perspectives**

In considering modern uses of the term happiness, it is first worth situating it relative to kindred concepts. The following is a basic set of orienting definitions that, though not the only way of configuring the territory, is congruent with most of the relevant literature. We can start by considering wellbeing, which most scholars regard as an overarching and all-encompassing concept that includes happiness (De Chavez et al., 2005). Broadly speaking, wellbeing can be defined as including all the manifold ways in which human beings can be, do, and live well. There are many ways of conceptualising and subdividing this complex terrain, but one intuitive approach is to differentiate between physical and mental wellbeing, which map onto the near-universal mind-body distinction, however that is variously conceptualized (Durkheim, 2013; Henrich, 2020). We might then also include social wellbeing, as reflected in the WHO’s (1948) definition of health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity.” Finally, some scholars have also argued for recognizing spiritual wellbeing (Larson, 1996; Cloninger et al., 2010; VanderWeele et al., 2021).

We can then introduce further nuance by viewing all forms of wellbeing as arrayed upon a spectrum between a negative and a positive pole – a metaphor developed by proponents of fields like positive psychology as a way of highlighting their relevance and value (and bringing renewed focus to the positive pole of mental wellbeing). Let us now incorporate two additional concepts, illness and health, denoting the negative territory of each spectrum as illness, and the positive territory as health. So, we can speak of physical illness and health, mental illness and health, and even social or spiritual illness and health (although these latter usages are less common). The metaphor is imperfect: all four dimensions are in themselves multidimensional (e.g., there are numerous forms or aspects of mental illness and health), and people may be regarded as being concurrently situated at various points along all these various internal spectra, doing poorly on some and better on others. Indeed, regarding mental wellbeing, the ‘dual continua’ model suggests that mental illness and health are better treated as disconnected – physiologically, functionally, experientially – and that people can experience aspects of illness and health at the same time (Keyes, 2002). Nevertheless, it is a useful guiding image for now.

With respect to all dimensions, wellbeing can be seen as the relative absence of illness, and/or relative presence of health. There is, naturally and rightly, often a strong focus on the negative territory of the spectra, on curing or at least ameliorating illness. This is the prerogative of fields such as medicine and physiotherapy for physical illness, psychiatry and psychotherapy for mental illness, social work for aspects of social illness, and certain aspects of theology and religion for spiritual illness. These fields do often aim to push people into positive territory, but broadly

speaking prioritise getting people towards at least the relative neutrality of 'zero' (i.e., absence of illness). This aim is reflected in Sigmund Freud's famous remark that the goal of psychotherapy was realistically limited mainly to turning "hysterical misery into ordinary unhappiness" (Breuer & Freud, 1955, p.308). Bringing people to 'zero' is of course laudable. But crucially, absence of illness does not necessarily entail the substantive and active presence of health. This is where the spectrum metaphor asserts its value. A person might be relatively free of physical or mental illness, and in that sense not suffering in negative territory. However, this does not mean they are necessarily flourishing in positive territory. Instead, they may just be languishing around 'zero' – not ill *per se*, but not excelling physically or mentally either (Keyes, 2007).

Thus, there is increasing interest in exploring the positive territory of these spectra. With physical wellbeing, this means not only striving towards the absence of illness and disease, but also accentuating the positive dimensions of physical health (Farrelly, 2021). This might include, for instance, helping people to develop a nutritious health-promoting diet and cultivate good patterns of behaviour and exercise. Similarly, social wellbeing is the focus of some aspects of public policy, education, and community organizing, which include efforts to improve society. Spiritual wellbeing is the prerogative of theology, religion, philosophy, and spiritual practices. And, most relevantly here, there is ever-more attention paid to the positive territory of the mental spectrum – not only to reducing illness, but the presence of positive mental health – as driven by fields like positive psychology.

Here is where happiness re-enters the conversation. Essentially, much of the positive mental territory could be deemed the realm of happiness, which one might define simply and also expansively as a desirable mental experience (or, alternatively, as a satisfying experience of living well). To further clarify: 'desirable' means that this mental experience is generally perceived as being coveted, pursued, valued, and appreciated (although some forms of happiness may not meet all these criteria for all people), or is recognized as such upon experience; 'mental' is used expansively to encompass the full range of psychological processes and subjective experiences (including emotions and beliefs but also dispositions, such as the virtues); and 'experience' refers to a condition or mode of being that is not permanent, but which can vary widely in duration (from a fleeting emotion lasting seconds to a durable way of being that could even last for years).

Recent decades have seen a surge of scholarship exploring this positive terrain of happiness, beginning in earnest in the 1930s. Initially, although fields like psychology were interested in mental wellbeing, they mostly focused on the 'negative' illness-centred half of the continuum – with important exceptions such as William James's (1902) interest in religious experiences – as reflected in Freud's aforementioned remark. But around the 1930s onwards, a new wave of scholars emerged, influenced by humanism, who advocated for a renewed focus on the positive potential of humankind. Foremost among these were Rogers (1951) and Maslow (1962), widely regarded as twin founders of humanistic psychology (with Rogers' 'person-centred' therapeutic approach and Maslow's research into human motivational hierarchies). They explicitly regarded their work as a counterpart to the deficit-based focus of clinicians like Freud. As Maslow influentially wrote (establishing the continua metaphor itself), "It is as if Freud supplied us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half." Which brings us back to our central focus here. For this 'healthy half' refers to the positive territory of the mental wellbeing spectrum, the broad sweep of terrain encompassed by the label 'happiness' (in the expansive way this term is being used here).

In the decades since, scientific research and theory on happiness has steadily accumulated. Most scholarship has focused on two main 'types' of happiness: hedonic and eudaimonic. This distinction has a long pedigree, often traced back to Aristotle (1999), as elucidated further below.

Hedonic happiness is essentially about feeling good. The dominant construct here is ‘subjective wellbeing’ (Diener et al., 1985), generally seen as comprising two main dimensions: cognitive (feeling good *about* one’s life, i.e., life satisfaction); and affective (feeling good *in* one’s life, i.e., positive emotions). By contrast, eudaimonia pertains more to self-development, and includes notions like the cultivation of character, the pursuit of truth and knowledge, and a commitment to ethical practice and improvement (Ryff, 1989). These are not the only potential forms of happiness though, and scholars have proposed expanding this taxonomy in various ways. For example, Wong (2011) noted that spiritual experiences tend to be absent from conceptualizations of hedonia and eudaimonia, yet are highly valued by many people. As such, he proposed the notion of ‘chaironic’ happiness – based on the Greek *chairō*, which denotes states such as gladness, joy, and bliss, but also grace and blessing – defining it as “feeling blessed and fortunate because of a sense of awe, gratitude, and oneness with nature or God” (p.70). This would naturally overlap with the idea of spiritual *wellbeing*, yet there may be value in differentiating them: spiritual wellbeing could denote the *relationship* a person has with phenomena deemed sacred, whereas chaironic happiness depicts an *experiential* state. So, even while hedonic and eudaimonic forms of happiness dominate modern research, these do not exhaust its potential forms, and as the field evolves so too will its constructs and conceptualizations of happiness.

Having looked at the main approaches to happiness in current scientific discourse and set some rough parameters for what we mean by this central term, the paper now explores various perspectives on happiness in earlier eras. These cultures may not have used terms for which ‘happiness’ is the closest English equivalent. But it is generally accepted that people in all times and places have enquired into questions of wellbeing, namely, how best to be, do, and live well (McMahon, 2006). In many cases, for example, societies have been concerned with elucidating conditions of natural laws to which individuals should conform in order to experience prosperity and wellbeing. Then, more specifically, people have also widely delved into the topic of happiness, insofar as we use this term generically and expansively to speak broadly of a desirable mental experience. In that respect, here we consider a selection of philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions, showing how these have developed ideas and approaches pertaining to happiness (and wellbeing more broadly). Of course, the coverage cannot even come close to being exhaustive, given the brief nature of this paper. But it will suffice to indicate the breadth and depth of thinking worldwide around these issues. To give some structure to the narrative, we’ll survey the terrain in a rough chronological order, beginning with some of the earliest recorded civilizations, and culminating in the modern era.

### 3. Indigenous perspectives

Among the earliest recorded cultures are those indigenous to Australia, to which humans are generally thought to have first migrated from Africa some 50,000 years ago, and thereafter developed a rich and complex culture. Forms of rock art, for instance, have been definitively dated to 26,000 BCE, with other examples potentially far older (David et al., 2013). Throughout this long developmental arc, ideas and insights pertaining to happiness began to emerge.

A powerful example is the nexus of thought and practice encompassed by the term *aljerrenge*. This signifies the complex cultural–religious belief system of the Arrente, though other Aboriginal peoples possess comparable knowledge systems under other names (e.g., *djugurba* among the Warlpiri) (Munn, 1973, p.23). It is sometimes rendered in English as ‘Dreamtime’ or ‘the Dreaming,’ terms coined by anthropologist William Stanner (2009) in the 1950s. His coinages have been criticised by some for being a mistranslation or at least a non-ideal rendering of the original terms (Swain, 1993, p.21), even if his respect for these concepts and the cultures that

originated them has been widely recognised. However, his intent seems to have been to highlight the epistemological significance of dreams as a means of acquiring knowledge, including receiving guidance from ancestors.

In any case, above all, concepts like *aljerre-nge* appear to denote holistic, all-encompassing ways of experiencing and perceiving all forms of life as interconnected. Stanner also coined the term 'everywhen' for this mode of understanding, encompassing past, present, and future. No mere synonym for 'timeless' or 'eternal,' it acknowledges the ongoing relevance of the primordial ancestral beings and powers that shaped the world (Skerritt et al., 2016). Moreover, it is not simply an 'origin myth': everywhen is a vibrant, complex, *living* reality. Aboriginal peoples past and present engage with this reality – also frequently described as 'the Law' – for guidance about how they should best live, from their relationship with the land to their personal interactions (Bellah, 2011, p.150). "Its basic connotation," writes anthropologist M.J. Meggitt, "is of an established and morally-right order of behaviour...from which there should be no divergence" (quoted in Bellah, 2011, p.150).

Although as modern Western scholars we may not be able to fully understand and appreciate the complex nuances and lived realities of paradigms like *aljerre-nge* – and are naturally wary of anachronistically imposing our concepts upon cultures that are remote from us in time and space – we may nevertheless be able to tentatively see its relevance to happiness, at least insofar as the expansive way we are deploying this term. After all, it is a vision of how humans ought to best live in the world, including a holistic appreciation of the interconnectedness of life and respect for ancestral tradition. As such, this vision falls within the purview of our conception of happiness – and certainly its more profound or elevated forms – since within it are contained ideas and values in relation to desirable mental experiences (e.g., of personal alignment with a cosmic order or Law). As such, concepts like *aljerre-nge* could arguably be regarded as one of our oldest extant perspectives on happiness.

#### 4. Egyptian perspectives

While ideas and practices potentially pertaining to happiness were forming among the peoples indigenous to Australia, comparable developments were taking place in Africa. Indeed, as the birthplace of humankind, there we find traces of markers of cultural evolution dating back *hundreds of thousands* of years. In West Turkana in Kenya, for example, there is evidence of tools made by early hominid species that may be 3.3 million years old (Harmand et al., 2015). *Homo sapiens* are then thought to have emerged around 200,000 years ago, although newer discoveries in Morocco suggest it may have even been 300,000 (Hublin et al., 2017). Thereafter, our evolution is tentatively marked by various developmental milestones, leading to the incremental creation of human culture. For instance, evidence of 'modern' tools by the San hunter-gatherers of South Africa have been found dating to 44,000 BCE (d'Errico et al., 2012).

Within this gradual emergence of culture, we see the development of abstract thought, including ideas relating to happiness. Africa is of course a vast continent, home to many peoples and societies, so it does not make sense to refer generically to a monolithic 'African culture.' So, by way of example, we might highlight the achievements of Egypt in particular, this being one of the first recorded civilizations – a complex society characterised by urban development and the creation of symbolic communication and artefacts – dating back as early as 5,500 BCE, and coalescing around 3,100 BCE with the formation of the first Early Dynasty (Wilkinson, 2002).

Among the innovations attributed to Egyptian culture are conceptual breakthroughs that touch upon happiness, broadly construed. For instance, the Egyptians developed a complex mythic structure that included symbolic representations of principles that were beginning to be

recognised as vital to happiness. Particularly important here is *Maat*, the daughter of the Sun God *Re*, and Goddess of truth, justice, balance, and harmony (Ferguson, 2016). In *The Book of the Dead* (ca. 1550 BCE), individuals are depicted as having to face a final judgment (this being the earliest known development of this concept), in which their innermost character would be weighed in the balance against *Maat* (Budge, 1895). This ritual underscored the importance of cultivating happiness in the present – particularly forms we might today associate with eudaimonia – and stressed its link with post-mortem forms that are more hedonic in character. *Maat's* importance in part related to the need for the emerging society to manage the competing needs of diverse peoples, made possible through people being exhorted to follow the principles she personified. In that respect, her influence became interwoven throughout Egyptian culture, including through processes such as ritual and art (Martin, 2008).

## 5. Mesopotamian perspectives

Roughly around the time the Egyptian civilization was forming, similar developments were taking place in Mesopotamia. From this 'cradle' were born many of our oldest and greatest empires, including those of Assyria, Akkad, and Babylon. From initial forays into agriculture starting around 10,000 BCE, by around 4,000 BCE many world-shaping accomplishments had taken place, from monumental architecture to innovations in metallurgy and writing (Algaze, 2009). Indeed, from this region hails the oldest surviving work of literature in the world, dated around 2100 BCE, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (George, 2002).

This tale illuminates the concerns of our forebears, which are all-too familiar to us (Ray, 1996). It speaks to existential concerns that remain of paramount importance today, including the sweetness and fragility of friendship (epitomized in the bond between Gilgamesh and the wild Enkidu, who is slain by the gods), and the human fear of death and longing for transcendence (dramatized in Gilgamesh's futile quest to learn the secret of immortality from Utnapishtim, equivalent to the biblical Noah). Gilgamesh is tempted by worldly pleasure – "make each of your days a delight," he is advised by an inn-keeper at the gates of the underworld, "bathe and anoint yourself, wear bright clothes that are sparkling, let music and dancing fill your house" (cited in Riley, 2014, p.31) – and eventually returns to Uruk to pursue the quasi-immortality of political glory. The epic's deepest message, however, is that "man's days are numbered; whatever he may do, he is but wind" (George, 2002, tablet II, l. 234-35). Gilgamesh thus represents one of the earliest surviving narrative meditations on how to shelter some small portion of happiness from the slings and arrows of fortune.

## 6. Chinese perspectives

Also laying claim to be one of the oldest civilizations, and certainly the longest continuous one, is China, whose founding Xia Dynasty emerged circa 2070 BCE. Throughout its rich history, it has generated many philosophies and ideas that directly pertain to happiness. By way of example, consider the school of thought known as Taoism. While its origins lie in unrecorded antiquity, its more immediate roots can be traced to the *I Ching* (or 'Book of Changes'). Arising out of shamanic practices involving the consultation of oracles, this crystallised in written form around the time of King Wen (circa 1150 BCE). Divination practices typically involved generating hexagrams – 64 permutations of six broken and unbroken lines – and interpreting the result, for which the text emerged as a guide. Central to the process is that hexagrams represent not states being but of *becoming*; the focal point is the 'moving' lines (any that are dynamic or 'unstable,' which thus herald the shift to a different hexagram).

As such, the overarching principle of the *I Ching* is change – paradoxically, the one immutable law in the universe. As Wilhelm (1950) wrote in introducing his translation, “He who has perceived the meaning of change fixes his attention no longer on transitory individual things but on the immutable, eternal law at work in all change.” Here we find the origin of Taoism, for this law is known as “the Tao, the course of things, the principle of the one in the many.” Moreover, the *I Ching* not only recognised the ubiquity of change, it also identified the dynamic through which it occurs: the dialectical interaction between opposites, which eventually became symbolised by the *yin-yang* motif (Fang, 2012).

The overarching message of Taoism is that deep experiential understanding of the dialectics of the Tao is the path to deep happiness. More specifically, Lu (2001) suggests that early texts referred to states such as *fu qi* – this being “the closest equivalent of happiness in Chinese ancient thoughts” (p.408) – which encompasses a sense of living virtuously and well. Guidance on aligning with the Tao animates the *Tao Te Ching*, a canonical text attributed to a sage named Lao Tzu, who possibly lived at some point between the sixth and third centuries BCE (though his existence is disputed). For instance, as expressed in Verse 47, “Mastery of the world is achieved by letting things take their natural course.” In that sense, Taoism endorses principles such as *wu-wei*, which translates as non-action, but which essentially means perceiving, acquiescing to, and aligning oneself with the organic currents and patterns of life (Slingerland, 2007). Such ideas have proved very impactful – with scholars like Suzuki (1959) suggesting a Taoist influence on Zen Buddhism for instance (although this claim is not universally supported) – and remain so to this day (Lomas et al., 2017).

## 7. Vedantic perspectives

As Taoism was gradually emerging in China, comparable developments were underway in the Indian subcontinent. There we see world-shaping achievements such as the *Vedas*, foundational texts of what is now referred to as Hinduism, which took shape between 1500 and 500 BCE. The four *Vedas* (*Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*) include prayers and mantras, ritual instructions and commentaries, and – in their concluding *Upaniṣads* – philosophical and spiritual reflection.

One way or another, all four *Vedas* have some relevance to happiness. For instance, much reference is made to *ānanda*, a form of intense happiness often translated as ‘bliss’ (Gispert-Sauch, 1977). *Ānanda* can also denote an experiential ‘release’ (*mokṣa*) from *saṃsāra* – the round of birth, death, and rebirth – into *nirvāṇa* (Collins, 2010). Although a complex concept, the latter depicts a zenith of psychospiritual attainment – also common to traditions like Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism – whether this is understood in traditional terms as liberation from the round of rebirth, or simply as the attainment of true insight and lasting peace in this present life (Ho, 1995). Furthermore, in some texts, *Brahman* – the ultimate reality, at once immanent to and transcendent of the sensible finite world – is even identified as “bliss” itself, as in the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upaniṣad* (Easwaran, 2007, 4.1.32) or the *Tejobindu Upaniṣad*, where *Brahman* is named “being-consciousness-bliss” (*saccidananda*) (Hattangadi, 2015, 3.39).

Such states are not merely intellectualised concepts; a central feature in the *Vedas* (and comparable texts) is how to actually attain them: “The mantra is the bow,” the *Munḍaka Upaniṣad* says, “the aspirant is the arrow, and the Lord the target” (Easwaran, 2007, 2.2.4). The *Upaniṣads* in particular focus on achieving experiential union between *Ātman* – something like an inner self, spirit, or soul, an unchanging essence beneath the contingent flux of personality – and *Brahman*. The experiential union of these is captured by the identity statement *Tat Tvam Asi* (That Art Thou), although there are different perspectives as to its nature (Gupta & Wilcox, 1984). For

instance, the “Non-dual” (*Advaita*) Vedanta so closely identified *Ātman* and *Brahman* as to verge on pantheism, whereas the “Qualified Non-Dual” (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*) Vedanta instead endorsed a kind of “pantheism” in which *Brahman* still transcends *Ātman* (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 1967, pp.506-508).

The *Vedas* – and subsequent teachings – then elucidate various paths for attaining the sought-after states of bliss or liberation. Consider, for instance yoga, which featured in the *Rigveda* and *Upaniṣads* before finding more complete expression in teachings like the Sutras of Patanjali (circa 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE). This is an overarching label for a nexus of psychospiritual practices, of which there are numerous branches, with each constituting a different ‘path’ to liberation, including: *hatha* (physical practice); *rāja* (meditation); *mantra* (vocalised sound); *guru* (dedication); *karma* (service); *bhakti* (devotion); *jñāna* (study); and *tantra* (esoteric insight). It is testament to the power of these ideas and techniques that they continue to be practised to this day, and indeed have become adopted and adapted globally (Raina & Singh, 2018).

## 8. Judaic perspectives

Meanwhile, as the *Vedas* were slowly coming into being, a similarly epochal and still-influential set of teachings were emerging to the West: the *Tanakh*, or ‘Hebrew Bible,’ the canonical collection of Jewish scripture. This includes the *Torah* (the Pentateuch, or five books of Moses), *Nevi-im* (books of the prophets), and *Ketuvim* (the ‘Writings,’ including the Psalms and wisdom literature). As with most such foundational texts, details of its authorship are uncertain and much debated (Levinson, 2003). With the *Torah*, for instance, Rabbinic tradition holds that Moses – who may have lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE – ‘received’ this from God upon Mount Sinai, and thereafter committed it to writing. However, modern scholarship suggests it may have been assembled over centuries before finally being committed to its canonical version around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Koorevaar, 2010).

Historicity aside, these have been among the most important texts in history, and have much to offer vis-à-vis our central topic. For instance, the *Torah* contains one of humankind’s oldest codified moral frameworks: the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* (also known as the Decalogue, or the Ten Commandments). Although preceded by examples such as the Code of Hammurabi – from the Mesopotamian Babylonian empire, written around the 17<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Wright, 2009) – it is arguably the most influential ethical code in the world, influencing multiple religions, and continuing to shape mindsets in the twenty-first century. Each commandment is a *mitzvah* (law or precept) that the Jewish people were obliged to follow, with exhortations to worship one God, honour one’s parents, and respect the Sabbath, along with proscriptions against idolatry, blasphemy, killing, adultery, theft, dishonesty, and covetousness. These were then augmented by many further *mitzvot* throughout the *Torah* – as many as 613, according to common reckoning (Eisenberg, 2005). Together these laws are a codification of wisdom, a guide for how people should best live. In that respect, they offer a meaningful perspective on happiness – mainly in a more eudaimonic sense – that continues to hold relevance today.

Indeed, the *Tanakh* identifies potential linkages and even interdependencies between eudaimonic and hedonic forms of happiness that foreshadow some modern scholarship in this arena (e.g., Kashdan et al., 2008). It stresses for example that the *Torah*’s objective goodness (which pertains to eudaimonia) should equally be a source of subjective delight (which aligns more with hedonia): “The ordinances of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether,” writes the Psalmist; “more to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps. 19:9-10). In this same spirit, Moses ben Maimon (aka Maimonides), the pre-eminent Jewish theologian of the Middle Ages, wrote: “The joy [*simḥah*]

which a person expresses in doing a *mitzvah*, and in the love of God that He commanded through them, is a great act of worship” (cited in Fishbane, 1998, p.158).

Ultimately, however, a life shaped by God’s Law is envisioned not only to be one of joy, but also of ‘*shalom*.’ This multi-faceted term sometimes suggests personal ‘peace’ (cf. Ps. 119:22), but at points also denotes the “harmony” of all creatures with one another and with God, and so rather than hedonia or even eudaimonia may align more closely with notions such as chaironic happiness: “You shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace (*shalom*); the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (Isa. 55:12).

## 9. Persian perspectives

While human reflection on the nature of reality and of the good life stretch back into the mists of pre-history, there appears to have been a qualitative collective shift between the eighth and third centuries BCE (Boy, 2015). This wasn’t precipitated by an individual genius or even region. In multiple places – from China to India to Greece – profound and unprecedented cognitive and philosophical revolutions seemed to have occurred somewhat in parallel. Karl Jaspers (1949) called this the *Achsenzeit* – the Axial Age – to signify that it marked a pivotal moment in our history.

One strand of this revolution is found in Persia, with the epochal Zarathustra – otherwise known as Zoroaster – who possibly lived in the seventh or sixth century BCE (Grenet, 2015). One of the most influential thinkers of his (and any) time, his teachings coalesced into a belief system that continues to attract adherents, making it one of the oldest extant religions (Stausberg, 2008). In contrast to the polytheism of many cultures at the time, he was one of the first thinkers to develop the notion of a supreme divinity, which he named *Ahura Mazda* (‘Lord of Wisdom’) and acclaimed as the originator of truth, order, and justice.

But this was not straightforward monotheism. Possibly uniquely among the world’s great religions – excepting certain schismatic schools within them – Zoroastrianism combines belief in a supreme deity with a form of cosmic dualism (Boyd & Donald, 1979). That is, *Ahura Mazda* is envisioned as engaged in a primordial struggle with his antithesis, *Angra Mainyu*, an equally powerful god of darkness and chaos. This is believed to eventually resolve into a monotheistic eschatology (a theology of ultimate destiny), when *Ahura Mazda* finally triumphs. However, this outcome is not guaranteed in Zoroastrian teachings, at least not within our human timeframe; forces of strife and chaos remain ever present and must be held at bay until they are finally overcome.

So, here again we find a vision pertaining to happiness – particularly its more eudaimonic forms perhaps – albeit one clothed in mythology. For Zoroastrianism holds that humans are active participants in this cosmic struggle, with a responsibility to join *Ahura Mazda*’s battle by cultivating wisdom and undertaking good deeds. Indeed, this association of happiness with moral and personal development is found across the traditions and teachings of this era, as the next few examples illustrate (as indeed do the previous ones).

## 10. Buddhist perspectives

Among the luminaries of the Axial Age, few are as celebrated and influential as Siddhartha Gautama, better known by the honorific *Buddha*, meaning ‘enlightened one.’ Gautama is generally believed to have been born in Lumbini, in present-day Nepal, possibly around 480 BCE (although it may have been earlier; Coningham et al., 2013). As with many traditions, our understanding of the origins of Buddhism is limited by a lack of historicity in source documents.

Nevertheless, the mythologised narrative describes Gautama living a sheltered life until age 29, when a series of existential encounters with illness and death compelled him to pursue a religious path dedicated to exploring the human condition (Kumar, 2002).

Living in a context shaped by the *Vedas*, he initially spent five years engaged in ascetic yoga practices. However, he eventually deemed such self-mortification unhelpful, and resolved to pursue a 'middle path' (e.g., between indulgence and asceticism). The narrative holds that he committed to meditating until he had attained *nirvāṇa*, and sat beneath a tree for 49 days until he achieved his epochal breakthrough. He then spent the next 45 years formulating and disseminating his insights, known by the term *dharma*, a term which can imply laws of nature. Fundamentally, these teachings focus on questions of happiness, at least in its deeper senses (i.e., experiences pertaining to forms like eudaimonic and chaironic happiness, and possibly even forms that have yet to be operationalized by modern psychology).

At the core of the *dharma* is the so-called Four Noble Truths. The first is that life is pervaded by *duḥkha*, a term often translated as suffering, but perhaps better rendered as dissatisfaction (since Buddhism recognises that there *are* joys in life, but that even these are rarely 'perfect'). However, this insight is tempered by the second truth, which is that the cause of *duḥkha* can be identified, being mainly attributed to people's tendency towards craving and attachment. Moreover, having understood these causes, the third truth offers the redemptive hope that *duḥkha* can be alleviated. The fourth truth then offers a roadmap to this alleviation: the Noble Eightfold Path. The path is a prescription for 'right living,' including the development of wisdom (right vision and conception), ethical conduct (right speech, conduct, and livelihood), and meditation (right effort, mindfulness, and concentration).

Advancing even a short way along this path is regarded as likely to improve one's wellbeing (Lomas, 2017a). In the nearer term, doing so is thought to facilitate *suḥkha* (the antonym of *duḥkha*), which potentially aligns with some notions of hedonia. However, Buddhism also holds a promise of a qualitatively different form of happiness, regarded as ultimate goal of the path – which the Buddha, and many people since, are reported to have attained – namely the liberation of *nirvāṇa* (Collins, 2010). As we saw above, Vedic religions typically interpret this liberation in terms of the union between the true self (*Ātman*) and ultimate reality (*Brahman*). Buddhists however have generally taught instead that suffering arises precisely from our tendency to reify fleeting constellations of thought and desire as a unified self, which vainly grasps after impossible kinds of permanence. The insistence that true happiness comes only from seeing that all is "empty" (*śūnyata*) of "intrinsic nature" (*svabhava*), and so "without a self" (*ānatman*) is one feature unifying the otherwise highly diverse traditions of Buddhist thought and practice (Collins, 1990, pp.87-146; Jones, 2021, pp.4-10).

## 11. Hellenistic perspectives

Of all the eras and traditions in this brief tour of historical perspectives, arguably none has had greater influence on contemporary thinking than Hellenistic Greece during the Axial Age. Even today many of its key figures remain household names, whose teachings remain a foundation of numerous aspects of modern life. This influence is evident in that many concepts and practices still bear the etymological imprint of their Greek roots, from democracy (power of the people) to philosophy (love of wisdom). Among this vast corpus of thought, Greek thinkers had much to say about happiness; indeed, contributions from this era are relatively well heralded and discussed in contemporary academic literature, so we will keep this section comparatively short.

Among these world-shaping figures, the person with arguably the strongest influence on contemporary thinking around happiness is Aristotle (1999), who taught that it was the highest

good because it alone was an end in itself. However, he was careful to distinguish between hedonia and eudaimonia, as noted above. He was disparaging of both hedonia and the masses who were preoccupied with such 'base' pleasures, complaining that such people were "slavish in their tastes," living a "life suitable to beasts" (Nicomachean Ethics, 1096a 15-20). By contrast, eudaimonia refers etymologically to having a good *daimon*: a guiding spirit, or perhaps from a modern perspective, one's conscience. In that respect, it reflects 'deeper' forms of happiness arising through self-cultivation, being defined by Aristotle as the "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" (Nicomachean Ethics, 1098a 16-17).

Of course, these concepts are far from the only contribution of this era to our central topic. Consider for instance Stoicism, the school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium around 300 BCE, which is notable for its insistence that 'virtue' (i.e., a good character) is all that is needed for (eudaimonic) happiness. Among its later adherents is the Roman Seneca (1992), whose works include *De Vita Beata*, often rendered as 'On The Happy Life.' This includes aphorisms such as "The happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is" (cited in McMahon, 2006, p.55). His fellow philosopher Epictetus (2004) took this line of thought to its extreme, claiming it was possible to be "sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, dying and yet happy, in exile and happy" (cited in Russell, 2013, p.219). Despite their insistence on the centrality of virtue for happiness, the Stoics also emphasized that virtue produces the supremely desirable subjective state of an 'untroubled mind' (*ataraxia*), a lucid, tranquil happiness involving an imperturbable detachment from the vicissitudes of life. This perspective too finds its champions and adherents to the present day (Becker, 2017) – as indeed do many other perspectives and philosophies from this era, for which the select few ideas mentioned here necessarily stand in as exemplars.

## 12. Christian perspectives

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3-11). So begins one of the most famous texts in history, the Sermon on the Mount, an oration which is often regarded as the zenith of Jesus' teachings, the very "essence of Christianity" (Quarles, 2011). After exalting those who mourn, those who hunger for righteousness, the meek and the merciful, he promises: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

As with the other traditions here, Christianity had much to say regarding our central topic. Consider, for instance, the poetically repeated central word of Jesus' sermon, 'blessed.' In the early Greek of the New Testament, this pivotal term was *makários*, which became the English 'blessed' via a circuitous route leading through Latin (*beatus*), Old French (*beatitude*), and finally Proto-Germanic (*blodison* – meaning to consecrate, originally with blood, as evident in its etymology). Nonetheless, in the Old Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible, *makários* consistently rendered the Hebrew '*ashrey*,' a term closely associated with '*shalom*,' and which is explained as "true happiness and flourishing within the gracious covenant God has given" (Pennington, 2017, p.43, cf. Ps. 1:1, 40:4). As such, an equally suitable – perhaps even preferable – opening for the Beatitudes might in fact be "Happy," or even, "Flourishing are the pure in heart..." (McMahon, 2006; Pennington, 2017, pp.41-44).

Of course, this is no mere pleasure, but the deepest – or alternatively the highest – happiness possible, and which is attainable – like the Stoic *ataraxia* – even in the midst of great material want or physical suffering. Here we strike again a crucial theme of this paper: the limitations of language, and the fact that 'happiness' can encompass many emotional states, from the banal to the sublime, which moreover may not always be easy to accurately express in a given tongue

such as English (Lomas, 2018). Of course, granular terms like ‘blessed’ can help to indicate its more profound forms. In this sense did Thomas Carlyle write, “There is something higher than happiness, and that is blessedness” (cited in McMahan, 2004, p.9). However, it would arguably be better to expand our conception of happiness itself, doing so in a way that can encompass notions like blessedness (and indeed, this movement towards conceptual expansion is central to our paper, as elucidated at the start).

Semantics aside, Jesus’s message was revolutionary. Many prevailing ideas on happiness (e.g., in the Roman world) positioned it either as determined by fate (and so outside of people’s control), or as only amenable to influence by a limited group of people (e.g., wealthy men with the power to arrange their lives in an agreeable manner) (McMahan, 2006). By contrast, Jesus not only preached that happiness could be attained by the poor and the persecuted, even more radically, he suggested such people were *more* blessed than the rich and powerful, a redemptive idea which continues to shape the present. Indeed, the New Testament ends with a vision of Jesus ruling over a New Heaven and New Earth in which there is no more crying or mourning or pain. This redemptive vision still inspires billions of people to this very day.

### 13. Islamic perspectives

A central debate within Christianity was whether the blessed state described by Jesus was attainable on Earth in some form, or only in the afterlife. We find similar considerations in the last of the great monotheistic traditions to emerge, Islam, which originated in Mecca in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE. It was there that the Prophet Muhammad was born in 570, and nearby received a series of revelations from Allah (God) via the angel Gabriel, the recitation and transcription of which became the Quran. Now it has the second-highest number of adherents worldwide of any tradition – after Christianity – estimated at nearly 2 billion, with the Quran among the most influential texts ever written. And among its teachings are in-depth commentaries on our central topic.

For instance, the Quran differentiates forms of happiness, including *mut’a* and *sa’adah*. The former refers to mere sensual pleasure, akin to the hedonism disparaged by Aristotle, and similarly looked down upon as a relatively crude earthly satisfaction (Abde & Salih, 2015). That said, in considering the *farah* (joys) available in this life, the Quran does distinguish negative ‘blameworthy’ joy (celebrating “the life of this world”; 13:26) from positive ‘praiseworthy’ joy (rejoicing “in the bounty of God and His grace”; 10:58). In any case, in contrast to *mut’a*, *sa’adah* is valorised as a superlative, even ultimate happiness, one only experienced in the afterlife and only accessible to believers. In that respect, considerable attention is paid in the Quran to the nature of the afterlife, painting beautiful detailed images of *Jannah* (often translated as heaven or paradise) (Kamil & Yunus, 2015). This is portrayed as a beautiful garden of bliss, featuring many different regions and levels – access to which depends upon people’s conduct in life.

However, these evocations of paradise do not mean Islamic perspectives on happiness are predominantly otherworldly or only focused on the afterlife. Relating to considerations such as praiseworthy joys, Islamic teachings devote considerable effort to elucidating what a good life on Earth involves, articulating the kinds of beliefs and practices that are thought to lead to desirable mental states. This includes valorising character development, involving the cultivation of virtues, such as temperance, modesty, and self-restraint (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005). In that respect, one can find parallels with classical Greek notions of eudaimonia, as outlined above. Indeed, both Greek and Islamic scholars contributed to the burgeoning vision of humanity that took shape in the Renaissance.

#### 14. Renaissance perspectives

Medieval Europe suffered regularly from wars, invasions, and epidemic diseases. Few would have disagreed with the future Pope Innocent III (1161-1216; 1969) when he wrote “All [people’s] days are full of toil and hardship. Rich or poor, master or slave, married or single, good and bad alike—all suffer worldly torments and are tormented by worldly vexations.” Of course, this was not the whole story of the thousand-year period. In addition to suffering, medieval society was typified by raucous festivals like Carnival and immense creativity in theology, business, and the arts. Medieval Europeans founded the first universities, laid the groundwork for the modern nation-state, and presided over the expansion of the European economy through trade.

That these years of creativity and change are still remembered as the ‘Dark Ages’ is largely due to the mythmaking of Renaissance thinkers like Petrarch (1304-1374), who mourned the lost glories of Rome, as well as later interpreters of the period like Jacob Burkhardt (1818-1897; 1990). Since civilization never died in medieval Europe, the Renaissance was not a complete ‘rebirth’ as the name implies. Still, the Renaissance did introduce new energies to European intellectual culture, including innovative ideas and practices relating to happiness (Lomas & Lomas, 2018). Beginning with Petrarch, increasing numbers of learned men—and even some privileged women—began to use the classical and Christian past in novel ways. They cultivated linguistic skills that allowed them to read broadly in ancient texts, using the knowledge they gained for both aesthetic and practical ends. Renaissance humanists found in the speeches of Cicero a model of persuasion that they hoped could eliminate the need for war. They founded schools designed to teach virtue in addition to beautiful Latin. And they sought to push the Catholic Church toward consistency with the teachings of Christ.

All these endeavors were designed to promote human flourishing as humanists understood it. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, humanists were using the newly invented printing press to reach a growing audience interested such topics. The great Dutch humanist, Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) playfully asked in his *Praise of Folly* (1509/1989) whether the foolish weren’t ultimately happier than the wise. In his popular satire, the Goddess Folly claimed credit for the continuation of human society generally; who, for example, would ever get married or have children if it weren’t for Folly’s intervention? Ultimately, Erasmus’ satirical book concluded that Christian virtue was superior to all. The greatest fool was Christ himself who forgave his enemies and gave his life on the cross.

Erasmus dedicated the *Praise of Folly* to his close friend, Thomas More (1478-1535). Indeed, the Latin title, *Moriae Encomium*, was a pun on More’s name. More was similarly invested in the question of happiness. His imaginative *Utopia* (1516/1965) broke new ground by imaging a nation that was organized in such a way as to best promote the happiness of its residents. The resulting island of Utopia was envisaged as surpassing Europe by eliminating warfare, poverty, and even the legal profession. The name ‘Utopia’ could mean either ‘no place’ or ‘good place,’ but there was no reason to think it was necessarily an *impossible* place. More thus inaugurated a tradition of thinking about imaginary worlds as a means of improving the actual one – thereby ideally promoting real, tangible happiness in people’s lived realities – a goal which took on even greater salience and prominence during the Enlightenment.

#### 15. Enlightenment perspectives

European thinking about happiness took another turn during the Enlightenment, although the *philosophes* of the era did borrow one trick from their Renaissance forebears: imagining the past as a period of darkness, misery, and superstition. In his celebrated essay, “What is Enlightenment?” (1784/1983), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) defined the Enlightenment as the

throwing off of intellectual and religious authorities. No longer would the wise be bound by tradition which obscured more than illuminated. The motto of the Enlightenment was “*Sapere Aude!*” or “dare to know!”

But dare to know what? Kant’s philosophy is today notorious for its abstraction, but Enlightenment thinkers were deeply impressed by the practical accomplishments of scientists and political reformers. The Enlightenment was as much about living as it was about reasoning. In recent years, some historians have summed up the whole Enlightenment as a commitment to “human betterment” (Robertson, 2005, p.28), or an attempt to “understand humanity – and the world in which humans live – in order to promote happiness” (Robertson, 2021, p.37). Even if this overstates the case, there can be no doubt that discussions of happiness took on a new prominence during the Enlightenment.

However, that does not mean that Enlightenment thinkers agreed about the best way to pursue it. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) assumed that the desire for happiness was universal. He thought that misery was occasioned by social competition, and so deemed a return to the simplicity of the natural state necessary for flourishing. He believed this could be possible by following the sentimental, self-directed philosophy of education described in his best-selling novel, *Émile* (1762/2009). Voltaire (1694-1778) was too attached to worldly comforts to seek happiness in rustic simplicity, but he was no less committed to pursuing it. His “Story of a Good Brahmin” described the plight of an Indian philosopher who was so subtle in his reasoning that he wasn’t sure he knew anything at all; he was miserable and wondered if he wouldn’t be better off being like his simple-minded neighbor who was happy in her religion and never bothered herself with difficult metaphysical questions. The narrator agrees that the key question is how to be happy, asking “What does it matter whether one has brains or not?” Voltaire’s long-term lover, the Marquise du Châtelet, was a formidable philosopher in her own right. After a painful breakup with Voltaire, she authored her *Discourse on Happiness* (1748/2009). In typical Enlightenment fashion, she thought happiness required liberation from the prejudices of the past. More positively, happiness could be found in pleasure. She wrote, “the only point of living is to experience agreeable sensations and feelings; and the stronger the agreeable feelings are, the happier one is” (p.350). In Châtelet’s view, women of high station should look for happiness mainly in good food and fashionable society.

The Enlightenment pursuit of happiness was not as decisive a break with the past as has often been supposed. For instance, historians increasingly acknowledge that the mainstream of the age included thought that was profoundly religious (Sorkin, 2008; Michalos & Weijers, 2017). For every convinced atheist, there were many rational Christians who remembered that earthly happiness could never compare to the heavenly variety. The two editors of the great *Encyclopédie* project, Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Jean le Rond d’Alembert (1717-1783), were atheists. However, the lesser-known Jean Pestre (1723-1821) – author of the article on ‘Happiness’ in the *Encyclopédie* – was a clergyman who wanted to defend the Christian faith using the language of nature and reason. Religious differences aside, Diderot and d’Alembert would have agreed with Pestre when he wrote, “All men are united in the desire to be happy. Nature has made happiness a law to all of us.”

Happiness was not merely a goal of the Enlightenment. It was also a right, or at least the pursuit of it was, as Thomas Jefferson penned in the Declaration of Independence. The pursuit of happiness could even be an obligation. The philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) thought that moral philosophy was essentially the study of happiness. He argued, “The best action is the one that procures the greatest happiness of the greatest numbers” (1725/2002, p.515). Hutcheson would lay the groundwork for utilitarianism which would later receive its classic formulations

in the work of Jeremy Bentham (1748/1832) and John Stuart Mill. Mill stated the foundational principle of utilitarianism was that “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse” (1859/2015). Utilitarianism would exercise a profound influence on contemporary scientific constructs relating to happiness, such as subjective wellbeing.

## 16. Conclusion

This paper has made the case that happiness – defined expansively as a desirable mental experience – has been a perennial concern across the world. Each of the civilizations and movements we have considered has taken distinct interest in the forms of life, from states of mind and character to modes of action, in which people rightly take satisfaction, if not always ‘pleasure’ in the hedonic sense. In some cases, different forms of happiness are contrasted, and there are exhortations to pursue one form over another – often a form closely tied to an understanding of what constitutes true human wellbeing. But that tie between human wellbeing and some forms of happiness is fairly consistent throughout the traditions. In short, people throughout history and around the world have valued and pursued desirable mental experiences – the mental phenomena arising from the experience of living well – i.e., happiness, broadly construed. This perspective is a counterbalance to some of the contemporary literature on the topic, which can sometimes imply that it is essentially only a modern and/or Western concern.

To articulate this view, this paper offered a brief overview of 14 different eras in human history, highlighting concepts and concerns that bear some resemblance to happiness as conceived today. Some are closer to more conventional contemporary interpretations of happiness than others. For instance, a narrower conceptualisation of this term might associate it mainly with hedonic happiness, and particularly high arousal forms of positive affect, such as joy or euphoria (Lomas, 2017b). In that respect, ideas like *simhah* in Judaism (often rendered as ‘joy’) are relatively close conceptually. Other items may be slightly further from such notions, such as the Taoist concept of *wu-wei* or the Stoic concept of *ataraxia*, which may align more with concepts such as ‘flow’ in constituting a more cognitive (i.e., attention driven) form of happiness. In that respect, this paper has been overt in seeking to present an expansive notion of happiness. Of course, it was necessarily selective; an exhaustive summary of all relevant ideas and traditions is far beyond the scope of one academic paper. Nevertheless, even offering a partial narrative of these historical currents is a valuable exercise, helping us to better understand and contextualise this most valuable of topics.

### Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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Lomas conceived and wrote an initial draft of the paper. Case and Cratty contributed substantive revisions and additions to particular sections. VanderWeele provided a high-level overarching review, and refined certain definitions and formulations. All authors then checked and honed the completed text.

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