

**The practical value of happiness as a policy goal:
Substantial, but complicated!**

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Abstract

The editors of 'Policies for Happiness', Stefano Bartolini, Ennio Bilancini, Luigino Bruni, and Pier Luigi Porta, collected some contributions of leading experts and some of their own thoughts to decide whether happiness can be a practical policy goal. They conclude that it is an acceptable option. This conclusion is acceptable.

There are even two additional arguments, neglected by the editors:

- a. We need information about subjective realities, like happiness, to evaluate the importance of objective realities like GDP, health, freedom and safety. The risk of arbitrariness and paternalism by experts, who develop their own objective indicators to assess such realities, can be reduced by the application of happiness as a subjective indicator and cross check.*
- b. If happiness is adopted as an (additional) goal we will find that people, policy makers included, have more freedom in the selection of standards and deciding about priorities.*

There are however two serious complications, neglected by the editors. The complications do not disqualify happiness as a policy goal, but deserve more attention.

- a. The editors acknowledge that the relation between happiness and objective living conditions is not self-evident, since adaptation and social comparison can have a substantial impact on frames of reference. A more fundamental reason is that happiness fulfils a cybernetic role for individuals. There are always fluctuations in good and bad conditions alike.*
- b. Frames of reference are important for happiness, and can be irrational, totally unwarranted, and even immoral. Happiness is positive but not by definition acceptable, and unhappiness is negative but not by definition unacceptable. People can be unreasonable in what they want or expect. We have to be critical and we need objective indicators to be critical about subjective realities like happiness.*