9 May 2025 · 

Qeios

Peer Review

# Review of: "Jeopardizing Happiness. “No One Can Coerce Me To Be Happy in His Way”"

**Gerhard Minnameier**[1]

1. Faculty of Economics and Business, Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Dear Lorenzo,

Although I suppose that this is meant as a blind review, I think I can reply openly as a critical friend. So, this is Gerhard reviewing your paper, which I enjoyed reading. Although I approve of much of what you write, some very important issues also provoked critical thoughts from my side.

First of all, I see two main messages that I think are timely and most important in current moral discourse around the world. The first concerns Kant’s dictum on which you build your analysis, and the second concerns the relational character of happiness. Both are well exposed, and I totally approve of these points.

As a consequence of letting people choose how they might reach happiness and flourish, you also rightly refuse to follow any of the cited suggestions of how to actually pursue or even finally reach happiness. As to the question of how best to pursue this general goal of individual freedom (which is behind this idea), however, things might not be the way you put them, and I think that the critique of the expropriating character of capitalism and capitalist accumulation or the “predatory neoliberal capitalism's peculiar propensity to make the majority of people unhappy” appears to me to be premature. I will try to explain this point.

In a capitalist economy, you certainly have inequalities of wealth and also inequalities of power, but you also have interdependence because you typically need the collaboration and cooperation of (many) others to be successful and to be able to continue. And in a competitive environment, which we still have in most fields despite very significant concentration, agents have to cooperate even more with their stakeholders. (In the case of natural monopolies, governments have to take control, which is why networks like the

 doi.org/10.32388/1ZSRO3 

railway system are typically owned and run by the state.) The reason for this is that the accumulation of wealth and also of productive resources takes place in positive-sum games in which agents interact freely. Of course, everyone is coerced by the particular conditions under which he or she has to make decisions, but within this framework, people are free to choose what to do, where to work, and how to pursue happiness generally.

The examples you give (the Duchess of Sutherland) and the Marxian theory on which you draw fail to account for this fact. Accumulation is put in the sense that some expropriate others and build their wealth and power on the loss of others. However, exchanges on markets are never win-lose, but win-win. The Sutherland example also does not fit because it does not describe bourgeois economic development, but rather practices of "noble" people, whose wealth has always been founded on exploiting others. At the end of section 4, you rightly mention that the enclosure of agricultural land dates back to the 12th century, long before the advent of capitalism.

A modern market economy based on democratic institutions seems to be the best setting to achieve what you seem to aim at: a (global) society in which people can thrive the way they wish without infringing on the freedom of others. At least, this is the outcome of the work of famous scholars like Hayek or Buchanan (and even Adam Smith to start with). In this respect, I can also recommend Clark & Lee's "Markets and Morality" (2011, Cato Journal, Vol. 31, No. 1) or Bruni & Sugden's "Reclaiming Virtue Ethics for Economics" (2013, Journal of Economic Perspectives, Vol. 27, No. 4). Both make very clear how the morality of markets brings about (conditions of) happiness in the sense you wish to claim (even social harmony and responsibility with respect to preserving common pool resources; aspects you also highlight). So, what is wrong with their arguments?

What you perceive as "the influx of collectivity in the individuals' search for happiness is magnificently represented by our current neoliberal era" and the examples you give are all consequences of a system in which each one is least coerced. In this sense, your overall argument appears to contradict itself, in my view at least. Of course, one can criticise overboarding consumerism and many other things, but they derive from what people want, and to assume (perhaps with Marcuse, whom you also cite) that they are just lured into these wants by capitalists is certainly too simple. After all, we all are free to choose, and many of us learn to revise their value systems and lifestyles. And when you write of "capitalist globalization, marked by continuous and unprecedented assault ... on the commons, perpetrated by certain supranational financial institutions and global economic governance bodies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund," you seem to overlook that in the course of that same globalisation, e.g., extreme poverty was reduced from 1.9 billion people (35% of the world's population) to meanwhile roughly 600 million people (less than 10% of the world's population). All this was brought about by globalisation and the economic growth it engendered. That same World Bank issues an Atlas of Sustainable Development each year that documents these developments and also their strong dependence on economic growth. Hence, it is not true that the powerful rich rip off the poor (as your examples and arguments suggest).

Concerning problems of the commons, in the just-cited passage, it is put as if capitalists and related governance bodies deliberately spoil them or at least fail to care about them. Neither seems to be true. First of all, these problems are unintended consequences of intentional behaviour. And today we know that they are also unavoidable to some extent because they result from social dilemmas (of the type of the famous prisoners' dilemma). Overcoming these requires changing the character of these games, and economists work very hard in considering and inventing ways to do this. Also, businesses are interested in that. The problem is to solve the governance problem and have proper institutions.

In the overall context of your discussion, I would also recommend considering, perhaps among others, a recent book by Oded Galor (2022, "The Journey of Humanity") in which he shows how closely linked all of our modern cultural achievements result from and depend on economic growth (diversity, general education, equal rights, and diversity). This makes clear that growth is not only about simply growth in material wealth (possibly at the expense of things more relevant to happiness). Such a view would be too simple.

Finally, solving and overcoming social dilemmas is, properly seen, what most of economics is all about. Such overcoming of social dilemmas opens ways for people to gain more happiness, also broadly speaking, without reducing the happiness of others or interfering with their own view of happiness. Hence, your attack on neoliberal capitalism seems to be flawed in my view, or at least premature, and it would therefore deserve closer scrutiny.

I say this because relational happiness and the non-coercion you reclaim are ideas that I strongly support. I hope you may find these comments interesting and worthwhile.

With kind regards,

Gerhard

## Declarations

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.