Capability and happiness: Conceptual difference and reality links

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ABSTRACT

Happiness is not the same as capability, but the matters are related. Capability is obviously required for living a happy life and happiness feeds back on capability in several ways. Capabilities affect happiness not only at the individual level, but also indirectly at the societal level. For instance: school education does not seem to make pupils any happier, but a high level of education is required for modern society that does add to happiness.

Insight in the interrelations between capability and happiness is required for making policy choices. If the prime aim is greater happiness for a greater number, one must know what capabilities are most functional for happiness in the given conditions. If the cultivation of capabilities is prioritized, one must at least acknowledge the possible loss of happiness. Inspection of the available data does not reveal much conflict.

1. Introduction

The ‘capability approach’ is a strand in welfare economics that focuses on “freedom to promote valuable beings and doings” rather than on “utility” in the sense of “income, commodities, or people’s happiness” (HDCA, 2009). The capability approach builds on the work of Sen (1985) and Nussbaum (2000).

In quality-of-life research, this capability approach is often contrasted with the ‘happiness approach’ (e.g. by Anand et al., 2005) of which Diener et al. (1999) and myself (Veenhoven, 1984) are representatives. In this paper I explore the differences between these approaches. What is the conceptual difference between ‘capability’ and ‘happiness’? How do these matters relate? And what are the policy implications of focusing on one or the other?

2. Conceptual difference

The concepts ‘capability’ and ‘happiness’ concern both ‘quality-of-life’. Their differences can therefore be elucidated in the context of an analysis of that concept. In an earlier publication I have distinguished four qualities of life (Veenhoven, 2000a,b), which are presented in Scheme 1.

2.1. Qualities of life

This classification depends on two distinctions. The rows denote a between chances for a good life and actual outcomes of life. Chances and outcomes are related, but are certainly not the same. The columns denote a distinction between external and internal qualities. In the first case the quality is in the environment, in the latter it is in the individual. Together, these two dichotomies mark four qualities of life.

Livability of the environment: The left top quadrant denotes the meaning of good living conditions. Often the terms ‘quality-of-life’ and ‘wellbeing’ are used in this particular meaning, especially in the writings of ecologists and sociologists. Economists sometimes use the term ‘welfare’ for this meaning. ‘Livability’ is a better word, because it refers explicitly to a characteristic of the environment and does not carry the connotation of Paradise. Politicians and social reformers typically stress this quality-of-life.

Life-ability of the person: The right top quadrant denotes inner life-chances. That is, how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life. This aspect of the good life is also known by dif-
The word ‘capability’ refers to ‘being able’, in Sen’s work typically being able to improve one’s situation and in Nussbaum’s being able to live a truly human life. ‘Being able’ requires both freedom from external restraints and personal skills. Freedom from external restraints belongs in the top-left quadrant of Scheme 1, while the personal competency to use environmental chances belongs in the top-right quadrant. In Sen’s work, the emphasis is in the top-left quadrant, in particular where he argues against discrimination. Yet he also highlights education, which is an individual quality. In Nussbaum’s work the emphasis is in the top-right quadrant. Most of the capabilities on her list are inner aptitudes, e.g. practical reason and imagination. Yet here she also mentions protection against violent assault, which is an environmental factor.

This duality of the notion does not reflect so well in the word ‘capability’, which typically refers to individual quality in daily language. It reflects better in the term ‘substantive freedoms’ that is used as a synonym. The term ‘freedom’ is mostly associated with absence of social restraints. In philosophical language the word is also used for an individual’s ability to take control over his or her life. In that context Berlin (1958) distinguishes between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ freedom and Bay (1965) between ‘social freedom’ and ‘psychological freedom’.2

2.2.1. Focus on individual capabilities

When used in this dual sense, the term ‘capability’ is equivalent to ‘life-chances’ and suffers the same problems of that notion. One of these problems is that it is a wide generic, the wideness of which leads to picking some particular aspects, as in Nussbaum’s list of capabilities. Another problem is that one looses sight on the interrelation between environmental demands and individual skills. The relevance of skills depends on their functionality in a given environment and that is reflected in the word ‘fitness’ and ‘psychology’ in biological terminology. Calling these things by the same name is not helpful for understanding their interrelation. For this reason I focus on capability in the limited sense of individual life-ability.

2.2.2. Kinds of individual capabilities

In this paper I distinguish between general capability and specific capabilities. General capability is what biologists denote as ‘fitness’ and involves all aptitudes that are relevant for a good life. Specific abilities are many, e.g. physical abilities such as ‘strength’ and mental abilities such as ‘musicality’. Nussbaum does not make that distinction, on her list of 10 vital capabilities figures ‘bodily health’ (number 2) next to ‘concern for nature’ (number 8).

**General capability**: Another word for general capability is ‘health’. Health can be defined negatively in terms of absence of defect or positively in terms of excellence of functioning. When we say that someone is in ‘good health’ we mostly mean that there is nothing wrong with this person’s body, when we say that someone is ‘intelligent’ we typically mean that this person thinks better than average. Another common distinction is between physical health and mental health. Physical health is number 2 on Nussbaum’s list of 10 vital capabilities. Mental health is not mentioned by Nussbaum, but should not be disregarded.

**Specific capabilities**: As noted there are many specific capabilities. In this paper I limit to the capabilities on Nussbaum’s list that have figured in empirical research on happiness. These are:

1 Economists use the term ‘utility’ in a quite different meaning, that is, as the subjective satisfaction derived from consumption. That notion should be placed in the satisfaction quadrant at the bottom-right in Scheme 1.

2 A third kind of freedom mentioned by Bay is ‘potential freedom’, that is, being aware of chances and constraints. This kind of freedom is both environmental (availability of information) and individual (personal knowledge).
Passing satisfaction with a part of life is called pleasure.

Part-satisfaction: Enduring satisfaction with a part of life is referred to as 'domain-satisfaction' when it concerns a field of life, such as education (number 4). It is also called 'inner qualities' in Scheme 1. In each case happiness is a generic for all the qualities mentioned in Scheme 1. The term is also used as a synonym for 'eudemonia' and then denotes the right column of 'wellbeing' that fit the above defined concept. I will particularly refer to 'domain-satisfaction' when it concerns a field of life, such as its variety. Sometimes the word happiness is used for such part-satisfactions, in particular for satisfaction with one's career.

Peak experience: Passing satisfaction can be about life-as-a-whole, in particular when the experience is intense and 'oceanic'. This kind of satisfaction is usually referred to as 'top' or 'peak' experience. When poets write about happiness they usually describe a feeling of this kind. Likewise religious writings use the word happiness often in the sense of a mystical ecstasis. Another word for this type of satisfaction is 'enlightenment'.

Life-satisfaction: Enduring satisfaction with one's life-as-a-whole is called life-satisfaction and also commonly referred to as 'happiness' or 'subjective wellbeing'. I have delineated this concept in more detail elsewhere (Veenhoven, 1984, Chapter 2).3

2.3.2. Focus on life-satisfaction

Which of these kinds of satisfaction should we use for assessing the relation with capabilities? Evidently that is the last meaning of overall life-satisfaction or 'happiness'. What we want to know is what capabilities are required for leading a satisfying life. In that context the concern is not with short-lived pleasures and neither with incidental peak experiences. Likewise, satisfaction in particular domains of life does not denote a satisfying life, e.g. not high job-satisfaction if that goes at the cost of low satisfaction with family life. So I will focus on happiness in the sense of satisfaction with one's life-as-a-whole. There are many misgivings about the value of happiness, such as that happiness is mere contentment and that it typically results from an unrealistically rosy view on reality. In this context I cannot go in the details of these qualms.4 Suffice to say that in assessing how happy we are, we use our mood as the prime source of information and that mood reflects the degree to which basic needs are met. As such, happiness signals how well we thrive biologically (Veenhoven, 2006) and is part of human ‘flourishing’.5

3. Capability → happiness

What capabilities are conducive to happiness? This question can be addressed at two levels: the individual level and the societal level. At the individual level the focus is on the relation between skill and happiness of particular persons. At the societal level the focus is on the relation between the level of capability in societies and the average happiness of citizens. Effect can differ between these levels. As we will see below, IQ is related to happiness at the societal level, but not at the individual level.

In the following review of research, I will draw on the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2008), in which I gather the results of empirical happiness research yielded with indicators of happiness that fit the above defined concept. I will particularly draw on the collection of Correlational Findings (abbreviated WDH-CF) that involves the results of both many cross-sectional studies and of fewer longitudinal investigations. The precise finding places

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3 In that chapter I have also distinguished two ‘components’ of happiness: an affective component (Hedonic level of affect) and a cognitive component (Contentment), which are seen to function as subtotals in the overall evaluation of life. That conceptualization is elaborated in Veenhoven (2006a).

4 I have discussed the various qualms about the value of happiness elsewhere (Veenhoven, 2007).

5 The term ‘flourishing’ is sometimes used as a synonym for ‘quality-of-life’ or ‘wellbeing’ and is then generic for all the qualities mentioned in Scheme 1. The term is also used as a synonym for ‘eudemonia’ and then denotes the right column of ‘inner qualities’ in Scheme 1. In each case happiness is indicative for these wider qualities, yet not the same. If people live happy, their environment is apparently sufficiently livable and their abilities apparently appropriate. This notion of apparent quality-of-life is discussed in more detail in Veenhoven (2005b).
in that collection are mentioned in footnotes, so that the interested reader can check my summary conclusions. The findings are too many and too diverse to be discussed separately in this paper.\(^6\)

### 3.1. Individual capabilities

Above I have distinguished between general capability and specific capabilities. What has research learned us about the effects on happiness of these capability variants? The findings are summarized in Scheme 3.

#### 3.1.1. General capability

As noted above, general capability is reflected in measures of ‘health’. There is a sizable body of research on health and happiness, the findings of which are summarized in the upper part of Scheme 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of capability</th>
<th>Correlation with happiness</th>
<th>Indications of causality</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Capability ↓ Happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General capability</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- negative (ill)</td>
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<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>- positive (fit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- negative (disturbed)</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>- positive (flourishing)</td>
<td>++</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Specific capabilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intellect (IQ)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>±</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{-}^{-} = \) strong negative, \(- = \) negative, \(0 = \) no correlation or effect, \(+ = \) positive, \(++ = \) strong positive


Unsurprisingly, health is correlated with happiness. What may surprise is that the correlation with mental health is stronger than with physical health and the correlation with positive mental health is strongest of all.\(^7\)

This correlation is at least partly due to an effect of health on happiness. It is beyond doubt that physical illness reduces happiness, even though several studies show remarkable adaptation among seriously sick and handicapped people.\(^8\) It is not surprising either that recovery from physical illness tends to be followed by a rise in happiness. Change in mental illness seems to affect happiness even more, in particular getting depressed and recovery from depression (e.g. Bergsma et al., 2009). There is less evidence for a causal effect of change in positive health on happiness, but such effect probably exists.

#### 3.1.2. Specific capabilities

What specific talents are required for happiness? Below I limit to the abilities on Nussbaum’s list of which the relationship with happiness has been investigated.

\(^{6}\) There is much more detail in the research literature than I can report in this paper, e.g. multivariate analyses and comparisons across different publics. What counts here is the general picture. The interested reader can find detail in the indicated sections of the World Database of Happiness, which is freely available at the internet.

\(^{7}\) WDH-CF, ‘Physical health’ (code P6) and ‘Mental health’ (code M7).

\(^{8}\) WDH-CF, ‘Physical handicap’ (code H2.2.1.2), ‘Change in physical health (P6.1.2)’ and ‘Chronic illness (P6.4.2.2).’
School intelligence. Capability number 4 on Nussbaum’s list is described as “being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a ‘truly human’ way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education”. This corresponds with the set of aptitudes that is measured with IQ tests, which have been developed for assessing the mental abilities trained in school. Several studies have assessed the relation between IQ and happiness and contrary to expectation these studies found no correlation. A follow-up study found no long-term effect on happiness either. Likewise, there is little correlation between level of education and happiness: high-school graduates being about as happy as compatriots with a university degree. This lack of correlation could be due to a tendency of unhappy people to invest more in schooling, which would suppress an otherwise positive correlation. Yet, follow-up studies do not show an effect either of earlier education on later happiness, not even among talented people. So it seems that this kind of capability does not add to happiness. It is unlikely that the things we learn in school have no effect on happiness at all, but it could be that above average school intelligence does not add to happiness any more in highly educated societies or that the benefits of education are balanced by its costs, such as the spending of one’s entire youth in school benches.

Social intelligence. The capabilities ‘Emotions’ and ‘Affiliation’ on Nussbaum’s list fit with the notion of ‘social intelligence’. This aptitude appears to be strongly correlated with happiness. This appears in correlations with self-rated ability as well as with ratings by others, such as clinical ratings and ratings by trained peers. Related personality traits are also correlated with happiness, such as assertiveness, empathy, extraversion, kindness, openness and sociability. Happiness is also strongly correlated with indicators of social functioning, such as with family relations, friendships, popularity, social participation and social support. Though ‘social functioning’ is not quite the same as ‘social ability’ it is likely that the correlations also reflect a link with ability. As yet there is no evidence that improvement of social ability results in greater happiness, but this is also likely to be the case.

Leisure skills. Ability to ‘Play’ is number 9 on Nussbaum’s list and this can be taken as ‘leisure skills’. Does this capability add to happiness? A large body of research shows positive correlations between involvement in leisure activities and happiness and between leisure satisfaction and happiness, a few follow-up studies suggesting a causal effect on happiness. Yet leisure ‘activity’ is not quite the same as leisure ‘ability’. There are no studies that assessed the effect of leisure capabilities such as being able to play the piano or expertise in gardening. Only in the case of sports we have a clue since skill level in sports was found to be correlated with happiness among British students.

Moral competence. Moral development is not a separate topic on Nussbaum’s list of core capabilities, but is involved in her description of ‘Practical reason’ (6) and concern for other people (5, 7). Empirical studies show a strong correlation between happiness and adherence to social values and the few follow-ups suggest a causal effect. Personality traits such as solidarity, trust and trust-worthiness are also more common among the happy. This pattern appears not only in self-rating of morality, but also in ratings by peers and teachers.

3.2. Level of capabilities in nations

Some of these individual level relationships are also observed at the nation level. Data are less abundant and causality is more difficult to assess.

3.2.1. General capability

There is a strong correlation between average physical health in nations and average happiness, both with absence of illness and longevity. Improvement of physical health in nations tends to be paralleled by a rise in happiness (Veenhoven, 2005a) and this is an indication of a causal effect. The data on mental health in nations are less abundant and do not allow a comparison with the strength of the effect of physical health.

3.2.2. Specific capabilities

Of the four capabilities discussed above, three have also been investigated at the national level, that is, school intelligence, social intelligence and moral competence.

School intelligence. In an analysis of 81 nations 1980–1990 Lynn and Vanhanen (2002) found no correlation between average IQ and average happiness, which fits the above-mentioned non-correlation at the individual level. Yet consideration of a larger data set does reveal a positive correlation (Choi and Veenhoven, 2009). Likewise, there is a positive correlation between the level of school education in nations and average happiness of citizens. How can it be that education adds to happiness at the nation level, but not at the individual level? The answer seems to be that an educated populace is required for the functioning of a modern society and that people flourish well in such societies (Veenhoven, 2006), while education as such is not does not add to individual happiness, probably because its benefits are balanced by costs.

Social intelligence. There are no comparable measures of social intelligence in nations and hence no studies that assessed the relation with average happiness. Still, there are clues in cross-national research on related matters. Studies on ‘national character’ show a tendency of greater happiness in nations where the average citizen is more extraverted and trusting.
Leisure skills. Measures of average leisure skill are not available at the level of nations. Performance in top-sports can be compared using medal counts, but top-sports is too much professionalized to be considered as leisure and the skill level of top-sports is not representative for the skill level of the average citizen. So in this case we are empty-handed for the time being.

Moral competence. Several studies have assessed honesty in nations using attitudes to cheating. When crossed with average happiness in nations a strong positive correlation appears, which fits the observed relationship at the individual level. The direction of causality is less well documented in this case and attitudes to cheating do not quite cover wider moral competence. Likewise, there is good evidence that corruption is detrimental to average happiness in nations, even in cultures where formalism is morally approved.

3.3. Causal mechanisms

Most of the above-discussed capabilities seem to add to happiness and this begs the question what causal effects are involved. Evidently, capabilities foster happiness to the extent that they are functional in mastering the problems of life. In that line biologists link ‘fitness’ to ‘survival’, while acknowledging that the functionality of capabilities depends on environmental demands. In this light it is understandable that not all skills learned in school are equally conducive for happiness and that social skill is typically more relevant than knowledge of medieval poetry. Capabilities can also be functional for the social system and as such contribute to happiness indirectly. We saw this in the case of school intelligence, which adds to happiness only at the nation level.

Less evident is that capabilities add to happiness also in the process of functioning. Nature encourages the use of capabilities with links to pleasant affect; we like to use and develop our capabilities even if there is no external benefit. This phenomenon is known as ‘intrinsic motivation’ and seen as part of a basic need for ‘self-actualization’. So, the effect on happiness is partly in the joy of exercise, in German aptly called ‘Functionslust’.

4. Happiness → capability

The observed correlations between capabilities and happiness can also result from an effect of happiness on capability development. What do we know about this causal connection? The World Database of Happiness (WDH-CF) contains only a few follow-up studies on this matter. The scarce results are summarized in the right column of Scheme 3. All these findings concern the individual level.

4.1. General capability

There is good evidence that happiness fosters physical health and the effect of happiness on health appears to be stronger than the effect of health on happiness. This appears in a 12-year follow-up study among American couples by Hawkins and Booth (2005:456), which showed a stronger correlation between baseline happiness and later health \((r = +.37)\) than between baseline health and later happiness \((r = +.13)\). As a result, happy people live longer and this was demonstrated in a synthetic analysis of 28 follow-up studies. Happiness does not lengthen life of seriously sick people, such as cancer patients, but it does lengthen the life of healthy people considerably. This means that happiness does not cure, but protects against falling ill (Veenhoven, 2008).

Protecting against falling ill concerns ‘negative’ health. Happiness seems to foster positive health as well. This is at least suggested by experimental studies using mood induction, which show that positive affect has an energizing effect (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Probably, happiness fosters mental health as well. Analysis of a 4-year follow-up study among the general population does indeed show lower incidence of mental disorder among the initially happiest people (Bergsma et al., 2009). There are also indications that happiness fosters positive mental health. Experimental studies show effects on creativeness, psychological autonomy and self-esteem (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

4.2. Specific capabilities

Data are less abundant in this case. Still the following pieces of evidence can be mentioned.

School intelligence: Though there is some same-time correlation between happiness and performance among high-school students, happiness does not predict school grades 3 years later. However, happiness in high-school does predict somewhat greater educational achievement 8 years later. On the other hand, happiness at age 30 appeared not to predict clinical ratings of cleverness in old age.

Social intelligence: There is better evidence on effects of happiness on social skill, such as greater kindness and trust. Probably there are also negative effects, such as greater vulnerability for deception, but these possible costs of happiness have not yet been investigated.

Leisure skill: Though happiness enhances curiosity and openness for new experiences, there is as yet no evidence that happiness makes us better sports or wine tasters. There is no evidence to the contrary either, so the cell in Scheme 3 remains empty for the time being.

Moral competence: Happiness predicts later adherence to social values and this indicates an effect of happiness on morality.

4.3. Causal mechanisms

Having established that happiness affects capability, the next question is how. The main causal effect seems to be that happiness fosters activity, activity on its turn fostering the maintenance and development of skills. This explanation fits the view that positive affect works as a go-signal, while negative affect rather instigates caution (Veenhoven, 2009). Happiness can also contribute to capabilities in indirect ways: e.g. since happiness facilitates social contact, happy people have more chances to develop social skills than the unhappy who spend more time watching television. All these mechanisms fit Frederickson’s (1998) ‘broaden and build’ theory of positive affect.

39 WDH-CF, ‘Modal honesty’ (code N3.50).
40 WDH-CF, ‘Condition of the nation: Corruption’ (code N4.9.1).
41 This drive to use one’s potentials is also known by the names of ‘mastery needs’ and ‘exercise needs’. Though often seen as something ‘high’, these needs exist in also in little children, as manifested in play, and in ‘lower’ animals.
42 WDH-CF, ‘Later school success’ (code S1.1.4).
43 WDH-CF, ‘Later educational level’ (code E1.1.4).
44 WDH-CF, ‘Later cleverness’ (code P5.2.14).
45 WDH-CF, ‘Later kindness’ (code P5.2.64).
46 WDH-CF, ‘Later trust’ (code P5.2.115).
47 WDH-CF, ‘Later values’ (code V1.4.1).
5. Capability versus happiness?

In Section 1, I referred to a controversy in quality-of-life research between the capability approach and the hedonic approach. Advocates of the capability approach stress the upper right quadrant in Scheme 1. They emphasize the importance of life-abilities and regard happiness rather as a by-product of the use and development of capabilities. They sniff of happiness as such, which they denounce as the simplistic joy of ‘Happy Hans’. This view lives among educators and therapists as well as among misanthropic philosophers. Advocates of the hedonic approach rather stress the right bottom quadrant in Scheme 1. In their view, the value of capabilities is in their functionality for a happy life. They warned against bookish education and repression of affective experience. This view is more common among the general public, which values happiness typically more than education (e.g. Harding et al., 1986) and supports the view that schools should focus more on happiness (BBC, 2006: Q8) and this view is also central in utilitarian moral philosophy.

What do the data tell us about this controversy? First of all, that there is no conflict in most cases. Capability is typically conducive to happiness, while happiness enhances capability. This interdependence is most pronounced in the case of general capability (health) but exist also in most of the specific capabilities discussed here. So one can agree on the same policies in spite of difference in principle. Still, the case of school intelligence illustrates that policymakers must sometimes show their hand. They cannot ignore the fact that school education does not add to personal happiness, in spite of its obvious economic functionality. Apparently there is ‘a loss of happiness’ in the educational system, comparable to the “loss of happiness in market democracies” depicted by Lane (2000). This calls for a critical look at what we teach in schools and how. It also calls for caution against pleas for life-long-learning.

If there is so little conflict, why then still this philosophical controversy?

Part of the answer is in stakeholder interest. As indicated in Section 2 on conceptual differences, there are vested interests behind conceptions of the good life and in particular in conceptions of the good life in terms of chances (upper row in Scheme 1). In that context, educators tend to see the good life as a cultured life and hence themselves as the main producer of the good. Probably for that reason they are receptive for arguments that happiness is not everything and buy myths such as that happiness is relative, for that reason they are receptive for arguments that happiness is an immutable trait and that slaves can be happy. One can prefer a life that meets particular cultural standards over a life that meets human needs and choose accordingly in case of conflict. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as one acknowledges the price of that choice.

6. Conclusion

Capability and happiness are different but related. Capability is obviously required for happiness, though not all capabilities are equally functional. Less obvious is that happiness fosters many capabilities, in particular health. In case of reciprocal causality there is little conflict between policies that prioritize either capability or happiness. A review of the available research findings shows much synergy, except in the case of school education.

References

Lane, R.E., 2000. The loss of happiness in market democracies. Yale University Press, New Haven, USA.