





While most would agree that human flourishing is a worthy endeavor, a modest attempt at capturing the implied meaning across multiple individuals quickly reveals the breadth of what may be implied by the phrase. Consistent throughout the empirical economic and psychology literature reviewed is an interpretation of human flourishing based on observable outcomes whether subjective or objective in nature. The subjective measures align closely with the economic concept of utility, the self-perceived wellbeing of the individual, most commonly referred to as “subjective wellbeing.” Objective measures presumably attempt to proxy for human flourishing and may incorporate metrics on health, counts of laughing, or electrical activity in the brain.

Outcomes alone would not capture the entirety of the notion of Eudaimonia as intended by Aristotle or most other philosophic endeavors to define the concept. For many of these, evaluations of flourishing must also consider inputs, the path traveled. Virtue, intentions, and responses to outcomes, in addition to the outcomes themselves, play an important role in the pursuit of flourishing. For example, it is reasonable to question whether the happy lunatic could be said to flourish even with high levels of self-reported subjective wellbeing.

Some philosophers and many theologians also include a consideration of telos in the evaluation of flourishing, measured as the degree to which one succeeds in fulfilling their ultimate purpose. For those whose beliefs align with the Westminster Shorter Catechism, man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. Despite health and happiness, an atheist would not be considered to flourish under these teleological beliefs. In some sense, this third category is also outcome based, but is clearly distinct from the first category and often incorporates a transcendent or eternal aspect.

For the majority of this paper, the existing empirical literature is considered in which the notion of subjective wellbeing is primarily used as a proxy for human flourishing. In the final section of the paper, the notion of wellbeing is broadened to consider the second two categories outlined above.

This paper proceeds in four sections. The first provides a brief discussion of the growth of GDP and provides context for what that growth looks like. The second lists and evaluates the















survey, and the World Values Survey (WVS).<sup>15</sup> Today, these polls collectively represent more than 150 countries and more than 98% of the world's population. The earliest iteration in the United States of a SWB question was conducted by the Gallup Poll in 1946. The initial question was quite simple and prompted respondents to indicate whether they were, "very happy," "fairly happy," or "not very happy." In 1960, Hadley Cantril was responsible for conducting a survey with significantly increased sophistication which he titled the "Self-Anchoring Striving Scale."<sup>16</sup> All three of the primary survey sources have subsequently adopted some version of Cantril's original ladder question with the deviation from Cantril in the WVS version being the greatest.<sup>17</sup> The current version of the Gallup World Poll's question reads,

Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you.

If the top step is 10 and the bottom step is 0, on which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time?

The WVS elects to ask questions targeting both life satisfaction (*All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?*) and happiness. There is strong correlation between the two. Questions also vary along additional dimensions such as addressing present vs future happiness or overall life satisfaction.

At this point a deeper question merits our attention. "Does an individual's subjective opinion of their own wellbeing equate to human flourishing?" Suppose several children have spent their entire lives within a single and relatively austere room. Their basic needs are provided for, but the room is all they know. Regardless of their response to questions about SWB, many would argue that they do not have enough knowledge of the world to accurately

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<sup>15</sup> Additional information for these data sources can be found at their respective websites. Gallup: <http://www.gallup.com/services/170945/world-poll.aspx>; Pew: <http://www.pewglobal.org/>; WVS <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>;

<sup>16</sup> Results were published in Cantril (1965). Cantril's intent was that individuals would define *their own* best and worst possible lives based on *their own* assumptions, perceptions, goals, and values.

<sup>17</sup> As might be expected, several other versions of these questions exist. Diener (1984) provides a comprehensive overview through its time of publication.



translators. As anyone who has spent enough time with Google Translate knows, this is not to be taken as given. After citing studies in Sociology together with work by Cantril, Easterlin concludes that “happiness is an idea that transcends individual cultures . . . [p. 93].” Other research has found a consistency in the recognition of emotions such as anger, sadness, and joy displayed in others’ facial expressions.<sup>20</sup> From the existing work, what is meant by happy and sad are reasonably consistent across cultures; however, the question of magnitude has not been definitively addressed. While this question remains open, most in the field appear comfortable that there is value in the comparison of these data across countries.<sup>21</sup>

Recall that research in the second category outlined at the beginning of this section seeks to understand the relation of prosperity and flourishing for a specific country *over time*. A natural concern which relates closely to that addressed in the preceding paragraph regards whether measures of SWB mean the same thing for residents within a specific country over time. Could it be that society’s notion of happiness in the 1950s is intrinsically different from what it meant by happiness at the turn of the millennium?<sup>22</sup> The existing (limited) body of evidence conflicts, at least initially. Several studies have utilized business cycle fluctuations to demonstrate that measures of SWB appear consistent over short periods of time.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, higher unemployment and inflation consistently imply lower happiness in the short term. Another body of work examines happiness and gender. Despite recent increases in the access to education and the workplace, reductions in time spent on housework as a result of technological advance, and increased control over family planning experienced by women in recent decades, women in both the United States and Europe report declining happiness relative to their male counterparts.<sup>24</sup>

Several potential explanations for this disparity between expected and observed levels of happiness in women have been offered. One study analyzes whether Americans spend their

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<sup>20</sup> Discussed in Stevenson and Wolfers (2008) in work by Ekman and Friesen (1971) and Ekman, et al. (1987)

<sup>21</sup> Cantril (1965), Easterlin (1974), Stevenson and Wolfers (2008), Diener and Tov (2008)

<sup>22</sup> Stevenson and Wolfers (2008) provide a discussion which addresses this concern. The content for this section makes use of their work.

<sup>23</sup> Di Tella, MacCulloch, and Oswald (2003), Wolfers (2003)

<sup>24</sup> Stevenson and Wolfers (2009), Blanchflower and Oswald (2004)

time in more or less enjoyable ways across generations. Men have experienced a gradual downward trend in the proportion of time spent on unpleasant activities while there is no such perceptible trend for women.<sup>25</sup> Additional explanations for this paradox have been relegated to the footnotes.<sup>26</sup> Similar to comparisons of SWB data across countries, this remains an open question. Consequently, the consistency of notions of wellbeing over time should be kept in mind when using this type of data.

A final set of related concerns exists for the third category of research on this topic. Does an individual's conception of happiness or flourishing vary over time? It is well documented that several transient factors can have a significant effect on an individual's evaluation of life. The strongest predictor of responses to SWB questions turns out to be whether the respondent has had any social time with friends or family during the past day. Other significant influences on SWB include whether the survey was administered on a weekend and whether the individual was currently experiencing a headache.<sup>27</sup> While these certainly have an effect on mood at present, these are transient conditions and unless chronically experienced, are unlikely to contribute to the notion of Eudemonia we initially set out to analyze. Controlling for known influences can account for any known characteristics which may affect reports on SWB. It is likely that several unknown or unmeasured characteristics which affect SWB remain. However, as long as these measures aren't systematically correlated with income, the law of large numbers should eliminate bias.<sup>28</sup> Kahneman (2006) raises concerns that within country comparisons of individuals may cause a "focusing illusion." Specifically, the concern is that asking about life satisfaction may lead people to assess their life relative to others on more concrete measures such as income. If this

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<sup>25</sup> Krueger (2007)

<sup>26</sup> Akerlof, Yellen, and Katz (1996) explore the relation between birth control pills and pressure on women to have sex outside of marriage. Stevenson and Wolfers (2009) suggest a change in reference point (think expectations) as a result of the changes to women's access. Hochschild and Machung's (1989) famous piece on the Second Shift, suggest that work in the market is on top of work in the home. However, Aguiar and Hurst (2009) raise questions regarding this view by using time use surveys to demonstrate that increases in market work for women has been more than offset by declines in non-market work.

<sup>27</sup> Kahneman (2010) and Smith (1986)

<sup>28</sup> Kenny (1999) as well as Layard, Clark and Senik (2012) suggest several such potential variables including democracy, quality of natural laws, health, weather and social trust. Kenny (1999) also calls into question the direction of causality. Specifically, whether growth causes happiness or happiness causes growth.





correlated with anxiety.<sup>34</sup> Rather than provide a long list of papers corroborating this claim, I proceed with additional detail on this widely accepted result.

First, while this consistent and positive relationship holds between income and various measures of SWB, it should be noted that measures of material prosperity are certainly not the sole determinant nor even one of the more important predictors of SWB. The Harvard Study of Adult Development is one of the longest-running and most comprehensive studies of mental and physical well-being with a 75 year longitudinal study examining most aspects in the lives of over 250 Harvard men and over 450 disadvantaged nondelinquent inner-city youths from the Boston neighborhoods. Recent writing generated by the study is more qualitative than quantitative in nature. Both current director (Robert Waldinger) and former director (George Valliant) suggest that warmth of relationships may have the greatest impacts on life satisfaction.<sup>35</sup> However, according to Valliant, warmth of relations also appears to have strong effects on monetary outcomes, which is suggestive of a third variable which influences both the independent and dependent variables considered in this paper.

This point merits expansion. It is doubtful that many reading this actually thought that little round metal coins or rectangular shaped paper would, in and of themselves, lead to one's flourishing. If income is related to SWB, it is likely affected through some opportunity that income affords. While income is not a satisfying ends, as a means it is something akin to potential yet unformed. It represents a claim on the productive capacities of a society and can be used to purchase food for the hungry or for the overindulgent. Wealth increases opportunity, but as it relates to flourishing it is more important how this opportunity is used than that the opportunity exists. This concept has been supported by many studies in the psychology literature. While there isn't space to extrapolate on most of them, a brief summary of several results are included.

Luhmann and Hawkey (2016) study a large German survey with a result that aligns with earlier findings in the field. Specifically that loneliness is a chief indicator of unhappiness.

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<sup>34</sup> Office for National Statistics (2015)

<sup>35</sup> Waldinger (2015), Valliant (2015)



However they also find that “the higher a person’s income is, the less likely it is that he or she will become lonely.” Howell and Hill (2009) support this finding in that expenditures on experiences rather than materialistic purchases have a greater effect on SWB with suggested causal channels of increased relatedness and reduced social comparison. Experimental results by Dunn, Aknin and Norton (2014) suggest that those who spend money on others rather than on self report greater happiness. This result was consistent across countries and age. Similar to the conclusion of Valiant, money does appear to buy happiness when the money is used as a means to enhance social connectedness. Further, it may be the case that low income is associated with increased isolation.

Similar to the results of Valliant in analyzing the Harvard Study, the results in the widely cited work of Kahneman and Deaton (2010) (henceforth the KD study) suggest that income is just one of many important variables which influence an individual’s SWB. For example, the study suggests that being older, educated, religious, married and female all have a positive effect on predicted SWB while obesity, divorce, being alone and smoking all had a negative effect.<sup>36</sup>

Another theme frequently addressed in the literature including the KD study regards the matter of whether a satiation point exists. A satiation point is a hypothetical point above which wellbeing stops increasing or perhaps even begins to decrease. While early studies often suggested a satiation point, later research pointed out that when a log scale is used, a satiation point no longer appears to exist in questions of SWB. Log scales show equivalent movement on the vertical-axis for equivalent percentage increases in income rather than equivalent movement for equivalent dollar increases in income. The idea being that similar dollar amounts matter more if your base income is lower.<sup>37</sup> KD further nuance this result by splitting questions of emotional affectation (reports of current happiness, smiling and laughter, etc.) from questions of life satisfaction (i.e. Cantril’s Ladder). While income increases both measures at

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<sup>36</sup> This is an incomplete list of all included variables. The seeming contrast with the earlier result from Stevenson and Wolfers (2009) on female happiness regards a question of level vs change. Women have consistently responded with higher levels of SWB however that gap has been shrinking which is the focus of the 2009 paper.

<sup>37</sup> Kahneman and Deaton (2010) and Stevenson and Wolfers (2013) provide two such examples

lower levels, at higher levels (specifically above \$75,000 in this study), increases in emotional affect are no longer significantly modified by increases in income while increases in life satisfaction continue to occur.

Another observation in the literature on this topic deals with the transient nature of increases in SWB in response to improvements of circumstance, commonly referred to as 'hedonic adaptation.'<sup>38</sup> The idea is that we all have a 'set point' or natural level of happiness. Disruptions in our lives including material disruption both positive and negative temporarily affect our happiness. However, the theory hypothesizes that we will naturally return to our set point regardless of the disruption. This observation has been made as early as Augustine and is stated elegantly by Rousseau in his Discourse on Inequality (1754):

Since these conveniences by becoming habitual had almost entirely ceased to be enjoyable, and at the same time degenerated into true needs, it became much more cruel to be deprived of them than to possess them was sweet, and men were unhappy to lose them without being happy to possess them.

Note that the proposed cause(s) of hedonic adaptation vary. While the prior quote suggests that a habitual experience moves our 'set point' to expect any frequently experienced material comfort, alternative explanations suggest that we craft our 'set point' based on the observations of those around us. In the paper, "Neighbors as Negatives," Erzo Luttmer finds that after controlling for an individual's own income, higher earnings of neighbors are associated with lower levels of self-reported happiness. People care about *relative* income rather than *absolute* income. We desire to "keep up with the Joneses" and the "Joneses" turn out to be defined to some extent by geographic proximity. If, as one increases their income, they simultaneously adapt their social circles to align with their augmented salary, hedonic adaptation would be observed. This concept was expressed over a century earlier by Marx:

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<sup>38</sup> Brickman and Campbell (1971)

A house may be large or small; as long as the neighboring houses are likewise small, it satisfies all social requirement for a residence. But let there arise next to the little house a palace, and the little house shrinks to a hut.<sup>39</sup>

As early as 1965, psychologist Hadley Cantril concluded,

[p]eople in highly developed nations have obviously acquired a wide range of aspirations, sophisticated and expensive from the point of view of people in less-developed areas, who have not yet learned all that is potentially available to people in more advanced societies and whose aspirations concerning the social and material aspects of life are modest indeed by comparison. (1965, p. 202 quoted in Easterlin, 1995, p. 41.)

Despite these multiple theories, empirical findings seem to contradict the complete reversion to a set point of happiness. While there certainly seems to be significant hedonic adaptation which reduces the initial increase in SWB in response to changes in material circumstance, according to Stevenson and Wolfers' (2008) work, some of the initial increase in SWB due to changes in income or wealth does persist.

In summary, increases in income at the individual level consistently align with increases in reported SWB. The increase in SWB is largest initially and smaller, but remains positive, over time. Once a log-scale is utilized, a satiation point no longer appears to exist in terms of increases in reported life satisfaction. Further, not all expenditures lead to equivalent increases in SWB. Expenditures that enhance relational ties such as expenditures or donations to others and expenditures on experiences rather than tangible goods appear to elicit the strongest increases in SWB.

#### *The Relationship between SWB and Material Prosperity at the Country Level*

While those with higher incomes tend to report higher levels of SWB, the more important question for humanity is aptly posed in a 1995 paper by Easterlin, "Will Raising the Incomes of All Increase the Happiness of All?" After all, if SWB is entirely based on one's *relative*

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<sup>39</sup> Marx and Engels (1919)

income rather than *absolute* income, then there is no point in seeking additional material prosperity at a global level since more material prosperity for one would lead to lowered wellbeing for others. In the aforementioned paper, Easterlin's answer to his title's question is "no." He begins his conclusion with the following:

Today, as in the past, within a country at a given time those with higher incomes are, on average, happier. However, raising the incomes of all does not increase the happiness of all. This is because the material norms on which judgements of well-being are based increase in the same proportion as the actual income of the society.

Expanding on the concept from Luttmer's "Neighbor's as Negatives" paper, Easterlin suggests that the set to which we compare our relative income includes not just our neighbors but our compatriots as well. Even still, in the decades that elapsed between Easterlin's original foray into the topic and his 1995 piece, a bevy of studies including Easterlin's own continued contributions led him to recant on his cross-sectional country result stating, "a positive happiness-income relationship typically turns up in international comparisons." (1995, p.42).

A lack of evidence is not the same as evidence that there is no relationship and by 1995 evidence of a relationship between SWB and material prosperity across countries had grown. However, the size of differences in SWB often appeared small and primarily seemed to hold only for countries with lower incomes. For example, Layard (2005) claims that "if we compare countries, there is no evidence that richer countries are happier than poorer ones—so long as we confine ourselves to countries with incomes over \$15,000 per head...At income levels below \$15,000 per head things are different . . ." (2005b, p. 149 quoted in Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008, p. 11.)

In their 2008 paper, Stevenson and Wolfers conclusively demonstrate that the relationship across countries between SWB and income holds more broadly. Their work chronologically documents earlier studies, provides additional insight and explanation for earlier outliers (i.e. samples which over-represent urban areas which correspond to higher average incomes), and converts from a linear income scale to a log income scale. After incorporating an additional decade of more globally representative data and making the

aforementioned adjustments, a clear relation between SWB and material prosperity across countries holds. Moreover, the coefficient on the slope of the increase in SWB with regard to increases in income is not significantly different from the slope at the individual level. Finally, using a logarithmic scale, the coefficient on the relationship between SWB and material prosperity is *higher* for countries with larger incomes than for countries with smaller incomes. This coefficient is easy to misunderstand and the referenced paper goes to some lengths to clarify the result. In short, the same dollar increase would do more for SWB in a relatively poor country than a relatively rich country but the same percentage increase would do more for SWB in a relatively rich country than a relatively poor country. To summarize, there is a significant and positive relationship between SWB and material prosperity across countries and further, no satiation point at the country level appears to exist.

The cross-sectional analysis was not Easterlin's primary evidence for his 1995 declaration that increasing the income of all does not increase the happiness of all. The crux of his argument lies in the survey data of 11 countries over time.<sup>40</sup> Ever since polls on SWB began, average prosperity in these countries has consistently increased. Surely if an increase in the incomes of all raises the happiness of all, it should be observed in these time series data. However, Easterlin finds no pattern between the large increases in material welfare and SWB over the last several decades. He points to Japan specifically as having the most dramatic increase in income. Japan experienced an intense rise in prosperity from post-WWII subsistence levels to a position of global leadership in just a few short decades.<sup>41</sup> Surely if raising incomes for all raises SWB for all, the polling evidence out of Japan should clearly reveal this pattern. The data as of Easterlin's publication showed no such increase in SWB.

The strongest argument against Easterlin's (1995) conclusion was contributed by Stevenson and Wolfers (2008) (SW08). As the time series evidence serves as the core evidence supporting Easterlin's Paradox, SW08 dedicate primary attention to an updated analysis of the

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<sup>40</sup> Specifically the United States, Japan, Denmark, Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium, Britain, Germany, Greece, France, and Italy.

<sup>41</sup> During the 1958 to 1987 period analyzed, real per capita income in Japan increased five-fold. (Easterlin, 1995, p. 39)

existing time series survey data. Their primary criticism of Easterlin's work is that "absence of evidence should not be confused with evidence of absence" (2008 p. 16). They proceed to provide several pieces of evidence which suggest that this final point of Easterlin's paradox may in fact result from a lack of available information at the time of Easterlin's publication.

At this time, the World Values Survey (WVS) offered panel data spanning multiple decades for many countries in excess of the original 11 analyzed by Easterlin (1995). SW08 find a general pattern that income and happiness tended to move in the same direction.<sup>42</sup> Later regression analysis demonstrates a positive correlation for both happiness and life satisfaction with the coefficient for life satisfaction roughly in line with the coefficient at the individual level. Unfortunately, the results are potentially biased due to changes in the ordering of questions asked in the WVS across waves.<sup>43</sup>

Next, SW08 proceeds to evaluate the updated surveys used in Easterlin (1995).<sup>44</sup> Using data through 2007, the authors are able to take advantage of roughly twice as many years of survey data. Using the updated surveys, the fitted coefficient  $\log(GDP)$  and life satisfaction is positive for 8 of the 9 countries with Belgium being a notable exception. While inconclusive, the updated data generally supports a positive relation between income and life satisfaction at the country level over time.

The key country used to support Easterlin's paradox was Japan. By the time SW08 conducted their analysis, Japan's real GDP per capita had increased an astonishing 6 fold since the end of World War II and the Life in Nation surveys provided continuous time series data beginning in 1958. Initial review of the updated data continued to reveal an astonishingly flat or even slightly negative relationship. However, upon closer inspection, SW08 find that the questions asked in the survey were meaningfully modified multiple times. When each version

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<sup>42</sup> Income and happiness moved in the same direction for 62 of the 89 observed changes while income and life satisfaction moved in the same direction for roughly half (46 of the 90) observed changes.

<sup>43</sup> Stevenson and Wolfers proceed to analyze the data using a difference in differences approach in an attempt to remove biases which arise due to changes in question ordering. The interested reader is encouraged to review section 5 of their paper for additional details.

<sup>44</sup> The Eurobarometer Survey began asking questions on life satisfaction in 1973. Easterlin (1995) used data through 1989. Stevenson and Wolfers (2008) update the data through 2007.

of survey question is separated from alternate versions, the relationship between SWB and real GDP per capita becomes positive for all but the most recent decade analyzed (during which Japan experienced significant and prolonged stagnation in GDP.) Again, SW08 provide suggestive evidence in contrast with Easterlin's earlier conclusion.

The final country analyzed is the US, whose survey data has been the most widely studied and which appears to support Easterlin's Paradox. Despite significant increases in real GDP per capita, surveyed happiness has declined slightly since the early 1970s. While the inequitable distributions of this increase in income may help to explain part of this result, it does seem to be the case that the increases in material prosperity of the US as a whole has not led to a corresponding increase in SWB.

Note that the debate regarding the Easterlin Paradox continues. In 2010 Easterlin and co-authors revisited their 1995 work with the same conclusion: "at a point in time both among and within nations, happiness varies directly with income, but over time, happiness does not increase when a country's income increases."<sup>45</sup> Specifically, Easterlin criticizes SW08 for primarily focusing on short term rather than long term fluctuations in income and that over periods of 10 or more years, income does not affect SWB. Shortly thereafter, Wolfers (2010) provided a rebuttal to Easterlin re-asserting that there is no paradox.

### **Broadening the Notion of Human Flourishing**

The short answer to the question "Does money buy happiness?" appears to be "a little." While relative socioeconomic position within a society seems to bring with it some amount of life satisfaction, the relationship of income and SWB across countries is more contentious, especially once a certain level has been reached, and the evidence for increases in wealth leading to increases in flourishing over time is still very much debated. That said, the difference in incomes from the poorest to the wealthiest in society are very large and the estimated cumulative effect of material prosperity when comparing the destitute to the decadent is

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<sup>45</sup> Easterlin et. al. (2010)

significant. Even still, material prosperity is not the core ingredient in the recipe for human flourishing. We shouldn't find this surprising. That "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" makes clear that wealth was never intended to be an end in itself.<sup>46</sup>

As this is perhaps the most regularly quoted scripture on the topic, a closer look at the text is warranted.<sup>47</sup> However before its pursuit, a brief aside. The entirety of the research rehashed in this exploration has focused on SWB as a proxy for human flourishing. Most faith practices would immediately object to this as doomed from the start and they would find allies in the Greek philosophers. One's positive perception of their own flourishing is certainly not a sufficient condition for a life well lived; otherwise derangement and lunacy could well be viable paths to human flourishing. SWB is a consideration of outcome rather than our actions, inputs, and motivations. However, it is these things which are generally considered critical in the evaluation of virtue. The Apostle Paul is the first in our exploration who will lead us beyond the experienced to the transcendent.

Although the scope of this paper prevents pursuit of all but a handful of perspectives, others are listed here. Eudaimonia, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, is most often used in reference to Aristotelian ethics. Concern with human flourishing is a central topic for many philosophers. These include Aristotle, Plato, the Stoics, the Epicureans, and even moral philosopher turned economist Adam Smith. Each explored to greater or lesser extent the role of

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<sup>46</sup> 1 Timothy 6:10

<sup>47</sup> In particular, I wish to explore 1 Timothy 6:2b-10 and 6:17-19. Replicated here for convenience:

<sup>2b</sup>Teach and urge these things. <sup>3</sup>If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, <sup>4</sup>he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, <sup>5</sup>and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. <sup>6</sup>But godliness with contentment is great gain, <sup>7</sup>for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. <sup>8</sup>But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. <sup>9</sup>But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup>For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. . . . <sup>17</sup>As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. <sup>18</sup>They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, <sup>19</sup>thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life. (ESV 2001)



material possessions in this pursuit. Smith, through personal observation and logical reasoning comes to several similar conclusions as the empirical literature, specifically in the concept of a set point and in the limited role of wealth in flourishing.<sup>48</sup> More recent examples of alternate approaches to this type of question would include Diedre McCloskey and Michael Sandel.

The Bible itself provides a metaphoric wealth of material on this topic. Money is mentioned well over 100 times, gold and silver another 700, and there are well over 1500 references to material possessions. While several books could and have been written on the topic I choose to focus on this particular passage in Paul's pastoral epistle to Timothy.<sup>49</sup>

As opposed to the empirical research, Paul's purpose is not to provide a method for increasing SWB. Paul is concerned with human flourishing, but of a different form. Consistent with the rest of his writing, for Paul, flourishing in this present age pales in importance compared to flourishing in the eternal.<sup>50</sup> Evidence for this claim, even within this short passage, abounds. Paul's greatest warning against a love of money is not earthly pain but the possibility of apostasy (v10). Timothy is subsequently admonished to flee the love of money and other traps of false teachers and to take hold of the eternal life to which he was called (v12). The rich of "this present age" (v17) are advised to use their wealth in ways that matter for that which is "truly life" (v19), clearly a reference to spiritual matters. Despite this difference in focus there is an astonishing amount of overlap with the empirical literature in prescribed action. This overlap is explored below.

This particular passage is generally exegeted beginning with 1 Tim 6:2b.<sup>51</sup> The passage 2b-19 can be split into four parts. Verse 5 completes an admonishment begun in verse 2 to avoid false doctrines, particularly the idea that godliness is a means of (presumably material) gains. In verses 6-10, general reflections on wealth and the desire for it are provided. This line

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<sup>48</sup> Smith (1790) Section 3, Chapter III covers both of these concepts. A particularly striking quote suggests that for both the wealthy and the poor, the greatest sources of happiness look surprisingly similar. In this particular instance, a meal shared with close friends.

<sup>49</sup> There is significant debate on the authorship of this letter. Among the most notable questioning Pauline authorship is Dibelius and Conzelman (1972)

<sup>50</sup> In this passage alone, see verses 7, 10, 12, 14 and 19. Perhaps the most clearly articulated version of this concept can be found in Php 3:8-11.

<sup>51</sup> For example, Marshall (2007), Towner (2009), Johnson (2001), Dibelius and Conzelmann (1972).

of thought is continued in verses 17-19 where Paul addresses those who *are* (as opposed to those who desire to become) rich in Timothy's congregation. It is notable that Paul's strongest rhetoric is reserved for those who desire wealth rather than for those who have wealth (the categories are not mutually exclusive). In both cases, Paul admonishes against an idolatry of money. These two passages are split by a personal exhortation to Timothy to flee the pursuit of wealth and other false teachings and instead to pursue his original calling.

Picking up in the second section outlined above (v6-10), Paul advises that as long as some minimal amount of material provision is allotted (in this case food and covering),<sup>52</sup> godliness with contentment is true gain. To use the language of the more recent literature, Paul appears to be suggesting to Timothy that rather than seek the increase of wealth, the key to 'great gain' lies in lowering one's set-point or expectations of what is required to achieve the 'good life' (to use the words of Easterlin and Crimmins). Further, Paul incorporates several clues that his real focus is the life to come. In verse 6, great gain lies in the combination of godliness with contentment. While the Greek word Paul uses for contentment (*autarkeias*) would be recognized as a reference to the Stoic/Cynic philosophical tradition of self-sufficiency, Marshall (2007) notes that the combination of godliness accompanied by contentment suggests not self-sufficiency but 'Christ-sufficiency.'<sup>53</sup> Given some minimal level of provision, our wellbeing is not contingent on our material state. Rather, it critically rests on our spiritual condition. Verse 7 follows with a reminder that none of our material possessions will accompany us after death. Consequently, contentment is a key virtue advocated by Paul and is used to begin and end the positive advice found in verses 6-8. Contentment is explicitly contrasted with those who 'desire to be rich' addressed in verse 9.

Society in the United States appears to be doing the exact opposite of lowering their set-point or finding contentment in their current state. Take for example Easterlin and Crimmins' conclusion nearly two millennia following Paul that "When Americans are asked to think about the 'good life-the life you'd like to have,' the proportion identifying goods such as

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<sup>52</sup> The word used here commonly is interpreted as clothing but may also refer to housing. In any case Paul is referring not to destitution but to a simple lifestyle Marshall (2007) referencing Stott (2014)

<sup>53</sup> Marshall (2007) also cites Fee (1988) and Roloff (1988) in support of this conclusion

‘really nice clothes’ and ‘a vacation home’ as essentials of the good life is considerably higher in 1988 than in 1975.”<sup>54</sup> That we have failed to actualize Paul’s recommendation is further emphasized as Easterlin suggests elsewhere that “[I]mportant are findings indicating that material norms and income increase, not only in the same direction, but at the same rate.”<sup>55</sup> In short, it appears that we will always want more.

Paul’s refrain in verses 8-10 are echoes of Old Testament advice. In line with Paul’s allowance for satisfying some basic level of need expressed in verse 8, the Old Testament’s institutional and individual mandates seem to indicate a moral value in alleviating the material destitution of the poor.<sup>56</sup> However, the admonition against those desiring to get rich in verse 9 may be a rehashing of the tenth and final commandment to Moses and the Israelites not to covet.<sup>57</sup> In fact, the word used for the love of money in Greek is *philargyria* which shares an etymology with *philagyros* and can be translated as covetous.

Herein Paul unintentionally provides a similar explanation for the Easterlin Paradox that more recent researchers have suggested.<sup>58</sup> When we covet, we turn our focus from something else (God in Paul’s case or our absolute level of material prosperity in Easterlin’s) to our relative level of prosperity. When we base our idea of the “good life” on the typical material enjoyments experienced by those around us, then our entire notion of wellbeing is wrapped up in having more or less *than*, rather than having enough. While getting richer *than* our neighbors may bring satisfaction on a relative scale, increasing the income of all while maintaining the relative distribution of wealth achieves nothing if our satisfaction is a derivative of our relative position.

In advising Timothy against *philargyria*, Paul is advising Timothy’s congregation against the love of, finding enjoyment in, or putting faith in silver or money—in other words, making an

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<sup>54</sup> Easterlin and Cummins (1991)

<sup>55</sup> Easterlin (1995)

<sup>56</sup> For examples see Deut. 15:1-2, Ezek. 16:49-50

<sup>57</sup> Exod. 20:17. Replicated here for convenience:

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.

<sup>58</sup> It should be noted, that the prescription of Easterlin and coauthors is negative (don’t compare to others), Paul is calling us not just to look away from others but to look towards God.

idol of money. Beyond ruin and destruction, Paul warns that through a craving for money, some have wandered away from the faith (literally, some have apostatized.)<sup>59</sup> This call to avoid the idolization of material possession is repeated in verse 17. As opposed to verses 9-10, the target audience is now those who are *already* wealthy rather than those *desiring* wealth. Paul's negative commands are not to be prideful (presumably because of wealth) and not to put hope in the security which appears to be offered by "uncertain riches." Modern examples may include the aging couple finding security in putting just a little more away for retirement, or the young professional who is full of faith that she will be carefree if she can just finish paying off this bit of debt. These mercantilist desires to accumulate and put our hope in wealth as the source of security continue to emanate a Siren's song to many governments and individuals alike. However, the potential consequences listed by Paul are about as strong as imaginable, including 'ruin and destruction,' self-inflicted pain, and even apostasy. Given his consistent focus on eternal outcomes, this is of ultimate concern.

Moving on to the positive commands to the "rich in this present age," the correct allocation of hope is not on riches but on God who is *the provider of those riches which are to be enjoyed*. Often, verse 10 is errantly quoted as money being the root of all evil. This would be odd indeed, for then verse 17 would imply that God is the provider of the root of all evil and that this root of evil is to be enjoyed. The ideas that material possessions are both a good gift of God *and* meant to be enjoyed do not find their genesis in Paul but appear repeatedly as early as the Pentateuch.<sup>60</sup> This implies that there must be some morally acceptable way for the income of the wealthy to be employed.

Verse 18 provides the anticipated prescription. Specifically, the wealthy are to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share. This strongly aligns with what might be recommended out of the empirical findings outlined in section 3.1 of this paper. Expenditures that enhance relational ties such as spending on or donations to others and outlays on experiences rather than tangible goods appear to elicit the strongest increases in SWB. To be clear, this is simply a by-product for Paul as his reason for this use of wealth is as an investment

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<sup>59</sup> Towner (2009)

<sup>60</sup> These themes are further discussed in Blomberg (1999), this particular reference from his conclusion (pp241)

in future treasure and in some way, to prepare the rich of this age to take hold of that which is truly life. This echoes the words of Jesus in his exhortation to store up treasures in heaven (Matt 6:19-20), as well as his response to the rich young ruler (Matt 19, Mark 10, Luke 18).<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps this passage from 1 Timothy is just a specific application of the Shema Yisreal.<sup>62</sup> When the wealthy (or anyone) finds their wealth an ends, when they love it and base their hope or security on it, they have given to money what was intended for God. When we base our perception of the good life on what we or our neighbors have, then we set our sights far too low and have looked for in material prosperity what can only be found in God. Paul's prescription to avoid breaking both the first and final commandment is to be generous and to share whatever wealth we receive from God.

While our current experience is considered by Paul, it is not his final word on flourishing. Instead, Paul concludes with how our actions in this world affect our outcomes in the one that is to come. Per Paul, the way in which our wealth assists in human flourishing is to enslave it in the service of love towards God and others. Our wealth is given by God to us to enjoy; but ironically, only in our own generous giving of it do we find the ultimate goodness intended through it. That the empirical literature also seems to imply this is the most effective way to use our money to increase SWB in the present is secondary. However, it is noteworthy and does bring to mind Jesus' words from his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Perhaps the most direct application of Paul's interaction with the Shema Yisreal and the use of money is found in Luke's rendition of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). This passage starts with a lawyer inquiring of Jesus how one might inherit eternal life (true life). In typical Socratic fashion, Jesus responds with a question, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" In Luke, the lawyer answers with what Jesus declares in Matthew to be the

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<sup>61</sup> Johnson (2001)

<sup>62</sup> The Shema Yisreal is the central prayer in the Jewish prayer book and is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Verses 4 and 5 are replicated here for convenience.

<sup>4</sup>"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>5</sup>You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

-ESV 2001

greatest and second greatest commandments. The greatest being a slight variation on the Shema's, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might," and the second being to love your neighbor as yourself.

When the lawyer asks for clarification as to who constitutes one's neighbor, Jesus responds with his famous parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells a racially charged story, using a despised Samaritan as the protagonist who demonstrates sacrificial love to a man beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Notable to our conversation is that the Samaritan's display of love to the man is demonstrated through his generosity with his material prosperity (oil and wine) as well as his wealth in paying for multiple days at a nearby inn. As the repeated use of material possessions is expressed in Jesus' response to an inquiry of how one obtains eternal life through loving God and others, the connection with Paul's cryptic closing to the passage in 1 Timothy 6 is apparent. It is through loving others in obedience to God by generously sharing our wealth that we store up treasure for ourselves as a good foundation for the future and so that we may take hold of that which is truly life.

I conclude by attempting to integrate Paul's passage in 1 Timothy with the more recent literature on our initial question. Critical to the relationship between SWB and material prosperity at the individual level is how that income is used. While Paul's ultimate aim is not to obtain the highest possible level of SWB, his advice aligns astonishingly well with what might be prescribed by someone exclusively looking at the existing empirical research. For income to increase SWB, it must be used relationally. Perhaps the most effective form is through sharing and generous giving as advised by Paul to the wealthy in Timothy's community. Verbrugge and Krell (2015) aptly summarize this passage with focus on both present action and future purpose, stating, "The goal for every believer is to prepare in this present age for the coming age, and one of the best ways for the wealthy to do this is to share what they have with those who do not" (p. 246).

The link between an individual's SWB and their material prosperity appears to be largely tied up in their set-point. Unfortunately, there is a general trend of increasing one's expectations as one's income increases. Paul suggests that rather than continuously striving

after more wealth, effort would be better spent on learning to be content with whatever situation in which one finds oneself. However, consistent with the Old Testament, Paul still expresses a role in alleviating the most severe forms of poverty. This seems to support the larger increases in SWB observed (at least in absolute levels) for those at the lowest end of the income distribution both across individuals and across countries.

At the country level, there is no doubt that most governments view it as one of the highest priorities to increase the material wellbeing of its citizens, often evaluated through measurements of GDP. This is at particular odds with Easterlin's assertion that increasing the income of all will not lead to an increase in the happiness of all. If the expectations one sets on the material requisites for human flourishing are a composite of the current living standards of one's neighbors, compatriots, and global standing, then there really is no way to globally raise levels of experienced happiness through pursuit of material prosperity alone. While the material pie is certainly not of fixed sized, if joy is derived through the relative size of one's individual slice, then the aggregate joy derived through any size pie may be fixed.

Here Paul's admonishment away from covetousness and towards contentment simultaneously presents an explanation for and a pathway out of Easterlin's paradox. As various forms of social media call us to compare ourselves to ever increasing standards of material attainment, Paul urges us to stop looking laterally and instead to set our hope on God. Do not set your faith, your hope, or your love in the amassing of material wealth. These sentiments are reserved rightly for God alone and will never be satisfied by money.

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