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THE BIG PONDER

Happiness

By Michael Hobbes

Michael Hobbes: Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. 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. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time? [MUSIC] That is the Cantril Life Ladder, the research question surveyors use to measure happiness around the world. If you report your current happiness at seven or above – congratulations, you're officially thriving. A score between four and seven puts you in the 'struggling' category, and under four classifies you as 'suffering.' These scales have become a staple of modern life. Every year, we get a new index ranking the happiest countries, the happiest cities, and the happiest people.

Newscaster 1: The United Nations just named the happiest place on Earth. It is not Disney World. It's Finland.

Newscaster 2: A high life expectancy, excellent economic growth, the best healthcare in the world, and a public transport system that runs to the second, it's no wonder that Switzerland is one of the happiest countries in the world.

Newscaster 3: And the happiest people on Earth are officially the Norwegians.

Michael Hobbes: As an American living in Germany, the first thing I always look for is the placement of my old home and my new home. Almost without fail, the results are the same: Germany close to the top, America toward the middle. According to the 2021 World Happiness Report, Germany is the seventh-happiest country in the world, and the U.S. is 19th. The Happy Planet Index puts Germany 49th and America 108th. And The Social Progress Index, which includes measures of well-being and health, puts Germany 11th and America 28th. [MUSIC] So what's the explanation for this? To find out, I figured I should ask the happiest Germans I could find. According to the most recent Glücksatlas, an annual survey by the Postal Service, Hamburg is the happiest city in Germany. So I got on a train, booked a hotel, and posted on social media that I was looking for locals to give me their theories on the secrets of German and Hamburgian happiness. The first non-weirdo to reply was Timm, a psychologist who specializes in depression among college students. He just moved back to Hamburg after studying in Bonn, and I asked him to meet me somewhere he associates with happiness.

[OUTSIDE SOUNDS]

Michael Hobbes: Timm, why have you brought me here?

Timm: Because this is a little ocean in the middle of Hamburg. This is the Außenalster, and I really like it here, and it is pretty windy, as you can tell maybe.

Michael Hobbes: We're sitting on a park bench next to the water. Timm has done fun runs here, and he often comes to watch the birds or the sailboats. Timm didn't know that Hamburg was the happiest city in Germany, but he says it doesn't surprise him.

Timm: I think Hamburg is a very green city. And the penthouse apartment or the really big salary or the nice car or whatever, you get used to that too, so you have to find new stuff. And it's easier and much cheaper if you find it in everyday life.

Michael Hobbes: I ask Timm about the most common reason his patients struggle to find happiness.

Timm: The most common thing I think is expectations. Expecting stuff from yourself you can't achieve. I think a lot of people either they don't achieve it or they do achieve it, and they're still not happy, and I think that's something a lot of people struggle with because you can't win.

[MUSIC]

Michael Hobbes: The question of how to compare happiness across countries has always fascinated me. I grew up in the United States and have lived in four other countries as an adult. One of them, Denmark, is widely known as the world's happiest country. I was living there in 2008 when a Gallup poll found that 72% of Danes considered themselves thriving, compared to just 21% of people worldwide. Since then, an entire industry has sprung up to explain the secrets of Danish happiness.

Newscaster 1: Universal healthcare, free university, education and generous unemployment benefits. Are these the keys to happiness?

Newscaster 2: According to Bernie Sanders, the U.S. would be a much better place if it emulated cycle-crazy Denmark.

Danish Interviewee: We don't have any wars, and the crime is low, and we can let our children walk to school in the morning by themselves when they're quite young. We don't have to drive them because of drive-by shootings or something like that.

Michael Hobbes: In fact, happiness is kind of having a moment. In the 1960s, the small, landlocked country of Bhutan embarked on a project to measure its success by Gross National Happiness. Instead of focusing on development indicators like national income or foreign investment, the government obligated itself to provide its citizens with contentment and well-being. It's even in the constitution! Since then, Bhutan has become both an economic success story and an evangelist for countries to look beyond mere economic indicators. In the 1990s, journalists from the American news show *60 Minutes* came to interview the Bhutanese royal family about how they did it.

Prince of Bhutan: Gross National Happiness is being able to find the right balance between economic well-being and emotional well-being.

Newscaster: To boost happiness, his commission ordered contemplation: two minutes of daily meditation at each school each day. Bhutan once had a stoplight. It was right here – the only stoplight in the whole country. But they decided it was too modern, so they took it out. They also decided they didn't want those icons of America's global reach: fast-food restaurants. So in Bhutan, there are no McDonald's, no Burger King, not even a Starbucks.

Michael Hobbes: In 2012, Bhutan launched an international effort to create a World Happiness Index that ranked countries according to how content their citizens were. Denmark was, of course, number one that year. The United States ranked 17th, and Germany was 26th. But what does it mean to say that one country is happier than another?

Adrian Daub: I don't know. And I think of the word, I mean what would you even say? Would it be the German word 'Glück'? 'Cause that's something that kind of happens to you, isn't it?

Michael Hobbes: This is Adrian Daub, a political scientist at Stanford University. He grew up in Cologne and moved to the United States when he was 16. His research focuses on the intersection between language, culture, and history, and he teaches a class called Germany in Five Words. Like most of the Germans I interviewed for this project, Adrian pointed out that asking Americans how happy they are isn't the same as asking Germans how 'glücklich' they are. Like 'love' or 'motherhood' or 'breakfast,' happiness is a word can't be separated from the people who use it.

Adrian Daub: I don't know if you know that famous ballad by Schiller, "The Ring of Polycrates," about the Greek king. Everything he does just turns out awesome. He beats all his enemies, he's

super rich, and whatever. And then the Egyptian king says to him: Well, you know, it's actually kind of scary how lucky you are. Eventually, this is gonna blow up in your face. You realize that, right? And so he's like: Well, just to be safe, I'm gonna take something I really value and destroy it. He throws a ring into the ocean. And then, they have dinner. And then at dinner, his cook's like: Hey, great news – we got this fish, and it had this amazing ring inside of it. Here, you should have it. And at that moment, the Egyptian king is like: I'm outta here, this is terrifying. That to me that says something about how the word 'Glück' functions. Because it's not earned, it's not worked towards, and it just kind of finds you, one way or another.

Michael Hobbes: When I first moved to Germany, I was fascinated by the fact that 'glücklich,' the word for happy, was directly related to 'Glück,' the word for luck. But it turns out this is almost a universal feature of the word. In English, 'happiness' derives from 'hap,' the old Norse word for fortune or luck. That's how we ended up with words like 'hapless,' which means unfortunate, and idioms like 'happy as a clam,' a truncated version of 'happy as a clam at high tide.' Similarly, the Spanish 'felicidad' and Italian 'felicità' come from the Latin word 'felix,' for luck or fate. Some of the earliest known versions of the word, in Ancient Greek, combine the concepts of luck, favor, and blessedness. 'Unhappiness' translates literally as 'poop spirits' – or, as we'd say now, 'shit happens.'

[MUSIC]

Michael Hobbes: And this is what happiness meant for most of European history. It wasn't an achievement or a feeling or even something you got during your time on Earth. Some early versions of the Bible translate the famous passage 'blessed are the meek' as 'happy are the meek' – happiness was a reward in the afterlife, heavenly compensation for living a life of piety and discipline. The fairy tale kicker 'happily ever after' began 'life in the Middle Ages, as happily in the ever after.' This explains why the German understanding of happiness seems so understated compared to the American version.

Saskia: In Germany, happiness is much more closer to being content than to having aspirations. So, it's much more that happiness is the small things. It's like a nice cup of coffee. It's probably closer to the Scandinavian 'hygge,' – I don't know if I'm pronouncing it correctly – but having pleasure in small everyday things and not saving up all the happiness to have one really great thing.

Michael Hobbes: This is Saskia, another Hamburger who agreed to meet and tell me the secret of her city's success. She doesn't own a car and doesn't want to, and she asked to meet me in one of Hamburg's many pedestrian and cycling paths. Saskia lived in Minnesota in high school, and to her, the American version of happiness always seemed like a response to the higher rates of instability and inequality she saw there.

Saskia: I always remember – I think it is a few years old – I saw a video of a woman getting trapped on a New York subway, with her leg between the subway stations and the train. And while people were trying to get her out, she was shouting: Don't call an ambulance, don't call an ambulance. I was younger when I saw it, and I was just like: Why wouldn't you call an ambulance? Then, obviously, I went into it, and that ambulances are horrifically expensive there. It's good that she shouted it because if there was a tourist nearby the closest thing they would do is call an ambulance because we're just like used to it.

Michael Hobbes: Saskia is describing something I've experienced myself. One of the happiest times in my life was my first round of living in Berlin and working at a human rights charity. I didn't make very much money, but I didn't need to. My living costs were low because Berlin makes it illegal for landlords to jack up the rent. My healthcare was taken care of due to the public system. I didn't even have to spend money on gas or bus passes because it's so easy to bike most places in Berlin. I wasn't rich, but I was secure. And as an American, it was a strangely new feeling.

[MUSIC]

Michael Hobbes: According to Darrin McMahon's *Happiness: A History*, the American conception of happiness began with John Locke. In his 1689 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke proposed that God wanted his subjects to be happy not only in the afterlife but also here on earth. At the time, this was a profound shift. As Locke described it, happiness meant pleasure. And seeking pleasure – or, to coin a phrase, 'the pursuit of happiness' – was God's will for all of his subjects. Over the next 200 years, this more immediate, earthly understanding of happiness caught on with the puritans and was eventually taken up by America's founding fathers.

Ian Beacock: It's a higher-order kind of thing. At moments of relative peace and stability, happiness is something that people might want, or you might want to offer. Whereas at a time of crisis when everything is falling apart, it doesn't feel like the most fundamental thing people need to hear about or people are wanting. People want stability, people want safety, people want prosperity.

Michael Hobbes: Ian Beacock is a historian who researches the use of emotion in politics. He wrote his dissertation on Weimar Germany while splitting his time between Berlin and San Francisco.

Ian Beacock: I think also in the United States, it's obviously one of the few countries where it's right at the core of the political slogan that holds the country together and goes back to the founding of 'life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.' Although even in the United States, it's telling

that it's not that you're being promised happiness. It's the offer that you can pursue it. It's so off in the future, you're not actually getting it, but you have the opportunity to do it. It's so fundamentally true of the American political myth and condition.

Michael Hobbes: This individualistic notion of happiness has spawned an entire industry. America has self-help books and religious gurus and skincare products explicitly promising that they, and they alone, are the way to end your pursuit of happiness by finally catching it. We've also built a vast science of happiness. Happier people have lower risk for cardiovascular disease, they sleep better, they have lower stress and less joint pain. They recover from surgeries faster and they're less likely to get colds. In 2006, researchers gave volunteers the hepatitis B vaccine and found a higher antibody response among happy people. Another study found that Catholic nuns lived longer if they recorded more positive emotions in their diaries when they were 22.

[MUSIC]

Michael Hobbes: Happiness might even be able to predict the future. In a 2010 study, researchers invited participants with no golfing experience to make a three-foot putt. Half of them were told that the ball they were using was lucky, other participants in the study had made more putts when they used it. The other half were just told the ball was used by everyone else. After the researchers tallied up all the scores, they found that the participants who thought they were using the lucky ball made two-thirds of their putts, compared to just half for the non-lucky group. In another study, researchers asked participants to solve a dexterity puzzle, basically a Rubik's Cube. Beforehand, they told half the participants: I'll be crossing my fingers for you. Again, the volunteers who thought they had luck on their side solved the puzzle faster. Researchers think this has to do with 'self-efficacy,' the belief that you have the power to change your own circumstances. Believing that you're more capable of success might make you more likely to try new activities or persevere when you fail at first. Studies have found that professional athletes are much more superstitious than the general population – and maybe they're on to something. Maybe happiness is like a kind of luck, a background belief that you're capable and deserving of getting what you want.

[MUSIC]

Michael Hobbes: But the more we learn about happiness, the more we discover a fundamental paradox: While individuals become happier as they get richer, countries don't. America's GDP has grown steadily since the 1960s, but happiness scores have barely budged. They might even be getting worse: In 2007, America ranked third among developed countries on the World Happiness Index. Nine years later, we came in 19th. The reason appears to be inequality: Humans compare themselves to the people closest to them. Even if you're comfortably middle class, seeing your neighbor buy a Tesla and install a swimming

pool makes you feel poorer. And it's hard to achieve happiness in a society where you confront poverty as much as you do in America. It's hard to feel secure when you're constantly being reminded of how one broken rung on a ladder can send you tumbling downwards. There's also the problem that desires seem to scale with wealth. Ask a struggling college student what would make them happy, and they'll say a Honda Civic and a studio apartment. Ask a 50 year old with a three-bedroom house and a 30-year mortgage, and they'll say a scuba vacation or a yacht. No matter where you are in your life, the thing that would finally make you happy is just beyond your reach.

[OUTSIDE SOUNDS]

Michael Hobbes: If I was gonna take someone to a place that I associate with happiness, it would be here: riding my bike in Tempelhof Field, the giant disused airport that's now a park right in the middle of Berlin. It's a sunny day, and I'm surrounded by kids and skateboarders and barbecuers and joggers. And the first time I ever visited Berlin, I bought a graphic novel for three euros at a used bookstore around the corner. And I came here, and I lied in the grass, and I read the whole thing. I don't know if that's German happiness or American happiness or even if I thought of it as happiness at the time, but that's what it feels like now. And maybe this is the whole problem with thinking of happiness as a cultural concept: maybe it's not an experience, maybe it's a memory. Despite my own happiness here, Berlin is actually one of the unhappiest cities in Germany. The same survey that put Hamburg at the top of the list ranked Berlin 16th out of the 19 cities and regions they surveyed. There's various theories for this, from Berlin's distance to nature to the standoffish culture of Berliners, to the greater number of artists, but the answer appears to be simple demographics. Berlin is one of the youngest and poorest cities in the country. There's more unmarried and unemployed people here, and that's enough to tick Berlin's happiness score slightly downwards. In fact, once you look into the specifics the differences within German are surprisingly small. On a scale of one to ten, Hamburg has a happiness score of 6.9, and Berlin has a score of 6.7. Ranking places on their differences in happiness obscures how similar they are. The same thing, it turns out, applies to the international rankings. According to the most recent Cantril Life Ladder data I could find, Americans rated themselves a 7.0., and Germans scored a 7.3. The top 10 countries on the World Happiness Index scored between 7.8 and 7.2. You have to go down to the 54th-happiest country, Thailand, before you find any country with a score under 6.0. And yet, a lot of the media coverage of these tiny differences just seems like an excuse to restate a bunch of superficial stereotypes about foreign countries.

Newscaster 1: It's only in the last 30 years that Bhutan emerged from an almost medieval isolation and gingerly tasted the fruits of the 20th century.

Newscaster 2: According to Danish experts, Scandinavians have a genetic predisposition towards happiness. Americans with Scandinavian heritage share those particular traits.

Michael Hobbes: And it's not clear that these happiness scores are even measuring happiness. When you go around the world and just ask people how happy they are, the top countries aren't Denmark and Switzerland. According to a 2014 Pew survey, they are Mexico, Israel, and Venezuela. A similar poll by Gallup in 2012 put Panama, Paraguay, and El Salvador at the top. The fact that so many of these countries speak Spanish indicates to me that happiness might not be a word that translates very well, much less a feeling. I found a study in Poland that discovered worryingly low happiness rates among children, but the researchers noted that admitting to being happy is something that's frowned upon in Polish society. Being happy and telling other people you're happy aren't the same thing. To compensate for this problem, the World Happiness Report adds statistical measures like per capita GDP, social support, life expectancy, and trust in government. That's supposed to make it more objective, but it feels to me like they're just turning happiness into another economic indicator. Maybe the Scandinavian countries keep topping these lists because the lists are designed to rank countries according to how Scandinavian they are.

[MUSIC]

Michael Hobbes: Remember the golfing study and the Rubik's Cube study – the ones where people who thought they were lucky performed better? Something I didn't tell you is that those studies were performed in Germany – the researchers didn't say: I'm crossing my fingers for you. They said: I'm pressing my thumbs, the German equivalent. Attempts to replicate the golfing study in the United States have almost universally failed. Researchers aren't quite sure why, but it could have something to do with Americans being more likely to believe that outcomes are within their control. Other studies have found that people who believe in meritocracy and the American Dream are more judgmental of people in poverty. Either way, the research on happiness keeps discovering that what appear to be universal rules break down as soon as you try to pull them out of one country and apply them to another.

[MUSIC]

Michael Hobbes: Even the origin story of The Happiness Index turns out to be a bit more complicated than it looks at first glance. The official narrative is that Bhutan was an underdeveloped backwater until the 1960s. Then, when its leaders swapped out economic indicators for well-being, it started to develop. But according to research by University of Ottawa professor Lauchlan Munro, this story is almost entirely invented. There's no evidence that Bhutan even mentioned happiness in any government documents before the 1990s. The country actually launched its well-being effort in the mid-2000s as part of a campaign to shore up domestic political support and to deflect global criticism from a yearslong campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Newscaster: The camps of eastern Nepal are now home to one in seven of the population of the tiny, Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. One hundred thousand people have been forced out or have fled their country in fear.

Interviewee: I didn't know what happened Bhutan government started evicting people.

Newscaster: It began, Mengala says, with a census that the government claimed was to identify illegal immigrants. But when they started evicting Bhutanese citizens, there was strong and sometimes violent opposition. It was then that authorities unleashed a campaign of terror against the ethnic Nepalese.

[MUSIC]

Michael Hobbes: Comparing countries on their happiness scores means comparing them on their politics. If that's what we're doing, then we should include all of their politics, even the uncomfortable parts. Most international surveys on happiness find that immigrants, minorities, poor people, and queer people are less happy – no matter where you find them. Many of the countries at the top of the well-being rankings, including Germany, the United States, and even Denmark, have worrying rates of depression and suicide. Given how easy it is for politicians to redefine happiness as whatever they want it to be, maybe it makes more sense to see it as a tool for public relations than a tool for development.

[MUSIC]

Michael Hobbes: After six decades of research, it's still not clear how to measure happiness and even less clear how to change it. We know that happier people have lower rates of heart disease and longer life expectancies, but we also know that happiness operates more like a personality trait than a mood. It might tick up or down after you get married or lose your job, but it's remarkably stable across your lifespan. Trying to make unhappy people happy might be more like making short people tall.

Adrian Daub: What I find always striking is that while we keep measuring it, we are kind of abandoning the very basis on which I would think that, you know, anyone's happiness would have to be founded, right? Like the absence of fear, the absence of, you know, one bad stroke of luck completely fucking up your life, right? So at the very baseline, which is, you know, there's a kind of contentment that comes from the fact that like you can fuck up a few things in your life. That a couple of things in your life – as they do in every human life – can go badly, and it will not completely do you in, right? You can come back from it. You know, the fact that we're abandoning that at the same time because that's all something that government has to guarantee, that's something that society has to really want. To be like: Yeah, so you crashed and

burned a couple times there in the middle, but you know what, here's a pension. Maybe your third act will be the charm.

Michael Hobbes: So what does all this mean for American happiness and German happiness and my own? The methodology section of the World Happiness Report points out that around 80% of the differences in happiness are between individuals, not between countries. There's happy Americans and unhappy Germans and every other combination you can think of. And sometimes, of course, the same people move from one country to another. I ask Ian whether he was happier living in Germany or America.

Ian Beacock: So I think this is a great example of how this starts to break down. When I lived in Berlin, my life in the city and my existence in a more equal society and a green, livable city felt good to me. And less stressful in lots of ways. But for lots of other reasons, San Francisco was a better home for me, and I was happier there, doing exciting work, meeting people, building a community. So, I think that's a good example of how, whatever you might think about national outcomes, a person's individual experience is actually quite different.

Michael Hobbes: For weeks now, I've been asking almost everyone I meet to rate themselves on the zero to ten scale. Best possible life versus worst possible life, where do they put themselves? Most of them think it's a silly idea. Whatever they say now, they might feel differently in a day or an hour. And someone else's idea of happiness is probably different from theirs. And then, after that, they say seven.

Ian Beacock: I think in general I'm sort of skeptical about quantifying emotions into an index because they're so contextual, both about individual psychology and about communities and global bonds and circles of care that I'm a little skeptical that you could put a number on it for an entire country. But that's also my skepticism of those kinds of indices in general, where you can say: Well, this country is like 74.3 democracy. I don't really think it works that way.

Michael Hobbes: I agree with Ian. Happiness is something we can recognize in ourselves and our friends and our memories. But there's no way to measure, no way to compare it across people or countries, that doesn't smuggle in our own personal ideas of what we want the world to look like.

Ian Beacock: I do think happiness is a kind of individualistic concept, thinking of it politically. It's something that, you know, speaking to an individual person and their ability to be happy in the world and to pursue what they want and do what they like. It's not really a really collective bond. It's not something that talks about what we owe each other or the bonds we share. And it might be for that reason that it's not a very powerful political concept because it doesn't ask anything of us and doesn't connect us in any way. You can talk about happiness but really what

we often mean is these component parts of it that are required for happiness to exist. And that's maybe prosperity, it's maybe a certain level of material equality, it's maybe freedom from war or it's maybe, you know, access to housing and have meaningful relationships in your life and, you know, maybe do meaningful work, you know. Happiness sort of breaks down as soon as you start to think about it.

Michael Hobbes: Back in Hamburg, I asked Timm what advice he has for people who want to be happy wherever they are.

Timm: With my patients, I have this little image, this little metaphor, where your life stands on one pillar. Like work. You can get a lot out of work, and that's great. And then, you have a bad day, and you have no other pillars. So, it's important, I think to have friends or hobbies, so if one of those things is terrible at the moment, you have a few other things to keep you afloat.

Michael Hobbes: So, maybe the secret to happiness is just not pursuing it at all. Maybe it's an experience, or maybe it's a memory, or maybe it's just a park bench, next to the water.

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