What makes life good? Happiness is certainly one answer. Someone who has lived happily for decades is much more likely to view life as good than someone whom happiness has eluded. Hence studying happiness is one prominent pathway for learning about the good life.

Yet happiness does not exhaust the concept of the good life. In ordinary discourse, the word “good” is used in both hedonic and moral senses, denoting either pleasure or virtue. People seek not just pleasure but meaningfulness, some of which is tied up with earning the respect of one’s peers, or perhaps imagining respect from posterity. Some of that is moral. There is also ‘good’ in the sense of competence, which like morality is a dimension of cultural respect.

Meaning and happiness overlap but are far from the same. This chapter will focus on how these two competing versions of the good life differ.

As point of departure, we suggest that nature and culture are differently relevant. Happiness presumably began in evolution when organisms felt pleasure in connection with having their needs satisfied. Happiness may therefore be relatively natural. In contrast, meaning may be generally cultural. A solitary animal’s ability to process meaning may be limited to simple associations. Language exists only in human cultures, and without language, the ability to process meaning is severely limited. What makes a life meaningful may be tied up not only with having social interactions but indeed participating in a cultural system with shared values and understandings.

One recent effort to disentangle meaning from happiness was a series of studies by Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, and Garbinsky (2013). Unlike most of my research, it went beyond college student samples, and the main study was a series of large national surveys of 397 adults, ranging in age from 18 to 78. The average age was 35, and half of the respondents were parents. (Men were underrepresented, as is the norm in social psychology.) Thus, many different walks of life were represented. The data had been collected by Aaker and Garbinsky, who invited Vohs and then me to delve into them. Thus, the conclusions were all post hoc, at least in the sense that they had not been formulated prior to data collection.

Empirical Approach

Six items formed the core of our effort to learn about meaning and happiness. The three happiness items were “In general, I consider myself happy,” “Taking all things together, I feel I am happy,” and “Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself happy.” The meaning items were roughly parallel: “In general I consider my life to be meaningful,” “Compared to most of my peers, my life is meaningful,” and “Taking all things together, I feel my life is meaningful.” The two sets of three items were summed
to create an index of how much each person rated his or her life as meaningful and happy.

The survey had collected a wealth of data about how people rated various aspects of their lives, feelings, attitudes, and experiences. Our goal was to exploit the data set to learn about differences between meaning and happiness. We got stuck at first on one troublesome fact, which was that meaning and happiness were significantly correlated with each other, indeed in the .6-.7 range. Thus, the two measures shared nearly half their variance.

The overlap between meaning and happiness self-reports might hold a profound insight. It is plausible that many things that make life meaningful would also increase happiness, and vice versa. An early survey of research on life’s meaning by Baumeister (1991) concluded tentatively that meaning was often a prerequisite for happiness, but not vice versa. Lack of meaning would reduce happiness, but lack of happiness would not preclude meaningfulness.

Then again, the overlap might not hold a profound insight. It is plausible, even likely, that when people respond to surveys, they have a global attitude that informs all their responses — especially when talking about themselves. This problem has been recognized in the self-esteem literature. Much spurious evidence of the ostensible benefits of self-esteem has consisted of showing correlations between self-report questionnaires. People score high in self-esteem by rating themselves favorably, and those same people may also rate their relationship skills, intelligence, and sex appeal also favorably, thereby tempting researchers to conclude that high self-esteem is closely linked to having those qualities. Objective evidence often contradicts them, however (for review, see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2004). For example, Gabriele, Ee, & XX (19xx) found that self-esteem had a significant positive correlation with self-reported intelligence — but had a nonsignificant negative correlation with scores on an actual IQ test.

Thus, some of the overlap between meaningfulness and happiness may reflect genuine kinship between those two dimensions of the good life, and some of it may boil down to simple tendencies for some people to furnish more globally optimistic and positive self-reports than others. Our solution was to discard the shared variance and focus on the differences. Hence our main analyses involved finding what correlated with happiness after controlling for meaningfulness, and vice versa.

All of this made our study explicitly exploratory, and the conclusions should not be taken as definitive. Statistically, discarding half the variance on the main measures (and conceding some of the rest to error variance) raises the possibility that the controls distorted the findings. Conceptually, it is possible that the correlates of the variance that is shared between happiness and meaning are different from the correlates that attend the non-shared parts. Put another way, the things that make life both happy and meaningful may differ from the things that give meaning without happiness, and from those that give happiness without meaning).

Getting What You Want

A first pattern of findings was that people who were able to satisfy their basic needs and wants were happier than other people. Satisfying needs and wants was largely irrelevant to meaning. Items such as whether one generally finds life easy, has
to struggle, and finds life difficult correlated with happiness but were mostly irrelevant to meaning. Health was linked to happiness but completely irrelevant to meaning. A sickly person can have as meaningful life as a robustly healthy one, but the latter is likely to be happier (not surprisingly).

Having enough money to buy the things one wants and needs correlated substantially with happiness but again seemed completely irrelevant to meaning. A scarcity of money reduced happiness but hardly made a dent in meaningfulness.

Emotions and feelings are often tied up with getting what one wants. As one would expect almost by definition, frequent good feelings were linked to high happiness, and frequent bad feelings correlated with low happiness. Again, they had no relation to meaningfulness. The only exception was boredom: Frequent feelings of boredom were linked to low scores on both meaning and happiness. Boredom is the opposite of the good life: boring lives lack both happiness and meaning.

All of this suggests that happiness is in many ways simpler, and presumably linked to earlier steps in evolution, than meaningfulness. Creatures feel good when they satisfy their needs and feel bad when denied satisfaction. Among human beings, getting the things one wants and needs boosts happiness but is surprisingly irrelevant to whether they find life meaningful. Money is a product of culture, not nature, yet its power to get people what they want links it to happiness more than meaning.

Past, Present, Future, and Combinations

One distinctive, remarkable, and profoundly important aspect of the human psyche is the ability to think about past and future events (S, the Gap). Most animals live in the present, “stuck in time” (Roberts, 2002), whereas humans adjust their behavior based on events that are hours, years, or even centuries removed from the here and now. These connections by which the distant past or future influences the present are mediated by meanings (for example, the symbolism of anniversaries or holidays, or the simulation of relevance to long-term values and goals) (for review and extended discussion, see Baumeister, Vohs, & Oettingen, 2016). Based on this analysis, we began to test the idea that time span would be linked to meaningfulness. Happiness, in contrast, seemed much more present-focused, as the preceding section already indicated: People are happy in the present when an urge finds satisfaction.

The surveys asked simply how much time people spent thinking about the past, the present, and the future. This is obviously a crude and simplistic measure. Yet the results were striking.

Happiness is apparently in the present. The more people thought about the present, the happier they were. The more they thought about the past and/or the future, the less happy they were. Even an additional item asking how often people imagine the future yielded a negative correlation with happiness. Apparently, if you want to be happy, live in the present and don’t think about past or future.

For meaning, the pattern was markedly different, though the correlations were weaker. Thinking about the past was marginally correlated with higher meaningfulness, as was thinking about the future. Combining those items into an index of mental time travel did yield a significant difference. Thinking about the present was irrelevant, and imagining the future more frequently was linked to higher meaningfulness.
A follow-up study confirmed the differential effect of future and present. Students rated happiness as fleeting but meaningfulness as lasting over time. This may be more perception than reality. In our main study, self-rated happiness was quite stable, as indicated by a correlation of .82 between reports of happiness across different waves separated by three weeks. Prior work has found happiness to be remarkably stable even across a decade (e.g., Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman, 1987). Phrases referring to the present were rated as relevant to happiness, whereas those referring to the future were rated as more meaningful.

These findings on time perspective were provocative, and fortunately some of us soon embarked on a large experience sampling study of people’s thoughts, with emphasis on time perspective (Baumeister, Hofmann, & Vohs, 2015/unpublished; see Baumeister, Vohs, & Oettingen, 2016). A large community sample (N=497) was contacted at random points during their daily activities and reported on their most recent thought. Each thought was rated separately as to whether it referred to past, present, and/or future, so that it was possible to indicate none or any combination of them.

The experience sampling study yielded strong confirmation of the view that happiness is present-focused whereas meaningfulness involves linking across time. Happiness was highest when people focused on the present and declined as thoughts roamed farther into future or past. The past was unhappier than the future. Thus, again, to maximize happiness, the advice would seem to be to remain focused on the here and now.

Meaning, meanwhile, showed a dramatically different pattern. Focus on the present was low in meaningfulness, whereas thoughts that invoked past or future were more meaningful — with thoughts about the future being far more meaningful than thoughts about the past. As further evidence of the link between meaning and time, the fairly large (25%) category of thoughts for which people reported no time aspect — that is, not past nor present nor future — were generally low in meaningfulness. Conversely, thoughts that invoked combinations of different times (e.g., both present and future) were highly meaningful. The highest average meaningfulness ratings attended thoughts that invoked all three of past, present, and future.

Thus, time may be antithetical to happiness but is vital for meaning. At best, happiness is focused on the present. But to render life meaningful it is apparently most effective to maintain some focus on the future, including integrating the future with the present (and occasionally the past). Planning links the present to the future, and in fact the activity of planning was relatively pleasant (especially as compared other thoughts about the future, such as worries). Planning is obviously a highly pragmatic, active way of thinking about aspects of one’s life in time, especially in that it lays out the requisite steps to reach desired goals.

Social Relations and Engagement

Earlier I suggested that happiness may have its roots in early evolution, such that solitary beings felt pleasure upon satisfying their needs. Almost certainly, however, social animals gain happiness by social contact and connection. Meaningfulness, meanwhile, seems heavily intertwined with social connection, to the point that most people would be hard put to imagine how a solitary life could be highly meaningful.
Thus, social relationships may be positively linked to both happiness and meaning. This was certainly evident in the Baumeister et al. (2013) data. There were multiple positive correlations with measures of feeling socially connected, spending time with friends, time with loved ones, and thinking that others regard oneself as connected to them. Conversely, there were negative correlations with recalling hours spent alone, anticipating being alone in the future, and the like. Both happiness and meaning showed these positive links.

Thus, both happiness and meaning gain from involvement in social relationships. On closer inspection, however, some important differences can be found. These were perhaps epitomized in two simple items that asked whether the person agreed with the statements “I am a giver” and “I am a taker.” Being a giver was positively associated with rating one’s life as meaningful and negatively associated with happiness. Being a taker showed the opposite pattern, though the effects were weaker and fell short of significance, though they differed significantly from each other.

The broader implication is that meaning comes from doing things for others, whereas happiness arises when others do things for oneself. Takers may be happier than givers, whereas givers have more meaningful lives than takers.

The giver-taker difference may be one area in which the analytical strategy concealed some important effects of overlap between meaning and happiness. With simple, uncorrected analyses, people who (claim to) do things for others are relatively happy. Correcting for meaning reverses the sign, from positive to negative. The implication is that doing things for other people does increase happiness — but mainly by increasing meaningfulness. If the connection via meaning is taken out, doing things for others detracts from happiness. (In contrast, meaning is positively linked to doing things for others, and controlling for happiness does not change that.)

Two other interpersonal measures are revealing. One had to do with taking care of children. Recalling time spent caring for children had a negligible effect on happiness and a trend toward increasing meaning among people who were not parents. They were presumably recalling taking care of someone else’s children. Among parents, who presumably were thinking about taking care of their own children, there was a significant increase in meaning but a trend toward less happiness. These findings speak to the so-called parenthood paradox, which is that most people want to become parents and want to be happy — but most evidence indicates that being a parent reduces happiness, so those two goals conflict. Baumeister (1991) provided one review of that evidence and speculated that people want both meaning and happiness, and parenthood may be a powerful source of meaning even if it does reduce happiness somewhat. That fits the findings indicating that parents gain in meaning as they recall taking care of children but if anything lose happiness. (Anecdotally, the optimal strategy for happiness would be to have grandchildren rather than children!)

The other interpersonal measure involved asking whether arguing was an activity that expressed and reflected the self. Arguing involves interpersonal conflict, almost by definition. This item yielded significant correlations with both meaning and happiness — but in opposite directions. Rating oneself as an argumentative person was associated with less happiness but greater meaning.

That arguing reduces happiness is hardly surprising. Arguing involves conflict and negative emotion. Happy people may avoid arguments. The positive link to
meaning is however more complex and even puzzling. I hesitate to recommend that people pick fights and arguments with other people as a way of pursuing the good life via increased meaningfulness. It is hard to see how life could be enriched by arguing about, say, who ate the last doughnut or who should empty the dog.

Most likely, arguing is a side effect of factors that increase meaning. People who are seriously involved in complex cultural undertakings and care passionately about them may find themselves needing to argue when they encounter someone who has a different view. It is thus not the interpersonal activity of arguing per se, but the passionate involvement, that enhances meaning. The next section will pursue this.

Involved in Society

Multiple findings suggested that being seriously involved in the affairs and events that go beyond one’s own life has effects on both meaning and happiness. In general, such involvements increase meaning, but some of them detract from happiness. We have already indicated some of these, namely helping others and seeing arguing as central to one’s identity.

Having major good and/or bad events occur in one’s life seems like it should have a potentially major impact on happiness and meaning, and indeed it did. Not surprisingly, people who reported plenty of good events rated their lives as both happier and more meaningful than other people. Having had plenty of bad events in one’s life led to lower happiness — but was correlated with higher meaning.

The occurrence of bad events is thus important for understanding the good life. A first point is that the impact of bad events on happiness far outweighed the impact of good events, indeed with about four times the impact in terms of percent of variance. This is consistent with a vast literature indicating that bad events have much stronger psychological impact than good events (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). The Chinese proverb “May you never live in interesting times” expresses the sentiment that happiness is more easily found in quietude, because the intrusion of major historical and societal events into one’s life has more power to reduce than to increase happiness.

The increase in meaningfulness linked to high rates of negative events is perhaps most puzzling. Again, I hesitate to recommend that people seek out personal and historical disasters as a pathway to finding a good, meaningful life. A more plausible interpretation of this finding is that meaningful lives are deeply enmeshed in important activities that go beyond the self and are thus partly beyond the self’s control. That fact brings the possibility that things will not turn out as one wishes and that one’s efforts and strivings will be in vain.

Thus, it is more likely that having a very meaningful life leads to more negative experiences than the reverse. The prescription for the good life is to pursue meaningful involvement in culture and society, not to seek out bad experiences.

Multiple other findings fit the conclusion that meaningful involvement brings risks and outcomes that can reduce happiness. Self-reported stress was linked to lower happiness and higher meaningfulness. Even worrying showed the same pattern: People who reported more worrying had less happy but more meaningful lives.

Both stress and worry are future-oriented. Stress is not so much the occurrence of bad events as living with the ongoing, threatening possibility that bad events will
occur (e.g., Brady, 1958). Worry is by definition thinking about possible bad future events; no one worries about the outcome of the Thirty Years War any more, even though plenty of people in the early 1600s worried about it. Thus, the stress and the worry findings are consistent with the pattern that thinking about the future increases meaningfulness but may sacrifice happiness.

Expressing Oneself

It is possible to live and create behavior without caring a fig for finding oneself, expressing oneself, discovering one’s true or hidden self, and the like. Presumably that is what most nonhuman animals do, almost exclusively. However, some peculiarities in human evolution have created a psyche that is capable of self-reflection and the attendant cultivation of concerns with self-discovery and self-expression. Hence some people are highly concerned with those matters, while others are less perturbed by them.

The surveys reported by Baumeister et al. (2013) asked people whether issues of personal identity were important to them. The higher importance people assigned to identity issues, the more meaningful their lives were. Importance of identity was unrelated to happiness, and in fact the trend was in the opposite direction (i.e., more identity importance went with less happiness). Caring about how one defines, understands, expresses, and fulfills the self is apparently an important component of a meaningful life.

Survey respondents were given a list of 37 different activities, and for each one they rated whether they thought engaging in that activity “reflects me,” a colloquial term for self-engagement and self-expression. The activities were widely assorted, ranging from working to sex to watching television to shopping. Of the 37, 25 were significantly correlated with meaningfulness — and all those correlations were positive. In contrast, whether people thought these activities reflected their self-concepts was mostly irrelevant to happiness. Only two items (socializing, and partying without alcohol) correlated positively with happiness, whereas five correlated negatively, and the vast majority showed no significant link.

Thus, doing things that express or engage the self is important for meaning but appears to have little to with happiness. The implication is that people make life meaningful by doing things that express themselves.

The five items that correlated negatively with happiness all correlated positively with meaningfulness. These were worrying, arguing, taking care of children, buying gifts for others, and watching television. Admittedly, that is an odd set, but they do bring up themes to which I have already alluded. Meaningful involvement in challenging, contentious social affairs can require worrying and arguing, neither of which is pleasant. Social involvement is apparent in buying things for others and taking care of children, which again reflect the theme that happiness comes when social interactions benefit the self but making sacrifices for others reduces happiness while bolstering meaning. The fifth item, watching television, may seem an outlier, especially as a source of meaning (the finding that watching television reduces happiness is hardly new). The meaning aspect may come from the pseudo-intimate relationships that people form, mostly in their imagination, with fictional characters in television series. Gabriel, Valenti and Young (2015) have elaborated how such characters function as “social surrogates,”
thereby counteracting loneliness and making people feel connected to other social worlds. Thus, perhaps becoming involved via television in a fictitious social world can furnish a sense of meaning, similarly perhaps to how involvement in real social worlds can furnish meaning.

Self-Reward and Self-Control

One survey item asked simply whether people ever reward themselves. People who reward themselves rated their lives as more meaningful than people who do not reward themselves. Perhaps surprisingly, self-reward was irrelevant to happiness, indeed trending in the opposite direction (happy people do not reward themselves).

Rewarding oneself is different from simply giving oneself pleasures. As one sign, giving oneself pleasures was (as already mentioned) positively linked to happiness but irrelevant to meaning. The difference lies presumably in that self-reward is part of a self-regulation process: One earns rewards by good behavior. The difference is perhaps something like just having a doughnut because you like doughnuts and having a doughnut to reward yourself after completing a tough assignment. If the doughnut was promised to self contingent on completing the task, it can form part of a self-regulatory loop.

Although it is risky to place much emphasis on a single item, especially when the item addresses only part of the broader phenomenon, the correlation of self-reward with meaning and not happiness could suggest that self-control is possibly orthogonal or even detrimental to happiness. Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, and Baumeister (2014) derived what they called the “Puritan hypothesis,” which is that high levels of self-control may foster disciplined pursuit of goals and success at various endeavors but at the cost of pervasive self-denial, so that life becomes a joyless performance of duties. Their studies found, however, that higher trait self-control was positively linked to happiness. This was true for both life satisfaction and moment-to-moment feelings.

The findings linking high self-control to happiness did not control for meaningfulness, as in the Baumeister et al. (2013) surveys, so it is possible that the contribution of self-control to increasing happiness occurs by way of bolstering meaningfulness and even that controlling for meaning would eliminate or reverse the pattern. This remains for future research.

Nonetheless, the positive link is itself relevant to the broader question of the good life. It is possible to look at social life in zero-sum fashion, such that the individual has to make sacrifices to comply with the rules and demands of society. Self-control in that context would seemingly reduce happiness, because it overrides one’s own inclinations so as to enable one to conform to rules and other standards.

Instead, however, it appears that self-control is beneficial to the self. Ample prior work had provided evidence of benefits of self-control, such as increased success in work and school, increased popularity, fewer mental and physical health problems, and fewer behavioral problems (see Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004; Moffitt et al., 2010; for reviews, see de Ridder et al., 2012; Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). These all suggest indirect pathways by which self-control could bolster happiness, by way of improving the quality of life. Direct enhancement is also quite plausible, insofar as good self-control includes control over one’s emotions: People with good affect regulation
skills may be able to manage negative emotions and sustain positive ones better than other people.

The positive impact of self-control on happiness is good news for people with good self-control (and perhaps bad news for people who lack it). It is also good in a broader sense, however. The extensive capacity for self-regulation is part of the distinctively human psychology, and it reflects the ability to alter oneself based on rules, norms, and other standards. Some have thus seen self-control as essentially self-harming. Freud (1930), for example, proposed that the super-ego (his term for the self-regulatory moral part of the psyche) was constructed by redirecting one’s aggressive instinct back toward the self, and he saw the operation of the super-ego as essentially denying oneself pleasures and satisfactions, with the added cost of guilt. The Hofmann et al. (2014) findings paint self-control in a much more positive light. Even it does bring some guilt and self-denial, its rewards apparently far outweigh its costs. Self-control enables people to live and work together effectively.

CONCLUSIONS

A good life would ideally be both happy and meaningful. At least, it would presumably be one or the other. The two criteria tend to overlap in people’s self-ratings, some of which may be affected by general halo effects and other tendencies to rate oneself positively or negatively. Nonetheless, they are different in important ways.

This chapter surveyed some of the key differences between the correlates of happiness and meaningfulness. Happiness appears to be the simpler and in evolutionary sense older of the two, and it remains closely tied to natural inclinations. People feel happy when they get what they want and feel unhappy when they do not. It is increased by interpersonal interactions and relationships that provide benefits to the self. It is diminished by struggle, stress, argument, worry, and anxiety, and it appears to thrive with a narrow focus on the present.

In contrast, meaningful lives are linked to giving to others and to being highly involved in complex social undertakings (even if these bring struggle, stress, argument, worry, and anxiety). Concern with building one’s personal identity and with expressing the self through diverse activities also goes with a highly meaningful life. A mental time span that encompasses past and future, indeed integrating past and present and future, is linked to finding life meaningful.

The enemies of both happiness and meaning include boredom and social exclusion. Being socially connected to other human beings is central to the human condition, and people who lack such connections tend to have trouble finding either happiness or meaning. Boredom appears to combine features of both unhappiness and meaninglessness, including being rooted in an unpleasant present moment that lacks redeeming connections to past or future.

Thus, our work suggests two different versions of the good life, with different pathways. The happy life is one of ease and enjoyment, focused on taking pleasures in the present. The meaningful life is oriented toward the future, concerned with constructing and expressing the self, and heavily involved in complex sociocultural activities. Inevitably, involvement in such activities will bring some stress and struggle, and most likely some failures and disappointments, and these may be very unhappy phases. But very likely they are part and parcel of a highly meaningful life.