

# TAKE IN YOUR HEN: FITTINGNESS AND HEDONIC ADAPTATION

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IN JULIA Donaldson's classic, *A Squash and a Squeeze* (2016), a little old lady is unhappy with the size of her house. "Take in your hen," says a wise old man ("Take in my hen? What a curious plan"), and of course, her house seems worse still ("What shall I do? It was poky for one and it's tiny for two"). She goes back to the old man, who now tells her to bring in her goat, and she does so, and the house worsens further. The story goes on, and in comes her pig, and her cow; the house is worse than ever. Finally, the woman goes to see the old man once more: "Take them all out," says the wise old man. She does so, and at the end of the story the little old lady is perfectly happy with her house—"Just look at my house—it's enormous now. Thank you old man, for the work you have done. It was weeny for five; it's gigantic for one. There's no need to grumble and there's no need to grouse. There's plenty of room in my house".

The story is funny, but is funny in part because the old lady's mindset seems perfectly comprehensible; we can imagine feeling just the same way as her at each point in the story. That is, the story mirrors a real psychological phenomenon: *hedonic adaptation*. This is the process by which we get used to our circumstances, so that our levels of happiness respond to the present goods in our lives in a way that is influenced by the recent past. For example, Sarah might have been overjoyed on first being offered a permanent academic post, but once she has had the job for a while, her feelings about that fact might be much more muted. She might now treat that fact as a given, and only respond with happiness if her career comes to involve some *new* goods. Similarly, in one classic study, lottery winners were found to gain happiness for around 2-3 months, before returning to their pre-win levels of happiness thereafter—presumably, by that point they have come to think of their wealth as just boringly normal (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman 1978).<sup>1</sup> And this same process is how the wise man gets

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1. For a more general overview of hedonic adaptation, see (Sheldon and Lucas 2016); it also sometimes goes by the name of *the hedonic treadmill* (Brickman and Campbell 1971). There are interesting questions about the baseline that hedonic adaptation disposes us to move towards, which may not be indif-

the lady to be happy with her house: by making her treat her house jammed with animals as the status quo, so that by the end of the story, her empty house at last comes to seem excellent by comparison, making her happy.

But the story also makes salient the question of whether this can possibly be appropriate. The little old lady's house is the very same at the end of the story as it was at the start, and so it might seem that either her happiness at the end of the story, or else her unhappiness at the start, must be unfitting. That is, we might think that at least one of these attitudes must be misvaluing her house. And more generally, we might think that undergoing hedonic adaptation guarantees that your happiness is, at some time or other, unfitting. For this reason, hedonic adaptation might seem inappropriate. That is, just as Donaldson's story rings a familiar bell for our own disposition to hedonically adapt, so too does it ring a bell for the incongruity of that process: you might have been ecstatic on being cured of cancer, about marrying your partner, or securing an academic job, but it is all too predictable that these feelings will fade despite the facts remaining unchanged. We might therefore think that either your earlier joy after these events was excessive, or else (more likely?) that your present indifference is wrongly too cold. It may seem that the most plausible conclusion to draw is that hedonic adaptation is inappropriate.

The basic question here about the appropriateness of hedonic adaptation is surprisingly neglected.<sup>2</sup> This paper makes a start on answering it. The structure is as follows: Section 1 clarifies the kinds of "appropriateness" at stake, and what I mean by "happiness". Section 2 outlines an important difference between happiness and goodness. Sections 3 and 4 explain how that difference ultimately mandates some

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ference but instead mildly positive, and varies between individuals (Diener, Lucas, and Scollon 2009). There are also questions about how the baseline is determined, and especially whether it is set by genetic factors, or one's environment.

2. Though see e.g. Moller (2011) and Calhoun (2017) for somewhat related discussion, and Callard (2019), Howard (2022), and Marui (2022), for closely related worries about how some other emotional reactions change over time.

kind of hedonic adaptation.

### 1. Norms on Happiness

Our broad question is about the appropriateness of hedonic adaptation, but in the background here is the wider question of whether happiness might *ever* be (un)fitting. On one view, happiness is more like a headache, perhaps (un)fortunate, but never itself subject to any norms whatsoever. But I assume that happiness is subject to some norms. After all, other emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, shame, pride, surprise, and disgust, all seem to be more fittingly directed at some objects than at others. For example, fearing that your cancer has spread is apt, in a way that fearing house spiders is not, and similar everyday examples could be given for these other emotions.<sup>3</sup> So the idea that emotions can be evaluated for their fittingness is commonplace, and on the further assumption that happiness is an emotion, it seems plausible that happiness is equally subject to some standard of evaluation.<sup>4</sup>

This thought is further supported by three more thoughts. First, you might reflect on your life and ask whether to be happy, and the resulting kind of reasoning seems to be of the kind that Richard Moran (2001) calls "deliberative". Such reasoning is not a mere prediction or discovery of how you independently feel, but instead involves forming a new attitude, and forming it in a way that, from the perspective of your deliberation, seems appropriate to you. When someone says that they don't know whether to be happy about something, they are seeking *reasons* to actively become happy or otherwise, not passive

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3. There is obviously more to say in each of these cases, and potential differences between them. On anger see Srinivasan (2018), on guilt, shame and pride see Taylor (1985); and on surprise see Baras and Na'Aman (2022).

4. For the claim that emotions can be evaluated for their fittingness, see e.g. D'Arms and Jacobson (2023), Deonna and Teroni (2012), Nozick (1989, chaps 9–10), and De Sousa (1987). Some capture this thought via the claim that emotions *represent* (perhaps doxastically, perhaps perceptually, or perhaps in some sui generis manner) the values that determine whether they are correct (Nussbaum 2004; Solomon 1976; Tappolet 2016), but I need take no stand on that here—see also Grzankowski (2020).

knowledge about their present or future mood.

Second, the norms governing happiness—like other norms—surface in further reactions we have to ourselves and others. You might find yourself unhappy, but if you think your circumstances are relatively fortunate, you might feel guilty about this unhappiness—“What right do I have to be unhappy? Some people have it so much worse”. Or, for another example, if I see you getting extremely happy because of something that seems to me to be a tragedy (e.g. the death of a certain politician), I might get angry at you, thinking that your happiness embodies a bad evaluation. Such emotional reactions plausibly reflect underlying normative commitments we have about when certain feelings are appropriate.

Third, the norms governing happiness are borne out by example. If you have been captured by the enemy, and face torture followed by certain death, your unhappiness seems clearly well-supported by your situation in a way that it might not otherwise. Vice versa, someone who has all the successes in the world but who remains miserable nonetheless seems to be getting something wrong if they are miserable. Such everyday thoughts rely on the thought that happiness can be evaluated as appropriate or otherwise.

Examples like these not only support the claim that happiness can be fitting or otherwise, but are also helpful in narrowing down the exact content of the relevant norm. I suggest they *prima facie* support what I will call *The Central Norm* on happiness:

The Central Norm: It's fitting to be happy to the extent your circumstances are good; unhappy to the extent your circumstances are bad.

We might finesse this norm in various ways, but I won't cover every relevant issue here. It's plausible that the norm governing happiness is something like this, and many finer details won't matter for our purposes here; I shall focus on just those issues that arise in the context of hedonic adaptation (for some related discussion, see e.g. Hurka 2000). One clarification that I should mention—if only to set aside—is that the

central norm plausibly needs modifying to allow that we might be happier about some goods than others in virtue of our personal connection to them: I might be especially happy about the successes of my own children, for example. This is true, but makes little difference to the arguments that follow. In what follows I tend to assume that fitting happiness responds to both partial and impartial goods, weighting the former more heavily, but very similar arguments would work if fitting happiness responded only to one or the other of these.

Hedonic adaptation itself can't be (un)fitting, since fittingness is a property of attitudes, and hedonic adaptation is not an attitude, but instead a process. Still, it is a process that involves a change in attitude, and if the resulting attitude is unfitting we might think that the process is derivatively inappropriate. So I'll be assessing the appropriateness of hedonic adaptation, but I take this to hinge on underlying questions about when happiness is fitting.

For that reason, I should say more to characterise fittingness. It is widely accepted that various attitudes can be assessed for their fittingness (Chappell 2012; D'Arms and Jacobson 2000; 2023; Howard 2018; e.g. Howard and Rowland 2022; McHugh and Way 2022; Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004).<sup>5</sup> For example, plausibly the fittingness of a belief depends somehow on its truth, the fittingness of an intention depends somehow on the permissibility of the intended action, and we can more broadly recognise fittingness conditions for numerous other attitudes, including emotions such as admiration, amusement, anger, and so on.

It can be tempting to introduce fittingness linguistically, with pairs of morphologically related words, where one names an attitude and the other names the property that makes the attitude fitting, as with admiration/admirable, amusement/amusing, and so on. But I am wary of introducing fittingness in this way, because the existence of such a pair of words in English is not criterial for the existence of fittingness

5. The notion is also closely connected to that of a “right-kind” reason—see Gertken and Kiesewetter (2017).

conditions for an attitude. For example, intentions are fittingly directed at permissible actions, but there is no morphological relation between the word “intention” and the word “permissible”, and no nearby equivalent word such as “intendable” or “intendsome”. The same applies to other attitudes, such as anger, and happiness. A better way to think about things is just to focus on the fact that many attitudes can be assessed in terms of whether they are directed at an object which somehow merits that attitude. There is an obvious sense in which wrongful behaviours merit anger; in which funny things merit amusement; and in which—I say—good things merit happiness.

With the notion of fittingness clarified we can immediately set aside one tempting reason to think that hedonic adaptation is inappropriate. This is that it serves to rob us of all our accomplishments and successes, so that even the greatest victories and most intense feelings of joy and relief soon fade away. For example, according to one compelling source, 60% of any gain to our income provides zero long-term benefit to our happiness because of adaptation effects (Clark, Frijters, and Shields 2006, 30). This is certainly a way in which adaptation can seem unwelcome for many of us, though we might equally wonder if there are two sides to this coin. After all, adaptation presumably also acts as a source of great benefit for those in bad circumstances, who at least adapt to those circumstances and avoid having continual misery poured on top of their objective misfortunes. Regardless, no matter whether hedonic adaptation is fortunate or unfortunate, this wouldn’t be relevant to our topic, which concerns fittingness, and fittingness is independent of the instrumental benefits and costs of the attitude in question. Even if some amusement at your boss’ joke would be helpful, that amusement is unfitting if the joke was not funny (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000), and similar claims are plausible for other attitudes such as belief and intentions, which can be fitting even if they are not beneficial. Likewise, whether happiness is fitting is not settled by any benefits or costs to being happy, such as the obvious benefits for oneself or any motivational costs to contentment. The little old lady is clearly fortunate by the end of the story as a result of her earlier adaptation,

but is her attitude nonetheless unfitting?

I now turn to clarifying the other part of our topic: happiness. We can distinguish questions about being happy regarding some specific thing—the weather, say—and being happy *overall*. Our focus here is on the fittingness of being happy overall. Plausibly the two topics are connected in some way or another, but rather than trying to understand that connection and the norms governing each kind of attitude all at once, here we’ll focus on just this one part of the puzzle—the norm governing overall happiness. If our answers are correct, they serve as constraints on any wider claims about the relationship between kinds of happiness, and on claims about any norms governing happiness that is targeted at some specific thing. Note that despite this focus on overall happiness, I shall sometimes use examples where someone is overall happy in virtue of some specific thing: examples where someone’s overall happiness has some dominant source are easier to construct and evaluate than more complex cases. But it remains overall happiness that is our focus, even if it might sometimes be grounded in some more specific object.

What exactly is it to be happy “overall”? Following Haybron (2020), we can distinguish three dominant kinds of theory. First, there are *life satisfaction* theories according to which overall happiness is constituted by some attitude towards some fairly general object—say, satisfaction with one’s circumstances, life, or world (e.g. Sumner 1996; Tatarikiewicz 1976; Telfer 1982). Second, there are *hedonistic* theories on which overall happiness is constituted by some aggregate of hedonic states—say, an aggregate of instances of pleasures and pains (Bentham 1823; Mill 1863), or of “attitudinal” pleasures and displeasures (Feldman 2010).<sup>6</sup> The third *emotional state* view treats overall happiness as constituted by other emotions and moods (Haybron 2008, chap. 6; Rossi and Tappolet 2022).

I will not try to adjudicate such disputes here. I take it to be pretheoretically attractive to say that overall happiness can be (un)fitting, and

6. For a somewhat similar view, see also Heathwood (2022).

likewise to endorse the central norm above. As such, any plausible theory of happiness must be consistent with these claims. For some of the views above, this consistency seems relatively obvious. For example, the life satisfaction view, attitudinal kinds of hedonism, and some versions of the emotional state view, all seem obviously consistent with the idea that happiness might be (un)fitting. For example, life satisfaction theories might reasonably say that whether happiness is fitting depends on how good your life is, attitudinal versions of hedonism might say that whether overall happiness is fitting depends on the value of the things your pleasures are directed at (cf. Feldman 2004, chap. 4), and emotional state theories might say that overall happiness is fitting just when all the underlying emotions are themselves fittingly responding to some relevant values (Rossi and Tappolet 2022).

For other views, it is less obvious how they might accommodate the possibility of fittingness norms on happiness. Perhaps this is a straightforward reason to reject those theories of happiness. Or perhaps it is a reason to distinguish multiple senses of “happy”, so that those theories are best understood as theories of something other than our subject matter here (see also Heathwood 2021, chap. 3). For example, we might distinguish my target phenomenon from other states of mind, such as bouts of bare conscious phenomenology, or objectless moods (Sizer 2000), even if the word “happiness” is flexible enough to sometimes refer to such things.

One final note: In this paper I focus on hedonic adaptation as it applies to happiness about good things. Everything I say presumably applies in exactly the same way to the topic of overall unhappiness as it responds to bad things. But I won’t stop to say everything twice.

## 2. Matching Happiness and Goodness

The central norm on happiness seems to say that our level of overall happiness should track just how good our circumstances are: when things are going fairly well, we should be fairly happy; when they are going very well, we should be very happy, and so on. This idea seems intuitive and captures obvious intuitions about cases regarding

fitting happiness (again, see also Hurka 2000). But this simple intuitive idea faces a serious problem: there is a significant mismatch between the scale of happiness, and the scale of value.<sup>7</sup> We’ll ultimately see that this mismatch provides an argument in favour of modifying the Central Norm in some way—indeed, in a way that permits hedonic adaptation.

The basic problem is that whereas the scale of goodness has no upper limit, the scale of happiness does have such an upper limit: things can always get better, but there is always some limit on the width of your smile.<sup>8</sup> One way to think about this upper limit of happiness is to say that your happiness cannot increase without some increase in phenomenological joy, but there are some limits on the phenomenology you are capable of having. On another (perhaps compatible) way of thinking about this limit, your happiness cannot increase without some change to your dispositions, but there is a limit to what you can humanly be disposed to do, given the restrictions of a finite mind. Either way, perhaps this limit varies from person to person, and even for an individual it might change over time. But we can set aside details like these—what matters is just that there is *some* limit on happiness. Arguably, on a cosmic scale the limit on our happiness is comparatively low: we can imagine creatures who are capable of feeling things far more fully than we, and to whom we seem emotionally stunted and without zest - perhaps they view humans as Spaniards might view the British.

In contrast, the scale of goodness has no upper limit: no matter how good your circumstances, they could be better still. Even if your life is perfect, moment-by-moment, it could be longer, and even if the world is perfect so far as it goes, it could be larger, and contain still more

7. In fact, there are plausibly two mismatches, since the scale of goodness seems continuous, whereas the scale of happiness seems discrete (at least for us). But I set this aside, apart from the brief footnote 12.

8. As above, in this paper I focus just on happiness about goods. But parallel claims are true—perhaps even more obvious—about unhappiness and badness: whereas the world can always get worse (just add another tortured soul), there is some limit on just how unhappy you can be.

perfectly well-off creatures within it. In what follows I assume that there is no logical upper limit to the scale of goodness. All that said, often the arguments would proceed equally well on the more modest assumption that the maximal amount of goodness is *extremely* high.

In short, human levels of happiness have an upper limit, whereas the scale of goodness has no upper limit. With this difference in mind, it is not clear that the central norm makes a sensible demand: how could my level of happiness be proportionate to the goodness of my circumstances, if these two things are measured on such different scales?

We can state this worry more carefully.<sup>9</sup> Since the central norm says to be happy to the extent your circumstances are good, the most obvious way to understand it is as saying that your level of happiness should range from zero to the maximum in proportion to how good your circumstances are, i.e. being maximally happy if things are as good as they could possibly be, 50% happy if things are 50% as good as they could possibly be, and so on. But though this simple proportional view is extremely natural, it is also enormously problematic. The problem is that no finite amount of value is even 1% as good as things could possibly be—value has no upper limit. So on this simple proportional view it's never fitting to be happy to any degree.<sup>10</sup> That seems implausible: surely some circumstances merit some happiness. Indeed, the initial motivations for the central norm hinged precisely on the idea that some instances of happiness seem more fitting than others.

Objection: The simple proportional view is counterintuitive, but de-

9. Some of the issues that follow bear some superficial similarities to the “linear” and “asymptotic” views that Hurka outlines about virtue and vice (Hurka 2000, 60–84), but our subjects are really quite different: his discussion primarily revolves around the possibility of limits on value of *our attitudes*, which is not the target of my discussion (though see Hurka 2000, 59, 76–77).

10. If the maximum amount of goodness is bounded but extraordinarily high, we will get a result which is slightly different but implausible in the same way: on that view, some *very* tiny amount of happiness might sometimes be appropriate, but only in response to *very* great goods.

fensible. We might present the view as saying that the fitting level of happiness is always zero, because no actual change in the world is remotely significant given the very wide range of possibilities there are. It is possible to get yourself into this kind of mindset, where nothing really matters because it's all cosmically insignificant. For example, here is Nick Bostrom, in the middle of entertaining thoughts about the vast future of mankind:

Something like 99.9% of all species that ever lived are now extinct. When will our own species join the dinosaurs and the dodos? How could that happen? And what can we do to stave off the end? [...] Chernobyl, Bhopal, volcano eruptions, earthquakes, droughts, wars, epidemics of influenza, smallpox, black plague, and AIDS. [...] Even the worst of those catastrophes were mere ripples on the surface of the great sea of life. (Bostrom 2009, 230)

Bostrom doesn't exactly endorse the view I suggested, but he at least indicates thoughts that tend in that direction. Still, *cosmic indifference* (as I shall call it) seems unwarranted. This is most plainly seen via stark example. Imagine that your life turns around overnight, so that you go from utterly desperate circumstances to great success. Perhaps you lose your family and your home, and are being threatened by physical violence and wider harms, but then your family and home are returned, your safety assured, and you suddenly find you have many great opportunities for success in objectively worthwhile projects. The cosmic indifference view says that it's fitting to be completely indifferent to this change, since on the overall scale of goodness the difference between these possibilities is tiny. But if there are any norms on happiness at all, surely they mandate some increase in happiness given such a change of circumstance.

One further and more principled worry about cosmic indifference is that happiness is supposed to play some role in our lives, enabling us to respond to our circumstances, and adapt our attention, desires, and bodies, to those circumstances—say, by relaxing after a win, or broad-

ening our attention while there are no threats present (see Fredrickson 1998; 2001). But on this view the functional role of happiness is utterly at odds with the norms governing it, since on this view happiness is never fitting even when our circumstances are favourable, and unfitting even when happiness would prime us to do things that would be apt in those favourable circumstances. I said earlier that instrumental considerations don't bear directly on fit, but that is consistent with the broader truth that there is *some* connection between an attitude being fitting and its disposing you to do sensible things under those circumstances (see e.g. Deonna and Teroni 2012; Kauppinen 2014).

There is a final objection we should consider. An objector might say that the limit on happiness holds only given very contingent features of actual human psychology, and they might point out that likewise, given certain contingent everyday facts, there is some upper limit on how good things are likely to get. In this way it might seem that both scales are in fact symmetric: both limited by contingent fact, and both unlimited in principle. There is an element of truth in these claims, but they do not help vindicate the simple proportional view above. The problem is that we, in our actual circumstances, need to know how much actual happiness—given our limitations—is appropriate to some given quantity of goodness. But that seems to require us to understand that actual amount of goodness in relation to some scale, and the obvious scale is the objective and unlimited one: that is the idea that the simple proportional view aims to capture. We might instead scale our actual levels of happiness to some contingent aspirations about how good things might realistically get, but to say that is precisely to reject the simple proportional view above, and instead accept some rival view like those I go on to discuss.

In short, it is not plausible that fitting happiness is just happiness that mirrors, in degree, absolute proportions of possible value—such a view is ruled out by the mismatch between the scale of happiness and the scale of value, in combination with the extremely modest premise that *some* happiness is sometimes fitting. But this was the most natural interpretation of the central norm.

We might want to be a little careful with exactly what conclusion we draw here. Is it that the simple proportional view above is false? On one rival picture, we might say that the simple proportional view nonetheless survives as a kind of ideal, but it is an ideal that we are somehow excused from in virtue of limits on our happiness. After all, perhaps the simple proportional view would apply to a being who had no limits on their happiness. I stay neutral on such questions: I leave open whether the simple proportional view is false, so that the views that follow are putative replacements for it, or whether instead the simple proportional view survives as a true ideal, so that the views that follow are supplements to that simpler norm, supplements that specify what creatures like us should do as a second-best option, given that we can't comply with the true ideal.

### 3. Proportionality up to a Limit

The problem above undermines the simple proportional view. Is there some better way to understand the central norm? In what follows I'll discuss some further possibilities. To aid us, we'll simplistically assume that we can assign exact numerical values to degrees of happiness and degrees of value. In reality, nothing this precise is possible, but this assumption greatly simplifies our discussion, without harm to the conclusions we can draw. More specifically, we'll assume that your level of happiness might be any number between 0 and 100, and assume that the goodness of your circumstances can be 0 or any positive number—*as* required, the former scale is limited in a way that the latter is not.

One attractive variant on the central norm would say that happiness should be proportional to goodness, but only within some limited range. Call this *the limit view*. Figure 1 is one simple version of the limit view.

This view says that you should get happier as things improve within the relevant limited range—say, when your circumstances improve from being 5 good to being 8 good. But this view says that once things get to a certain level of goodness (here, 10), you should be maximally happy, and if things improve from there, there's no requirement

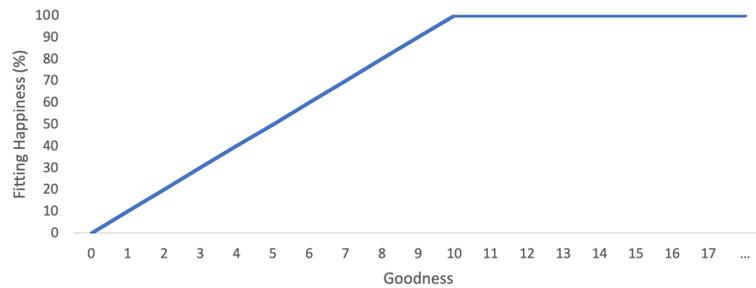


Figure 1: A simple version of the limit view

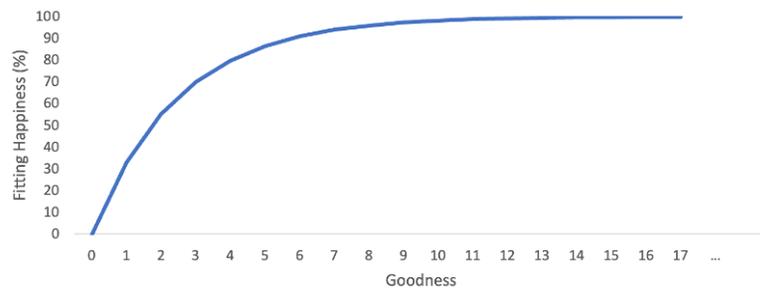


Figure 2: An asymptotic version of the limit view

to become any happier.<sup>11</sup> Imagine, for example, that the maximum is set at some particular kind of excellent but imperfect utopia. On the resulting view, you should be happier as things become closer to that utopia, and maximally happy if we reach it, but no happier if things get still better from there.

I will shortly explore different versions of the limit view. But we should first note one way to improve the view regardless of the further details (cf. Hurka 2000, 71–73). We might think that the fitting level of happiness is a monotonically increasing function of goodness, with a limit, so that the fitting level of happiness increases for any increase in goodness, only with a smaller increase each time so that it never truly reaches the maximum. See Figure 2, where the apparent plateau is in fact always sloped, and never reaches 100 for any finite extension of the graph.

This asymptotic version of the limit view is potentially more plausible than the prior linear one, since it recommends further happiness in response to *any* increase in goodness. Still, it is very similar to the linear limit view, since the change in happiness for any quantity of goodness above a certain amount will be extremely minimal: in the graph above, 10 goodness already requires that you be more than 98% happy, and further increases beyond, say, 100 goodness will require utterly tiny increases in your level of happiness. So although there is no true limit on this view, there is a kind of *quasi-limit*: a point at which further increases in goodness require only insignificant increases in happiness.<sup>12</sup>

11. One could have a version of the limit view that also places a lower limit on goodness, so that no happiness is fitting at all until the amount of goodness exceeds some minimum amount. The other views that follow could also be modified with parallel changes. Such modifications raise various questions, but they are structurally similar to those discussed in the main text about an upper limit, and so I won't discuss them separately. I would be inclined to endorse such modifications, in parallel with those I discuss, but the upper limit discussed in the main text is enough to allow us to make sense of *some* hedonic adaptation, which is our main goal.

12. Plausibly, your level of happiness is also on a discrete scale, so that you are not capable of having levels of happiness that make such fine discriminations as those mandated by the asymptotic view. So perhaps even the

So the asymptotic view may well be superior to the linear limit view, but both views are nonetheless similar in dealing with the mismatch between the scale of goodness and the scale of happiness by treating changes in goods, past a certain point, as having no *significant* effect on fitting happiness, and that will be the crucial claim in what follows. In what follows, I will keep things simple and largely just talk about the “limit” view, and a limit on fitting happiness. But this is just a simplification for presentational purposes, and you could translate everything I say about limits into claims about quasi-limits as understood above.

Is the limit view plausible? Obviously, much depends on where the limit is placed.

Imagine first the *high-limit view*, which treats the limit as 1000 units of goodness, where 1000 units of goodness is a kind of brilliant paradise, 900 a slightly less brilliant paradise, and so on. On this scale, let’s imagine that the realistic possibilities for you hover in the range between 5 and 10 units of goodness. Given that, the high-limit view says that in the actual world, you ought, even in the very best circumstances, to be only *very* marginally happy—it recommends less modest amounts of happiness only in more paradisiacal places. So if the limit view is understood as the high-limit view, it is not so different from the cosmic indifference view previously considered, since it equally says that almost no happiness is ever fitting. We should reject such a view.

We might instead prefer the *low-limit view*, which treats the limit as something very low, say, 2 units of goodness, where that is something like the life of a 14<sup>th</sup> century labourer. And let’s again imagine that the realistic possibilities for you hover in the range between 5 and 10 units of goodness. Given these facts, the low-limit view, being the opposite of the high-limit view, of course has the reverse implication that near-maximal happiness is almost always fitting for people like

you. That also seems implausible. It tells you to be almost completely unmoved by any realistic change in fortune, so long as your circumstances remain non-disastrous, and that seems implausible: isn’t it fitting to be upset at the difficulties in your love life, the failures of your preferred political party, the bad fortune of your football team? Isn’t it fitting to be significantly happier when these are going much better? True, because we are working with the asymptotic version of the limit view, improvements in these things should always be met with *some* increase in happiness. But we are imagining the low-limit view to be one that treats the graph as significantly plateauing at around 2 units of goodness, so that changes well above this point can only ever require extraordinarily tiny increases in happiness. We might think that more significant changes in our feelings can be warranted by ordinary changes in our circumstances.

I conclude that neither the high-limit view nor the low-limit view is plausible. The underlying issue driving the problems for these views should be intuitive given the earlier mismatch. The more we calibrate the happiness scale so that it lends weight to differences at the high end of the goodness scale, the less sensitive it is to difference as the low end of the goodness scale, and vice versa. Both options seem problematic: the high-limit view renders us utterly insensitive to changes between the realistically available lower levels of goodness, and vice versa the low-limit view renders us utterly insensitive to changes between the realistically available higher levels of goodness. Steering a course between these extremes promises to be difficult, since the fundamental issue is that the scale of goodness extends much further than the scale of happiness: it is hard to see how to understand fitting happiness so that it is significantly sensitive to changes in degrees of goodness across the full range of that large scale.

#### 4. A Variable Limit

Obviously, we would ideally avoid these extremes and go for a kind of medium-limit view, on which the limit remains high enough to be demanding, but low enough to be achievable. But presumably, such a

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asymptotic view involves a hard limit of sorts, given the discreteness of our levels of happiness. But note that the admission wouldn’t require us to revert to the simple linear model: even with discrete levels of happiness, it might be attractive to say that mandated increases in happiness are smaller the closer you are towards the top of the scale.

view should set the limit in a way that is somehow calibrated to your particular circumstances. If it is not so-calibrated—if it is in fact better calibrated to people living in much better or worse circumstances than the ones we face—it will simply collapse into either the high- or low-limit views above, telling you either to be consistently very unhappy because you fail to live in true paradise, or else telling you to be consistently near-maximally happy because your life surpasses those of 14<sup>th</sup> century peasants. (And, even if—fantastically!—the limit were impartially calibrated in a way that by pure chance happens to suit your very specific circumstances, it would of course recommend either no happiness, or near-maximal happiness, for other people in other circumstances, and that might seem equally strange: do we really want to say, e.g., that no happiness was ever fitting for any medieval labourer?)

So if we are to adopt the limit view, we should do so but with the limit somehow calibrated to your particular circumstances in some way: we should adopt the *variable limit view*. On this view, we imagine that the limit is set, and continually reset, over time, in light of some facts about what magnitude of goodness is realistic for you in your circumstances. The variable limit view could recommend vast, if temporary, changes in happiness given the kind of fluctuation in circumstance that you see during your life, rather than recommending an eternally unchanging state despite large changes in circumstances. To represent this view visually, perhaps the Figure 3 represents the fitting level of happiness for a someone with worse prospects, and Figure 4 the fitting level of happiness for someone with better prospects.

For example, let's simplistically imagine that clean drinking water is enough to make one's circumstances good to degree 4. Perhaps for someone without access to such clean water, its arrival mandates great happiness, as in the first graph above—there, you should be 80% happy if you have this good in your life. But perhaps over time, as this benefit becomes commonplace, this same fact comes to merit much less happiness, as in the second graph above, so that this same fact comes to mandate that you be only 55% happy. As time passes, further changes might make this same good merit even less, or more, happiness.

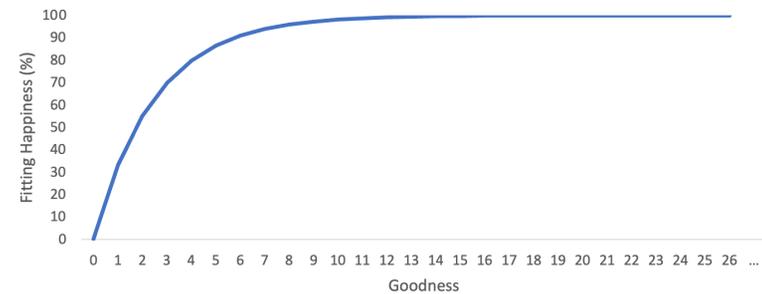


Figure 3: The fitting level of happiness for someone with worse prospects

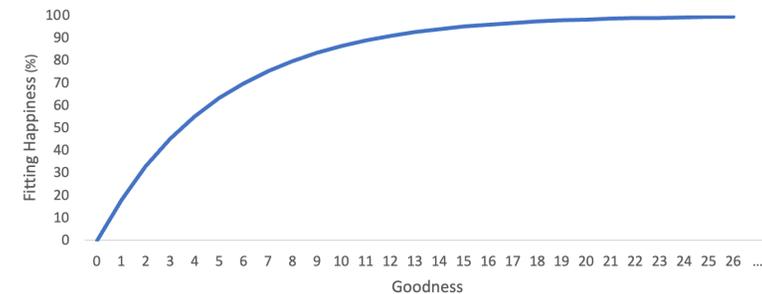


Figure 4: The fitting level of happiness for someone with better prospects

Let me summarise where we are. There is a forceful argument in favour of hedonic adaptation: it follows from the variable limit view, and the variable limit view is the only view we have seen that adequately accommodates the fact that the scale of goodness is large, and the scale of happiness is comparatively small. If the fitting level of happiness for some given quantity of goodness is unchanging over time, that would quickly entail that for at least some people, they always ought to be not happy at all, and for others that they always ought to be near-maximally happy. But neither option looks plausible. In contrast, if the fitting level of happiness for some given quantity of goodness changes over time, it follows that significant changes in levels of happiness are often fitting: our level of happiness can rightly be significantly affected by changes in the world, but also continue to be so affected even if the world becomes markedly better, or markedly worse. In this way, hedonic adaptation is a way of accommodating the fact that the scale of happiness is unlike the scale of goodness.

There are two remaining points of detail I should mention.

First, I said above that the variable limit view should say that the fitting level of happiness, in response to some given good, is *somehow* calibrated to your circumstances at a particular time. There are many possible ways it might be so calibrated. For example, we might revise the central norm on happiness to say simply that we should be happy only about *new* goods. That would perhaps be the simplest way of having it be calibrated to your own evolving circumstances over time, and thereby permitting hedonic adaptation. But there are other possibilities too. For example, on the assumption that the closeness of other possible worlds changes over time, another way to continually calibrate the norm would be to say that it's fitting to be happy about goods only if things are better here than they are in nearby possible worlds. Such a view would also mandate some hedonic adaptation. Or, for a third possibility, we might say that it's fitting to be happy in response to goods only insofar as they exceed what was recently probable. Again, such a view would mandate a degree of hedonic adaptation. Deciding between views like these—whether fitting happiness varies depending on

history, nearby possibility, past probability, or something else entirely—is a fascinating task, but one for another place. Here I only say that the best version of the central norm will incorporate *some* mechanism for ensuring that the fitting level of happiness is calibrated to your own particular circumstances. That is enough to show that some kind of hedonic adaptation is appropriate, even if there are further details to be filled in.

The second remaining point of detail is related. How fast should we hedonically adapt to our circumstances? Some of the intuitive cases above involved whole changes in society over long time periods, rather than mere changes in goods in your life over a short period. Does the introduction of some new good in your life force *immediate* changes to the mapping from degrees of goodness to degrees of fitting happiness? Or does it impose such changes only over the long term?

Though some of the examples so far focus on the need for adaptation over very long time periods, the underlying reasoning may really favour recalibration over shorter time periods. This is because the underlying point is just that by adapting to the most recent good, you give yourself better prospects for responding in a fitting way to further goods. If you were to instead adapt more slowly, your prospects of this kind would be much worse. Let me illustrate the point with an example. Imagine that some great good comes into your life: you get married. Plausibly, this merits great happiness. But does it continue to merit happiness in the longer term? No doubt various related facts might do so, insofar as your marriage might bring you new goods over time—the honeymoon, children, and so on. But set those aside: does the narrower fact that you are married to so-and-so continue to merit great happiness? If it did, then there is a danger that you will be unable to respond fittingly to new goods in future, having a preexisting high level of happiness, treating yourself as already at the relevant limit (or, given the asymptotic view, extremely close). So though it might look like a kind of failing to get less happy with your marriage over time, this prevents a different and larger kind of failing, namely being unable to respond fittingly to any further good news in future. As

we receive new goods, the limit has to be recalibrated upwards fairly quickly. Otherwise we might find ourselves near the limit very quickly, and that would entail a long-term failure to be fittingly sensitive to any further changes in goods. In short, hedonic adaptation has to happen relatively quickly, or else the first large good event in your life would mandate near-maximal happiness for all of the intervening time while you adapt, and that would involve a kind of long-running insensitivity.

Does this argument favour totally immediate adaptation to each and every good? Not exactly. The argument gives *a* reason to adapt to new goods more quickly, so as to enable us to be sensitive to new goods. But there might be countervailing reasons why happiness ought not respond quite so quickly. Maximally brief happiness hardly counts as a response at all, and if we are trying to capture the idea that happiness can be a fitting response, it needs to at least last long enough to count as a *response*, even if over the longer term that response diminishes with adaptation. A full story here about the exact correct pace of hedonic adaptation would require us to say more about the point of responding with happiness, so that we can understand these countervailing pressures more clearly. Here I have defended only the claim that some hedonic adaptation is appropriate, not that it is always appropriate no matter how extreme or quick.

There is one final loose end to acknowledge before I conclude. I said at the start that I would focus on cases where people hedonically adapt in the sense of ceasing to be happy with goods. But we can briefly note that the very same reasoning applies to hedonic adaptation of unhappiness to bads. Imagine that some great bad comes into your life: you have arthritis. This merits unhappiness. But over time, your unhappiness might diminish. This might seem unfitting—surely the arthritis remains bad!—but in fact it is perfectly fitting. For again, otherwise, we must imagine that we should be eternally sad, or never sad, and neither option sounds right. Better to say that the degree of badness that mandates sadness changes over time, so that your level of sadness should track realistic changes in how bad the world is over time. You should be sad about your arthritis, but only for a time, so

that you are able to be sensitive to whatever new worse bads might arrive. Just as hedonic adaptation to goods is justified by the way in which the scale of goodness outstrips the scale of happiness, too hedonic adaptation to bads is justified by the way in which the scale of badness outstrips the scale of unhappiness.

## 5. Conclusion

We began with the question of whether hedonic adaptation could be appropriate—not whether it is helpful or harmful, but instead whether it guarantees some kind of mistaken evaluation of one's circumstances. I defended the view that it is appropriate. That main argument hinged on a mismatch between the scale of happiness and the scale of goodness, so that our levels of happiness cannot be proportionate to absolute degrees of goodness. Under these circumstances, an unchanging norm would tell us, or others, to be eternally happy or indifferent even while undergoing vast changes in circumstances, and that seems inappropriate in its own way. In contrast, a norm that changes over time, permitting hedonic adaptation, has more plausible implications about when happiness is fitting.

Let us apply the central lesson to the *Squash and a Squeeze* case with which we began. Remember the story: the old woman is unhappy with her house, introduces many animals to worsen it further, and then removes them all, ending happy with her house. The puzzle is whether her happiness at the start and end of the story can possibly both be fitting, given that she is unhappy at the start, happy by the end, but about the very same house both times. The view above suggests that this is possible. Since the scale of goodness outstrips the scale of happiness, there is no sensible norm that tells the old lady to be happy just to the extent her house is absolutely good. We might instead imagine a norm that tells her to be happy in proportion to the goodness of the house, but only within some fixed range. But such a view might imply that the old lady, or someone else, ought to be eternally happy, or never happy, just because their circumstances leave them always below or above the relevant limit—perhaps the old lady should be maximally

happy throughout the story because she has more than a crumbling cave, or permanently sad because she doesn't have access to a futuristic palace. Since all these options seem implausible, the best remaining option is to endorse a norm according to which the degree of goodness that mandates some given level of happiness is not fixed, but instead changes over time. But such a norm permits that the old lady's happiness might be fitting at both the start and end of the story. This isn't guaranteed by what I have said, since I left open some questions about the exact form and speed of adaptation, and perhaps adaptation is in principle sometimes appropriate but not in the case of the old lady. But at least, there is no principled reason to say that her happiness is inappropriate merely because it undergoes some adaptation.

While this paper focused on the appropriateness of hedonic adaptation, somewhat similar points may well apply to other emotions. For example, grief lessens over time as the loved-one's death recedes in time; anger fades about even the largest transgressions, and your pride in your accomplishments need not be so eternal as the gold statue you won. Similar questions arise in these cases about whether the relevant kind of emotional change over time can be rational (e.g. Callard 2019; Howard 2022; Marui 2022), and similar answers to those I have given might be offered, if the target value scales vastly outstrip the possible magnitudes of the relevant emotions. The extension of my arguments to those cases seems promising, though the details are a matter for further work.<sup>13</sup>

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