The Futile Pursuit of Happiness
Jon Gertner

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by Jon Gertner

If Daniel Gilbert is right, then you are wrong. That is to say, if Daniel Gilbert is right, then you are wrong to believe that a new car will make you as happy as you imagine. . . . That’s because when it comes to predicting exactly how you will feel in the future, you are most likely wrong.

A professor in Harvard’s department of psychology, Gilbert likes to tell people that he studies happiness. But it would be more precise to say that Gilbert—along with the psychologist Tim Wilson of the University of Virginia, the economist George Loewenstein of Carnegie-Mellon and the psychologist (and Nobel laureate in economics) Daniel Kahneman of Princeton—has taken the lead in studying a specific type of emotional and behavioral prediction. In the past few years, these four men have begun to question the decision-making process that shapes our sense of well-being: how do we predict what will make us happy or unhappy—and then how do we feel after the actual experience? . . .

Until recently, this was uncharted territory. How we forecast our feelings, and whether those predictions match our future emotional states, had never been the stuff of laboratory research. But in scores of experiments, Gilbert, Wilson, Kahneman and Loewenstein have made a slew of observations and conclusions that undermine a number of fundamental assumptions: namely, that we humans understand what we want and are adept at improving our well-being. . . . To understand affective forecasting, as Gilbert has termed these studies, is to wonder if everything you have ever thought about life choices, and about happiness, has been at the least somewhat naïve and, at worst, greatly mistaken.

The problem, as Gilbert and company have come to discover, is that we falter when it comes to imagining how we will feel about something in the future. . . . What Gilbert has found . . . is that we overestimate the intensity and the duration of our emotional reactions—our “affect”—to future events. In other words, we might believe that a new BMW will make life perfect. But it will almost certainly be less exciting than we anticipated; nor will it excite us for as long as predicted. The vast majority of Gilbert’s test participants through the years have consistently made just these sorts of errors both in the laboratory and in real-life situations. . . . On average, bad events proved less intense and more transient than test participants predicted. Good events proved less intense and briefer as well.

Gilbert and his collaborator Tim Wilson call the gap between what we predict and what we ultimately experience the “impact bias”—“impact” meaning the errors we make in estimating both the intensity and duration of our emotions and “bias” our tendency to err. The phrase


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characterizes how we experience the dimming excitement over not just a BMW but also over any object or event that we presume will make us happy. . . . You may have high hopes, but the impact bias suggests that it will almost certainly be less cool, and in a shorter time, than you imagine. Worse, Gilbert has noted that these mistakes of expectation can lead directly to mistakes in choosing what we think will give us pleasure. He calls this “miswanting.” . . .

“You know, the Stones said, ‘You can’t always get what you want,’” Gilbert adds. “I don’t think that’s the problem. The problem is you can’t always know what you want.” . . .

“People ask why I study happiness,” Gilbert says, “and I say, ‘Why study anything else?’ It’s the holy grail. We’re studying the thing that all human action is directed toward.”

One experiment of Gilbert’s had students in a photography class at Harvard choose two favorite pictures from among those they had just taken and then relinquish one to the teacher. Some students were told their choices were permanent; others were told they could exchange their prints after several days. As it turned out, those who had time to change their minds were less pleased with their decisions than those whose choices were irrevocable.

Much of Gilbert’s research is in this vein. Another recent study asked whether transit riders in Boston who narrowly missed their trains experienced the self-blame that people tend to predict they’ll feel in this situation. (They did not.) . . .

All of these studies establish the links between prediction, decision making and well-being. The photography experiment challenges our common assumption that we would be happier with the option to change our minds when in fact we’re happier with closure. The transit experiment demonstrates that we tend to err in estimating our regret over missed opportunities. . . .

Gilbert does not believe all forecasting mistakes lead to similar results; a death in the family, a new gym membership and a new husband are not the same, but in how they affect our well-being they are similar. “Our research simply says that whether it’s the thing that matters or the thing that doesn’t, both of them matter less than you think they will,” he says. “Things that happen to you or that you buy or own—as much as you think they make a difference to your happiness, you’re wrong by a certain amount. You’re overestimating how much of a difference they make. None of them make the difference you think. And that’s true of positive and negative events.”

Much of the work of Kahneman, Loewenstein, Gilbert and Wilson takes its cue from the concept of adaptation, a term psychologists have used since at least the 1950’s to refer to


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how we acclimate to changing circumstances. George Loewenstein sums up this human capacity as follows: “Happiness is a signal that our brains use to motivate us to do certain things. And in the same way that our eye adapts to different levels of illumination, we’re designed to kind of go back to the happiness set point. Our brains are not trying to be happy. Our brains are trying to regulate us.” In this respect, the tendency toward adaptation suggests why the impact bias is so pervasive. As Tim Wilson says: “We don’t realize how quickly we will adapt to a pleasurable event and make it the backdrop of our lives. When any event occurs to us, we make it ordinary. And through becoming ordinary, we lose our pleasure.”

It is easy to overlook something new and crucial in what Wilson is saying. Not that we invariably lose interest in bright and shiny things over time—this is a long-known trait—but that we’re generally unable to recognize that we adapt to new circumstances and therefore fail to incorporate this fact into our decisions. So, yes, we will adapt to the BMW and the plasma TV, since we adapt to virtually everything. But Wilson and Gilbert and others have shown that we seem unable to predict that we will adapt. Thus, when we find the pleasure derived from a thing diminishing, we move on to the next thing or event and almost certainly make another error of prediction, and then another, ad infinitum.

While Gilbert’s most notable contribution to affective forecasting is the impact bias, Loewenstein’s is something called the “empathy gap.”

Here’s how it expresses itself. In a recent experiment, Loewenstein tried to find out how likely people might be to dance alone to Rick James’s “Super Freak” in front of a large audience. Many agreed to do so for a certain amount of money a week in advance, only to renege when the day came to take the stage. This sounds like a goof, but it gets at the fundamental difference between how we behave in “hot” states (those of anxiety, courage, fear . . . and the like) and “cold” states of rational calm. This empathy gap in thought and behavior—we cannot seem to predict how we will behave in a hot state when we are in a cold state—affects happiness in an important but somewhat less consistent way than the impact bias.

“So much of our lives involves making decisions that have consequences for the future,” Loewenstein says.

Would a world without forecasting errors be a better world? Would a life lived without forecasting errors be a richer life? . . . The research on affective forecasting suggests that people may have little ability to anticipate their adaptation beyond the early stages.”

Loewenstein, along with his collaborator Dr. Peter Ubel, has done a great deal of work showing that nonpatients overestimate the displeasure of living with the loss of a limb, for instance, or paraplegia. To use affective forecasting to prove that people adapt to serious

physical challenges far better and will be happier than they imagine, Loewenstein says, could prove invaluable. . . .

To Loewenstein, who is especially attendant to the friction between his emotional and deliberative processes, a life without forecasting errors would most likely be a better, happier life. “If you had a deep understanding of the impact bias and you acted on it, which is not always that easy to do, you would tend to invest your resources in the things that would make you happy,” he says. This might mean taking more time with friends instead of more time for making money. He also adds that a better understanding of the empathy gap—those hot and cold states we all find ourselves in on frequent occasions—could save people from making regrettable decisions in moments of courage or craving. . . .

“But I should have learned many more lessons from my research than I actually have,” Gilbert admits. “I don’t think I want to give up all these motivations,” he says, “that belief that there’s the good and there’s the bad and that this is a contest to try to get one and avoid the other. I don’t think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense.” . . .

“Hope and fear are enduring features of the human experience,” he says, “and it is unlikely that people are going to abandon them anytime soon just because some psychologist told them they should.” In fact, in his recent writings, he has wondered whether forecasting errors might somehow serve a larger functional purpose he doesn’t yet understand. If he could wave a wand tomorrow and eliminate all affective-forecasting errors, I ask, would he? “The benefits of not making this error would seem to be that you get a little more happiness,” he says. “When choosing between two jobs, you wouldn’t sweat as much because you’d say: ‘You know, I’ll be happy in both. I’ll adapt to either circumstance pretty well, so there’s no use in killing myself for the next week.’ But maybe our caricatures of the future—these overinflated assessments of how good or bad things will be—maybe it’s these illusory assessments that keep us moving in one direction over the other. Maybe we don’t want a society of people who shrug and say, ‘It won’t really make a difference.’ Maybe it’s important for there to be carrots and sticks in the world, even if they are illusions,” he adds. “They keep us moving towards carrots and away from sticks.”


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