

BROADENING THE SCOPE OF ECONOMIC HISTORY:
HOW HAPPINESS HAS CHANGED OVER THE LONG PERIOD
AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

The essay reviews the changing relationship between economic conditions and the ideas of happiness over the long period, from hunter-gatherers to the present age. It argues that cultural aspects, in their interplay with social conditions and institutions, are crucial for understanding the rise of the modern world, and it proposes an interpretative schema within which to explain the origins of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. On this basis, the article calls for closer integration between economics and economic history, on the one hand, and psychology, ethics and politics on the other: it is vital to gain better understanding not only of the past but also of our times, given the widening gap between technological progress and ethics.

Keywords: Happiness, Enlightenment, Modern Economic Growth, Total History.
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1. INTRODUCTION. WHAT KIND OF HAPPINESS?

To begin with, it is useful to clarify what is meant by ‘happiness’.¹ Schematically, we may consider happiness to be the combination of three elements: a) freedom, understood both as emancipation from material constraints (i.e. control over the natural environment and understanding of the physical, biological and psychological laws that govern nature and our species) and as the capacity to reduce the obstacles that people, intention-

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¹ This paper is basically an English version, rearranged, updated and (hopefully) improved, of the first chapter of FELICE 2017.