

PART I

THE FLOURISHING
MINDSET





CHAPTER ONE

WHY HAPPINESS ELUDES US

*“PERFECTION OF MEANS AND CONFUSION
OF GOALS SEEM—IN My OPINION—TO
CHARACTERIZE OUR AGE.”*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

In 2007, Stephen Schwarzman (whom I’ll refer to as Steve), CEO of the Blackstone Group—one of the most prestigious investment firms in the world—came to visit India for the first time. Being chairman of Blackstone India at the time, I went to the Mumbai airport to welcome Steve and personally escort him to our office. As we drove through one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods, Steve fell silent as he took in the scenes of street life that flashed past, at one point asking if we might slow down to watch a group of children playing ball in the street.

When we arrived at the office, he remained lost in thought as we made our way to the meeting room where he addressed the Mumbai team. He said, “Before I tell you what’s happening at Blackstone globally, let me share one experience with you that has affected me

this morning. As we drove through the airport, I saw poor children in the slums playing, laughing, and exuding pure joy. Their clothes were torn and smudged, as if they haven't had a bath for a month, but they were happy with an amazing purity in their smiles. In sharp contrast, right before coming to India, I had taken a walk through the New York office to meet and greet employees. I saw that my twenty-four-year-old colleagues, who are earning a substantial income, often had expressions that weren't particularly joyful." Although Steve is hardly the first to note the low correlation between material wealth and happiness, as a quintessentially wealthy and highly successful executive once referred to as the "King of Capital," his words carried considerable weight in my mind.

Although I had the same intuition, I thought it was clouded by my own cultural bias. I had gotten to know several highly successful and wealthy people who were miserable in their personal lives. Steve's observation that day heightened my awareness of this curious paradox and brought up questions that have stuck with me ever since. How indeed can people with so little material wealth be so happy and those with so much be so unhappy? And what does this say about the very nature of happiness and why it eludes so many of us? A hint to this puzzle was provided by Robert Biswas-Diener (son of the happiness pioneer Ed Diener), who, after traveling the world and interviewing people about their lives and how satisfied they were, concluded that, "While the poor of Calcutta do not lead enviable lives, they do lead meaningful lives."³²

Ed Diener was a highly influential psychologist renowned for his pioneering work in the field of subjective well-being. His research and subsequent work generally show a correlation between national wealth and average life satisfaction up to a certain point. However, beyond a certain threshold of national wealth (which various studies

have tried to pinpoint), the correlation between increasing wealth and increasing happiness tends to weaken significantly or even disappear. Factors beyond just wealth play a crucial role in national well-being. These include social support, freedom, trust in government, long life expectancy, and perceived corruption.³³

GOALS ARE NOT THE GOAL

The pursuit of happiness often mistakenly leads us to believe that certain achievements—a beautiful home, a luxury car, career success, and financial abundance—are the keys to a fulfilling life. Of course, it's a false dichotomy to go to the other extreme and claim that happiness has nothing at all to do with wealth. While I consider ends as being, by definition, the ultimate goals within a fulfilled life, means do possess intrinsic value. Without satisfying a minimum level of means, the quest for ends does not even make sense; what is the point of dwelling upon meaning when one is hungry or cold? Means include the usual materialistic goods, such as money, shelter, and food, but they also encompass more sophisticated and abstract means, such as getting a good education, earning a well-regarded job, starting a family, volunteering for a cause, or serving society.

We all have an innate need to be loved, respected, and accepted by others. We start learning by imitating others whom we hold in high regard. We conform to societal norms. During our cognitive development process, we start overlaying a social self on top of our authentic self. In the process, we assimilate many false metanarratives that focus on means and not our ends. We start to measure the means and start to define our goals to maximize the means. Gradually, the means crowd out our ends. As we start to feed this socialized self, we increasingly start to starve our authentic self, which inherently longs

for love, learning, and play. We succumb to what is known as “means/ends inversion,” (MEI), mistaking the *means* to a good life for the *ends*.

The means and ends debate is not new. In his landmark 1930 essay British philosopher and economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that larger and larger numbers of people would be free from problems of economic necessity. He advised “to value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful.”³⁴ By “good,” he meant that economic gains should be obtained morally and spread among the maximum number of people, rather than be concentrated in a few hands. Using the words of Jean Baudrillard, “We wish to restore the original contradiction between ends and means, between individuals and social forces, to foster a confident yet socially considerate approach towards life for every individual.”³⁵

HOW MEANS CROWD OUT ENDS

MEI happens at the level of individuals, organizations, and countries. More often, this phenomenon happens without us even being aware of it. Let’s illustrate MEI with a few broad examples on the individual and societal levels.

As Albert Camus said, “A man wants to earn money in order to be happy, and his whole effort and the best of his life are devoted to earning money. Happiness is forgotten; the means are taken for the ends.”³⁶ In obsessively pursuing wealth or fame or power, believing it will automatically bring happiness and security, we often neglect relationships, health, and personal growth in the process. The means of wealth accumulation and seeking power or fame have become the ends, while the actual ends (happiness and relationships) are lost in the pursuit of the means.

Many of us fixate on achieving an “ideal” body image, believing it will lead to acceptance and admiration by others. However, this pursuit can become an obsession and lead to body dysmorphia or

eating disorders. The means (perfect appearance) has become the end, while the end (self-acceptance/love) remains elusive, even if the physical goal is reached.

A company might prioritize maximizing profits above all else, even if it means cutting corners on quality or exploiting its employees. The means (profit) has become the end, while the end (providing valuable products and/or services and creating a positive work environment) is secondary. This can lead to customer dissatisfaction, ethical breaches, environmental damage, and long-term damage to the company's reputation.

A media outlet might focus solely on increasing website traffic through clickbait headlines and sensationalized content, even if it means sacrificing journalistic integrity. The means (website traffic) has become the end, while the end (engaging and informing an audience) is compromised. The media outlet might have high traffic, but it also has a poorly informed and disengaged readership.

The economic and social policies of most countries focus on maximizing GDP. They prioritize economic growth as the primary measure of progress, even if it comes at the cost of environmental degradation, social inequality, or declining mental health. The means (economic growth) has become the end, while the end (national well-being/flourishing) is not adequately addressed.

Society might become overly focused on technological advancement, believing it will automatically solve all our problems. However, technology can also create new problems, such as job displacement, privacy concerns, and increased social isolation. The means (technological advancement) has become the end, while the end (solving societal problems/improving lives) is not carefully considered.

AI designed to optimize social media engagement might prioritize generating sensationalist content to maximize likes and shares,

even if it undermines the platform's goal of fostering meaningful communication. This misalignment arises when the AI, lacking humanlike judgment and ethical considerations, relentlessly pursues its narrow objective without regard for broader consequences. AI remains a tool serving humanity's intended purposes, not the other way around.

In universities, publishing rather than impacting the world becomes the goal of an academic department as professors get judged on quantity and the academic impact of their publications. The relentless pursuit of high grades can create a system where the means (achieving top marks) overshadows the end (genuine learning and intellectual growth). When grades become the primary focus, students, educators, and even institutions can inadvertently compromise the very essence of education.

Multiple articles and surveys (such as Harvard's Healthy Minds Survey and reports from the university's Task Force on Managing Student Mental Health) consistently show significant percentages of Harvard undergraduates and graduate students reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety.³⁷ Laurie Santos, who teaches the most popular online course on happiness from Yale, says, "In Spring 2018, I taught 'Psychology and the Good Life' for the first time. I created this Yale course because I was worried about the levels of student depression, anxiety, and stress that I was seeing as a professor and head of college at Yale. There's this Yale pressure cooker of expectations, failures, deprecation, anxiety. This pressure cooker wreaks havoc on the mental lives of every single one of us so that at the end of the year, we leave mentally battered and exhausted semester after semester."³⁸ While grades can be a useful measure of progress, they should not be the ultimate goal. One of the things I liked during my days at Stanford's Graduate School of Business was that grades were not disclosed to potential employers and were not prioritized. Hence, I audited an extra class every quarter to maximize my learning.

The means crowds out the ends in medicine when doctors are incentivized to take on ever more patients and spend less time with each of them, all for the goal of maximizing profit instead of maximizing patient well-being. I have many doctor friends at prestigious hospitals in India and the US who confide in me that they are given annual budgets that result in overdiagnosis and unnecessary tests, raising healthcare costs everywhere.

At the societal level, we may follow the herd, without questioning whether what we value is contributing to our well-being. We may constantly strive for attention on social media, obsess over celebrity culture, or care more about net worth than character.

WHY LOVE, LEARNING, AND PLAY ARE THE TRUE ENDS

While studying at Harvard, I arrived at a profound speculative insight: Our ultimate human purpose is to evolve through love, learning, and play. Knowing that our physical evolution is constrained by our place in the solar system, I now believe that our journey unfolds through these three essential and interconnected facets of ourselves, reflecting the very nature of the universe. We connect through love, seek understanding through learning, and embrace life's richness through play.

Loving, learning, and playing are the three deepest yearnings that form our intentional core. We will refer to the love, learn, and play core with the initialism **LLP** in this book. The existential questions we seek answers to are our mind's way of bringing our attention to this core. Just like we have feelings of hunger so we may eat food, we have a sensation of loneliness to overcome separation so we may love. We feel curious so we keep learning all our lives. And we have imagination

for play, to celebrate life as a child does, and to experience the wonders and explore the mysteries of our world.

The path to human flourishing is remarkably simple, yet profoundly transformative. We can love, learn, and play in anything we do, any profession, and at any stage of our lives to truly flourish. Think of **LLP** as a software app. To use it, we may need to clear some space on our hard drives by eliminating old programming, dispensing with socially constructed desires, and removing false identities. The good news is that there is an app that is compatible with all operating systems: People of all races, nationalities, religions, beliefs, and socio-economic statuses, as well as those who are **SBNRs** (spiritual but not religious) or **nones** (individuals who identify as religiously unaffiliated) are invited to download the **LLP** mindset. Just as the double helix of DNA controls many of our biological functions, loving, learning, and playing form a triple helix of human flourishing.

Initially, I thought this may be too simple a framework, but then I read two quotes that convinced me I'm on the right track. The first is from Sir Isaac Newton: "Truth is ever to be found in simplicity, and not in the multiplicity and confusion of things." The second is from philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity."

Loving, learning, and playing are our deepest longings and, hence, ends, not means. To understand ultimate ends, ask yourself why. "Why do I want well-being? Why do I want love? Why do I want to learn? Why do I want to play?" An ultimate end is not a means to anything else. Nothing is worth doing unless the goal is an end in and of itself. In addition, there is no limit to how much you can love, how much you can learn, and how much you can play, especially when we define these in their widest manifestations, as I will in subsequent chapters. That is another criterion by which to differentiate ends from means.

