



# e-quilibrium

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## Affective Forecasting

As people make decisions about their futures, a major consideration is how they imagine they will feel about whatever is decided. People typically want to have positive emotions about their decisions (satisfaction, happiness) and avoid negative emotions (sadness, regret).

Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard psychologist, studies affective forecasting, that is, people’s predictions about how they will feel about future events. The conclusions he draws from his research are rather surprising... people are distinctly inaccurate in predicting how they will feel about future events. We can accurately answer the question, “How happy are you right now?” But we tend to be rather inaccurate with questions such as: “How happy were you?” “How happy will you be?” “What makes you happy?” Rarely are people as happy or unhappy as they forecast themselves to be about a given event or experience.

If you are like most people, you are inclined to argue with Gilbert. “How can some ivory tower psychologist tell me I can’t predict what will make me happy in the future?” The answer is that the way in which we think is biased.

Suppose I were to imagine what it would be like to live in the San Diego area. Immediately I think about what I subjectively know about San Diego, especially from the times I have visited there. Because my memory is incapable of remembering everything, it tends to remember the best, the worst, and the most recent. Memory functions more like an

editor (modifying and adapting for ease of recall and for making sense) than a scribe (recording factual data). Unfortunately, memory and imagination often don't do well with the most likely. Therefore, my prediction about what it would be like to live in San Diego is biased, based upon my memory of the best, the worst, or the most recent experience or information I have about that city. If I actually moved to San Diego, it's highly probable that I will experience the most likely, not what I most remember (i.e., best, worst, or most recent). For example, I might imagine that there would be frequent walks on the beach at sunset (i.e., the best) if I were a San Diego resident, but if I actually lived in San Diego it is most likely that I would regularly be in my house at sunset rather than on the beach.

Gilbert describes how imagination about the future has three major shortcomings. First, we fail to be skeptical about what our brains have "filled in" and "left out" of our imagined future... we incorrectly assume accuracy. Second, our imaginations tend to project the present into the future... we fill in the unknowns of the future with what we know today. Third, we tend to under appreciate how different things look when they actually happen... that is, the characteristics we think about when imagining a future event tend to be much less prominent when the event actually occurs.

There is a bit more to the story. Gilbert has a solution to the problem of inaccurate affective forecasting. Instead of imagining on our own (simulating) what a future event will be like, Gilbert suggests finding a surrogate. That is, find someone who is actually experiencing the imagined event and learn what it is like from that person's perspective (remember, people tend to be accurate about how happy they are right now). Better yet, check with several people. Unfortunately, this simple solution tends to be readily rejected with the argument, "But I'm unique. No one else's experience can predict my experience." (Yes, another bias... people are actually much more similar than they are different... we're not as unique as we like to think we are.)

Gilbert has written an engaging book, Stumbling on Happiness, in which he more thoroughly and elegantly describes the errors we make in predicting how we'll feel. His contributions are important because we go through life making decisions based upon our predictions about how happy we will be about the choices we make. We want to be happy. Better

accuracy in predicting how we will feel is one potential route to greater life satisfaction.

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