ABSTRACT. One of the ideological foundations of the modern welfare states is the belief that people can be made happier by providing them with better living conditions. This belief is challenged by the theory that happiness is a fixed 'trait', rather than a variable 'state'. This theory figures both at the individual level and at the societal level. The individual level variant depicts happiness as an aspect of personal character; rooted in inborn temperament or acquired disposition. The societal variant sees happiness as a matter of national character; embedded in shared values and beliefs. Both variants imply that a better society makes no happier people.

Happiness can be regarded as a trait if it meets three criteria: (1) temporal stability, (2) cross-situational consistency, and (3) inner causation. This paper checks whether that is, indeed, the case.

The theory that happiness is a personal-character-trait is tested in a (meta) analysis of longitudinal studies. The results are: (1) Happiness is quite stable on the short term, but not in the long run, neither relatively nor absolutely. (2) Happiness is not insensitive to fortune or adversity. (3) Happiness is not entirely built-in: its genetic basis is at best modest and psychological factors explain only part of its variance.

The theory that happiness is a national-character-trait is tested in an analysis of differences in average happiness between nations. The results point in the same direction: (1) Though generally fairly stable over the last decades, nation-happiness has changed profoundly in some cases, both absolutely and relatively. (2) Average happiness in nations is clearly not independent of living conditions. The better the conditions in a country, the happier its citizens. (3) The differences cannot be explained by a collective outlook on life.

It is concluded that happiness is no immutable trait. There is thus still sense in striving for greater happiness for a greater number.
1. INTRODUCTION

The Pursuit of Happiness

Happiness is a main goal in present day Western society. Individually, people try to shape their lives in such ways that they can enjoy them. Politically, there is massive support for policies that aim at greater happiness for everybody. It is widely believed that we can get happier than we are. There is also consensus that we should not acquiesce in current unhappiness.

The belief that we can get happier is rooted in the Humanistic view of man. Rather than a helpless being expelled from Paradise, man is seen as autonomous, and able to improve his condition by the use of reason. This view was at the core of the 19th century Utopian movement and is still at the ideological basis of the 20th century Welfare States. Planned social reform, guided by scientific research, is expected to result in a better society with happier citizens.

The conviction that we should try to improve happiness is rooted in Enlightened thought as well. The notion that happiness is to be preferred above unhappiness figured already in ancient Greek moral philosophy. In the 19th century it crystallized into the Utilitarian doctrine that the moral value of all action depends on the degree to which it contributes to the ‘greatest happiness for the greatest number’. Though few accept happiness as the only and ultimate goal in life, it is generally agreed that happiness is worth pursuing. Happiness ranks high in public opinion surveys on value priorities. See a.o. Harding (1985: 231.)

This ideology is not unchallenged however. It is argued that happiness is not the most valuable goal and it is claimed that we cannot get happier even if we would want to.

The objection that happiness is not worth pursuing rests partly in religious doctrines that glorify suffering. Such doctrines figure in Calvinist moral philosophy and in some variants of Hinduism. Objections come also from advocates of other endvalues who are eager to depreciate the competitor. Many Marxists for instance reject happiness as something ‘false’, equality being the only ‘true’ value they accept. Such moral objections find support in theories about adverse effects of happiness. Happiness is said to make people politically uncritical, socially unre-