

Conceptions of happiness: philosophical and evolutionary considerations

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DOI: 10.18355/XL.2021.14.03.10

Abstract

This paper offers a critical analysis of the conclusions of the most recent research in the field of social psychology and positive psychology, with a special focus on Jonathan Haidt's conclusions published in his acclaimed book *The Happiness Hypothesis* (2006). Various factors contributing to subjective feelings of happiness are considered and assessed on the background of what modern research has come to call a 'divided self,' reflecting the dynamic and often conflicting relationship between the human rational ego and his/her emotions and internal (often subconscious) drives. While our individual genetic predispositions have a substantial impact on the way we feel and act, intentional mind-focusing techniques, proper types of psychotherapy or spiritual counselling, and adequate medicine (e.g., Prozac) have a measurable influence on human character development, subjective wellbeing, and feelings of happiness. This paper claims that it might be difficult to answer the question of what constitutes happiness and how one achieves it without answering first the question of meaning in a twofold manner: first, giving adequate consideration to life's meaning from within, i.e., from the perspective of the personal/moral subject; and second, considering the wider context of the person's subjective consideration in asking the question 'what is the meaning of life' in general. To attempt to answer this second question, one needs to delve into deeper philosophical/spiritual waters.

Key words: happiness, Jonathan Haidt, subjective wellbeing, the meaning of life

1 Introduction

Our study's topic was chosen out of concern for what appears to be a profound crisis of what some have come to call the 'Global Human Village.' This crisis has modern roots as its origins can be traced to a series of fundamental changes in human communities that had traditionally been legitimated by ancestral and religious belief systems but which are now increasingly transformed into new structures consisting of a blend of rationalism and technological innovation under the auspices of the legal behemoth of the nation-states. This new blend of rationalist, scientific-technological thinking of the legal state is legitimized by its ability to provide welfare to its people. Political institutions have thus become not only a source of welfare but also of authority and hopes for human flourishing, including the so-called 'Subjective Wellbeing' of citizens.

Despite optimistic expectations by politicians and progressive liberal elites, the shift in welfare management from individuals and local communities to state entities, coupled with a pervasive presence of Industrial Revolution 4.0 technologies, have not brought about the promised levels of subjective wellbeing among the populace. In addition, objective measures of societal wellbeing are also looking bleak. Besides a looming demographic crisis that threatens Western countries with depopulation (with fertility rates as low as 1.3), skyrocketing divorce rates (exceeding 50% in some countries), high rates of legalized euthanasia, and rapidly rising cases of depression and suicides (especially among the youth) attest to a deepening social and moral crisis. A new evaluation of factors contributing to happiness is therefore in order. Needless to say, to examine happiness, in general, is too complex of a task for one research team, let alone for one research paper. Happiness can be studied from various perspectives (Tanzer, 2021; Yang et al., 2021; Sutton, 2021; etc.), taking into account

the human agent's life outcomes (an objective view) or subjective perceptions of one's wellbeing (a subjective approach). There is a need to conduct empirical studies of what constitutes quality of life across diverse segments of society. However, the prevailing trend of cultural relativism renders such endeavors difficult, as members of a given society employ various divergent criteria in evaluating what constitutes wellbeing, success, or happiness. Nevertheless, there are common indicators that can be employed with a degree of caution. These include: professed feelings of satisfaction, feelings of enjoyment/pleasure, the significant others' view of their levels of wellbeing, the degree of one's achieving the values that they profess to hold dear, etc. It is revealing to note here that, according to available research data, "although wealthy nations are on average happier than poor ones, people do not get happier as a wealthy nation grows wealthier." (Diener – Suh, 2000: 10)

This paper offers a critical philosophical analysis of the conclusions of the most recent research in the field of social psychology and positive psychology, with a special focus on Jonathan Haidt's (2006) conclusions published in his acclaimed book *The Happiness Hypothesis*. (cf. Ott, 2007; Parker, 2010) Various factors contributing to subjective feelings of happiness are considered and assessed on the background of what modern research has come to call a 'divided self,' reflecting the dynamic and often conflicting relationship between the human rational ego and his/her emotions and internal (often subconscious) drives. While our individual genetic predispositions have a substantial impact on the way we feel and act, intentional mind-focusing techniques, proper types of psychotherapy or spiritual counseling, and adequate medicine (e.g., Prozac) have a measurable influence on human character development, subjective wellbeing, and feelings of happiness. This paper claims that it might be difficult to answer the question of what constitutes happiness and how one achieves it without answering first the question of meaning in a twofold manner: first, giving adequate consideration to life's meaning from within, i.e., from the perspective of the personal/moral subject; and second, considering the wider context of the person's subjective consideration in asking the question 'what is the meaning of life' in general. To attempt to answer this second question, one needs to delve into deeper philosophical/spiritual waters.

2 Identifying Viable Approaches to and Essential Elements of what Constitutes 'Happiness'

A great majority of the contemporary studies on happiness share two things in common: (1) they recognize the complexity of the issue and acknowledge the presence of multiple factors that act synergically in producing feelings of subjective wellbeing; (2) they recognize that the subjective experience of happiness is fundamentally personal and should be treated on the personal level. (Negoita, 2020) This means, among other things, that human agents must be motivated to pursue the question of happiness, to embark on a meandering journey in search of what maximizes happiness in their life. The question of human personal motivation is thus foundational in the process as well as in any academic scrutiny of this matter. (Leontiev, 2020)

If our observations above are true, any attempt at identifying a viable 'happiness hypothesis' must be complex in nature and must examine the personal motivational forces behind the human search for happiness. Modern science can and should be interlaced with traditional wisdom to achieve a truly holistic treatment of the mystery of what constitutes happiness and how one attains it. Instead of clear-cut definitions, we are confronted with emerging realities and creative tensions that become indispensable as we delve deeper into the conundrum of the ongoing interplays between the human agent's (1) given conditions, (2) internal needs (both subjective and objective) and (3) external opportunities.

The first dimension, the realm of ‘given conditions,’ reflects his/her genetic constitution and conditioning life circumstances that give him a multifaceted starting point in life: (a) Physical appearance; (b) Personal character; (c) Physical abilities / limitations / disabilities. The second dimension includes objectively determined as well as subjectively perceived needs and desires that bring a measurable level of safety, comfort, pleasure, and overall contentment. Objectively speaking, this can be food, shelter, money, socio-political stability, economic security, meaningful engagements at work and with individuals and institutions that are perceived as significant by the human agent and his surroundings. (Leontiev, 2020) Subjectively speaking, this includes desired levels of satisfaction of the objective needs as perceived by the personal, moral human agent. Physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual - understood in a general philosophical sense, rather than purely in religious categories - contentment is then derived from a dynamic tension between given and perceived needs on the one hand and external opportunities on the other while taking into consideration one’s original starting point (originally given conditions).

As the functioning of the human mind is much more multifaceted than most people are ready to discern and admit, to answer the question ‘What constitutes happiness?’ is a challenging undertaking. The human mind is an inner realm in which divergent, often conflicting actors fight for supremacy. The Enlightenment’s presupposition of a reasonable, educated mind being able to govern human emotions and make rational and therefore good decisions was called into question already in light of the psychiatric/psychological trends of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries (especially following the works of Sigmund Freud), and the turn to vitalism and voluntarism in Feuerbach and Nietzsche. Instead of being primarily rational agents, humans appear to be more driven by their emotional and intuitive/instinctive selves. This then sheds new light on how to approach the question of what truly satisfies humans in the sense of providing a lasting experience of happiness.

3 The ‘Elephant’ and the ‘Rider’ Metaphor for Understanding the Motives of Human Behavior

3.1 Uncovering the Deep Division within the Human Psychosomatic Self

The metaphor of an elephant with a rider seems appropriate and revealing of the inner conflict that rages within the human mind. (Haidt, 2006: 2) Humans cannot fully consciously control all parts of their body (especially their internal organs) with their rational mind. The structure of the brain testifies to this division. The limbic system (the evolutionary older part of the human brain) is in charge of our ‘lower impulses’ and instincts, while the neocortex is in control of cognitive processing, including inhibitions, which regulates the instinctive drives of our ‘animal self.’ If the neocortex is damaged, this situation will become manifest in disorderly, sometimes self-destructive behaviors. The linguistic capacity of the neocortex portion of the brain uses language to plan ahead, negotiate appropriate behavior and play by socially acceptable rules. (Kringelbach – Berridge, 2009)

The reality of our lives, however, shows us a different picture. It is not the neocortex that exercises the decisive power over our actions; instead, it is our emotions and feelings. Our ‘animal’ self, composed of lower impulses, instincts, feelings, and emotions, tends to be the major driving force of human behavior.

The genetic composition of the human individual exerts a *softly determining* function in terms of human characteristic traits, capacities as well subjective feelings of wellbeing. When we use the phrase *softly determining*, we mean the kind of determination that is not absolute, unequivocal, but rather one that can be shaped and influenced by human cognitive and volitional activities. This is not meant to negate what has been established above. The animal self in us remains the originating, robust force that gives the initial impulses and drives much of human behavior.

The emotiveness and suspicious impulsiveness of the animal self is a natural phenomenon, a product of the evolutionary process that embodies the living organism's will to survive. It has long served as an evolutionary advantage for the human species and its ancestors. This includes a stronger response to potentially dangerous things than to beneficial things.

Genetically-based physiology is closely related to personal psychology (the governing moods of a person), including one's overall disposition to life. In other words, being an optimist versus being a pessimist is largely inscribed in one's genome. (Inglehart – Klingemann, 2000) People who are mainly left-brain active tend to be happier than those who are mainly right-brain active. Recent studies suggest that between 50-80% of one's subjective happiness is determined by one's genome. "Since the psychological process of reward is closely linked to pleasure, studies to elucidate the brain mechanisms of happiness have focused on the neural circuitry that processes reward information. Brain imaging studies have revealed that the orbitofrontal cortex, cingulate cortex, medial prefrontal cortex, insula, nucleus accumbens, ventral pallidum, substantia nigra, and ventral tegmental area are the key areas related to happiness. ... Orbitofrontal activity has been shown to encode the subjective experience of pleasure." (Funahashi, 2011: 222) The mechanism of genetically-induced or genetically-based happiness utilizes *Dopamine* as the 'hormone of happiness.' Increased levels of Dopamine secretion result in mental states of inner contentment conducive to overall feelings of happiness. "By boosting dopamine levels using levodopa (L-DOPA) as human subjects made economic decisions and repeatedly reported their momentary happiness," a direct effect "on both choices and happiness" can be established. Recent study by Rutledge (et. al., 2015) also confirmed that "boosting dopamine also increased happiness resulting from some rewards." It identified "specific novel influences of dopamine on decision making and emotion that are distinct from its established role in learning." (Rutledge et al., 2015: 9822)

3.2 Case Study: Technology as a Source of Happiness Based on Increased Levels of Dopamine

There is a growing movement of technology enthusiasts who advocate the use of technology indiscriminately as a viable path to happiness. There is some truth to the technology enthusiasts' argument that using modern technological inventions to consume audio, visual, or audiovisual contents brings a measurable level of satisfaction to the consumers. (Gros et al., 2020) This can be measured based on the consumer's self-evaluation of their state of consciousness and the level of pleasure they derive subjectively from actively using their smartphones, tablets, computers, smart TVs, etc. The subjectively perceived increase in the human agent's wellbeing is derived from a chemical reaction in the human brain that produces higher Dopamine levels – the so-called chemical of 'happiness' that our brains and, subsequently, human psyches crave for.

The causal connection between a raised level of dopamine concentration in the human brain and positive subjective feelings – i.e., feelings that can be defined as 'happiness,' fulfillment, contentment, pleasure – is a well-established fact. (Sharot et al., 2009; Rutledge et al., 2015) We are interested in two further questions that emerge in this regard: (1) Is the dopamine-induced feeling of pleasure/happiness sustainable long-term without detrimental side effects? (2) Is the dopamine-induced perception of happiness truly satisfying and conducive to long-term positive life outcomes on the individual as well as societal level? We will deal with the latter question later in the paper. For now, let us turn our attention to the former question, that is, the question of sustainability and potential detrimental effects of engaging in activities that entail the use of modern technologies, the result of which are increased levels of Dopamine in the human brain.

Recent studies show that indiscriminate use of handheld audiovisual technologies, such as smartphones, tablets, and laptop computers leads to addiction. This addiction cannot be analyzed solely on the social and psychological level but must be scrutinized on the physiological level by looking at what is going on in the human brain. Scientists have established that there is a causal link between the frequent use of smartphones (with prolonged eye contact) and the increase of Dopamine in the human brain. The human brain subsequently craves for the increased level of the 'happiness' chemical, and hence it supports behavioral patterns (on both the conscious and subconscious levels) that lead to activities that produce this chemical. Focused attention to one's phone or tablet belongs to such activities; thus a behavioral pattern is gradually reinforced in the human agent prompting him/her to spend more time looking at the screen.

This situation is much more dangerous with children and adolescents who cannot fully control their behavior and adequately foresee its consequences. Dopamine helps adolescents cope with increased stressed levels. There are age restrictions on alcohol and tobacco products but there are no age limits for social media and the use of electronic devices. This can result in having an entire generation addicted to these devices. The prospect that we are facing is to have an entire generation of people – the so-called 'Generation Alfa' – who have not learned to cope with their stress levels in other ways than by turning to their mobile electronic devices. Interactions on virtual social networks are replacing face-to-face human interactions. This, in turn, results in young people's uneasiness when they find themselves in physical interactions with other humans. Indications signaling a potential problem can be observed in Generation Alfa age group's low ability to read and correctly interpret body language; inability to carry on a prolonged conversation; a diminished vocabulary; an alarmingly decreased sense of empathy and development of soft social skills; a sense of disconnectedness from the physical world of nature; etc. The scary thing about this development is that this generation has no other point of reference of what constitutes "normalcy" other than the world permeated with social media and electronic gadgets that they grew up in. Their processing of stimuli, interpretation of the world and interhuman relationships, developing value judgments based on social media interactions (to name but few critical areas) is the new normal without the possibility to reference to another, competing standard of "normalcy," as the world of their parents and grandparents slowly departs to oblivion.

Accidental deaths due to overdosing, rising number of homicides, cases of depression, and an increased rate of suicide among the generations of people born after 1990 are alarming wake-up calls that something is missing in this happiness equation. In spite of employing the latest technology to connect people and make communication more intense and faster than ever, we see a dangerous spike in loneliness and isolation among young people, which then leads to depressions, self-harming behavior, or suicidal thoughts. We now have a growing group of people who are addicted but lack the skillset to ask for help. In the midst of a vast sea of connectedness through shared social networks, they swim alone and against the tide of not being understood and accepted for who they are. In their desperate attempts to be accepted, to make a meaningful impact, to fit in, young people pretend to be shiny, strong, disinterested (when it comes to negative social phenomena), and happy because they believe that this is the sure path to being included and liked by their peers. True problems and deep questions thus rarely get a chance to surface to be dealt with. Such staged happiness turns out to be stifling, unbearable, yet they fear what an alternative might entail. Hence the feelings of entrapment and depression.

While much of this predicament has its roots in the indiscriminate usage of electronic devices and social networks, some of it can be blamed on potentially faulty upbringing. The generation of their parents, according to recent studies conducted on this question, has taken it upon themselves to support their children by sheltering

them from adverse conditions and giving them unqualified freedom to develop ‘naturally’ based on their innate inclinations. The parental support entailed praising the kids in all circumstances without reference to their true achievements. It became fashionable to award metals to children who finished up last in a race and praising them for even the slightest achievement as if they were world champions. Getting into honors classes became predicated upon their parents’ complaints rather than the students’ own academic achievements, and graduating with good grades too often became the result of teachers’ not wanting to deal with the complaining parents. Such over-protective, unreasonably ‘supportive’ culture of parenting and upbringing/education in general has created a society of ‘pampered’ emerging adults who expect to receive the same treatment once they enter the ‘adult’ corporate world. The underlying culture of *safetyism* is a stumbling block for emerging adults to mature and learn to navigate the meandering roads of life. (Haidt – Lukianoff, 2018) Their sense of security and self-esteem tends to get all but shattered following their first job interviews and initial months of employment. After running on the steroids of underserved promotions, encouragement, and instant gratification, their lofty self-confidence plunges to levels well below the median, contributing to an acute sense of unworthiness, lack of belonging, meaninglessness, and profound feelings of unhappiness. (Sutton, 2021) Insatiable urgency, defined as fundamental impatience, produces the culture of ‘quitting’ – if I cannot make an impact the first week or month in a new job, or a new relationship, that is (supposedly) a clear signal that I should quit and look for something else. Life is a complicated journey. Relationships and making a difference in the world of politics, social life, and human interaction entails a long, difficult process of climbing, learning, adjusting, persevering. It takes patience and concerted effort to achieve one’s goals. Hence, happiness is something that people need to strive for and patiently, deliberately work for.

4 Looking Beyond the Human Genome and Dopamine Levels

The strong influence of genes on one’s happiness, as documented by numerous studies, constitutes an important factor in the happiness cocktail. However, it is not the only one, and it is less deterministic in nature than may appear following its introduction in this paper. When trained properly, the elephant rider – the cognitive, rational self – can learn to steer the emotional and impulsive beast onto a path where lasting contentment and happiness can be experienced.

Long-term, regular (daily) meditation can substantially influence one’s personal outlook on life, making it more coherent and optimistic. Cognitive therapy is another effective method of shaping one’s self-perception and overall stance towards life. Invented in the 1960s, cognitive therapy has since been recognized as a viable antidote for feelings of depression. It represents the art of substituting self-blaming thought patterns with more positive ones, resulting in a renewed, more positive self-image of the human agent.

Another important element in the puzzle of human happiness revolves around the principle of reciprocity. Humans have evolved in reciprocal relationships because such patterns of behavior constituted an evolutionary advantage in a hostile environment. The instinct of reciprocity is so deeply ingrained in human society that people must learn to exercise it cautiously. There are times when reciprocity yields detrimental consequences for those engaged in it, especially if they suspect injustice in the process. Experiments have shown that people choose to forfeit opportunities of receiving offered goods or services if they feel that the offered amount (or the art in which it is offered) violates their rights and/or dignity. The ensuing disappointment begets anger and resentment on the subjective level and gossiping about the other actor in the process on the social level. The level of happiness, both subjectively and objectively (socially expressed) decreases as a result of this.

Furthermore, the lack of happiness has roots in the subconscious avoidance by human agents of negative feelings and experiences of displeasure. This tendency results in, among other things, an acute lack of self-critical reflection because recognizing one's own limits and shortcomings induces unpleasant feelings. The inner denial of the possibility of failure committed by the human subject seems to be a robust self-defense mechanism that unites the emotive/instinctive self (i.e., the elephant) with the rational self of the human person. The process of secondary rationalization that follows an initial perception of accusation is put to the service of defending the emotive/instinctive self's self-image instead of a calm, objective, rational evaluation of the criticism. Such inner bias toward defending the indefensible in situations of legitimate criticism increases conflicts among the people and raises the level of experienced anxiety among humans. (Haidt, 2012) This faulty defense mechanism further entails the imposition of an 'apocalyptic framework' on one's assessment of the outside world. When perceived through such an apocalyptic lens, human counterparts are seen as evil agents, whereas the defensive human subject perceives himself/herself and his/her clan as good agents. Again, these inner psychological dynamics and their social consequences help produce an environment conducive to discontentment, frustration, and unhappiness.

To overcome this malign dynamics, a conscious cognitive exercise may be employed. Its goal is to train the human mind to recognize what is going on and be ready to admit small, relatively unthreatening elements of behavior that can be acknowledged as suboptimal. To reduce one's cognitive biases is one of the goals of cognitive therapy, though a similar result may be achieved through intentional, regular meditation as well. The reward of doing so is twofold: one achieves a more accurate self-assessment, and one creates a more constructive environment of interpersonal communication by invoking the principle of reciprocity.

External events have a much lesser influence on the human agents' experiences of happiness than previously thought. This is due to the exceptionally well-developed ability on the side of humans to adapt to changes in their external environment. Though undoubtedly an important evolutionary advantage, adaptability can sometimes play against human happiness. Recent studies that examined the lasting levels of happiness among lottery winners have shown that the winners quickly adapted to new levels of financial security and that what had initially brought them intense feelings of happiness dissipated into the ordinariness of life soon after. What appears to bring more lasting happiness is: (a) the number and intensity of human relationships and (b) doing what the given person is good at. People living in long-lasting loving/caring relationships and also individuals with many friends report more intense and more stable feelings of happiness on average. (Haidt, 2006)

The intensity of one's social connectedness, however, needs to be coupled with opportunities to engage or even excel in activities in which one is good at. Recognizing one's strengths and passions and then identifying ways of developing those strengths in activities that are publicly acknowledged as useful and meaningful appears to be a solid way to achieve experiences of profound, lasting happiness. (Susan, 2010) Interestingly, if the human agent's strengths are matched with relevant opportunities to put them into practice, such a situation will not result in adaptive boredom, i.e., such individual's adaptation to being in this situation will not decrease his/her level of contentment even if the situation lasts long-term.

Love is another important element of the happiness mix. Naturally, love is a term that denotes numerous states physiological states and states of mind, which express themselves in a wide variety of ways. From passionate and romantic love, to parental love; from friendship to long-lasting companionship; from excitement to charity and selfless care – in its many forms and expressions, love animates the human soul and motivates human action. This is in congruence with the so-called attachment theory in developmental psychology as well as in depicting interpersonal attachments as

constitutive to human relationships and general emotional wellbeing. (Bowlby, 2005) Human socializing and problem-solving skills (i.e., the ability to think critically and creatively) are, to a large degree, contingent upon the levels of interpersonal attachment of the given human agent. Foundations for being able to develop healthy attachments are laid in the family setting. “The infant’s dependence on adults is more profound than his need to resolve his discomfort, for only adults can teach the child to trust. A child cannot become trusting all by himself, any more than he can hop out of the crib, open the refrigerator, and heat up a bottle of milk for himself. The baby cannot navigate through the cycle of trust without an adult partner.” (Roback-Morse, 2004: 33) Love as a long-lasting, caring companionship reminds the human subjects of the secure, loving environment of their home, permeated by parental love. This then provides the much-needed sense of security and stability, which is conducive to projecting a healthier self-image, experiencing subjectively higher levels of happiness, while at the same time acting in a caring, selfless way towards the significant others in one’s immediate environment. Revealingly, recent study conducted by Titova and Sheldon (2021: 1) confirmed that “trying to make others happy is more personally beneficial than when others try to make us happy.” Those individuals who substitute love as long-lasting companionship with passionate love, ever chasing after more intense sensual experiences, grow disappointed and tired over time. While high doses of Dopamine and the related hormone Norepinephrine are stimulating and rewarding short term during intense outbursts of passionate encounters, they are not sustainable. Such chemical imbalance in the human body tends to exert destabilizing effects on the human subject when the levels of hormones subside. Any feelings of happiness, therefore, remain fleeting.

The somewhat elusive sense of lasting happiness is further connected with the personal growth of the human subjects. Personal growth opportunities present themselves throughout human life but most intensely at times of personal crises and/or experienced hardships. Adversity can yield benefits, but these benefits do not come automatically. There are instances when adversity spawns feelings of lasting anxiety, which later morph into depression. While most individuals emerge from intense personal crises with a healthier self-image marked by boosted self-confidence, others are bruised and discouraged. Difficult times make humans feel vulnerable and wanting, which in turn disposes them to openness toward seeking companionship, asking for help, and thus solidifying human relationships. This side effect, while unpleasant during the experience of crisis, plays a considerable role in helping the given person mature (Tanzer, 2021) and become more solidly anchored in the social safety net of his local community. In addition, challenging and adverse times place a ruthless mirror in front of the individuals going through them, helping them realize their limitations and thus attain a more realistic self-image. The disparity between one’s self-concept (which the rational self believes is characteristic of the self) and one’s actual personality (based on one’s instincts and subconscious drives) engenders inner tensions that decrease the level of perceived happiness of the individual. The level of happiness is thus inversely related to the level of discrepancy between these two self-conceptualizations. Adverse situations help the human self reflect on one’s self-concept, become more realistic, and diminish the discrepancy between the conflicting self-concepts. (Haidt, 2012)

Another layer to the study of happiness reveals the principle of promoting practice against abstract deliberations. A deep, long-lasting sense of happiness is related to one’s character development towards altruism and virtues. Yang (et al., 2021: 276) found out that “moral judgment plays a relatively unique role in happiness attributions, which is surprisingly early emerging and largely independent of linguistic and cultural influences, and thus likely reflects a fundamental cognitive feature of the mind.” The virtues nascent to an altruistic character, however, must be practiced, not merely

reflected upon. Aristotle and much of the ancient world, along with most of the Middle Ages, emphasized the role of practiced virtues in the shaping of human character and – in this way – molding one’s self-image as someone who is a part of a living tradition within the local community. In fact, Aristotle’s logic considered “as an excellent state of the soul, in which the distinction between happiness and morality is overcome.” (Pereira, 2020: 93) This constituted the core of what was considered ‘a happy life’. The intentional practice of moral behavior under the tutelage of moral examples (embodied in the moral teachers, parents, superiors, etc.) shaped one’s outlook of the self as well as of the meaning of social life. (Sutton, 2021) Needless to say, such behavior often goes against the instincts and often selfish impulses of the ‘emotive, carnal self’ (the elephant from our introductory metaphor). Nevertheless, with patience and perseverance, the ‘emotive, carnal self’ can be tamed and trained – but only if the training process is practical, i.e., experiential, within the framework of real life. More concretely, the intentional, guided practice of altruistic behavior develops interpersonal connections, solidifies social ties, and brings meaning and a sense of purpose to the trained individual. Such a dynamic is conducive to experiences of happiness. Studies show that people who regularly engage in altruistic activities (e.g., charitable work) are on average happier and live longer than people who are passive and/or passively receive help from others.

Another element that seems to help achieve a sense of contentment is living in a closely-knit human community with clearly set rules. Human subjects who live without a coherent vision of life defined by fundamental values tend to project this outer incoherence inwardly and become restless, more susceptible to feeling stressed out and insecure. Conversely, a clear system of shared beliefs and rules provides for the needed coherence of inner life.

5 Examining the Role of Transcendence

To establish a meaningful relationship among humans, one must acknowledge one’s finiteness of being. As long as a human subject believes that he/she is self-sufficient, they are bound for a solitary, isolated, and fundamentally unfulfilled life – provided that humans as personal beings are indeed essentially relational beings. (Lopez-Perez – Zuffiano, 2020) The acknowledgment of one’s limitations is the first step to opening oneself up to the other in reciprocal acts of receiving and giving. Such is the common predicament of contingent beings in a contingent world. Two important inferences can be drawn from this principle: (1) the human being is not a ‘*homo optionis*’ as Sartre (and others) would have him; and (2) human contingency (ontological as well as existential) points to potential transcendent sources of meaning, truth, and happiness. (Taylor, 1992; 2009)

Commenting on the first of the two principles, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 6) lay bare the arrogant attempt of the postmodern human to cast his/her identity as *homo optionis*: “The human being becomes (in a radicalization of Sartre’s meaning) a choice among possibilities, *homo optionis*. Life, death, gender, corporeality, identity, religion, marriage, parenthood, social ties – all are becoming decidable down to the small print; once fragmented into options, everything must be decided.” (Beck – Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 6) Such newly invented freedom, however, becomes an unbearable burden, from which there is no safe exit strategy. The human subject then becomes creative in inventing ways “to escape this ‘tyranny of possibilities’ – such as flight into magic, myth, metaphysics. The overtaxed individual ‘seeks, finds and produces countless authorities intervening in social and psychic life, which, as his professional representatives, relieve him of the question: ‘Who am I and what do I want?’ and thus reduce his fear of freedom.” (Beck – Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 7; citing: Weymann, 1989: 3)

The combination of human intellectual emancipation, technological innovation, overall economic prosperity, and stable democratic governance of human political

communities gave rise to „a world which seems to proclaim everywhere the absence of God. It is a universe whose outer limits touch nothing but absolute darkness; a universe with its corresponding human world in which we can really experience Godlessness. ... it is the sense that all order, all meaning comes from us.” (Taylor, 2009: 376) However, as Goldman (2011: 351) incisively reminds us, “without the hope of immortality we cannot bear mortality. Cultures that have lost the hope of immortality also lose the will to live. Culture is the stuff out of which we weave the perception of immortality.” (Goldman, 2011: 351)

Transcendence experienced either in the form of spirituality or as institutionalized religion has the power to shape the human psyche (on the emotional/instinctive as well as cognitive levels) as well as human cultures and societies. (Berger, 2011; Berger – Luckmann, 1991) The Western experience with religion has engendered a new understanding of the human being as a relational human person with an inalienable dignity. (Neogita, 2020) Socially embodied, this experience encouraged solidarity and charity based on recognizing our human mutuality and interdependence. Concrete institutions and structures of the social safety net that we take for granted today have their roots in this new anthropological outlook. In addition, religion in the common Western experience during the past 2000 years has elevated mutual sacrifice, faithfulness, forgiveness, and love/caring as constitutional for human relationships practiced within families as the most intimate human communities.

Added to these obvious social benefits is the advantage of inhabiting a much more colorful, complex reality if one forsakes the immanentist presuppositions about reality and stays open to transcendence. Doing so enables one to recapture a sense of awe induced by encounters with the *numinosum* (the awe-inspiring realm of transcendence, or transcendent being). Human minds seem to have a divinity scale according to which we assess things to comply or contradict that which is true/holy. This is true across cultures, despite the fact that concrete expressions and manifestations of such perceptions vary. If a person behaves like an animal, such behavior is looked upon with contempt or ridicule, whereas if a person engages in prayer, poetry, or moral/cultic rituals, they are usually praised by their surroundings. Furthermore, awe-inspiring experiences do not need to be limited to spiritual/transcendent encounters. Beautiful memories or special attachments of individuals may fall into this category as well. The point is that such experiences elevate the human soul into an experience of ecstasy. Fleeting as they may be, experiences of awe and ecstasy have mobilizing and edifying effects upon human individuals and tend to help them become better and happier persons. Being connected to something greater than themselves while experiencing awe, humans savor such moments of bliss and derive deeply satisfying meaning from them. This dynamic is further intensified when done in a communal setting with others (e.g., during prayers or various cultural and religious rituals).

4. Conclusion

Happiness and meaning go together and enforce each other. They emerge dynamically from the right relationship between the human subject and his/her surroundings. A happy life is a meaningful life – this is the first and most fundamental principle we wish to establish. Once humans establish healthy interpersonal relationships, their ability to experience purpose in their lives increases. This is predicated upon the fact that humans are more than ‘individuals’ – they are, in fact, profoundly relational beings. The robustness and maturity of their individuality are contingent upon their experiences of human attachments from very early on in their development and throughout their lives. It is thus wise and, to some degree, necessary for humans to surround themselves with people with whom caring and stimulating relationships can be developed. In addition, happy life is usually an engaged, creative life. Also important is that the creative activities, whether they formally belong to the category

of work or leisure, must be in congruence with one's beliefs about what is good and noble. Unless one's values are in resonance with one's creative endeavors (including job duties), tensions will emerge within one's personality, and one's sense of happiness will diminish.

Human agent's inborn capabilities and personal/emotional attachments are shaped both by one's original (originally given) circumstances and external opportunities, thus remaining important components in the drama of searching for happiness. Loving relationships (personal attachments) and meaningful professional engagements (the human agent's self-realization in a work environment) constitute the foundation of the elusive cocktail of a happy life.

Happiness is not a single, isolated, clear-cut category. It is rather an emerging property of life lived in a certain way with a specific disposition of the human mind and heart. It is entangled with meaning, attachment/belonging, and lived virtues (a moral character actualized in moral attitudes and actions). These are then the indispensable, constitutive elements of the puzzle, the essential ingredients of the 'happiness mix,' conducive to a good and happy life. (Wolf, 2010) Speaking of meaning, this crucial building block of happiness is related to our ability to develop and cherish a coherent vision of life within which we project our love and desires. Our love for things and persons included in our projected vision of life motivates and compels us to make decisions and act on those decisions. The stronger and firmer our love for things and other persons is, the more motivation and meaning we derive from our interactions with those realities and the more stable our world vision remains.

The question of transcendence should not be shunned or excluded from the happiness equation but rather incorporated in the broadest possible sense of the term. One does not need to be a 'religious person' to cherish experiences of encountering/experiencing transcendence. A mere recognition that there is something greater than the mind asking the question (and the soul trying to dissect the experience) seems to be conducive to finding meaning in life. The recognizing of transcendence as something other and greater than one's self prompts the human subject to ponder his/her limitedness and contingency, leading them back to the human community where one's limitedness is an invitation for relationships with the other. Instead of institutionalized religion, many people choose meditation as a tool to connect themselves with transcendence.

Acknowledgements

1. This paper has been supported by the Kazan Federal University Strategic Academic Leadership Program.
2. The work is performed according to the project of improving competitiveness of the leading Russian universities among the leading world scientific education centers "5-100" of First Moscow State Medical University.
3. The work is performed according to the Program of Development of Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation for 2020.

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Words: 7552

Characters: 50 616 (28,12 standard pages)

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