

A new design of happiness in the context of the modern world

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Abstract: *The concept of happiness was constantly reshaped during the human history and its axiological landmarks were designed specifically in economics and legal systems. A new analysis of the trends generated by digitization throughout axiological horizon of happiness, as well as an evaluation of the efficiency of indicators which evaluates the global level of happiness are the objectives of this research. Happiness is one of those concepts that can have multi-disciplinary approaches (philosophical, religious, psychological, psychoanalytical, etc.) and its interpretation can generate new thought paradigms.*

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JEL Classification: I30, I31

Introduction

One could say that human beings are ontologically defined not only through their cognitive faculties, but also through their aspiration towards happiness. The universe of values, that seems so volatile, offers identity to humans, it represents an ontological anchor of our species. Both humans' happiness and the legitimacy of humans' aspiration towards happiness have known numerous conceptualizations throughout time.

In common thinking, happiness is understood as a „state of complete and intense spiritual content”¹ or, in a more psychological approach, as a „good mental state, characterised by positive or pleasant emotions, from content to intense joy”².

¹ <http://dexonline.ro/definitie/fericire>, 22.09.2017

² <http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fericire>, 22.09.2017

2. A brief history of the concept of happiness

For Aristotle, the axiological horizon of happiness was virtue, understood, first and foremost, as a source of happiness. Virtue is also seen as an action of the free and rational will of the human being, a path of moderation between asceticism and hedonism (Aristotel, *Etica Nicomahica*, 2007). To Aristotle, humans are social beings and individual happiness can be realized within a political system capable of promoting a virtuous behaviour. Therefore, happiness and its achievement have always depended on values accepted by society at a certain point in time, but also on the perennial content of the axiological triad represented by the Good, the True and the Beautiful.

From a Buddhist perspective, people tend to seek sensual pleasures, material possessions, attachments which are not actually permanent and this fact becomes an inevitable source of suffering, generating the disappointment of loss and envy towards others. Finding happiness implies humans' option for a middle ground between an ascetic life and one dedicated to the ephemeral joys of material aspirations and can have a three-dimensional approach: ethical, cognitive and mental concentration. Consequently, happiness can be achieved through effort, using instruments such as learning, practice, as well as exercises of the mind and will. For renowned Buddhist Matthieu Ricard (World Happiness Report, 2013), happiness is a matter of attitude, a way in which we interpret the world. It's much more difficult to change the world, but every individual can change the way that they relate to the world, the way they interpret it. From this perspective, we choose whether or not we are happy, which opens the horizon of a new approach of the problem of our responsibility, both for our own destiny and the evolution of humanity.

The principles of Aristotelian ethics were adopted and developed by the ethics promoted by the medieval Roman Church through the works of Thomas Aquinas, but a fundamentally new notion appears, according to which man's life and actions must serve God's will. The purpose of human life is to obtain eternal happiness, not the ephemeral happiness of the short life on earth and eternal happiness can be achieved by following God's will.

For philosopher Immanuel Kant, „happiness is the state of a rational being in the world, for which, in the whole of its existence, everything is going according to its will and desire and is based on the agreement of its nature with its entire purpose, as well as the essential principle of determining its will” (Kant, published in 2010). Achieving happiness is a function of human reason to identify the agreement between its nature and

purpose and thus presumes the existence of a will that institutes purposes of becoming. In fact, the notion of happiness has always been connected, one way or another, with that of the meaning of life.

The Industrial Revolution, through its abundance of goods and services, gives a new scope to human beings' aspiration to own material goods and to have new standards of living and, implicitly, throws the notion of happiness back into the whirlwind of new conceptualizations. A new perspective on the human status is created, this time, a consumerist one. The orientation of understanding happiness in terms of achieving material wealth generates a marginalization of ethical values. The most important function of an object is that of utility, however, without it being correlated with the educational system, moral values and evolution of social relations. The individual tastes that the appreciation of an item as being useful depends on are considered a given, as they cannot be interpreted in a moral sense or a descriptive way (World Happiness Report, 2013). In the twentieth century, the media has had a huge role in consolidating the consumerist perspective on happiness, both because of the models of success in life that it has promoted intensely and persuasively, as well as because it creates very strong stimuli for consumption, both through advertising and the formats of the shows that it makes.

In the last two decades people have started to talk more and more about the failure of consumerism, about its incapacity to generate happiness. At the same time, the global problems that humanity is faced with (the problem of durable development, social justice, family values and civic spirit) generate a detachment from consumerism. The fact that economic progress must also have an ethical basis has also been confirmed by the global economic-financial crisis that also was triggered, in recent years, by a lack of moral values in the financial sector. Humanity feels an acute need to go back to moral values and to reshape the axiological, but also legal and institutional horizon of happiness.

3. Happiness as an indicator of well-being

Throughout time there has been a real preoccupation for the legal legitimacy of happiness. The legal code that dates back to the unification of Bhutan (1729) states that, „if the government cannot create (dekid) the happiness of its people, than it has no reason/ purpose to exist”³. This vision reflects a very modern approach of the concept of political governing of a nation.

The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America (1776), states in a firm and

³ www.grossnationalhappiness.com

visionary manner the right of human beings to not only equality and freedom, but also the pursuit of happiness: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness*⁴.

Throughout time, human beings have undergone numerous transformations, but have never given up the pursuit of happiness, giving life a meaning and an axiological content. Contemporary society is faced with a new set of problems generated by the need to implement the principles of durable development and to globalize new communication and information technology, to digitalize human activity and to equip the environment that humans are living in with artificial intelligence, which creates a new perspective on the pursuit of happiness and its content. In fact, at an institutional level, one can observe a new type of preoccupation for the legitimacy and assessment of human happiness.

In 1972, the fourth king of Bhutan declared the Gross National Happiness index to be more important than the Gross National Product, deciding that national policy and development plans would be directed based on the first index⁵. In July 2011, the UN General Assembly adopted a historical resolution it invited member states to measure the level of happiness of their people and use this index as a guide for developing public policies. In April 2012 the first UN summit on the happiness and wellbeing of the population took place, presided by the first minister of Bhutan. In 2012, the UN also published the first *World Happiness Report* that was followed, two months later, by OECD publishing the first Guide to introduce international standards for the measurement of wellbeing.

Gross National Happiness is a global indicator of progress that measures at the same time economic sustainability and social development, simultaneously pursuing the protection of the environment and cultural values. In Bhutan, the country of origin of GNH, this index is based on four pillars: (1) promoting sustainable

⁴ www.archives.gov, 19.09.2017

⁵ www.oecd.org, 19.09.2017

development, conserving and promoting cultural values, (2) preserving the environment and establishing good governing (www.grossnationalhappiness.com). The four pillars are laying the bases of a new system for assessing human civilisation.

In the UN's *World Happiness Report - 2013* it is stated that the notion of happiness can be understood in two ways: as an emotion (are we happy today?) or as an assessment. In the assessment of happiness, three types of measurements/ indicators were used: assessing positive emotions, assessing negative emotions and assessing life as a whole. Thus, one enters the subjective territory of emotions in order to perform assessments of government services. Humans' satisfaction with regard to the educational system, the health system, their workplace, the preservation of the environment, civic involvement, social justice becomes a reference point for optimizing governing and finally, improving political action. The right to happiness places the citizen at the centre of government services.

The UN's *World Happiness Report-2017* introduces a new vision in assessing the happiness of citizens as a complex relationship between what is social and what is personal. This recognizes the need of a modern human being for support from other people, for freedom and protection against the phenomenon of corruption.

4. Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the human being, from the beginning of his history until today, is on the road of searching happiness. Whether it is understood as a value, or is approached as an economic indicator, happiness is indissolubly linked to the human being destiny. At the same time, information society brings deep transformations in the lives of individuals and the community. Human existence is moving more and more into the virtual space, human needs are being reshaped and human emotions are connected to a new, digital world. However, even in a virtual reality, humans will find themselves in the pursuit of happiness which is still connected to the Aristotelian values: the Good, the True and the Beautiful.

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