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## ANCIENT DESIRE FOR FRAGILE HAPPINESS

**Abstract.** The 21st century man desires happiness (happier, better life), just like his forefathers in the dawn of history. What, however, do the movements of the contemporary differ in fulfilling the ideal of happiness from the man of the past? Who or what could help to achieve this ideal? The study attempts to point to different areas of life of man and society in fulfilling the model of happiness. We assume that ethics - applied ethics - can be one of the most effective tools to approach this desire, hope, vision or dream. The case study points to this option.

**Keywords:** Applied Ethics, happiness, model of happiness, Homo felix

## STAROŻYTNE PRAGNIENIE DELIKATNEGO SZCZĘŚCIA

**Streszczenie.** Człowiek XXI wieku pragnie szczęścia (szczęśliwszego, lepszego życia), podobnie jak jego przodkowie w początkach dziejów. Czym jednakże ruchy współczesne różnią się w realizacji ideału szczęścia od człowieka z przeszłości? Kto i co może pomóc w osiągnięciu tego ideału? Badania wskazują na różne obszary życia człowieka i społeczeństwa w spełnianiu modelu szczęścia. Zakładamy, że etyka – stosowana etyka – może być jednym z najbardziej skutecznych narzędzi do realizacji tego pragnienia, nadziei, wizji czy marzenia. Studium przypadku wskazuje na tę opcję.

**Słowa kluczowe:** etyka stosowana, szczęście, model szczęścia, homo felix

*Ethics turns into the science of happiness,  
the only science, that for people  
is really useful.  
Gilles Lipovetsky, 2007*

## 1. Ancient desire for „fragile“ hapiness

In the records of ancient philosophers submerged in the depths of morality we often come across the opinion that happiness and morality are synonymous. In a simplified way, it would mean that only a perfectly moral person can be happy. On the contrary, where there is no moral and virtuous life, happiness cannot be found. This state can be found in the ideal communicative society, but in reality, we often witness the disharmony between goodness and happiness. This is also the opinion of G. Lipovetsky whose work will be analysed in the next part of this study. Firstly, let us return to the ancient opinions of the father of ethics, Aristotle. According to the Nicomachean Ethics, happiness (eudaimonia) is understood as the goal we are pursuing in any practice; perfect and self-sufficient goodness, the ultimate goal of our actions. (Aristotle, En I, 1097 b, p. 28) Aristotle clearly distinguishes happiness (blessedness – eudaimonia) and (sensual) hedonism (hédoné). According to him, human happiness depends upon permanent activity during which a person's best ability is put into use by focusing on the perfect subject. But the best ability of man is his reason. Happiness can therefore depend only upon an intellectual activity. Aristotle distinguishes two perfect subjects related to reason and therefore two alternatives of happiness. One of the most perfect stimuli is the truth understood in terms of pure theory and the corresponding happiness of theoretical life (bios theoretikos). The second stimulus is represented by good life and social activity (in polis) and the corresponding happiness of practical life (bios praktikos). Based on this, a wise person is relatively self-sufficient in their theoretical life, therefore they do not need moral virtue. On the contrary, in a practical life, perfection and self-sufficiency can only exist in a justly arranged environment. The social structure of polis is the environment in which the good life and actions can become real. In this case, happiness depends upon the intellectual activity performed at home, with friends, neighbours, and in the political sphere. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle also discusses the possibility to achieve the greatest goodness and true happiness in hedonism, however, he considers it low. People who opt for this path “*behave like slaves, because they choose the life of cattle.*” (Aristotle, EN I., 1095b, p. 23)

Aristotle's model of virtues in the ancient era was adjusted for new purposes in the Middle Ages, and rediscovered at the end of the 20th Century. Based on it, achieving happiness depends upon external life conditions – health, good offspring, friends, welfare of the society, etc. What had to change to make the way for the Homo Felix of the 21st Century?

## 2. „Homo Felix“ of the 21st century

Distinct from previous societies (open, closed, consumption, industrial), the contemporary society also known as hyperconsumerist considers personal happiness and private hedonism the ultimate goal. Despite certain types of return to Aristotle, this society accepts the hedonism he despised. As suggested by G. Lipovetsky, “homo consumericus” has emerged, the hyperconsumer who freed himself from ancient traditions, social bonds and bans. His hobbies and buying preferences spring from emotional stimuli, follow the quality of life and health, company brands and aesthetic perception, and he searches for their immediate satiation. (Lipovetsky, 2007) In his publication *Paradoxical Happiness. An Essay on Hyperconsumption Society*, Lipovetsky goes through three stages of consumption society, however, his conclusion is not apocalyptic. Although he does not see this society through rose-tinted glasses either. Lipovetsky claims that our societies are richer and more powerful than ever before, but they fear the loss of contacts, necessary limitations, old age and are anxious about their own health and safety. Man remains vulnerable and fragile as always. (Lipovetsky, 2007)

He attempts to describe and analyse our current hyperconsumption society using five models named after mythological creatures as a metaphor which helps us understand happiness and hedonism. The first model is named after Penia, the patron of poverty; it claims that a society which emphasizes the “holiday of happiness” is, in fact, poor. The second model named after Dionysus represents the uncontrollable growth of needs and brutification of the principle of delight, highly stimulated sensual life and immediate satiation of all desires. The third model is called Superman which sees the contemporary society through a prism of application of power, maximum use of potential and overcoming our limits. Moral hedonism is merely an illusion, the contemporary world is, in fact, characterised by activism; its buzzwords are competition, victory and frenzy. The fourth model is called after Nemesis, the goddess of revenge and jealousy who embodied evil in the ancient times; she destroys welfare and excessive happiness, and brings on hatred, jealousy, rivalry and competitiveness among equals. Lipovetsky emphasizes that servility is merely an illusion covering the truth – a war of everyone against everybody, and *schadenfreude* every time someone else’s happiness is destroyed.

The last, fifth model, is called Narcissus. Lipovetsky tries to show us how far we have gone; under the influence of consumption society, human existence withdraws into privacy. New consumption societies break down the corporate dictat of large institutions, derail historical utopia and morals of victims, and encourage the extreme individualisation of lifestyle and ambitions. Private delights emerge to the surface along with a new culture dominated by consumption, cult of the body, psychology, love for autonomy, and passion for individual success. (Lipovetsky, 2007)

Since the Enlightenment, thanks to science, technology and progress, mankind walks towards a happier and better future. Today, we no longer have to stare into the future, happiness is perceived as an immediate and constantly renewing delight, or even some form of materialisation of the welfare utopia. However, in the 20th century we come across a crisis related to this progress. It was caused and embedded by the experience of the generations who survived the two world wars, mass murder (on all continents), totalitarianism, biotechnological threats, etc. Based on this we are anxious about the ecological and environmental state of the Earth; this issue is addressed by environmental ethics – one of the oldest subdisciplines of applied ethics. Today, the consumer is the accused; he is the addressee of informational and awareness raising campaigns. His is the mission to save the planet by changing his day-to-day life and accepting the principles of sustainable consumption. How to achieve it? Three stimuli could help us: technological progress, higher awareness resulting in the acceptance of responsibility by citizens, and finally – publicly stated rules. (Lipovetsky, 2007) Appeals for change and innovation in economic development are intensifying because outdated theories and strategies have been exhausted. This issue is addressed by economic, business and management ethics and partially also by other autonomous sub-disciplines of applied ethics. We witness the emergence of new spiritual and religious movements and changes in the social structures which prompts social ethics to take a stance in the solution of the new moral dilemmas. The turn of the 21st Century is the era of new technological inventions, perceived by some as miracles, because they kick-started to life sub-disciplines of applied ethics such as the ethics of research, science, technology or biotechnology. It resulted in the emergence of new professions and redefining the “uselessness” of occupational ethics within the set of applied ethics. Hand in hand with the ethics of technology, ethics of media (mainly the new ones) are signalling a paradoxical fact – the more communication tools, fun and games we have, the more lonely we feel and the more we lose our self-confidence. In other words, we surround ourselves with new products and increase our consumption, but it does not make us happy. Not even the books on how to achieve happiness and various guides on improving our quality of life can help us. The media shower us with advice about health, fitness, relationships (with kids, spouses, neighbours, migrants, etc.), love and seduction. Ethics provides consulting and guidance in searching for the common sense in this chaos of emotions and experiences.

According to Lipovetsky (2007), our happiness partly consists of “unnecessary” delights, games, superficialities, illusions and sometimes even by making our lives meaninglessly easy. This immoral component of the “happy human” on which the hyperconsumerist logic is based cannot be erased, because it reacts to the human need of simple and accessible pleasure. (Lipovetsky, 2007) The idea of voluntary self-restraint promoted mostly, but not only, by experts in environmental ethics is removed from the ideal of self-fulfilment pertaining to the “happy human” of the 21st Century. Our aim is not to warn of an apocalypse brought on by

the hyperconsumption society, however, it is necessary to voice the fact that certain corrections would indeed be a responsible and just step for humanity.

The contemporary hyperconsumption society is often despised and many believe it will lead humanity to the brink of decadence due to its selfish nature, high criminality and pursuit for money. These phenomena can hardly be denied. On the other hand, a large portion of the world population care about the poor, ill or those affected by disasters. Therefore it can be stated that not even the hyperconsumption society can cancel out the influence of moral principles. With the increasing power of technology and markets, the domain of ethics takes on new dignity and meaning. We are, in fact, not facing a disastrous loss of values; it is just that seemingly incompatible moral opinions as well as pluralisation of the value systems are blooming and there are multiple ways in which goodness can be understood. Values are not dying, only heteronomous moral principles are being deconstructed and the individualisation of ethical attitudes is taking place. (Lipovetsky, 2007) Searching for happiness remains the never-ending and eternal mission of humanity on the Earth. We need to re-learn how to find pleasure in small things to achieve great happiness in life.

### **3. Case study as a form of postfoundationalist education**

Similarly to G. Lipovetsky, we must state that a higher standard of life is not accompanied with happiness and enthusiasm – on the contrary, dissatisfaction and depression are on the rise. Which path will then lead us towards a happier life? American economist Scitovsky claims that accumulated experiences are the key. Scitovsky distinguishes pleasure as “positive goodness” from comfort as “negative goodness” created by removing discomfort. Lack of comfort seems to be the inevitable precedent of pleasure. Man naturally cannot live in absolute discomfort and experience absolute happiness at the same time. The dilemma is following: either we opt for pleasure at the expense of comfort, or absolute comfort at the expense of pleasure. (Lipovetsky, 2007)

#### **3.1. Will pleasure win over comfort?**

Colleagues Janka Boďová and Darinka Urdová live on different streets of the same city. Darinka Urdová lives in a luxurious detached house with a fairly large garden, fish pond and a gazebo. There is a pool and a sauna in the house. It can be said, that Darinka enjoys luxury and comfort. She can afford it, because her husband is the CEO of a supranational corporation. There is only one thing she cannot have – she is failing to get pregnant. Since childhood, she has been used to a high level of comfort, expensive clothes and accessories and other luxury items. Her marriage allowed her to maintain her lifestyle. However, her husband Oto is seldom at home due to his work. Darinka spends her time mostly by herself.

She is alone because her friends spend their time with their families. She often asks herself: is this happiness? To display my expensive clothes, accessories, and wealth in general? To be an outsider at work because there is nothing I can talk about with my colleagues? On the other hand, Janka is a married mother of two living in a three-room apartment in a block of flats. She radiates happiness. Her husband Laco works in IT and makes good money. Her children Ľubko and Anka are both high school students requiring resources which their parents are trying to provide. They can afford a holiday at the seaside. Their life could be described as happy, and they would confirm it themselves. Janka is trying to be efficiently altruistic, therefore she gives 20 – 30 € to a specific child in a children's home (her name is Zuzka). Last month, Zuzka was joined by her little brother Miško. Janka was pondering which friend could she ask to join her and help Miško to provide him with pleasure (positive goodness); the state is supposed to take care of his comfort. Janka came up with the idea to ask Darinka. It is obvious she has enough resources and such activity could help ease her loneliness. At first, Darinka resolutely refused this. Why should she support someone else's child? But when she came home to her large and empty house, she felt guilty. She turned on her laptop and searched for information on the children's home. She browsed photos from various events and reflected. Would it not be nice to help a small, defenceless child who just happens to be the victim of unfavourable circumstances to have a better life? It would not cost her much and what she can get back might indeed make her life better, too. Or will she make a completely different decision?

In our hypothesis, we assume that Darinka will voluntarily give up a small portion of her life-long luxury because she realizes she can share it with Miško, an abandoned child. She will do it, despite the fact that according to statistics, the richest people are less likely to help than those who only have just enough for themselves.

### **3.2. Possible solutions**

1. Darinka will not support Miško financially and will continue to live her stereotype.
2. Darinka will donate a one-time gift for Miško in order to appear a good person in front of her colleagues and the rest of the world, but will continue her luxury life.
3. Darinka will awaken from loneliness, take an interest in Miško, first support him, then decide to adopt him to provide both herself and the boy with pleasure.

### **3.3. Moral consequences of individual alternatives**

In the first alternative, Darinka did not support the boy to provide him with pleasure. She continued to live her luxurious, although stereotypical life. This decision is not in line with the ethics of virtue, her lack of generosity is shameful. From the point of view of the ethic of responsibility (who is responsible?), Darinka is seen as irresponsible (to whom?) to Miško (for what?) for not helping him even though her financial situation would easily allow her to do so and provide him with pleasure (based on what criteria?), i. e. positive goodness. The

ethic of obligation does not show her in a better light either; according to this principle, common sense says that good must be done.

As for the second alternative, it is nice that Darinka supported the boy, but only once and with the aim to show that she was not interested and did not wish to be further involved. She merely proved that she could do it. From the perspective of virtue, such behaviour can be described as calculative. The positive dimension of her action was not fulfilled from the perspective of the ethics of (classic) utilitarianism either. It was not beneficial for most parties (social aspect). The ethics of principles were left unfulfilled in terms of harmlessness, merit, justice, and autonomy.

The third alternative seems acceptable from the perspective of the ethic of virtue – Darinka expressed her interest in Miško. She revisited her stereotypical life in relationship to the children's home, Miško and her colleagues at work. She decided to take on more responsibility (who? Darinka; to whom? to the children's home; for what? for financial support; based on what criteria? because she can afford it). By supporting the social dimension of the ethic of utilitarianism, she proved that she cares about the general good.

### **3.4. Solution of the moral dilemma**

From the perspective of normative ethical theories, the morally optimal alternative is the third one. In this scenario, Darinka decides to financially support Miško and later considers adopting. Darinka and her husband decide to help and potentially even adopt the child; from the perspective of the ethic of virtue they seem to be highly moral, noble, selfless, and humane people. They realize they have the ability to provide Miško with a better life and he will make their life better in return. They will fill each other's life with pleasure. In terms of the ethic of obligation, we are speaking of help in partial distress (negative goodness is transformed into positive goodness) which is highly valued.

In terms of the situational ethics, the child in the specific situation requires non- standard help which cannot be provided by the children's home, i.e. the child is provided with positive goodness in the form of comfort as much as possible. The ethic of discourse is also fully employed, how else could both parties become convinced that they are doing a good thing (children's home and potential adoptive parents)? As we have already mentioned, the ethic of responsibility could play a major role in the decision-making process.

In the company of polite people, the criteria of the ethic of obligation would also be met; Darinka (and her husband) convinced us of this. From the perspective of preferential utilitarianism, this alternative is justified for both the child and the couple.

To conclude, the hypothesis we stated was slightly sceptical, yet still in favour of the good thing. Using the third alternative, positive goodness can be achieved for Miško, Darinka and her husband because the preconditions for negative goodness were present beforehand and ready to make the newly created family happy.

## 4. Summary

We should not stop half way (comfort) towards our happiness which is impossible without the happiness of other people. We should have the will and strength to achieve the true happiness in our lives which lies in their living. In the words of F. M. Dostoyevsky, happiness does not lie in happiness, but in the achievement of it.

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