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**Success and Happiness**

**Abstract**

The pursuit of success in Western culture is often perceived as a pursuit of happiness. Once the goal is obtained, and we have succeeded in reaching our objective, we are happy for a week, a month, or perhaps for just a single moment. But then the feeling passes and we set out again, hurrying to succeed and achieve our “next” happiness. Sandage refers to this idea as “the holy trinity” – life, ambition, and the pursuit of happiness.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this article, I propose to present several roots in Western culture that link success to happiness, while attempting to deconstruct this cultural paradigm.

The premise that external success leads to contentment is deeply embedded in Western culture and can be found in the Bible[[2]](#footnote-2) and in Greek philosophy. Contemporary capitalist-consumerist culture, however, significantly bolsters the belief that success and achievements generate happiness; thus, as Marcuse argues, modern man finds himself in a one-dimensional existence.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the dialogue *Gorgias*,[[4]](#footnote-4) Socrates argues that happiness is not related to the pursuit of exterior accomplishments. Necessity means shortage, and shortage means suffering. Thus, in and of itself, the Socratic debate on success and happiness indicates that this cultural formulation existed in his day. Later in the history of Western thought, Spinoza described the mass pursuit for external success and competition within society as akin to the aspiration for happiness, even though he viewed this success as ingenuine and therefore, invariably painful.[[5]](#footnote-5) In *The Conquest of Happiness*,[[6]](#footnote-6) Bertrand Russell, like Spinoza, discusses the causes for dissatisfaction with life in the Western world. Among the key factors, Russell highlights the fallacy of the notion that the pursuit of external success leads to happiness. This pursuit, in his opinion, causes a lack of happiness.

In the modern era, there are those who opine that if we are incapable of reaching the internal tranquillity that Socrates[[7]](#footnote-7) seeks (*Eudaimonia*), or the inner success that Nietzsche proposes, all that we do in life will be insignificant.[[8]](#footnote-8) Many do not achieve happiness, because in this era attaining happiness essentially entails the aspiration for success measured in terms of external parameters nurtured and disseminated by the capitalist culture. In fact, our reward is not manifest in our enjoying *the* journey, but rather in the fact that we completed *a* journey – *any* journey – successfully. The moment we achieve our goal, Ben Shahar argues, we mistakenly interpret the sense of relief we experience as happiness.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Key Words:**

**External Happiness, Internal Happiness, Competition, Happiness, Ambition, Comparison, Relief**

1. Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers – A History of Failure in America*, Harvard University Press, 2005:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Binah Nir, *The Failure of Success*, (Tel Aviv: Reisling, 2016), Hebrew, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*: *Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), Chapter One, pp. English page numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Plato, Gorgias English source [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Benedict Spinoza, *The Theologico-Political Treatise*, English Source. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bertrand Russel, *The Conquest of Happiness*, (New York: New American Library, 1930) p. English page number. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Fernand Schwartz, *La Sagesse de Socrate: Philosophie du Bonheur*, (French publication information and page numbers) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (English or German publication info and page numbers). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tal Ben-Shahar, *In Happiness and Happiness*, (Tel Aviv: Meter, 2008), Hebrew, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)