**Success and Happiness**

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**Introduction**

The pursuit of success in Western culture is often perceived as the pursuit of happiness. Having obtained our goal, we are happy for a week, a month or perhaps for just a single moment. But then the feeling subsides, and we set out again in a hurry to succeed and reach our ‘next’ happiness. Sandage (2004, p. 14) refers to this quest for success as ‘the holy trinity’—life, ambition and the pursuit of happiness.

The premise that external success entails inner happiness is deeply embedded in the history of western culture as evidenced in biblical texts (Nir, 2016, p. 117), classical Greek philosophy such as Socrates, Aristotle, and in various time periods in the history of western culture. The pinnacle of this cultural myth appears in contemporary capitalist-consumerist culture—a culture that strongly fosters the belief that success and achievement generate happiness.

Regarding the modern era, some contend that if we are incapable of reaching the internal happiness sought by Socrates or the inner success proposed by Nietzsche as we will explain in this paper, our entire life accomplishments will be insignificant. Many do not achieve happiness. To attain happiness in these times means aspiration for material success measured by parameters nurtured and disseminated by the capitalist culture. Practically speaking, however, our reward is not the pleasure enjoyed during our journey, but merely in that we have successfully completed *a* journey—any journey. The moment we arrive at our destination, we mistakenly interpret our sense of relief as happiness.

In this paper, we will present a preliminary cultural-philosophical analysis of the prevalent cultural linkage between the values of success and happiness. Likewise, we will distinguish between external success—success in external social terms relevant to each era, and internal success—that which the individual perceives authentically and in personal terms. We will examine various eras in western culture, emphasizing capitalist culture, showing how it employs every available method to market the pursuit for success, promising immense happiness at the end of the race. Seeking the origins of this cultural concept will enable us to identify its cognitive foundation, and to decrease necessity’s control on our lives; this change in perspective enables a new evaluation of our attitudes and our taking responsibility for them (Foucault, 1977, p. 152). In other words, what we often perceive as inevitable is not necessarily historical. This culture is dominated by fundamental beliefs and ideas so deeply rooted that, they are often only apparent in hindsight, in another age. The present analysis challenges their status as intuitive concepts. The beliefs and desires regarding success and happiness are cognitive and culturally dependent.

**External Success and the Desire for Happiness**

Many justify the pursuit for success in western culture as a formula for attaining happiness, and therefore success has become the object of desire for many who construct their self-image, self-value, and in many ways, identity on conventional criteria for success, especially on professional and economical levels. The discourse on success as a guarantor for happiness exists in the media, political rhetoric, education, and art. These days, book shelves as well are laden with formulae for success in business, relationships, parenting, studies, and physical appearance as guarantees for happiness. Western culture nurtures the importance of the outcome—success, its attainment as a goal. This perception is deeply embedded in western thought, as many studies demonstrate. We will mention four.

McIntosh and Martin (1992) contended that three elements, including the desire to obtain an objective and succeed, constitute happiness. In his study on the essence of happiness, Tatarkjewicz (1976, pp.1-7) pointed to success as one of the four meanings attributed to happiness by the West. A study led by Kahanmann (Leitman and Laslow, 2006, p. 83) on the core nature of happiness, revealed that when subjects are asked to quantify the happiness they experience, their evaluation is based on social parameters. It has further been found that our happiness derives less from what we own and more from comparing our circumstances to others. Ben Shahar (2008, p. 32) has argued that capitalist western culture bolsters the belief that success generates happiness. These contemporary studies, which identify the widespread cultural perception in the West of success as an essential component of happiness, are focused on external success. In other words, on success in terms of external dimensions based on society’s perception of its essence in the capitalist era.

As convincing and valid as these arguments may seem, we propose that the relationship between external success and happiness is not a purely capitalistic conception; its origins may be traced throughout the history of western culture, beginning already in biblical times. Psalms opens with a clear articulation of this view:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked […] but their delight is in the law of the Lord […] They are like trees planted by streams of water […] In all that they do, they prosper (*Psalms* 1:1-3).

Happiness is guaranteed to the man who desires God’s law, and happiness is manifest as success and prosperity:

Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. (*Psalms* 128:1-3).

Happiness is pledged to the righteous as reward for material success. From the perspective of the Hebrew language of the Bible, as explained by Mowinckel, the blessing bestowed upon man is no other than a life force manifest as happiness and success, while curse empties life of all goodness (Mowinckel quoted in Weiss, 1987, p. 468).

But one can also find the attitude that attempts to disengage the linkage between success and happiness in the Bible, in Ecclesiastes. ‘What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever’ (*Ecclesiastes* 1.3-4). For all his searching and pondering to find a way that will lead him to happiness, Ecclesiastes reaches the conclusion that no path founded on the material purposes of life can provide happiness and instill meaning in life. One cannot achieve a life of happiness; therefore, one should not search for happiness in life’s external successes (Cohen 2007, pp. 258-260). Ecclesiastes recognizes that possessions and pleasures cannot procure happiness and satisfy the soul. Ecclesiastes studied the world and when wisdom did not bring him happiness, he became addicted to successes and pleasures, servants and maids, silver and gold, possessions and luxuries; in his words, he denied himself nothing he desired:

‘I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.’ (*Ecclesiastes* 2.10-11)

Luxuries and the pleasures of life led him to disappointment and to the understanding that it is beyond man’s abilities to change life and world orders ‘All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return’ (*Ecclesiastes* 3.20).

Catholic Christianity deconstructs the linkage between material accomplishment and happiness; views competition, pride, and the pursuit for corporeal success as sinful; and preaches for a humble life. The Sermon on the Mount articulates a fundamental opposition to corporeal success in this world, while promising happiness to those who do not desire it—‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’ (*Matthew* 5:5), and to those who do not ‘store up […] treasures on earth’ (*Matthew* 6:19). By preaching for its dissolution, these early texts prove that the linkage between success and happiness is a cultural phenomenon.

The importance of happiness and material success is also part of the Christian myth; success is considered important, even if it is postponed and reserved for the World to Come:

…you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones […] And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life (*Matthew* 19:28-29).

Feuerbach’s (1957, pp. 47-48) remarks—that in a round-about way religion achieves the very same goal that man naturally hurries to reach directly—are particularly interesting here. Faith in a future life is not faith in an unknown life: the ‘transition’ is in fact the ‘here’.

In the seventeenth century, Spinoza critiqued the society of his time that viewed the competitive pursuit of external success the means of achieving happiness. In his opinion, this is not real or true success and it invariably entails suffering. Man endures ordeals to achieve material success and to gain the respect of others, believing that this will bring him joy. Spinoza argues that the man who derives happiness from setting his good fortune against the losses of others does not know what true success and happiness are (Spinoza, 2007, pp. 33).

In *The Conquest of Happiness*, Bertrand Russell (1955) points to the causes for dissatisfaction in the western world. Amongst the principle causes he notes competition and struggle for success. Our culture nurtures competitive success as a primary source of happiness. But in Russell’s view, this pursuit undermines man’s contentedness with life:

If you ask any man in America, or any man in business in England, what it is that most interferes with his enjoyment of existence, he will say: ‘The struggle for life’ […] Now that is not what the businessman means when he speaks of the ‘struggle for life’ […] The trouble arises from the generally received philosophy of life, according to which life is a contest, a competition, in which respect is to be accorded to the victor (Russell, Internet Archive).

Russell describes the pursuit for competitive success that society dictates as a battle for success and as one of the causes for discontent and the lack of happiness in life.

**Inner Success and the Desire for Happiness**

The linkage between success and happiness is evident in classic Greece as well. Socrates emphasizes the relationship between man’s happiness and morality. *Eudaimonia* means happiness, success or well-being. But for Socrates, success is not dependent on external criteria dictated by society, but rather on inner achievement. In his view, the mundane, external goods—money money, honor, and health—are not capable of generating true happiness and well-being, without man’s virtues and agency. Socrates deconstructs the link between external good and happiness, and associates inner accomplishment with happiness. To be happy the righteous requires nothing but righteousness:

Best of men […] are you not ashamed that you care for having as much money as possible, and reputation, and honor, but that you neither care for nor give thought to prudence, and truth, and how your soul will be the best possible? […] Not from money does virtue come, but from virtue comes money and all of the other good things for human beings. (Plato, *Apology* 29d-e, Perseus Digital Library)

Socrates underscores the relationship between morality and happiness. Inner success is manifest in tending to the soul, following in the ways of truth, acquiring and having virtue. ‘Know that this is of a truth—that no evil can happen to a good man’ (Plato, *Apology* 40c-41c, Perseus Digital Library); 'He is richest who is content with the least..' (Plato, Gorgias, p.343).

Aristotle develops and elaborates on Socrates and his predecessors. In his discourse on happiness, he too relates to *eudemonia*, that is, happiness not in the sense of momentary pleasure or as a particular mental state, but rather as a central purpose of human life. Man’s success and happiness depends on the cultivation of his individual qualities. The conditions for a happy life, according to Aristotle are: a life of reflection, good and moral virtues, and active citizenship in which happiness is associated with honor and the pursuit of material pleasure.

Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and many do not give the same account as the wise. (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, Classics MIT online).

Aristotle also deconstructs the linkage between a life of external success and happiness, and views happiness in the context of internal success—in finding meaning and purpose in life.

In our view, Nietzsche best presents a deep, philosophical and cultural understanding of the lack of happiness in competitive eternal success. Nietzsche distinguishes between internal success—related to the will to power—and the pursuit of external success—related to the striving for superiority; according to Nietzsche, inner success is the feeling of power blossoming and overcoming inner challenges. This is fundamentally different than self-satisfaction—which is not power—derived from external competition and the desire to surpass others. Thus, Nietzschean positive power and sense of success mean overcoming internal obstacles as opposed external, social competition.

In overcoming oneself, Nietzsche means prevailing over the socially determined stipulations and influences that construct man’s character. This in turn, brings about happiness (Golomb, 1999, p. 129). The desire for power is directed mainly inward, not outward, whereas the desire to excel in competitive measures is a desire for battle: ‘The aspiration for perfection is the aspiration for the annihilation of your fellow-man’ (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 183). For Nietzsche happiness depends on self-creation: by way of critical interpretation and self-exploration, man establishes his individual, unique and productive existence. This dynamic is directed internally toward the self that transcends the mentality of the herd toward individuality. Although Nietzsche pays heed to the importance of happiness, he does not see it as life’s goal, nor as an important aspect of life.

Referring to the modern era, Schwartz (1999, p. 11) opines that if we fail to obtain the inner happiness that Socrates seeks, life will be meaningless. Given the contemporary, overriding conviction that happiness lies in conflating the pursuit for external success (the accumulation of material possessions) with excessive rationalism, most are in fact rendered dissatisfied. Western capitalist society ‘accepts success as the only criteria for judgement. However, it cannot say what success is’ (Lyotard ,2006, p..(35

**Conclusion**

Culture and society are extremely influential in constructing the norms and values according to which we live. In this paper, we have seen that among the values enrooted in western culture the pursuit for external success is presented as a guarantee for happiness. This conception appeared in different cultural time periods. There were those who nurtured this linkage and those who aspired to deconstruct it if only because of its tangible presence. This linkage reaches its pinnacle, however, in the capitalist era.

The great forces of modern capitalism influence how we prescribe meaning to our lives, and the capitalist phenomenon underlines various aspects of our culture (Bell 1976, pp.14-16). Capitalist culture is laden with problems and contradictions (Illuz 2002, pp.7-13). On the one hand, it creates conditions for personal liberty, and one of its principle components is individualism. Thus, the individual is free to make authentic choices including their desire for success and happiness. On the other hand, contemporary culture encourages processes of unification and leads to homogeneity and conformism expressed, among other things, as various criteria for external success. Success in terms of identical and unified parameters cannot lead, in our view, to internal, authentic and personal happiness, but rather to momentary happiness derived from reaching a goal and the subsequent sense of relief. ‘Pleasure, joy, delight, satisfaction, significance often substitute the word happiness’ (Ben-Shahar, 2008, p. 21). We conclude with Seneca’s words:

All men […] wish to live happily […] our habit of thinking that those things are best which are most generally received as such, of taking many counterfeits for truly good things, and of living not by reason but by imitation of others […] let the mind find out what is good for the mind […] A happy life, therefore, is one which is in accordance with its own nature […] enduring all things with most admirable courage, suited to the times in which it lives, careful of the body and its appurtenances, yet not troublesomely careful (Seneca, *Of A Happy Life*, Bks 1-3).

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