**Success and Happiness**

**Abstract**

The pursuit of success in Western culture is often perceived as a 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 joy 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. In this article, we propose to present several origins in western culture for the connection between success and happiness, while attempting a preliminary analyse of this cultural construct.

The premise that material 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 (in Socrates and Aristotle, among others), through Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers. But it is only in contemporary capitalist-consumerist culture – a culture that fosters the belief in success and achievement as generating happiness – that this myth is fully realized.

Regarding the modern and postmodern eras, some contend that if we are incapable of reaching the internal tranquillity that Socrates seeks or the inner success that Nietzsche proposes, our entire life accomplishments will be insignificant. Many do not achieve happiness. To attain happiness in these times is linked to the aspiration for material success measured by parameters nurtured and disseminated by the capitalist culture. We do not take pleasure in the journey, but merely in that we have successfully completed *a* journey – any journey. That is our reward. The moment we arrive at our destination, we mistakenly interpret our sense of deliverance as happiness.

Keywords: external success, inner success, competition, happiness, ambition, relief, comparison

**Introduction**

In this paper, we will present a preliminary cultural-philosophical analysis of the prevalent cultural linkage between the values of success and happiness. We will focus on various eras in western culture. Our emphasis is on capitalist culture as employing every available means to promote the pursuit for success, promising that once attained immense happiness will follow. Seeking the origins of this cultural concept will enable us to identify its cognitive foundation. In other words, what we often perceive as inevitable is not necessarily historical. The fundamental beliefs and ideas upon which the culture is founded are so deeply rooted that, from a historical viewpoint, they are mostly ‘lost’ or rendered inconspicuous, obscured by traditions and conventions. Analysis challenges and destabilizes these cultural cornerstones, thereby revealing the beliefs and desires regarding success and happiness as cognitive, and culture dependent.

**External Success and the Desire for Happiness**

Many justify the pursuit for success in western culture as a formula for attaining happiness. 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 implications that happiness carries in western culture. A qualitative study led by Kahanmann (Leitman and Laslow, 2006, p. 83) on the core nature of happiness, revealed that subjects evaluate their level of happiness in terms of social measures. It has also been found that happiness is derived less from what one owns, and more from how it compares with others. Ben Shahar (2008, p. 32) has argued that capitalist western culture bolsters the belief that success generates happiness.

As convincing and valid as these arguments may seem, we propose that the relationship between success and happiness is not prescribed solely by capitalism, but that its origins may be traced throughout the history of western culture, beginning 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 covets God’s law, and the reward of 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 a Hebrew perspective, as Mowinckel clarifies, 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).

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 invariably call attention to the linkage between material success and happiness as a cultural phenomenon.

The myth of Christianity emphasizes the significance of contentment and material success; although success 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).

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

In the seventeenth century, Spinoza (2007) critiques his contemporary society in its persuasion that relative success affects happiness. As achievement that is not real or true, it invariably causes suffering. Man endures ordeals to satisfy his passion for 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.

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. The 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 (1997) 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, it is not the mundane, external goods – money, honor and health – that generate true happiness and well-being, but man’s virtues and agency. Socrates deconstructs the link between external good and happiness, and associates inner accomplishment – morality – 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 perfecting of the soul, following in the ways of truth, acquiring and having moral 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…’ (…).

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 individualistic virtue](http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/science-of-happiness/strengths-and-virtues/)s. 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 too 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. Distinguishing between internal success – manifest as mental fortitude and inner growth – and the pursuit of external success – engendered in a compulsion for superiority, Nietzsche stresses overcoming extreme hardships and obstacles as conducive to growth and virtue. This is fundamentally different than self-satisfaction derived from external competition and the desire to surpass others. Thus, Nietzsche’s positive fortitude and subsequent fulfillment are the result of triumphing over internal obstacles and not over contenders in the context of external, social contest.

In defeating 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 strength is directed mainly inward, 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’ (…). 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 in turn, strays from the herd toward individuality.

In the postmodern era, Schwartz (1999, p. 11) opines, failure to obtain the inner happiness that Socrates seeks, deems life worthless. 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..)

**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 throughout the history of western culture is the pursuit for external success as a conduit for happiness. 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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