

Is it possible to live a happy life in a value-neutral world?*

Viktória Németh

Jonathan Haidt:

The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom

Basic Books, 2006, p. 320

ISBN: 978-0-46-502802-3

Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist and professor at New York University's Stern School of Business. Since his youth he has been searching for the answer to the age-old question: What is the meaning of life? and How should we live a happy life? He has dedicated his first book, entitled "The Happiness Hypothesis", to this topic. The book is also inspired by his philosophy of life: it is not possible to live a happy life in a value-neutral world.

The book sheds new light on the achievements of positive psychology. Antique philosophy and theology build a bridge between the centuries-old wisdom of religions and scientific achievements. He pays special attention to identifying which old theories are supported by modern psychology and science and which ones are not.

According to Haidt, a happy life partially depends on external circumstances, contrary to the propositions of Buddha or the stoic philosophers. On the other hand, he also agrees with the Buddhist view in the sense that finding the inner harmony is of key importance. It is the external circumstances that make our happiness lasting.

The author is concerned not only about the happiness of the individual, but also about the anomie and atomised state characterising the entire western society. In a state of anomie there is a conflict between the accepted norms and the social reality. Deviant behaviour, such as the high number of suicides, is frequent. The author is of the opinion that the people of Western civilisation do not recognise that their view on norms and morality is rather strange for other civilisations and that those are based on – false – psychological approaches.

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official view of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank.

Viktória Németh is a communications expert of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank. E-mail: nemethv@mbn.hu.

According to Haidt, the European moral mentality got off to a good start in ancient history: one need merely consider the Bible, the epic of Homer, Aesop's fables, *The state* by Plato or Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Greek philosophy already contained the elements that carried the risk of a subsequent comedown, at the same time creating the basics for moral and scientific curiosity. For the investigative mindset it is difficult to find the place of logic in moral behaviour and emotions.

The principles that developed during the Enlightenment produced societies that respect the rights of the individuals, while they work efficiently for the good of people. However, this approach went hand in hand with a few unintended consequences. If we ignore the question of morality: it weakens morals, makes people narrow-minded, and on the other hand it leads to moral rationalisation, which is harmful for the mental state. The feelings of lack of roots and despair entail amoral and antisocial behaviour.

Finding harmony starts from within the individual and it is an extremely difficult task, as the human mind is divided into parts (right brain vs. left brain, automatic vs. controlled or conscious vs. unconscious parts), which often conflict with each other. The author often uses a metaphor in the book, according to which human mind is like a rider on the back of an elephant, where the conscious mind is the rider and the unconscious mind is the elephant. The rider is able control the elephant only partially. The book presents several methods that facilitate the cooperation of the two sides.

Human behaviour is based on the "Golden Rule", i.e. on the principle of reciprocity, which plays a much greater role in our life than we may think. (*the principle of tit for tat or an eye for an eye.*) Another truth that directly influences the principle of reciprocity is hypocrisy, according to which we examine the world through the bias lens of good and evil, which diverts us from following the Golden Rule. That is, "*Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?*"

In order to understand human happiness it is essential to examine where happiness comes from. If we mean by happiness that we acquire what we would like to have and can form the world as we wish, we can expect short-term high spirits. If we assume that happiness comes from within, it is worth examining the wisdom of Buddha and the stoic philosophers. Modern researches also confirm ancient wisdom in many respects. Changing our attitude often helps reduce internal tensions. On the other hand, research has also shown that there are goals where our efforts made to attain those may contribute to our happiness and certain environmental factors can make our happiness more lasting.

Research also confirms that *“what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger”*. This is the so-called *“post-traumatic growth”*, which is related to the interpretation of the events and to our standpoint.

On the other hand, our standpoint may change depending on the extent to which we deal with our virtues. Ancient wisdom contains much useful advice related to virtues and virtuous life that can be used even today. For example, positive psychology can be of great help in developing and unfolding our strengths and virtues.

As regards the meaning and fullness of life, Haidt encouraged the readers to study the religions of the world. The results of the surveys conducted by the author put the emotions generated by the spiritual dimension and the related virtues, which influence our day-to-day life and lifestyle, in a framework that is relevant both for the religious and the non-religious. At this point in his theory he presents very unique research, e.g. how the development of religion was impacted by the feeling of disgust, and where is the place of moral elevation and awe within human emotions. The emotions and thoughts related to the higher dimension, affecting day-to-day life, also explain phenomena such as religious fundamentalism, political culture war and experiencing the meaning of life.