

Notes for the XXI century

Education and happiness

If educating is helping to live, a good education must show the path for happiness.

Education is a human process as old as human kind. It is an essential process for the survival of the group and the continuity of the humankind. Through education, the human being transmits the knowledge amassed by a group, instructs in the norms of coexistence, shows the experience acquired by the group, and point out the position that each must take within the community. Education fosters the systematic transmission of the group's culture in the social, cultural, and political system. From this perspective, a good educational system is the one that facilitates the social, cultural, and economic assimilation and acceptance in a greater percentage of citizens, minimizing the percentage of social marginalization, counter-culture, and vandalism. Any educational project promotes the excellence of the students in the frame of the current educational system, in such a way that the mature and dominant generation intent to educate and instruct the new students to achieve a new generation of citizens who will continue and improve the existing social project. From this frame of reference, a good educational system is that which increases the equality of opportunities for all the citizens without ideological, origin, race, gender, or religion distinction, and which favors vital satisfaction of its citizens and also the group to which it pertains.

I

Happiness is, basically, a mood which corresponds to a temporal situation of the being to whom the circumstances in its life take place in the desires way. In other words, the life desired by an individual matches for a specific moment with the real life. Happiness is a synonym of serene joy, pleasant or deeply satisfactory mood and has been a topic of philosophical debate in the times of classical antiquity. In the ancient philosophy was the last and supreme goal of the person who could achieve it either through pleasure (hedonism, Epicureanism), through reason (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle), or the control of pain and passion (stoicism). Modern philosophy substitutes the ancient individualist and selfish concept of happiness and articulates ethical thoughts in which individual happiness must be linked more each time to the other one's happiness in order for it to be effective. This way, different interpretations about the essential condition of happiness and the ways of achieving it appear: sacrifice and charity for the other (of Christianity), the altruist concept of happiness (defended by the economist Adam Smith and by the philosopher and educationalist Jean Jacques Rousseau) for those for whom individual happiness cannot exist if it doesn't come along, in one way or another, with the other person's happiness. There is even some philosophers, like Kant, who dispense happiness as a motivation, since this condition constitutes an imperative need for reason.

Nowadays, positive psychology, fundamentally promoted by Anglo-Saxon psychological tendencies which search the wellbeing of the postmodern man and the development of human potential, contrasts with "negative" psychology, almost exclusively centered in the traumas, disorders, and pathologies off the mind. Positive psychology basically studies pleasant emotions, the development of virtues, and the search for happiness. The base of their analysis and studies has its roots in the fact that money, considering a certain minimum amount, doesn't give happiness, but that there are a series of intrinsic and extrinsic factors which influence in achieving happiness. Parting from this premise we can see that, in developed societies, a great deal of their citizens tend to take shortcuts to achieve pleasure (drugs, sex without love, television, shopping, "the good life") and, in a rich society, more shortcuts come to existence by the minute. On the other hand, we attend to a process of growing individualization of the postmodern man before the group, which means a decrease (or even loss) of family, friend, community, or religious circle for the person. These were the traditional institutions which supported the individual during difficult times and which have always meant, throughout the life of people, centers of gathering, anti-depression, and personal and social rehabilitation. Finally, Social Sciences have also vertebrated theories in which the individual as a victim of its environment and that the important is not the individual but the context, which at the same time manipulates and limits the individual, is highlighted. All of it shows a dark sight so that the man of our days can reach happiness. But what philosophers and thinkers do agree on is in the fact that, for the individual to achieve high levels of vital satisfaction and even reach happiness, he must own a solid level of personal formation.

According to the British Richard Layard (Happiness. Lessons on a new science, Taurus, 2005), economic sciences tend to identify happiness with wealth, which constitutes an error, since the lives of the citizens of Western developed countries are

much more comfortable than fifty years earlier and with a greater quality of life, and yet we are not happier than our ancestors. This author (just as his compatriot Jeremy Bentham, philosopher of the XVIII century) supports the idea that the best society is that one which produces greater amount of happiness, so this economist believes that in the future we will have to think about more flexible jobs, which attend the worker's motivation above their extreme competitiveness. Along this line, Bhutan, a small country in between India and China, with a monthly income of 46 dollars per person, is considered as one of the happier states of the planet. It has a government whose priority consists in achieving the happiness of its citizens, for which's purpose has changes the international term Gross National Product for gross National Happiness. In Spain, Eduard Punset, (*Trip to happiness*, Ediciones Destino, 2005), says that the scientific revolution off the last half century has unleashed the most important change in the history of human evolution: the elongation of life expectancy and, along with it, the desire of being happy here and now.

II

In line with these concerns, it surprises the apparition of two world wide studies about happiness in the planet. Leicester university (United Kingdom) has elaborated the first World Map of Subjective Wellbeing (2006), structured after a survey to 80,000 people in all the world, according to whom the happiest country is Denmark, followed by Switzerland and Austria, while Zimbabwe and Burundi occupy the last places in the ranking of the list. This study has its foundations in the analysis of life expectancy, economic wellbeing, and the population's access to education. Some explanations about the results are that the happier countries are those which have less future expectations and, in addition, the population of small countries tends to be happier because it has a greater feeling of community. In the European commission survey performed every six months the previous classification is reinforced, since it places Denmark as the happiest country in Europe. Kaare Christensen, the author of the report published in British Medical Journal, justifies that the Danish are more fortunate because they are the ones with less future expectations and pertain to a small community. In this classification the U.S. occupies the twenty-third place, and Spain the forty-six, out of a total of 177 countries. To counteract this study, the London consultancy New Economics Foundation and the NGO friend of the Earth elaborated the Index of the Happy Planet (2006). The authors of this study were based on indicators such as a population's life expectancy or the environmental impact on their territory, combined with the subjective feeling of happiness, and they came up with the conclusion that the best place to live in is Vanuatu, a small island of the Pacific Ocean which lives on agriculture and fishing, and owns a life expectancy of 68.8 years. In this list in the first places we find countries such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republican, Panama, and Cuba. The U.S. is found in the 150 position, France in the 129 and Spain in the 85, out of a total of 178 countries. This index concludes that the richest countries are not precisely the happiest ones.

Two of the most outstanding persons in positive psychology, Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson (*Character, strengths and virtues. A handbook and classification*, Oxford University Press, USA), elaborated in the year 2004 a list of six indispensable virtues to reach happiness:

1. Happiness and knowledge, which translates into curiosity, creativity and learning.
2. Courage, in order to achieve goals before difficult situations.
3. Humanitarianism and love, in order to be aware of other people's feelings and emotions.
4. Justice, to achieve a healthy coexistence within a community.
5. Soberness, to protect oneself from excesses.
6. Transcendence, to give a meaning to life.

Epilogue

The moral proposals which positive psychology offers us complete and reinforce our educational philosophy and, above everything, they lead the way, not the goal.

If we want to efficiently contribute in the formation of our alumni and that they can be vital and happy beings, collaborating in the reconstruction of a supportive, equitable, and sustainable society, the educators must actively participate in the vertebration of a solid, personalized education in harmony with the social and environmental context; showing as possible as can be the road to happiness.

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