

## INTRINSIC HAPPINESS: THE SEED INSIDE EACH PERSON

### FELICIDAD INTRÍNSECA: LA SEMILLA DENTRO DE CADA PERSONA

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#### **Abstract**

*Happiness is a permanent internal state constituted by a genetic predisposition, people's choices in life, and the way in which people handle the circumstances. Therefore, happiness should be found inside each person and not extrinsically. Extrinsic material goods are only a prerequisite, but not happiness themselves; they are important in order to satisfy basic needs, and start aiming higher.*

*Key words: Happiness, eudaimonia, genetics, relationships, freedom, external events.*

#### **Resumen**

*La felicidad es un estado interno permanente, constituido por una predisposición genética, las elecciones personales de vida, y la manera en la que se manejan las circunstancias. Por lo tanto, la felicidad debe ser encontrada dentro de cada persona y no extrínsecamente. Los bienes materiales externos son sólo un prerequisite, más no brindan felicidad en sí mismos; éstos son importantes para satisfacer las necesidades básicas y apuntar hacia metas más altas.*

*Palabras clave: Felicidad, eudaimonía, genética, relaciones, libertad, eventos externos.*

## Introduction

“The foolish man seeks happiness in the distance; the wise grows it under his feet” (Openheim, 2015). Like the seed of a fruit, happiness lies in the heart of the human structure. It is sleeping there, waiting for the person to find it and start watering it in order to make it grow. There is no need to go chase it outside, as Openheim (2015) said, it is wiser to look inside the person and cultivate happiness from there.

The man has always been concerned about what happiness is and how to find it. In the antiquity, the Greeks, used the term «eudaimonia» to refer to happiness. This word has a very interesting meaning, which is «having a good guardian spirit» (Mastin, 2008). Eudaimonia is then, a permanent internal disposition that allows the person to flourish and have a good life regardless of the external events. Nowadays, a modern documentary, which summarizes the research done so far about this topic, states that happiness is 50% genetic, 40% intentional behavior and 10% circumstantial (Happy, 2013). Happiness, understood as eudaimonia, covers all those three dimensions, which can explain why happiness should be found inside each person and not extrinsically.

## Biological predisposition

Happiness is intrinsic, first of all, because it depends on the person's biological predisposition. There are studies showing a close relationship between subjective well-being, understood as the person's own satisfaction with life, and genetics.

Numerous twin studies show that children with different life experiences can be equally happy because of their same genetic predisposition. Moreover, there are significant correlations showing «that identical twins are significantly more similar in their level of happiness than fraternal twins, which suggests that genetic factors might play a role in this trait» (De Neve, Christakis, Fowler & Frey, 2012, p. 197). This inclination to happiness is determined by the influence of a genetic factor over the most frequent personality dimensions. As Weiss points out, «these findings indicate that subjective well-being is linked to personality by common genes and that personality may form an «affective reserve» relevant to set-point maintenance and changes in set point over time» (De Neve et al. 2012, p.205). In order to gain that favored type of personality, which is more likely to experience life in a positive way, the person usually punctuates «low —in— Neuroticism and high —in— Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness» (Weiss, 2008, p. 205). Meaning that, an elevated percentage of people's happiness has to do with a genetic predisposition to a certain type of temperament, something that is completely inside each person even before being born.

Furthermore, some neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin are also related with the possibility to experience happiness. Research results show that high dopamine levels are associated with greater life satisfaction, whereas, serotonin levels should not get too elevated (Happy, 2013). That is why some antidepressants

that lower the serotonin concentration work so well. As Harmer, Bhagwagar, Perrett, Völlm, Cowen, & Goodwin (2003) confirmed, «selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as fluoxetine and paroxetine are effective in a wide range of emotional disorders, including depression» (p. 148). Overall, a significant percentage of people's happiness is determined by their congenital brain composition, which constitutes an intrinsic set point to develop a happy life, and another important part comes from two core human potencies.

### **Intentional behavior and relationality**

Happiness is reached by the exercise of two fundamental intrinsic human mechanisms: freedom and relationality. Freedom is a result of the two highest faculties of the human being: intelligence and will. Thanks to intelligence and will, humans can exercise their freedom to make personal choices and their actions can be called intentional behavior. As mentioned before, studies asseverate that 40% of people's happiness depends on what they choose to do in life (Happy, 2013). If this is true, almost half of the responsibility of a person's happiness or misery lies on, an intrinsic mechanism, his or her freedom.

The second essential and inherent characteristic of the human being related to happiness is relationality. Studies give also lights about what kind of life choices conduct people closer to happiness and further from depression. Apparently, the majority of

people who report to have a happy life, has also functional and close relationships. Rojas and Ibarra-López (2014) point out, "the importance of the family and friendship domains of life in explaining people's satisfaction with life" (p. 24).

As a social being, the man needs to be immerse in a community to fulfill the need of belonging and to be able to donate his own talents and flourish. Therefore, having relational goods always correlates with «positive effects on self-declared life satisfaction» (Becchetti, Pelloni, & Rossetti, 2008, p.2). So, people who perceived themselves as happy persons have also close bounds with significant people such as friends and family, meaning that relationships have a very positive repercussion in people's happiness. This is how, the second big part, intentional behavior, that constitutes a holistic vision of happiness, can be achieved by the exercise of intrinsic mechanisms; same mechanisms that would explain why the external events cannot make people happy or unhappy.

### **Facing the circumstances**

The third aspect that intervenes in people's happiness is the circumstances. Knowing that a tenth percent of happiness is related to external events might suggest that these occurrences happening around the person would be the ones determining his or her happiness. Nevertheless, the personal disposition to confront each situation is more important than the circumstance itself. As the modern research affirm,

it is probably correct that our ordinary notion of long-term happiness does require it to have a certain degree of stability or robustness, and that this counts against the rival views, especially hedonism. But if emotional states are conceived of in a strongly dispositional manner, as including mood propensities, they become too stable, too insensitive to changes in the contextual factors. (Klausen, 2015, p. 3)

This means that happiness does not depend on external facts. As the author shows, the environmental stimuli are continuously changing, and are not as stable and strong as the internal predisposition needed to achieve a permanent state of happiness. On the opposite side, there are studies arguing that some experiences could break the person's deepest mechanisms, making them rebel their selves against what is happening. Klausen (2015) illustrates this idea,

while it remains conceivable that a person could be happy even when undergoing the most excruciating pain (assuming that she were able to maintain a positive emotional condition), it seems that some kinds of pain go deeper than others, and sometimes may even penetrate into one's core self. (p. 4)

Obviously, cases like that can happen. Yet, when that occurs to a person with an internal state of calm and well-being, the breakdown doesn't last long. Rapidly, the strong positive psychological state succeeds and overshadows any degree of a bad situation. A clear example of the stability of

happiness throughout different incidents and its permanence in time is the experience of a young Italian woman. Her name is Chiara Badano, at the age of 17 she was diagnosed with a terminal osteosarcoma and her first reaction was to ask: "won't I be able to run anymore? Won't I be able to walk anymore? Won't I be able to practice sports anymore? All my friends... my tennis... the mountains... the beach... Mom, is it fair to die at 17?" (Chiara Badano *A Teen's Life and Beatification*, 2011). But, after only 15 minutes, as it can be read on her book, she accepted the situation and continued with her happy life. Her dad used to spy through the keyhole of her door to see if she was calm even when nobody was watching, and she was not only peaceful, but also with a smiling face and bright eyes. She did not even cry, besides those first 15 minutes, until the moment of her death when her last words were, «be happy because I am» (Zanzucchi, 2007, p. 70). Chiara Badano was truly happy, regardless of her sickness, the acute pain, or the impossibility to be cured. Her happiness was not affected by any external mean; her personal beliefs and life choices determined her, internally, to be happy.

This life experience confirms that people can be happy despite any type of bad moments. Happiness is not a temporal emotion, how the wise Greeks anticipated ones, it is a permanent internal state that does not depend on extrinsic facts.

Is happiness related with external goods?

However, it is important to mention that happiness has also been associated to a

sum of joyful moments, well-being and comfort. Some people argue, therefore, that happiness is a life's goal that can be conquered through extrinsic means. They state, for example, that «wealthy people don't just have better toys; they have better nutrition and better medical care, more free time and more meaningful labor—more of just about every ingredient in the recipe for a happy life» (Dunn, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2011, p. 123). According to this view money could really buy happiness.

Furthermore, modern neuroscience supports them showing how certain brain areas related with positive emotions are activated with external stimuli. As Dreak (2011) explains, «the amygdala is sensitive to detection of pleasantness/unpleasantness (valence) of stimuli in addition to features specific to emotional states such as fear, disgust, sadness, and surprise» (p. 74). It would be as simple as to give the brain a chain of rewards to trigger a waterfall of happiness. Unfortunately, it is not like that. This modern conception, although interesting and tempting to follow, relates to something a little different than happiness. As Berrige and Kringelbach (2011) recognize, «while some progress has been made in understanding brain hedonics, it is important not to over-interpret. We do not yet have a neuroscience of happiness» (p. 20). The cerebral areas activated through extrinsic means are pleasure areas related with hedonia not with eudaimonia; two close related, but not interchangeable concepts. The article of Naor, Okon-Singer, & Ben-Ze'ev (2014) clearly illustrates the difference,

The notion of hedonia is simpler and easier to measure, while the notion of eudaimonia is more complex and harder to qualify. Whereas hedonia refers to a present subjective state, eudaimonia connects to the present, past and future in an individual's virtuous activities, which are expressions of the individual's unique nature and capacities. (p. 2)

True happiness cannot be conquered in one moment, in one single step, with one or more material objects. That is why wealthy people «aren't that much happier than those who have less» (Dunn et al. 2011, p. 123). Naturally, extreme need bordering with malnutrition and health problems would be also an obstacle to people's happiness. The truth is that basic needs should be met in order to be able to aim higher. As Maslow (1943) set out in his hierarchy of needs,

it is quite true that man lives by bread alone-when there is no bread. But what happens to man's desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled? At once other (and «higher») needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still «higher») needs emerge and so on (p. 375).

Extrinsic means related with hedonia are not happiness themselves, but they are a prerequisite to worry less about the basics and start cultivating real happiness, which lies inside each person.

## Conclusion

As the modern research has found out so far, happiness is constituted by a genetic predisposition, people's choices in life, and the circumstances; all intrinsic factors, including the last one, if handled internally right. Thus, the chase of happiness should turn into an inner search and not into an exterior hassle.

Naturally, some external goods are important to satisfy people's basic needs and get the person ready to pursue higher goals. Once the minimum corporal requirements are met, the next step is

to exercise the freedom in the better way possible in order to build strong and close bonds with friends and family, being able to fulfill the need of sociability and belonging. Hopefully, all that added to a positive genetic predisposition, would be enough to achieve a stable psychological state, which will resist any possible incident, making the person truly happy no matter what.

Every robust plant was once little and weak, in the same way, the seed of happiness residing in man's core demands to be discovered and nurtured with personal care, decision, time, and a lot of effort.

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