

# THE ADVICE OF THE WISE: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON ADVICE FOR A HAPPY LIFE

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## ABSTRACT

*The demand for happiness advice is vast and many different thinkers have offered their views. This special issue presents a cross section of happiness counseling through the ages and considers the advice by classic Chinese philosophers, Epicurus, Schopenhauer, as well as contemporary New Age thinkers and self-help authors. The papers follow three leading questions: 1) What is recommended for leading a happy life? 2) How does this advice fit in the worldview of the author and into a social, cultural and historical context? 3) Are the recommendations in line with what is known about the conditions of happiness? There are common themes in advice for a happy life but also much contradiction, and some honoured philosophers offer advice that can harm happiness if it is taken to heart by present day readers.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Demand for advice

“Animals are happy as long as they have health and enough to eat”. This is the famous opening remark by Russell (1930) in his self-help book *The Conquest of Happiness*. He adds that humans should have the same propensity, but lack it. For almost everybody happiness is a goal in life, but food and health do not guarantee its attainment. We can enjoy life in spite of ill health and adversities.

There is no way of knowing whether Russell was right about the happiness of animals, but he is certainly right in his observation regarding humans. Human happiness is not the simple product of favorable circumstances. Happiness is in part a consequence of making the right choices. The pursuit of happiness is not easy and hence man has always sought advice on how best to attain happiness. Our increasingly changing modern society that is based on the individual pursuit of happiness has enhanced the need for happiness advice.

Once predestination governed a traditional life and life choices were restricted. Today people often have a wide range of options available. Individual choices can make the difference between happiness and misery, but it is difficult to foresee the consequences of such choices. Therefore it is understandable that people seek counseling in their pursuit of happiness.

## **1.2 Plan of this special issue**

This issue sets out to chart the field of happiness counseling. The first aim is to give an idea of what is recommended for leading a happy life and to get an overview of the similarities and differences in the counsel that is provided. It will appear that there are more differences than similarities. This raises the question as to why recommendations differ so much, and this leads to the second aim of this issue: to get an overview of the logic underpinning these divergent recommendations. To that end we will explore the contexts in which these ideas emerged, and look at the intellectual history and the wider social and cultural background of the ideas. The fact that the various recommendations differ so much also raises questions regarding their applicability. Will we really become happier if we live up to the advice handed out by the various experts? This leads to the third aim of this issue, that is: an evaluation of the reality value of the various types of advice on offer today and in the past. Thus we also considered to what extent the various types of recommendations for a happy life fit the conditions for happiness observed in empirical research.

## **2. APPROACH**

In this special issue we consider a broad range of happiness advice. The papers describe cases drawn from different cultures, different periods in history, and from different intellectual traditions. Together the papers give a cross section of important players on the happiness advice market, but the picture is by no means complete. The present analysis is limited to some prominent examples. The different advisers have been—or still are—influential.

The papers about Epicurus (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, this issue) and Schopenhauer (Schalkx & Bergsma, this issue) deal with concrete advice from individual philosophers for ways of thinking and behaving. The other papers discuss schools of thought. The paper by Guoqing and Veenhoven (this issue) compares the advice for a good life provided in three classic Chinese schools of philosophy, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. This study limits itself to the earliest writings on these classic ideas. The paper by Berg (this issue) focuses on New Age, while Bergsma (this issue) discusses the modern genre of psychological self-help books.

## **2.1 Leading questions**

In each of these articles the following four questions are considered:

What is recommended for leading a happy life?

How does this advice fit into the worldview of the author or his or her way of thinking?

How does the way of thinking fit into a social, cultural and historical context?

Are the recommendations in line with what is known about the conditions of happiness?

## **2.2 Difference from earlier studies**

There have been earlier studies about happiness advice, mainly in the tradition of the humanities. These studies often focus on the ideas of one prominent intellectual. Examples are the studies about the guidelines for a happy life provided by Thomas Aquinas (Kleber, 1988), Epicurus (Tielsch, 1978), Kant (O'Connor, 1982) and Karl Marx (Peperzak, 1968). Other studies have a focus on a period in history, for instance the literature and way of thinking in France in the 18th century (Mauzi, 1960), the Middle Ages (Buschinger, 1990) or antiquity (Hufnagel, 2002). Two other studies deal with ideas of happiness presented in fairy tales (Bausinger, 1983) and happiness in the context of personal relationships as presented in popular magazines in the period 1951–1973 (Kidd, 1975).

These earlier studies most often concentrate on the first question in the bullet table given above. Some authors also tackle the relationship between conceptions of happiness or advice and a specific worldview or a social, historical or cultural context, but we were unable to find any study in the bibliography of the World Database of Happiness that examined the reality value of the advice (Veenhoven, 2006). The happiness enhancing or reducing effects of specific ideas is a subject that has been neglected to date.

## **3 RESULTS**

### **3.1 What is advised?**

Beginning with the earliest happiness advice that has come down to us through human history, we meet considerable divergence. By 500

B.C. Chinese philosophers had already formed three schools in classic Chinese philosophy: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. These schools have different views on how one should live. Confucianism inspires people to take care of others and to live a virtuous life. Its central concepts are friendship, family, responsibility, duty, learning, tolerance, conversation and reflection upon oneself. Taoism is much more individualistic and mystical than Confucianism and has little to say about serving society, but more about finding a balance between self and others, and self and nature. People should follow the natural order of things.

In Buddhism suffering takes the central role. The world is continually changing, the messages we receive from our senses are illusory and it is impossible to escape suffering, except by seeking liberation from a self-centered existence. This escape is possible by giving up social ties and even pleasant feelings (Guoqing & Veenhoven, this issue).

European philosophers do not agree among themselves about the road to happiness either (Annas, 1993). The early Greek philosopher Epicurus maintained that everybody can reach the state of feeling pleasant by following the ‘four-part cure’: ‘don’t fear God, don’t worry about death, what is good is easy to get, and what is terrible is easy to endure’. Rules number three and four need the most explanation. According to Epicurus feeling good is easy, because absence of pain is enough. All we have to do is to fulfil our desires in a sensible way, so we don’t get hooked on sensory pleasures. Pain is easy to endure, because chronic pain is not very intense and acute pain is not a problem either because it will not last long (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, this issue).

In contrast, the 19th century German philosopher Schopenhauer did not believe in true happiness, and the best possibility one had was a life relatively free from pain. Life is better if one’s complaints are trivial and boredom sets in; since not much good is to be expected from life, it is wise to try to be satisfied with as little as possible, and not to ask for more. Personality is considered an important factor for happiness (Schalkx & Bergsma, this issue).

Modern advice in the tradition of ‘New Age’ is rather diverse, but several common themes can be identified. New Age advice stresses the importance of spirituality, finding one’s true self and attaining self-knowledge. People are advised to trust their gut-feelings and to distrust experts. The need to connect with family, partners and all things in the universe is another theme. Meditation, positive thinking and the need to take control of one’s life are also prominent. The last themes are living healthily and simply (Berg, this issue).

Modern ‘self-help’ authors also form a heterogeneous group. They offer a blend of personal wisdom with ideas drawn from different schools of psychology. In general they seem to be influenced by humanistic psychology. They stress things like self-actualization, self-understanding, autonomy, tolerance, development of skills and finding meaning and purpose in life (Bergsma, this issue).

### 3.2 Social context of the advice

The different ideas about happiness are not just a consequence of the purely individual preferences of the people who gave the advice. The conditions of living at the time had a strong bearing on the sort of advice given, although the same circumstances also gave rise to different concepts regarding ways to become happy.

Guoqing and Veenhoven (this issue) discuss three classic Chinese philosophies: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The first two arose in China about 2,500 years ago, the last was imported from India 500 years after that. Ancient China was an agrarian society, where most people lived in close-knit communities, often in harsh conditions. The happiness advice was primarily aimed at nobility, people who had the means to support philosophers.

Epicurus (341–271 B.C.) lived at a time when philosophy flourished—the Hellenistic period in Greece. It was a time of great social and political upheaval, the mingling of different cultures and the decline of the city-state. Epicurus promised his followers happiness if they would live alongside him in a predictable

community called The Garden. His philosophy can be partly understood as a way of dealing with the political instability, wars and dynastic struggles and the feelings of alienation many felt at this time (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, this issue).

The philosophy of Schopenhauer (1788–1860), the founder of pessimism, is by no means a logical consequence of the great social circumstances of his time. It is more likely that Schopenhauer's own place in society was a driving force behind his happiness advice. He was part of the elite and worked in universities, but his ideas did not receive the acclaim that Schopenhauer felt they were entitled to. His social life and relationships did not bring him satisfaction either; his happiness advice can be thought of as a way of convincing himself that what he was missing was not important. Just like the fox decided in the fable of Aesop that the grapes must be sour as he could not reach them (Schalkx & Bergsma, this issue).

The New Age movement and psychological self-help books have gained importance in modern, individualistic multiple-choice societies. New Age thinkers are part of a counter culture that seems to rebel against the rationality and perceived harshness of modern societies. The happiness advice is in part a logical consequence of this position. New Age thinkers give the advice to connect with others, find your true self, distrust experts and live a simple life (Berg, this issue). Psychological self-help authors take an intermediate position between the counter and regular culture. They use ideas and theories drawn from all schools of psychology and are therefore more closely linked to the academic psychology establishment. Yet they take the liberty to cherry pick ideas, often without much concern for empirical data. Self-help authors are not taken very seriously by academic psychologists and are often ridiculed, although several renowned psychologists have written self-help books (Bergsma, this issue).

### 3.3 Intellectual context of the advice

The social background of happiness advisers certainly plays a part in the forming of their views on happiness, and how they counsel happiness, but their view on the world is even more important. The classic Chinese philosophers had different views on life. For Confucius life was about kindness and the concern for the well-being of others. The social group, society and conduct within it played a central part in the thinking of Confucius and it was up to the individual to function well in this context. Confucianism is also characterized by rationalism and optimism. Confucians believe that humans can realize their own ends, through their own ability, power and effort. Happiness is to be achieved by living virtuously. Taoism placed emphasis on Nature. This philosophy is more mystical and deals with the balance between human beings and Nature, between individuals and society, between oneself and other. The laws of Nature are considered all-powerful, so the best option is to follow the 'Tao', and not try to change it. Happiness is something that happens to you, when you no longer try to control the circumstances of life. Buddhism teaches that the world is continually in flux, and that people should liberate themselves from a self-centered existence in which suffering is inevitable. Buddhism has a more negative view on life and the ultimate goal of life is to step out of the wheel of life and death, to cease to be reborn. People should give up their illusory desire for happiness (Guoqing and Veenhoven, this issue).

For Epicurus the central goal in life was to feel good. Pleasure—*Hêdonê*—is intrinsically valuable and is the main criterion for all actions. Epicurus is quite

pragmatic. He advises people not to fear gods or death. Death is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist.' (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, this issue).

Schopenhauer was the founder of pessimism. In his view, humankind is led by the 'Will' which manifests on strong desires such as for sex, food, money and company: but these desires can never be fulfilled, and pain and suffering results. Even if you reach satisfaction, it will soon be boring. In essence life is bad, but you can make the best of it in two ways. You can become an artist or try to be an ascetic and repress the desires of the Will (Schalkx & Bergsma, this issue).

An important theme in New Age is the assumption that there is a spiritual dimension that is often described in terms of omnipresent cosmic energy, love and wisdom. The various religions are all based on the same cosmic truth. Two assumptions are basic. The first is holism that refers to the interconnectedness of different elements in the universe. It is impossible to get an idea about what is happening by focusing on elements in a reductionistic way. There is a lot of room for individualism. Personal experience is central in New Age. It is a form of self-spirituality. Happiness is to be achieved by trusting your gut-feelings and finding inner peace (Berg, this issue).

The psychological self-help books also emphasize personal experience. The central theme is that you can feel good about yourself and your life if you put effort into it. The pursuit of happiness is in your own hands. Personal growth, personal relationships and coping with stress are the most central themes. The self-help authors are strongly influenced by humanistic psychology with its focus on self-actualization and authenticity. Another important theme in self-help is the emphasis on human strengths, something that self-help has in common with the new school of 'positive psychology' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The flaws and weaknesses of the individual receive less attention (Bergsma, this issue).

### 3.4 Usefulness of the advice

The differences mentioned raise questions about the reality value of all this advice. If the wise disagree so much, at least some of them must be wrong. As announced we have tried to assess the applicability of the recommendations for a happier life by considering the fit with observed conditions for happiness in present day society.

#### 3.4.1 Method

The idea to review the efficacy of happiness advice might seem a bit grandiose. There is a lot that is unknown about the dynamics of individual happiness. What golden standard can be used to judge the happiness advice of others? The answer is that a golden standard does not exist, but there is a wealth of data that allows us to make a correlation between the happiness of an average person and certain conditions of living. For example, for most people a busy social life goes together with a higher level of happiness than a solitary life. These correlations allow us to check indirectly happiness advice. If an adviser tells you to live alone in a cave on a hill, it is not likely that the happiness of the average person who follows the advice will be enhanced.

### 3.4.2 *Notion of happiness: enjoyment of life-as-a-whole*

A complication is that different advisers aim at different aspects of the good life, although all advisers in this issue aim at getting us to feel as good about life as possible, when real happiness is not considered possible. The adjective ‘good’ in the context of quality of life can refer to meeting moral tenets. This can be judged by whether people live up to rules or ideals or whether they live deliberately up to their own life-plan. ‘Good’ can also refer to hedonistic qualities, life is good as long as it is enjoyed (Veenhoven, 2003).

Hedonism comes in two variants. The first can be described as living pleasantly, by maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. In this idea the emotions and moods from day to day are the measure for the quality of life. The other hedonistic concept of the good life takes happiness as a standard. In this view individuals have more freedom to attribute meaning to their own feelings. For example, an Australian forensic anthropologist, Clea Koff, was interviewed on Dutch television (De Wandeling, KRO, 16-04-04) after she had worked for nine years in Rwanda, excavating the victims of the 1994 genocide from mass graves. Her work gave her nightmares, but she did not mind because she felt she had made a meaningful contribution to the surviving relatives of the victims. Pain does not have to be the enemy of a good life in the second hedonistic concept of the good life, because it can be thought of as part of something good, such as a process towards personal growth, flow or mastering new challenges. In this view happiness is enduring satisfaction with life as a whole (Veenhoven, 2003). This view of the good life as a happy life is a central idea in classic utilitarianism (Bentham, 1789) and in this Journal of Happiness Studies. We have used this idea to check the evidence base of the advice.

### 3.4.3 *Analogy with evidence based health advice*

The central question in this special issue is whether the advice of the wise is likely to enhance hedonistic/utilitarianistic happiness if somebody was to follow the advice in a modern day society. Surprisingly, this is a question that not many scholars have tried to answer with the help of research data. The World Health Organization has used the following definition of health since 1948: ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (<http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/>). Happiness is considered to be an integral part of health by the WHO, but is not treated in the same way as the physical aspects of health. With the help of epidemiologic research it has been shown that habits like a healthy diet, enough exercise, no smoking and modest drinking reduce the risk of several kinds of disease and a lot of effort is being devoted to get people to practice healthy habits (De Ridder, 2003).

The general public is less well educated about the science of happiness. What kind of advice is likely to enhance the enjoyment of life? The World Health Organization does not offer a clue. One could say that we still live in the Middle Ages with respect to happiness. A ‘physician’ in those days gave the advice not to take a bath as a precaution against the bubonic plague, although lack of hygiene was an important contributing factor for catching this deadly disease. Since then empirical investigations have forced physicians to give up their armchair ideas about what constitutes a healthy lifestyle and to come up with evidence-based

recommendations. Will happiness advice go through a similar evolution?

If so, this could also enhance the physical aspects of health as well. Happiness can have a positive effect on longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen 2001, Pressman & Cohen, 2005) and a cognitive behavioral intervention to enhance positive, happy thoughts can reduce depression relapse (Fava, Grandi, Zielezny, Rafanelli, & Canestrari 1996). If we want to spread valid ideas about happiness, we may as well start with evaluating existing advice. This special issue can be thought of as an effort to evaluate happiness advice empirically and theoretically; but obviously the studies presented here are limited to a small number of examples.

#### 3.4.4 Results

The comparison between the health recommendations in the Middle Ages and modern happiness advice was too bleak. In our limited sample it is apparent that newer advice has a better fit with the empirical data than the older advice, but the older advice certainly has some valuable components. Apparently, individual happiness advisers do take the trouble to read the modern literature and are not primarily driven by their own moral ideas about the good life.

The classic Chinese philosophies are reviewed by Guoqing and Veenhoven (2004, this issue) following several themes. The first is how valuable life is in itself. A positive view on life correlates positively with happiness. Confucianism and Taoism have such a positive view, and Buddhism has a very negative view. The sense of Buddhism that life can be happy is probably harmful. Buddhism also has a negative view on personal social ties, whereas satisfaction with personal relationships is correlated strongly with happiness. Confucianism rightly recommends an investment in social ties. Taoism takes an intermediate position, and warns against losing individuality. Confucianism perhaps overstates that one should meet social obligations. The views on engagement in society are also divergent. Taoism prefers a retreat to Nature, Buddhism advocates withdrawal from all earthly commitments and Confucianism advises one to be fully involved in society. In modern societies more engaged citizens are happier on average. The central conclusion is that Confucianism offers the best chances for happiness and Classical Buddhism the worst.

Many Epicurian instructions about the good life fit modern correlational data about happiness. Epicurus recognizes the importance of the fulfilment of biopsychological needs of people. He also is right about the value of intimate relationships and that this is more important than materialism and status. His advice about moderation and varied pleasures is also accurate. His advice about engagement in society is less fortunate. Another shortcoming of Epicurus' happiness advice is that he focused too much on avoiding pain, which led to too much passivity in the pursuit of happiness (Bergsma, Poot, & Liefbroer, this issue).

The work of Schopenhauer is characterized by an irony. He recognizes that personality is a very important factor in happiness, but he fails to see the influence of his own personality on his happiness advice. His neurotic nature deprived him of satisfying relationships, but this does not mean that his advice for average readers to stay away from friendship and relationships is justified. Developing social skills and keeping active will make you happier in the long run (Schalkx & Bergsma, this issue).

New Age thinking can be described with the help of ten main

*Ad Bergsma* recommendations for a happy life. Berg (this issue) presents *The advice of the wise* data that suggests that seven recommendations have the potential to enhance happiness: become spiritual, be authentic, know yourself, connect with others, think positively, take control and live healthy. For two recommendations—meditate and follow your gut feelings or intuition— Berg was not able to find evidence whether the advice was beneficial for happiness or harmful. The advice to live a simple life justly warns against too much materialism, but robs people of many pleasures.

Important themes in the psychological self-help books that sell best in the Netherlands are personal growth, personal relations, coping with stress and finding one's identity. Bergsma (this issue) concludes that self-help authors search for happiness in directions that show a high correlation with subjective well-being, but there are a lot of recommendations in the self-help literature that are not up-to-date. Self-help is an area with acknowledged experts and proven psychobabblers and it is up to the reader to make a distinction between the two. There is some indirect evidence to suggest that reading self-help books may be a part of a healthy, active coping style.

#### **4 LIMITATIONS**

The most striking feature of this special issue has been the search for an evidence-base for happiness advice. A discussion of the limitations of this approach can be found in the afterthought in this issue (Bergsma, this issue). The afterthought also contains a sketch of an agenda for future research.

This Special Issue Ruut Veenhoven was a driving force in putting this special issue together. He offered valuable suggestions for the concept of the special issue and for all the papers in it. This special issue could not have been made without him. We owe him our greatest gratitude.

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