

Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis; Putting Ancient Wisdom to the Test of Modern Science*

Random House, London, 2006, 297 pp, ISBN 9780434013364

Jan Ott

Published online: 20 February 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

Jonathan Haidt is an Associate Professor at the University of Virginia and co-editor of “Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived”. His “Happiness Hypothesis” is an assessment of factors contributing to happiness. The assessment is properly based on ancient wisdom and modern psychology and is a plea for a balanced approach to avoid jumping to conclusions. The book is interesting for readers who want to know more about happiness and happiness-research.

Haidt discusses the importance of ten great ideas. The most basic of these ideas are about the divided self, changing your mind, the pursuit of happiness, love and attachments, and happiness as a result of the interaction between internal needs and external opportunities. First we discuss these basic chapters and then some interesting side-roads.

The Divided Self (chapter 1). An essential and recurrent element in the book is the distinction between our rational ego and our emotions and motives, each with specific dynamics. In Haidt’s metaphor: the rider and the elephant. If there is a conflict the elephant wins because the elephant is older in terms of our evolutionary history and considerably stronger. Haidt wants to stress the importance of cooperation between the two and this is an important fact to be taken into account in moral education. The rider must train and direct the elephant but has to respect its characteristics in order to be effective. An interesting claim in this chapter is that people without emotions are unable to make any decisions; without the emotional input of the elephant the rider will be mentally paralyzed.

Changing your mind (chapter 2), and *The pursuit of happiness* (chapter 5). Our happiness depends for a great deal on our way of thinking and how we see the world. Our individual genes have a strong impact on this way of thinking but we do have possibilities to make changes, for instance by meditation, cognitive therapy and Prozac. This implies that our individual happiness H does not completely depend on our biological genetic set-point S: H is more than S. Buddhists and stoics even go several steps further; they believe they are just riders and completely in control of

J. Ott (✉)
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: jan.ott@planet.nl

their mental state. They believe they can change their thinking by voluntary mental activities V . However, this vision is also too extreme and simple: our set-point and individual circumstances C have a considerable impact: H is more than V . This actually completes Haidt's happiness formula $H = S + C + V$, but in the next chapters he nicely specifies this formula.

Love and attachments (chapter 6) and Happiness comes from between (chapter 10).

According to behaviorists material circumstances have a decisive impact on our behavior and happiness. Haidt modifies this vision by following Harry Harlow and John Bowlby who have demonstrated the importance of inborn needs. Pleasant material circumstances "as such" are not sufficient; people need specific circumstances or opportunities to develop their inborn capabilities and emotional attachments. In this last chapter Haidt specifies his happiness-formula with a nice conclusion about the nature of happiness: happiness requires an adequate fit between internal needs and external opportunities and grows at the borderline between the self and the environment

This is the mainstream in Haidt's book but there are some interesting side-roads. The impact of adversity is always a fascinating puzzle in happiness research. In chapter 7, *The Uses of Adversity*, Haidt describes some positive effects that adversity may have on happiness. Adversity can help people to get a better understanding of their own personal strengths and can deepen social relationships. In other words: adversity can mobilize important psychological and social resources and by doing so demonstrate the existence of such resources. This has positive effects on contemporary and future happiness. Apart from that, adversity can help to reconsider and update priorities in life. Haidt also describes a more specific effect: the actual life of people is usually not an outcome of rational choices, but in many ways the outcome of accidental circumstances and incidents. In many lives this history has created some inconsistencies between basic personality traits, personal habits and goals people pursue in life. Adversity can stimulate people to face such inconsistencies and to do something about it. If such actions reduce inconsistencies and improve harmony, then this can also have a profound and structural positive effect on happiness.

Two other side-roads are Haidt's discussion of morality and the meaning of life in chapter 8, *The Felicity of Virtue*, and chapter 9, *Divinity With or Without God*. In Haidt's vision Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham deserve both a prize for coming up with a single moral rule, to be applied through the power of reason, that can cleanly separate good from bad. Kant's principle is the "categorical imperative": actions are only acceptable if the rules guiding this actions can be acceptable as general laws; breaking an inconvenient promise is not acceptable since breaking inconvenient promises can never be acceptable as a general law. Bentham's principle is "the greatest happiness principle": actions are morally acceptable if they, in their consequences, increase the average happiness. Haidt admires both philosophers but has two problems with their interpretation of morality; an interpretation that has become dominant in our modern times. First it weakens morality and limits its scope because it confines morality to specific situations and dilemmas. The ancient philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, saw morality as a matter of character, at work in everything a person does. Haidt prefers their interpretation of morality as "an ethics of virtue". Morality in that sense, as practical wisdom, is important for happiness and Haidt admires Franklin who developed such wisdom deliberately. Haidt's second problem with our modern interpretation of morality is that it is based

on bad psychology because it is only based on human rationality—the rider—and has nothing to do with human emotions—the elephant. Moral education, for instance in our treatment of animals, will be more effective if it is supported by emotions.

Meaning is another important issue in Haidt's work; not as a linguistic problem of finding a definition or metaphor, but as a question of purpose in life. Haidt makes a distinction between two questions:

1. What is meaning or the purpose of life?
2. What is meaning or the purpose within life?

The first question looks at life from the outside, it looks at people—and everything else—as objects. This question is properly addressed by theologians, physicists and biologists. The second question looks at life from the inside, from the living subject's point of view. According to Haidt this second question is empirical and can be examined by scientific means; this question is properly addressed by theologians, philosophers and psychologists. Haidt ignores the first question and tries to answer the second one. At that point he returns to the external conditions C in his happiness formula. Love and work—at the borderline between internal needs and external opportunities!—are in his vision the most important conditions for a meaningful and happy life. Meaning and happiness are obviously closely connected in Haidt's vision.

Haidt's book is obviously an excellent piece of work. Perhaps we can make just two critical comments. Haidt's argument that "an ethics of virtue" is important for individual happiness as a type of practical wisdom is convincing. There is much to be said in favor of stimulating such wisdom in schools and otherwise; even if schools and people prioritize different virtues. However, a broader interpretation of morality to incorporate such "ethics of virtue", is debatable. Modern morality and ethics are indeed about specific dilemmas in human relations and seek rational and socially acceptable solutions. There is nothing wrong with that. The real problem appears to be the lack of implementation of morality. Discrepancies between rationality and emotions—or the rider and the elephant—contribute to this failure, but a broader interpretation of morality would only disguise this problem, without offering a solution. A broader interpretation could also create serious conceptual problems, because the distinctions between morality, social values and individual virtues would become unruly. A second critical remark concerns Haidt's vision on meaning within life. He believes that theologians, philosophers and psychologists can find meaning in life by scientific research, since meaning is a suitable object for empirical research. This is also debatable. People can only create their own meaning, as individuals or collectivities, by the attribution of values to anything they choose. This attribution is a nice object for social research but this research will never provide us with any answers about the meaning within life as such. We must always make our own decisions about values and meaning within our own life!