



Chapter 3

PROMOTING HAPPINESS ETHICS: THE GREATEST HAPPINESS PRINCIPLE

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What should be the purpose of our lives and what is the source of our ethical obligations? In the 19th century most people would have given a broadly similar answer to these questions: “We should live as God commands and, if we do, we shall find our reward in the life hereafter.”¹ These beliefs were sustained by frequent attendance at church, mosque or temple, which provided a combination of uplift, comfort, social support and, in some cases, fear.

Since the 19th century things have changed substantially, especially in the West. Modern science has challenged the belief in a God who intervenes, and in a life after death. Though 59% of the world’s population still describe themselves as religious, the proportion has fallen in most parts of the world, and this trend is likely to continue.² Where religious belief declines, a new view of ethics emerges. The rules of behaviour are then seen as made by man rather than by God in order to improve the quality of our human life together.

But how well can these rules survive without the religious sanction? To some extent they persist by force of habit. But their hold is weakening. In 1952 half of all Americans thought people led “as good lives - moral and honest - as they used to.” There was no majority for the view that things are going to the dogs. But, as the table shows, by 1998 there was a three-to-one majority for precisely that view - that people are less moral than they used to be.³

| Percentage saying that people lead “as good lives-moral and honest-as they used to” (United States) | |
|---|----|
| 1952 | 51 |
| 1965 | 43 |
| 1976 | 32 |
| 1998 | 27 |

Clearly there has developed, to a degree, a moral vacuum, into which have stepped some quite unwholesome ideas.

Many of these ideas are highly individualistic, with an excessive emphasis on competition and on personal success as the key goal in life. In this view each person’s main obligation is to themselves. An extreme proponent of this view is the writer Ayn Rand, who became the favourite guru of the U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan. In this world individuals do of course collaborate sometimes, but only when it is in their own individual interest. There is no concept of the common good, and life is largely a struggle for places on the ladder of success.

But such a struggle is a zero-sum game, since if one person rises another must fall. In such a world it is impossible that all should progress. Instead, if all are to progress, it has to be through a positive-sum game where success for one brings success for others.

So we need a new ethics which incorporates the best values to be found in all religions, but which is equally convincing to people with no religious faith at all. As the Dalai Lama has put it,

“For all its benefits in offering moral guidance and meaning in life, religion is no longer adequate as a basis for ethics. Many people no longer follow any religion. In addition, in today’s secular and multicultural societies, any religion-based answer to the problem of our neglect of inner values could not be universal, and so would be inadequate. We need an approach to ethics that can be equally acceptable to those with religious faith and those without. We need a secular ethics.”⁴

So there are two key questions that need answering.

First, what **ethical beliefs** could best represent universal values in a way that is based on human need and not divine command?

And, second, what kinds of **secular organisation** are needed to promote and sustain ethical living in the way that churches, mosques and temples can?

The greatest happiness principle

So, first, what ethical idea based on human need can best fill the moral vacuum left by the decline of religious belief? The answer must surely be the great central idea of the 18th century Anglo-Saxon Enlightenment on which much of modern Western civilisation is based.⁵ This can be expressed in three propositions.

- We should assess human progress by the extent to which people are enjoying their lives—by the prevalence of happiness and, conversely, the absence of misery.
- Therefore, the objective of governments should be to create conditions for the greatest possible happiness and the least possible misery. As Thomas Jefferson put it, “The care of human life and happiness ... is the only legitimate object of good government”.⁶
- Likewise the obligation of each of us is to create the greatest amount of human happiness that we can in the world and the least misery. (Overall happiness of course includes our own.)

And in all of this it is more important to reduce unhappiness (or misery) than to increase the happiness of those who are already higher up the scale.⁷

These three propositions are what may be called the “greatest happiness principle”. It was Proposition 1 which inspired many organisations, like the OECD, the EU and many governments, to reassess their answer to the question: what is progress? And it was Propositions 1 and 2 which have mainly inspired the production of successive World Happiness Reports - our hope has been to display enough of the new science of happiness to enable policy-makers to make happiness a practical goal of policy.⁸ But it is Proposition 3 that we wish to promote in this chapter, because we believe it should be the

central principle which inspires those billions worldwide for whom religion no longer provides the answer to how we should live.⁹

The principle is frequently misunderstood.¹⁰ For example, it does not assume that people are only concerned about their own happiness. On the contrary, if people only pursued their own happiness, this would not produce a very happy society. Instead the greatest happiness principle exhorts us to care passionately about the happiness of others. It is only if we do so that true progress (as we have defined it) can occur.

But what is so special about happiness? Why not judge our progress by our wealth or our freedom or our health or education, and not just our happiness? Clearly many things are good. But different goods are often in competition. My spending more on health may mean spending less on education. Or wealth-creation may require some limitations on freedom. So we have to ask why different things are good? And in most cases we can give sensible answers. For example ‘Wealth makes people feel good’ or ‘Ill health makes people feel bad.’ But if we ask why it matters how people feel—why happiness is good—we can give no answer. It is just self-evident. So happiness is revealed as the overarching good, and other goods obtain their goodness from the fact that they contribute to happiness. And that is why an “impartial spectator” would judge a state of human affairs by the happiness of the people.¹¹

The greatest happiness principle has a universal appeal. It has the capacity to inspire, by mobilising the benevolent part of every human being. In the language of Jews, Christians and Muslims, it embodies the commandment to Do as you would be done by, and to Love your neighbour as yourself. In the language of Hinduism and Buddhism, it embodies the principle of compassion—that we should in all our dealings truly wish for the happiness of all of those we can affect, and we should cultivate in ourselves an attitude of unconditional benevolence.¹²

Is there any prospect that we can achieve such a caring way of life? Many people are skeptical. They believe that human nature is inherently selfish and we should just accept that fact. After all, it is the fittest who survive, and those must be the people who put No 1 first. But this crude form of Darwinism is quite contrary to the modern understanding of human nature and of human evolution, since it is the human instinct to cooperate which has given humans their extraordinary power over most other vertebrate species.¹³ The fact is that we have two natures, one selfish and one altruistic, and it is the function of our ethical culture to promote the altruist within us over the egotist.

In this context, an ethical system that favours not only others' happiness but also our own has a much better chance of being implemented than one that is pure hair-shirt. It is therefore a huge advantage of the greatest happiness principle that it requires self-compassion as well as compassion towards others.

Organisations for ethical living

Not all readers will agree with the greatest happiness principle. But we can all agree on one thing. In an ever more secular society we urgently need non-religious organisations which promote ethical living in a way that provides inspiration, uplift, joy and mutual support—through regular meetings of like-minded people. Such organisations should not be anti-religious—they should simply meet a human need which, for many people, religion cannot meet.

There are as yet surprisingly few secular organisations that perform this role. Sunday Assemblies are one attempt.¹⁴ 'Humanist' organisations are another, but many of these focus mainly on attacking religion. Increasingly, Westerners are turning for spiritual support to non-theistic Buddhist or mindfulness groups. Other supportive organisations include Alcoholic Anonymous

and other anonymous groups, but they cater only to people with specific problems. Then there are of course millions of charities like the Red Cross/Red Crescent which provide inspiring examples of ethical living, but again they are devoted to fairly specific causes. There are also general purpose ethical organisations like Rotary International or the Freemasons, but they have limited membership.

By contrast, churches, mosques and temples are open to all and their message is universal—it relates to every aspect of life and provides a sense of meaning, uplift and connection. We need equivalent secular organisations. There must be many more such organisations than I have mentioned, and by the end of this century they will surely be everywhere.

Action for Happiness

One such pioneering organisation is Action for Happiness (www.actionforhappiness.org), founded five years ago. Each member pledges to “try to create more happiness and less unhappiness in the world around me.” To support this, the movement offers online a combination of modern positive psychology and traditional wisdom from both West and East. And, to facilitate the development of groups which meet regularly face-to-face, it offers an 8-session course on Exploring What Matters, which can be led by any well-motivated volunteer. After the first sessions these groups continue to meet regularly, drawing on a standard format suggested by the movement.

The patron of the movement is the Dalai Lama, who views it as a practical organisation promoting many of his views on happier living. To date 60,000 people in 170 countries have joined and made the pledge.

It is impossible to foresee what pattern of secular spiritual organisations will develop over

the century. But history shows the necessity for humans of some organised form of spiritual life and regeneration. I would welcome information from other secular organisations which see this as their role.

Conclusion

We live in an increasingly irreligious age, but we have to ensure that it becomes more, and not less, ethical. So the world needs an ethical system that is both convincing and inspiring. In this chapter we offer the principle of the greatest happiness as one which can inspire and unite people of all ages from all backgrounds and all cultures. But to sustain people in living good lives, we need more than a principle. We need living organisations in which people meet regularly for uplift and mutual support. To create secular organisations of this type is surely one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century.

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- 1 In Hinduism there are many gods, and in the stricter forms of Buddhism there are none. But in both faiths there is a reward in the next life.
 - 2 WIN/Gallup International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism (2012), Table 3 gives data comparing 2012 with 2005 for 39 countries. In the majority religiosity had fallen. In the U.S. for example the proportion who called themselves religious fell from 73% to 60%. Similarly, weekly U.S. attendance at a place of worship fell from 43% to 36% (see Gallup Historical Trends www.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx). Cross-sectional evidence within countries worldwide shows that religious people are on average poorer, less-educated and older. This may help to explain the overall downward trend in religious belief. For evidence on whether religion improves happiness and why, see Diener et al. (2011).
 - 3 Putnam (2000), p.139.
 - 4 Dalai Lama (2012).
 - 5 See for example McMahan (2006), Bentham (1789), Mill (1861).
 - 6 Jefferson (1809).
 - 7 The 18th century writers like Bentham used average happiness as the sole criterion for evaluating a state of affairs but we believe that the dispersion of happiness should also be given (negative) weight. See O'Donnell et al. (2014), Chapter 4.
 - 8 For further discussion, see O'Donnell et al. (2014).
 - 9 For a similar view, see Dalai Lama (2012).
 - 10 For further discussion, see Layard (2011), Chapter 15.
 - 11 For the idea of the impartial spectator, see Singer (1993).
 - 12 Jinpa (2015).
 - 13 See for example Ricard (2015).
 - 14 These have regular gatherings in 68 chapters across 8 countries www.sundayassembly.com.

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