

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

Happiness is composed of avoided misfortunes.

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This book is entirely devoted to a question which closely interests all of us: how can we improve the general conditions of our life? We frequently overreact to events simply because we do not understand them and, furthermore, because we do not know how to cope with them in a suitable way. However, our harmful reactions inevitably make us unhappy.

We are more educated than ever, but this progress remains limited and does not concern certain significant aspects of human life. We consider that the abilities to read, to write and to count are essential to accomplish our daily activities. These skills, that we progressively learned, give us undeniable advantages. Nevertheless, we leave to chance the responsibility to teach us how to respect others, how to correct our erroneous interpretations and to discover sources of conflicts and misunderstandings.

Thus, we get older and nobody ever explains to us how our psychological processes work. Yet, those processes govern our everyday life; they allow us to perceive the world, to interpret it, to maintain good relationships, in short, to achieve all of what to *live* implies!

Human being and life: no directions for use

Many experiences shape our existence. Unfortunately, education systems do not teach most significant abilities which help our daily life, as knowing how to develop effectual interpretations of reality, how to manage emotions or how to develop positive relationships.

Although it seems less practical than the abilities to read or to count, a better understanding of our psychological processes provides undeniable advantages that we could benefit from every day. This understanding leads to greater motivation, more harmonious relationships, and allow us to view events and react to them in a more moderated way. But, especially, it improves our capacity to make judgments, which is extremely

advantageous when time to make crucial decisions in our life comes.

In this book, I invite you to carry out an enthralling quest which will lead you to discover who you really are, to understand how you reason, how you interpret events in your everyday life and how you manage your relationships. By examining those various dimensions, we will see how it is possible to rise up in oneself a lifelong happiness.

The aim of this book could be summarized as follows: let us see how well-being can grow in ourselves, in our relationships, and how we can better understand our entire life through the way we understand it. Those three keys will open the doors of a true improvement that will be felt even in the smallest details of your daily life. Through a popularized synthesis of recent scientific research on the subject, I will explain to you all these absolutely fundamental “instructions” we can benefit from in our life.

A few definitions of happiness

In all periods of history, in all languages, human beings have continuously described a state which seems to be an ideal: happiness! Of course, the notion of happiness has not always been described with the same precision, and several terms were used to refer to it. Sometimes related to love, other times to religious bliss, happiness tempted philosophers in their writings and took many faces, from art work and wealth to artificial paradises. Religions and other rituals have also tended towards this harmony. These austere ways of living were an efficient mean to meet essential psychological and emotional needs, like self-esteem and social recognition. Those mystic experiences gave meaning to life; the beneficial feeling to be useful in the world. However, as progressed scientific research, we now found new explanations and new ways to fulfil those needs.

In a more or less concrete way, the human search for meaning became a quest for happiness, for an intense, constant and irreducible joy. But this attempt remains unrealizable insofar as the notion of happiness simply does not describe reality! Did popular wisdom not notice that no one, from the richest to the more accomplished person, has ever reached such a state of durable joy? Did we never notice that happiness arise in and through a collection of

moments of varying nature that are usually short, which agreeably punctuate our lives in a sporadic and unforeseeable way? For instance, such happiness seems to appear in different circumstances, as in love, when we succeed in a project which required much effort, or during the pleasure and relaxation travelling brings. Still, those states are happy *because* they are not permanent. The happiness I present in this book is not the one we usually imagine, simply because such a state of euphoria or constant satisfaction does not really exist. And to determine such an agreeable state is even more complicated: the way we define happiness varies from one person to the other!

Therefore, to win the first prize on the lottery can transform moments which previously remained too rare, even exceptional, into usual habits. To have the possibility, when you wish, to drink high-class wines or to travel around the world does not lead you to a permanent state of happiness. You will feel an intense pleasure only at the beginning. We always get accustomed to new states, as pleasant as they are! For this reason, these intense moments of satisfaction are only possible for short periods. It is interesting to note that, in the chemistry of the brain, these moments of exaltation rise through the work of particular molecules – neurotransmitters such as endorphin, dopamine and serotonin. Without these substances, we would feel no euphoria at all. However, as it happens with drugs, our body cannot constantly maintain this exceptional state and the effect of these natural substances remains restricted.

Thus, the limit of this definition of “happiness” is simply a physiological one. We quickly forget that it is the scarcity of these happy moments which makes their intensity! A constant happiness would rapidly desensitize our body to that state of natural euphoria. This is exactly what the poet Aragon meant when he wrote that no happy love exists. It is only the circumstantial dimension of love which makes passion rise, increasing the force and beauty of this ineffable feeling.

To everyone, happiness seems to constitute the main goal, but we defined it as a state of euphoria and constant satisfaction. In a more effective way, is it possible to find a more realistic definition of happiness, as a general way to improve our life? And, if this definition exists, how do we have to proceed to reach this state of well-being?

As far as we extend our look on the human history, we notice a systematic search for happiness. Already three centuries ago, Epicure, a Greek philosopher, wrote in *The Letter to Ménécée*: “It is necessary to study the means of acquiring happiness, since when we live happy, we have everything, and when we do not have it, we do all we can to acquire it”. In ancient philosophy or nowadays, we seek to improve our lives. But the new means I propose in this book to reach happiness, through the understanding of our psychological processes, are quite different from all of the means Epicure had in his time...

In today’s society, the popular definition of happiness is often synonymous with health, material comfort and richness. Unfortunately, few of these elements depend on what we are and on our personal values. This kind of happiness is defined primarily through external recognition: how much money we earn, who our friends are, which new technological innovations we bought, etc. As opposed to the happiness Epicure evoked, this kind of happiness is not one of moderation but, rather, is one of excess. Even wealthy people, those who easily fulfil their primary needs, benefit from diversified activities and cultural events, do not see where life leads them and they remain deeply dissatisfied without knowing what to do to improve their well-being. That shows how happiness relies neither on richness nor on popularity – or on other external factors – but it relies on ourselves! For this reason, we must learn how to develop interior skills to make our well-being grow and to counter the pressure society exerts on us.

The problem does not essentially lie in the nature of what society promotes. Values such as professional success can make people really happy. The danger rather lies in the way we adopt these values, often without analyzing their relevance with respect to our own values. For instance, if we are told that marriage leads to intense happiness, it is possible that future events will confirm this claim. But if we embrace this belief and have the misfortune to bear a difficult union, we will be vivaciously disappointed. If we always follow others’ beliefs, trusting only what the majority thinks, it will become extremely easy to lose ourselves, to forget our personal path and our personal values. Of course, this phenomenon is normal because social activities, relationships, mass media and publicity increasingly spread their influence. It is

natural to assimilate a part of those values. But if these variations of pleasure and recognition may sometimes yield happy moments, they do not ensure our permanent well-being.

I may now summarize the definition of happiness I started above. It cannot simple be social values, as wealth, or a constant state of euphoria, because our organism will necessarily reduce it. Everyone formulates his/her own definition of happiness according to his/her life experiences, his/her interests, and this definition often takes an absolutely ideal and unrealistic form which is impossible to maintain constant. So, what remains? As you notice, it is very difficult to define happiness in a universal way. We frequently make this mistake when we try to define this state through general characteristics, such as popularity.

In the following chapters, I will explain how to make happiness rise in yourself through inclinations that are absolutely personal. Instead of an unrealistic ideal, you will learn to develop a healthy living context, a functional state of mind related to the way you interpret events of your daily life. And, since it is useless to propose a single explanation that would include all forms of happiness, we can identify what is essential at its foundation: to identify and to control psychological processes and behaviours which make our misfortune. Then, it will be possible to nourish, for ourselves, the fertile garden in which our personal experience of well-being will grow.

Now that I defined happiness with so many restrictions, one is right to wonder what this state is, in positive terms! As opposed to an illusory and particularly intense happiness, I will introduce you to another kind of well-being. I will define happiness as a stable state of harmony in oneself, in our relationships and in almost all life events. I will explain what is fundamental to understand to reach and maintain this state of soft serenity. Afterwards, this realistic happiness will progressively become foreseeable, controllable and permanent.

Let us begin our fantastic journey inside the human mind, to understand the limits of our psychological processes and reduce their harmful consequences. Then we will be able to identify what is truly important in our life and we will turn our attention to the tools that will make a satisfactory and lasting happiness grow in ourselves.