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The need of the epicurean concept of “the pursuit of happiness” in the European Union

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Introduction

Happiness or subjective well-being may be considered to be a conscious experience of hedonic feeling or cognitive satisfaction, according to current consensus opinion of psychologists and neuroscientists¹. This notion philosophically corresponds to Epicurus' concept of happiness as the katastematic pleasure of lack of body pain (aponia) and lack of anxiety or soul suffering (ataraxia)². The Athenian philosopher recognized that the pursuit of a blissful life is the goal of sane people.

Decades of psychosocial research has accumulated empirical evidence that subjective experience of well-being consists mainly of two interrelated components: cognitive life satisfaction and pleasant versus unpleasant moods and emotions³. Most studies do not distinguish between the two components of subjective well-being, but some people think that life satisfaction corresponds to cognitive evaluation of one's life as a whole, whereas happiness refers mainly to transient emotions⁴. The distinction between cognitive and emotional well-being is usually made by idealist philosophers who do not consider people as biological beings but prefer instead to treat them in theoretical terms⁵.

¹ Diener E. and Suh E.M. “Measuring quality of life: Economic, social, and subjective indicators”, *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 40, 1997, pp. 189–216; Frey B.S. and Stutzer A. “What can economists learn from happiness research?”, *Center for Economic Studies & Ifo Institute for Economic Research, 2001*, Working Paper No. 503, pp.1-37.

² Epicurus. “Letter to Menoecus”, Diogenes Laertius 10.128

³ Diener E. and Suh E.M. 1997, p. 200.

⁴ Diener E., Suh E.M., Lucas R.E. and Smith H.L. “Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress”, *Psychological Bulletin*, 125, 1999, pp. 276–302.

⁵ Lazarus R.S. “The cognition-emotion debate: A bit of history”. Chapter in: *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, Dalglish T. and Power M. (Editors) 1999, John Wiley and Sons, UK, pp. 3-19; Miettinen O.S. “Idealism and ethics of public-health practitioners”, *European Journal of Epidemiology*, 2005, 20, p. 807; Frankfurt H.G. “On Bullshit”. Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 33-34.

On the other hand, neurobiology and biological psychology have accumulated hard evidence that humans have at the same time instincts, emotions and cognitive functions, in agreement to naturalist philosophers like Epicurus. By observing the human nature, the Athenian philosopher recognized the fact that the basic needs of people lay in instincts, he determined the purpose of human life on emotional grounds (namely the pursuit of happiness), and he considered prudence as the supreme agent of selection of physical needs and of satisfaction and preservation of emotional balance through virtue and friendship⁶. Therefore, in this presentation the terms happiness, subjective well-being and life satisfaction will be treated as synonymous with each other and the greek word eudaimonia.

The unhappy situation in the European Union

In this presentation, I will show evidence that unhappiness or low life satisfaction is consistently reported by many Europeans over a period of several decades and that this fact results from the main widespread philosophies in Europe which do not aim at happiness of individuals. In addition, I will argue that the life disappointment felt by many Europeans is highly correlated to widespread notions of “democracy deficit” and lack of public support for EU.

In an era of socioeconomic crisis, there is accumulating evidence that in almost all European Union (EU) countries (including Greece) over 60% of people declare that they do not feel happy or very satisfied with life⁷. Certainly, the EU countries share this average lack of life satisfaction with most of the rest of the world. In the 2013 Global Happiness Report of 156 countries, only eight of the 28 EU states were among the 20 happiest countries in the world, while twelve were distributed in places 21-51 and the remaining eight (including Greece) in places 70-144⁸.

One might argue that the overall unhappiness in EU should be circumstantial due to the recent financial crisis, but this does not seem to be true. I will provide two lines of empirical evidence that support against the notion that unhappy EU citizens is a recent phenomenon.

The first line of evidence includes Eurobarometers data since 1974, which indicate that the unhappiness trend of most EU countries is similar for forty years⁹. Over a period of four decades and despite some fluctuations, less than 40% of people in eleven EU countries have been declaring to be happy or very satisfied with life. In three countries (namely The Netherlands, Luxemburg and Sweden), 40-50% of citizens have been reporting to be satisfied with life, while in one notable exception (Denmark), subjective well-being has been fluctuating between 50% and 65%¹⁰. The

⁶ Yapijakis, C. ‘Ethical teachings of Epicurus based on human nature in the light of Biological Psychology’, 23th World Congress of Philosophy, August 4-10 2013, Athens, Greece; www.epicuros.gr/artheta/23_filo.pdf

⁷ europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/index_en.cfm

⁸ Helliwell J., Layard R. and Sachs J. (Editors). “Global Happiness Report”, 2013.

⁹ europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/index_en.cfm

¹⁰ Christensen K., Herskind A.M., Vaupel J.W. ‘Why Danes are smug: comparative study of life satisfaction in the

most plausible explanation for the Danes' happiness is that it stems from their mentality of fully enjoying the present without having high expectations for the future¹¹. This is exactly what Epicurus recommended, namely to enjoy the present with prudence, self-sufficiency, virtue and friendship without fear or vain desires for the future¹².

Furthermore, a second line of evidence comes from an EU survey long before the current socioeconomic crisis. A European quality of life survey, which was published in 2005, indicated a great deal of resignation and disappointment of Europeans¹³. The survey reported that more than one third of EU citizens were pessimistic about the future, and they believed that they were forced to do incorrect things in order to get ahead those days, that good luck was more important than hard work for success, and that life had become so complicated that they felt lost.

Interestingly, the survey noticed that despite an unequal distribution of happiness in a north-south divide and a west-east divide, the disappointment pattern was consistent in almost all EU countries regardless of economic development. According to the survey: "Once national prosperity has reached a certain level beyond hardship and the fulfillment of basic needs is assured, subjective well-being remains only weakly linked to such a general measure of economic welfare, and other country differences, such as education, life expectancy or the quality of society play an important additional role"¹⁴. As a rule, citizens of almost all EU countries declared that were mostly satisfied by family life and were least satisfied by education and standard of living¹⁵.

The survey started with the observation that "interventions to promote subjective well-being have not been explicitly at the centre of a European social policy strategy up to now"¹⁶ and concluded: "The core message of this report is that subjective quality of life, as a main provider of individual welfare, can be improved by raising the individuals' standard of living, by developing the political and democratic culture in a country and by providing citizens with better opportunities to live a life according to their needs and aspirations. Individual characteristics and psychology might determine subjective well-being to a large extent, but social inequality and the quality of a society are also decisive factors. Their improvement and modification can and should be of immediate concern for policymakers"¹⁷.

According to several studies and surveys, EU is faced with a "democracy deficit" and

European Union', *British Medical Journal*, 333, 2006, pp. 1289-1291.

¹¹ Christensen K., Herskind A.M., Vaupel J.W. 2006, p. 1290.

¹² Epicurus. "Letter to Menoeceus", Diogenes Laertius 10.127,130-133.

¹³ Böhnke P. "First European Quality of Life Survey: Life satisfaction, happiness and sense of belonging". 2005, pp. 17-18. <http://www.eurofound.eu.int/areas/qualityoflife/eqls.htm>.

¹⁴ Böhnke P. 2005, p. 21.

¹⁵ Böhnke P. 2005, p. 26.

¹⁶ Böhnke P. 2005, p. 1.

¹⁷ Böhnke P. 2005, pp. 95-96.

diminishing support from its citizens¹⁸. The lack of public identification with the EU is a result of the lack of more accountable governance but, more profoundly, communication structures, which make political community possible. Obviously, it is not irrelevant that the EU policies mainly aim in economic growth and prosperity and not in well-being of people. This notion reflects the fact that the right to pursue happiness is not included in the 54 articles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union¹⁹. Of course, this issue is contrary to the will of the people, in general. A survey in the United Kingdom found that 81% of the population agreed that the Government's primary objective should be the creation of happiness, not wealth²⁰.

The absence of the right of happiness in EU is not coincidental, but it is philosophically deliberate, since it is well known that one of the main foundations of European civilization is philosophy. According to Nebredø, the two main philosophies that shape the background of modern European thinking is the Neoplatonic/Christian Center-right Europeanism and the Stoic/Kantian Enlightenment Center-left Europeanism²¹. None of these two philosophical approaches seem to be interested mainly in human individual well-being. The Neoplatonic/Christian tradition is characterized by idealistic, elitist and teleological ideas with faith in God, virtue and justice as the abstract supreme goods. On the other hand, the Stoic/Kantian Enlightenment is characterized by rational, deontological and social duty ideas with reason, virtue and social justice as the abstract supreme goods. Neither of these philosophical approaches places emphasis on individual value of every human being, like the humanistic ethical philosophy of Epicurus.

The need for happiness in EU

The philosophers Aristotle and Epicurus were the first to realize that the purpose of philosophy is happiness. Furthermore, Epicurus recognized the right to well-being of all people teaching wealthy and poor men and women of all classes including slaves. The Athenian philosopher taught that happiness corresponds to absence of mental and physical pain and may be attained through observation of nature, prudence, free will, virtue and friendship.

Many centuries later, in 1776, the main author of the American Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, influenced by Epicurus' teachings, included among basic human rights the right of pursuit of happiness. Jefferson wrote to a close friend: "As you say of yourself, I

¹⁸ Ward D. "The European Union democratic deficit and the public sphere: an evaluation of EU media policy", 2002, IOS Press, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, p. 16; Tsoukalis L. "The Unhappy State of the Union", Policy Network, 2014, UK, p.27, <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/The-Unhappy-State-of-the-Union.pdf>

¹⁹ Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2010/C 83/02). *Official Journal of the European Union*, 2010, C 83/389-403.

²⁰ Holá B. "Key Competence Happiness—A New Horizontal Theme in Adult Education and Counseling". European Commission project report, 2009, p. 3.

²¹ Nebredø T. "Past and present sources of European Union. A comparative historical-institutionalist analysis", Doctorate thesis, 2009, University of Bergen, Norway, pp. 15-19.

too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us”²².

Due to the legacy of Jefferson, for more than two centuries the people of the United States of America know it is their right to pursue happiness in their democratic society, regardless of their financial status²³. Even in the first part of the 19th century a democratic culture was rooted in USA supported by public spirit, as the French Tocqueville noted with admiration back in 1840:

“There is a sort of patriotism... [which] is engendered by enlightenment, grows by the aids of laws and the exercise of rights, and in the end becomes, in a sense, mingled with personal interest. A man understands the influence which his country's well being has on its own; he knows the law allows him to contribute to the production of his well being, and he takes an interest in his country' s prosperity, first as a thing useful to him and then as something created”²⁴.

In light of the above, there seems to be a correlation of democracy deficit, lack of public identification with the EU and widespread unhappiness of Europeans. The time has come for introducing the Epicurean concept of the pursuit of happiness in the EU culture²⁵. The writings of Christian and Enlightenment philosophers who were fond of Epicurean philosophy like Gassendi, Condillac, Diderot, La Mettrie, Jefferson and others may serve as intellectual bridges with current main philosophies.

The Declaration of the right of happiness in the EU

In 2012, the United Nations (UN) decided to recognize that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal and right, designating the 20th of March of every year as International day of Happiness²⁶. According to the UN resolution, the General Assembly was “conscious that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal and recognized the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal goals and aspirations in the lives of human beings around the world and the importance of their recognition in public policy objectives”. Also, UN “recognized the need for a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic growth that promotes sustainable development, poverty eradication, happiness and the well-being of all peoples”.

Based on the above, at the Fourth Panhellenic Symposium of Epicurean Philosophy that was held in Pallini, Athens in February 2014, I proposed the Declaration of the right of happiness in the

²² Mapp A.J. “Thomas Jefferson, Passionate Pilgrim: The Presidency, the Founding of the University, and the Private Battle”, 1991, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, p. 295.

²³ Kahneman D., Diener E. and Schwarz N. (Editors). “Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology”, 1999, Russell Sage Foundation Press, New York, USA; Kahneman D. and Deaton A. “High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2010, 107(38), pp. 16489-16493.

²⁴ Tocqueville A. “Democracy in America. Parts 1 and 2”, 1840 (translation Lawrence G. 1998), p. 236.

²⁵ Melinte I.E. “The pursuit of happiness: Attaining a higher level by means of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union”, *International Journal of Communication Research*, 2013, 3, pp. 147-151.

²⁶ United Nations General Assembly on 28 June 2012, 66/281. “International Day of Happiness”.

European Union that concludes thus: “We (the people of EU) ask for the recognition of this right of happiness in the European Union, since it is self-evident that it is a fundamental human right and its non-recognition in any part of the world constitutes the violation of this natural right”²⁷. The Declaration of Pallini, Athens, as otherwise known has been initially signed by 114 people, and has been officially supported by the Mayor and Municipal Council of Pallini. So far it has been translated in 12 European languages with the aim to collect thousands of signatures across Europe, so that the issue be discussed in the European Parliament and the right of the pursuit of happiness to be ultimately recognized in the EU.

It is self-evident that the recognition of the fundamental human right of happiness in the European Union is a historic need for Europeans, in order to change their way of thinking and policies towards a brighter and happier future.

²⁷ Yapijakis C. “Epicurean influences in modern Humanism”. 4th Panhellenic Symposium of Epicurean Philosophy, 14-15 February 2014, Pallini, Athens, Greece; <http://epicuros.gr/pages/en.htm>