

**Alejo José G. Sison, *Happiness and Virtue Ethics in Business. The Ultimate Value Proposition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015.**

*Happiness and Virtue Ethics in Business* is the latest book from Alejo Sison, who is a professor of philosophy at the University of Navarra and internationally recognized as a leading scholar of virtue ethics, one of the three main areas in ethics, along with the deontological and utilitarian ethics. The book's main theme – happiness – has engaged philosophy since ancient times, but has recently taken on a different hue that distances it from its meaning in classical antiquity. Happiness is essential for understanding Aristotle's virtue ethics, but in the second half of the twentieth century, especially with Richard Easterlin, it became identified with individual, subjective wellbeing. As the subtitle of this book indicates, Sison gives readers a strong argument for moving past modern social science's quantitative and empirical approaches (so-called "modern happiness studies") and reinstating an objectivist approach to virtue.

Throughout the 300 pages that make up this book, Sison contrasts the different topics that have been studied regarding happiness with an integrative approach to virtue. This approach is nothing more than the expression of a more realistic human rationality, which instead of splitting up the various aspects involved, integrates them into an overall picture of what constitutes a successful life. That is precisely what the Greek notion of "eudaimonia" meant, which Sison presents in the final chapter, developing an Aristotelian position that gives unity and meaning to the text. It is worth noting that both the final chapter and the epilogue provide an excellent summary of the Aristotelian approach applied to business, a line of research that Professor Sison anticipated in his earlier book *The Moral Capital of Leaders: Why virtue matters* (Edward Elgar, 2003).

*Happiness and Virtue Ethics in Business* also presents a good summary of the various results that modern happiness studies have put forward, which focus on analyzing the correlation between specific variables such as income, consumption, motivation, psychological satisfaction, biological disposition, work, leisure, inflation, politics, religion, etc. and happiness understood from an individual and subjective point of view. Sison attempts to transcend this approach supplementing it with Aristotelian virtue ethics.

There is a significant difference between the classical and modern approaches. While for Aristotle happiness can only be understood within a community, which supports certain assumptions and values, for the modernist line that Easterlin initiated, happiness is nothing more than a sense of wellbeing that is subjectively and individually experienced. It is worth noting that this approach deliberately

avoids normative philosophical discussion and focuses on subjective psychological perceptions, unlike economic theories that analyze more objective indicators such as income level or gross product collected in a “utility function”. The curious thing about this approach is that, thanks to the help of many experimental tools, it acquires a certain sense of objectivity in accordance with current scientific paradigms. While accuracy is important in measuring, we should remember the Aristotelian warning that not all realities are measurable to the same degree of accuracy and that “the study of ‘Eudaimonia’ or human flourishing within the political community, which requires more flexible standards” (29). In any case, instead of using technique and measuring instruments without reflection, they should be used within a narrative or interpretive horizon that gives them a meaning that is truly human.

By including an exhaustive, up-to-date and widely inclusive examination of the main issues that modern happiness research has addressed, Sison reveals that happiness studies quite obviously and systematically omit virtue and its crucial role in achieving happiness. The last chapter, therefore, develops an Aristotelian perspective that is laudable because it is objective and understands life in its entirety, it examines happiness as a rational development, and assumes a teleology in human life that demands effort and discipline, which makes happiness a reward of virtue or, in different words, human excellence. Aristotelian *eudaimonia* is presented as a praxis that includes the administration of both internal goods, which is the object of ethics, and external goods, i.e., economics, and within the latter provides a natural boundary, subordinating both to the community realm of politics since «happiness, mainly, is not a matter to be thought about, but one to be lived and experienced by real individuals of flesh and blood» (250).

«Happiness is a complex human phenomenon with an inescapable social dimension, where context and quality are of primary importance» (33); that is to say, happiness is not material or quantitative, it cannot be measured in strict terms, and it has a common foundation based on universal human experience that makes it objective. This does not mean that there is such a thing as an objectively virtuous action independent of the person who performs it; rather, it means that the prudent man performs virtuous action. «All virtuous acts require prudence (*phronesis*) or practical wisdom, the habit of making rational choices accompanied by the right reasons to act in a certain way, given a set of circumstances» (254). Thus, the challenge is posed: it is imperative that businessmen, towards whom this book is primarily aimed, develop the virtue of prudence or practical rationality.

The modern happiness studies that are reviewed throughout this book begin from the individualism of *homo economicus*, which is directly influenced by neoclassical economics. It is nothing more than a rational abstraction explained from production and consumption, or rather, consumerism, which is the expression of the moral failure of a desire that cannot be educated or controlled because it has lost its ultimate reference. In the end, only an ideal of life, and the narrative that this ideal demands, can offer such a reference. «The recovery of Aristotelian virtue ethics serves to give a stronger foundation and greater integration or coherence to many of the findings of modern happiness research» (269), thus providing a more

realistic vision, which is essential for recovering the meaning of a truly human life. «Happiness is not something one acquires or simply does, but something one becomes [...] developing the proper virtues of character» (272). In short, as the book concludes, contrary to the modern way of thinking, happiness is not a right, but rather a reward of virtue. The book's scope transcends the limits of business by offering a clear diagnosis of the current cultural crisis and, what is more, presenting clues for overcoming it.

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