

Second nature

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A few weeks ago I wrote a column about the power of complex (composite) emotions. I stated that for instance (almost) no one is courageous at birth. But by combining the will with a lot of practice one can eventually become courageous. This also applies to other complex emotions, such as cheerfulness and resilience. By converting these complex emotions into a second nature (only the primary emotions are innate and therefore the first nature), we can certainly give direction to our lives and that is very important. On an individual scale, different second natures can yield very different life stories. However, it is certainly not the case that all successes and failure can be explained through this mechanism. How do the virtues (fuelled by complex emotions) relate to success and failure?

Indirectly and in principle unpredictable on an individual level. Some pessimists who see objections everywhere have reached the absolute top and some born optimists always seem to have little luck.

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Scientifically there is no evidence for the makeability of happiness. At the most, history shows that “good fortune” can be stolen; the wealth of one person, or even an entire nation, often passes over the backs of others. But we do not know anything about psychological happiness when we only look at material ‘happiness’ (prosperity). However, we do know, for example, that sudden fame and money in the lives of “ordinary” people often bring many (mental and emotional) complications. Many (Hollywood) stars have suffered from depression and alcohol and drug abuse. The younger the fame, the stronger the blame.

Happiness as a mental state must not be confused with material realities of happiness. Neither is one who made happiness into her second nature always partying, nor is someone who made melancholy into her second nature, necessarily depressed. However, happiness gurus often wrongly make this link. In her book *Smile or Die*, Barbra Ehrenreich writes that structural problems cannot be solved with, for example, a mindfulness course. In fact, it is dangerous to shift the responsibility for material well-being through psychology from the collective to the individual. Positive thinking then counts as the scourge of liberalism. In this way, those who have prosperity can rationalize away feelings of responsibility for the less fortunate.

Happiness and (mis)fortune are very individual matters of different origins: mental and material. They can not be (directly) traced back to each other. Prosperity can always turn into adversity and vice versa. This does not alter the fact that someone who has made courage or cheerfulness her second nature, has a different attitude to life than someone who, for example, has made lability into second nature. So if we can not opt for fame and fortune, we can choose to develop our second nature, and it is precisely those choices (plural) that make us who we are!