The happy organisation – a deontological theory of happiness

Section one   -   Happiness and responsibilities
TNT and the "moving the world"-campagne
In a recent interview Peter Bakker, CEO of *TNT* – a company providing mail and logistics services in over 200 countries, income of over a billion euros per year – explained why the company started its long-term "Moving the world"-campagne in 2003. In this campagne the company cooperates with the UN's World Food Program, providing logistic expertise and facilities and financial support of about 5 million euros yearly.
To summarise this interview very briefly, Bakker states that he feels it to be the company's responsibility to do something against the huge difference between rich and poor in and between the countries in which the company operates and to improve the living conditions of poor people in the so called third world. The second reason, he says, is that this project strengthens the motivation and commitment of employees. "People don't work for money alone anymore, they want to be proud of what they are doing, proud of the company's achievements, they want to see that the company, and thereby their work for the company, makes a difference, makes the world a little better. So, if you want your employees to keep motivated, if you want them to work harder, cooperate better and be more creative, and if you want to make the company attractive for new talented people to work for, simply being a financially sound and responsible company isn't enough anymore. You have to be socially sound and responsible as well."

To some readers Bakker's words about the company's responsibility to make the world better may seem to come right out of church, out of a world of high moral values and standards, upon which it is good to reflect now and then, or maybe every sunday, but which are still values and standards belonging to a world different and separated from the world of business. But the fact is that Bakker is no priest or vicar. He is a successful businessman, realising that the world of doing business has changed considerably in the last century.

About my grandfather, and how the world has changed
I sometimes give my students the example of my grandfather. Born in 1890, as the youngest of 23 children, living in a small apartment in Amsterdam, his father drinking spirit to escape from his daily misery. My grandfather started working at eight and the first thirty years of his life the only thing he was focused on was survival. He didn't care about working conditions or about the world around him, let alone about personal fulfilment or giving true meaning to ones life. His only care was earning enough money to survive, just as it was for most of the labourers at that time.

Luckily, for most people in the western world this situation has changed enormously. We generally have an income that allows us not to worry anymore about our physical survival. Furthermore, we have houses that are far more comfortable, we have fridges, washing machines and vacuum cleaners to make householding a lot easier, working weeks of five days, holidays and so on. And we have television and internet, which have made us far more aware of the world around us and how this globalised world affects our own lives. Also, these media have strengthened our belief in the value of our own opinions and the need to express them.
In short, all kinds of economical and technological developments in the last century have changed not only the world but our consciousness as well profoundly. We now want our personal opinions to be heard, in daily life and in our working environment as well, we don't simply want a reasonable wage, but also personal fulfilment, we want to do something with

our lives, give meaning to it, express our concerns, be a world citizen, for the simple fact is that, in this globalised world, we indeed all *are* world citizens.

Doing business in a network of social responsibilities
Back to business. The same developments we have described very briefly above have had a huge impact on organisations as well. First of all, the globalisation. Practically all organisations nowadays are dependent of a global market. Even my brother's bakery is. The price he has to pay for his grain isn't something he can settle himself, as maybe the baker did a hundred years ago, personally negotiating with a farmer or tradesman. There is a world grain market, as there is a world oil market, a world coffee market, and so on. This dependency makes organisations also dependent of all kinds of social developments in every part of the world.
Secondly, but equally important, is the fact that the impact of organisations on our world and our lives has grown hugely. On the one hand because our economic activities are seriously affecting our environment, our climate. On the other hand, because the big, multinational companies have become enormously powerful institutions, economically and politically.
Thirdly, and again equally important, the consciousness of organisations has changed, just as has happened to the people working in them. Organisations aren't closed, selfcontained, static systems anymore, they are open, dynamic systems constantly interacting with their stakeholders.
In other words, organisations have become living entities in the global and very complex system of life in general. And as every individual, because of his activities and thereby his influence on others, has a moral responsibility towards these others, every organisation also has a moral responsibility to the stakeholders it influences by its activities. Just as, in turn, the stakeholders have this responsibility towards each other and towards the organisations (see figure 1).
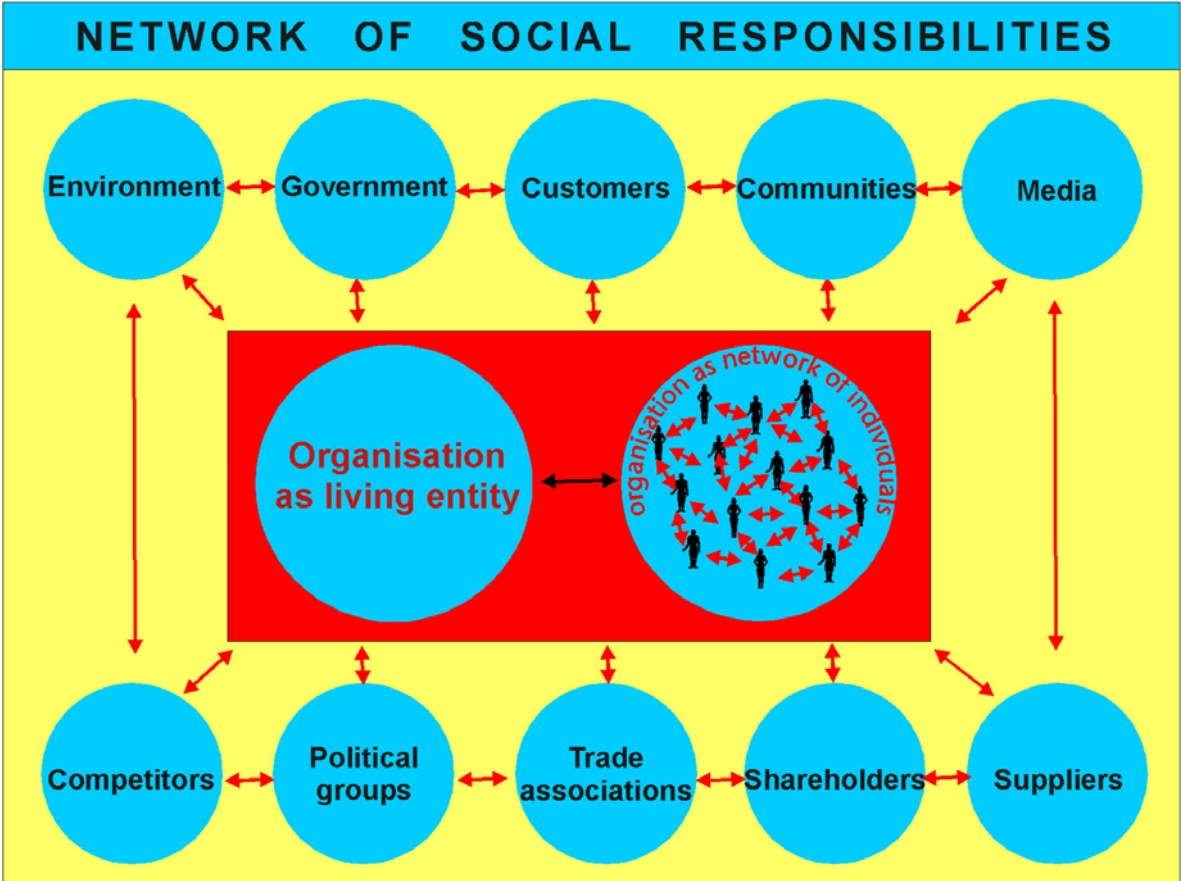

Figure 1   Network of social responsibilities of an organisation

Now, responsibilities can be seen as a burden, and sometimes they are. But the fact is, we can't do without them. To have some responsibility for the well being of ourselves, of other individuals, for the well being of a group or society or for preserving the earth, is actually the sole reason for our existence. So, every organisation has the responsibility to contribute to the well being of itself and all of its stakeholders. Not only because this responsibility is morally as indisputable as it is for us as individuals, but more importantly because this responsibility gives an organisation a chance to give meaning to its activities, to give meaning to its life. And finally, because this responsibility gives an organisation a chance not only to make money, but to become happy as well. No doubt all this doesn't make the life of organisations easier, but at the same time no one can deny that this is truly a chance well worth striving for.

Section two   -   Happiness as a moral obligation
About the relativity of height and weight of moral responsibilities
In the first section we have used the term happiness in the usual sense of a *state of mind*. However, we have made it less subjective by making this state of happiness dependent of taking responsibilities upon oneself – as individual or as an organisation. Also, we have implicitly equated happiness with meaningfulness. Giving meaning to ones life makes one happy and true happiness only finds itself expressed in a meaningful live. Thirdly, we have given happiness a strong moral dimension. Happiness is a moral 'thing', requiring high moral standards to be truly realised.

These assertions seem to be quite judgmentary. They more or less explicitly seem to say that, for instance, my grandfather couldn't have been happy in the first thirty years of his life, while focussing solely on survival, on generating an income. These assertions may even seem to say that my grandfather in this same period of his life lived according to low moral standards, however morally justifiable his choices and actions may have been given his circumstances.
Finally these assertions seem to indicate that there is a linear relation between number or size of responsibilities and degrees of happiness: people, or organisations, are more happy if they have more or 'heavier' responsibilities taken upon them.

None of these judgmentary conclusions are true. I guess my grandfather has had his moments of happiness, while focussing solely on survival, that is, while taking no other responsibility upon himself than looking after his own well-being. The question of low moral can be refuted as well. In his case the traditional moral hierarchy of interests, in which general interests and interests of a group are considered of higher value than mere selfinterests, is inverted and morally justifiable inverted as well. In other words, in the expression 'high moral standards', the 'height' is relative, defined by general moral theory in combination with situational data.

This relativeness of 'height' of morality also implies that the weight of responsibilities is relative, as is the number of responsibilities in relation to degree of happiness. One can be happy, focussing only on selfinterests and survival, and at the same time as well one can live a life which is morally completely justifiable and even a life which is worth living. When ones life is mainly concerned with survival, one has the responsibility to survive and succeeding will make you happy. When ones life is concerned with taking care of children, raising, educating and feeding them, succeeding in realising these responsibilities will make you happy, self-survival alone won't.

About the immorality of levels and hierarchy
On the other hand, the fact that one can distinguish levels of interests in relation to levels of responsibilities – self interest, general interest, responsibility for income, responsibility for the general good etc. – suggests that one can also distinguish levels of happiness. And - as the

example of my grandfather may have suggested already to some readers - these levels may well be derived from the wellknown Maslow-pyramid of psychological needs (see figure 2).
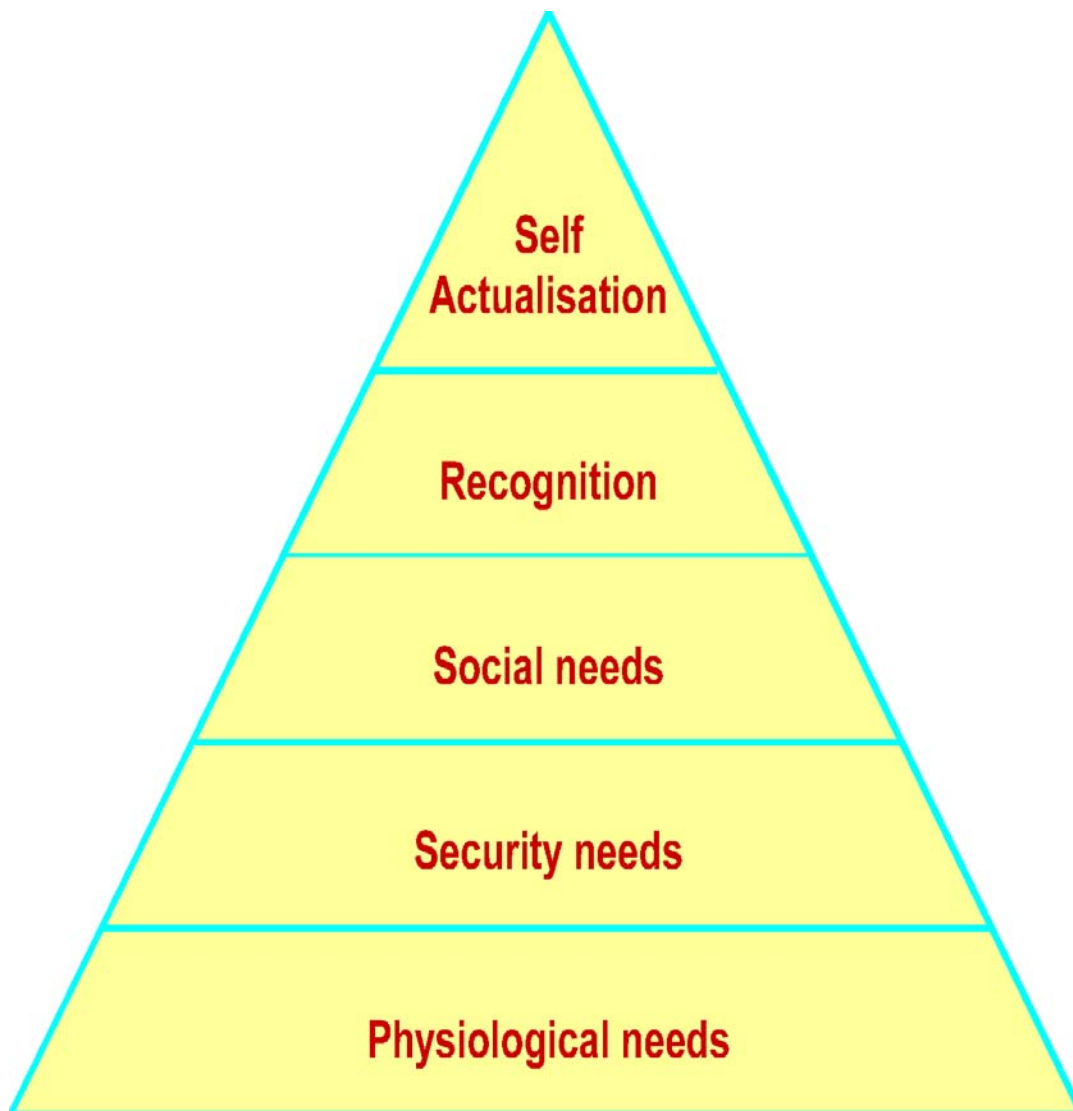

Figure 2   Maslow's pyramid of pschycological needs

However, when trying to distinguish levels of happiness in accordance with the levels of needs in the pyramid of Maslow, we must make one important critical remark about these levels. The 'Maslow-levels' suggest a form of hierarchy, but as we have seen above this hierarchy is very relative, subjective and dependent on context and circumstances. In this sense the pyramid-shape is misleading and even immoral, as well for these levels of needs – though Maslow may have found otherwise – as they are for our levels of happiness. In short, one level of happiness isn't 'better' or 'richer' or 'more worthwile' or 'more enduring' than any other level. Every distinct level just has its own context, its own sources from which the specific needs can be fulfilled and from which happiness can be attained. So I guess it's better to skip the word 'levels' altogether and replace it from now on with the word 'sources'. There are different sources of happiness, related to different contexts or situations one lives in.

The moral obligation to become happy
I want to stress that any judgment about the value of specific sensations of happiness linked to specific sources, is misleading. It is in fact what many philosophers have done, even in different cultures. Plato for instance, in describing the ideal path of life to attain 'true happiness' and Aristotle, in making happiness only attainable for the financially independent

citizens of Greek society. But Epicure, the Stoics, Buddha, the Hindu philosophers and many others in later centuries all have done the same, in describing some sort of concrete path to happiness. Quite recently, for instance, Nussbaum – in 'Women and human development' (2000) sums up a list of conditions for happiness that are a combination of abilities and situational circumstances, e.g. the 'ability' to play and recreate, having had basic education, etc.

There is, however, not one concrete path, there are no specific levels and there are no specific, hierarchically distinguishable sensations of happiness and it would be immoral to distuingish them.

Given the fact that different levels of happiness are related to different sources, the only two 'judgmentary' things left over to say are that, for one, it may be inspiring, or just 'more fun', to explore all these sources instead of only one or two, if of course the situation a person is in allows him or her to explore more than one source. The other judgmentary remark we may make is that, since we have linked happiness to contexts and contexts to responsibilities and given the fact that we do have a moral obligation to live up to our responsibilities, we do also have a moral obligation to become happy.

The knocked over pyramid of happiness
What we can do now is replace the different needs in Maslow's pyramid with different sources of happiness. At the same time we should tilt the pyramid to get rid of the suggestion of hierarchy. As for the rest the shape of the 'knocked over pyramid' can remain the same. Though the main reason for remaining this shape is to support graphically our act of tilting the traditional (and immoral) hierarchical concepts described above.
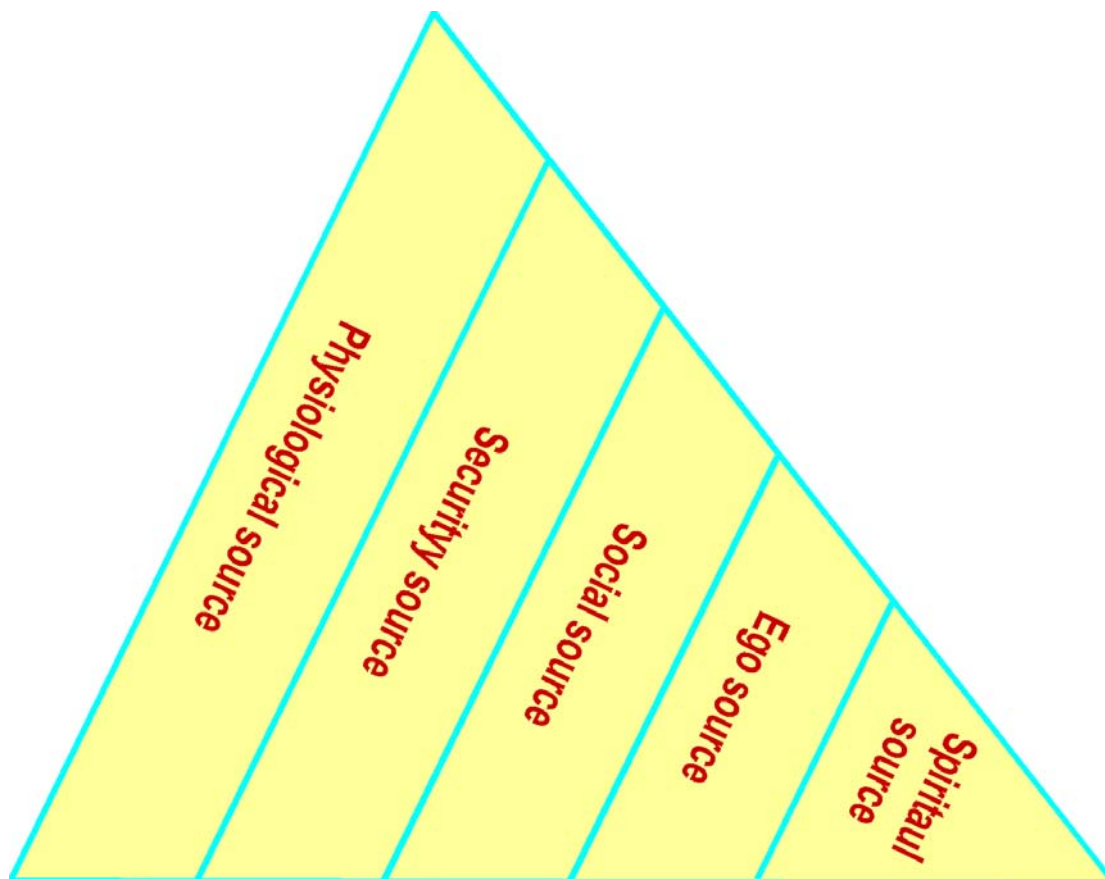

Figure 3   The' knocked over pyramid' of sources of happiness

Now I guess it's fairly easy to describe to a certain extent aspects or subsources of the different main sources of happiness as named figure 3, since they can be linked directly to the needs Maslow names. For instance, in the main source of physiological source, one may find subsources to make us happy like food and money. In the second, the security source, one may find subsources like shelter, stability, safe living and working environment and so on. In the social context there are subsources like acceptance and friendship. The recognition source consists of subsources like success and prestige and, finally, the spiritual source has to do with a range of subsources related to love, beauty, creativity and religious experiences.

The final question dealt with in this paper is whether we must still see happiness as some sort of state of mind, considering, among other things, that it is so closely linked to acting upon responsibilities, exploring sources and fulfilling needs. We will deal with this matter in the next section.

Section three – Happiness as a competence
The dynamics of happiness
Traditionally happiness is considered either as a momentary experience - for instance when someone watches his favourite footballteam make the winning goal - or as an enduring state of mind. We have mentioned already a number of philosophers above who have conceived happiness as a state of mind, and many other philosophers have also used this same perception of happiness, like Bentham, Mill, Thomas Aquinas and so on.
In contrast, Nietzsche saw happiness as a dynamic mental concept. In fact, he didn't like the notion of happiness at all because of this traditional association with an enduring state of mind. In his Heracliteic vision of constant change there was no room for enduring situations or states of mind. So instead of concepts like the Epicurean 'ataraxia', which the Roman philosophers translated as 'placida pax' or 'summa pax', he advocated the opposite as worth striving for: 'unrest' and the disturbing of every static situtation, notion or concept.

Though 'unrest' isn't really something which at first seems attractive to most of us, Nietzsche's view on the concept of happiness may be far more in accordance to what we have said about it up till now than the more static concepts of other philosophers. If attaining happiness is all about living up to responsibilities in a given context, about exploring different sources of happiness, then it surely is a dynamic process, with the inevitable ups and downs given the fact that situations and contexts are constantly changing.

This implies that our moral responsibility to become happy which we have described in the previous section is not about attaining states of happiness, enduring or momentary, but about keeping the process of 'striving for' alive. We have a responsibility to constantly reactivate this process, not in order to reach a steady state of happiness, since there is non, not even in order to attain momentary sensations of happiness, though we can sometimes feel this sensation thanks to our striving and thanks to fortunate circumstances. We have a responsibility to constantly reactivate the process of striving for happiness, in order to fulfill needs and responsibilities.

The competence
In this sense happiness can be seen as a true competence, consisting of abilities to tap from one or more sources the energy to evoke sensations of happiness. At the same time this energy will enable you to fulfill needs and live up to your responsibilities. Happiness, in short, is a competence that strengthens moral consciousness and moral practice, and moral consciousness and moral practice in turn will strengthen the competence of happiness.

Section Four – Happiness of organisations
The living organisation
We have used the expression 'happy organisation' a couple of times in this paper. First of all in the title and a second time in the first section, asserting that organisations have 'a chance to become happy', by acting upon their responsibilities. Later on we have argued that individuals have a moral responsibility to become happy. We have also presented the organisation as a 'living entity' (see figure 1). By doing this we have more or less equated an organisation with an individual. This may seem a bit silly, though the concept of a 'living organisation' is quite popular among managementgurus nowadays. The concept is supported by the consciousness of organisations as being open, dynamic systems constantly influencing and being influenced by stakeholders. The concept is also supported by the fact that organisations, like human beings, do have responsibilities towards their stakeholders quite comparable with the responsibilities we ourselves have towards our 'stakeholders'. However, to say that organisations also have a mind, a psyche and even a soul, as many managementgurus nowadays try to convince us of, seems to be a little far fetched. An organisation is 'living' in the sense that it grows and shrinks and interacts with its environment. From this perspective metaphors of the 'birth', 'death', 'sickness', 'health', 'life-cycle' and so on of organisations are acceptable. And in this metaphorical sense we have allowed ourselves to speak of a living organisation. But we have not used it in the sense that we by any means would support the idea of having discovered a new 'species', as for instance Peter Senge does in his book 'Presence' (2004). This metaphor might just be a little too much 'over the top' (to use another metaphor) and therefore not acceptable anymore.

The happy organisation
Having said this, using the expression 'the happy organisation' seems not acceptable either, as a metaphor that pushes the equation of man with organisations a little too far. However, the expression is acceptable and can even serve as a powerful theoretical concept, if we see happiness as a competence. In this concept the happiness of an organisation consists of a set of abilities and attitudes needed to analyse and act upon responsibilities, to fulfill needs according to circumstances and to tap from the different sources of happiness as much as the organisation in its actual context can. For since organisations do have moral responsibilities towards themselves and towards stakeholders, to a large extent comparable to our responsibilities to our own stakeholders, organisations too have the moral obligation to strengthen their competence of happiness.

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