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Benedictine monasteries from the point of view of happiness economics

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Abstract

This paper examines Benedictine monasteries and the way of life of Benedictine monks from the perspective of happiness economics. We argue that social interaction and the personal identification of monks with their community are important determinants of the successful historical performance of monasteries and of the fact that monasteries have managed to provide satisfaction to many generations of monks. We use Adam Smith's concept of the mutual correspondence of sentiments to describe the nature of social interaction. We describe how higher satisfaction with life motivates monks to fully invest their potential into the future of the organization and thus leads to better corporate governance and management. Finally, the paper presents ideas for future empirical research in monastic communities.

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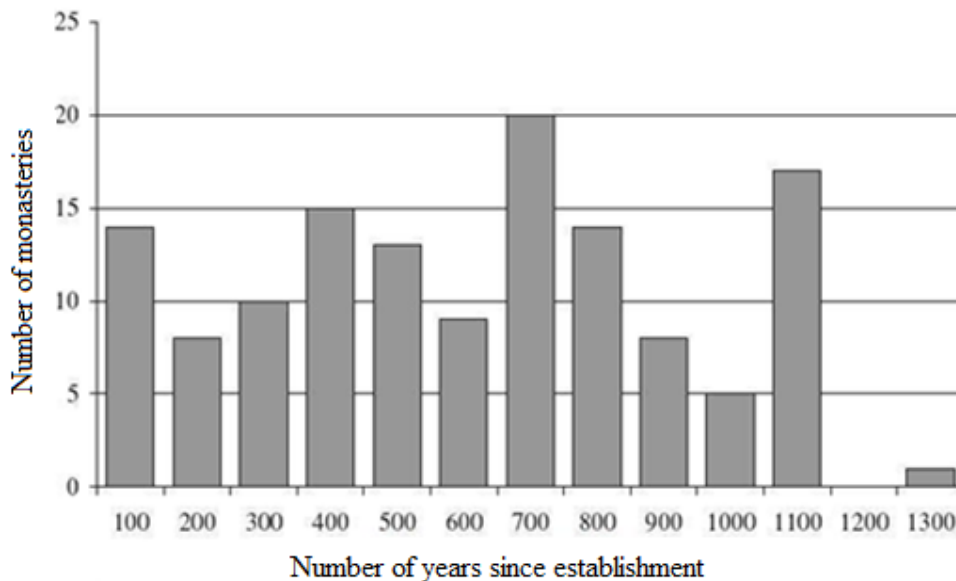
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1. Introduction: Why are Benedictine monasteries interesting?

The aim of this paper is to examine Benedictine monasteries and the life of Benedictine monks in terms of the economics of happiness. Benedictine monasteries are extraordinary institutions that have been remarkably successful in the past. According to Inauen and Frey (2008), this organization can be characterized by its unusual stability and its ability to “stay on the market” for centuries. Inauen and Frey investigated all 133 existing Benedictine monasteries in Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg and the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Their results are shown in the following graph:

Figure 1: Average lifetime of Benedictine monasteries¹



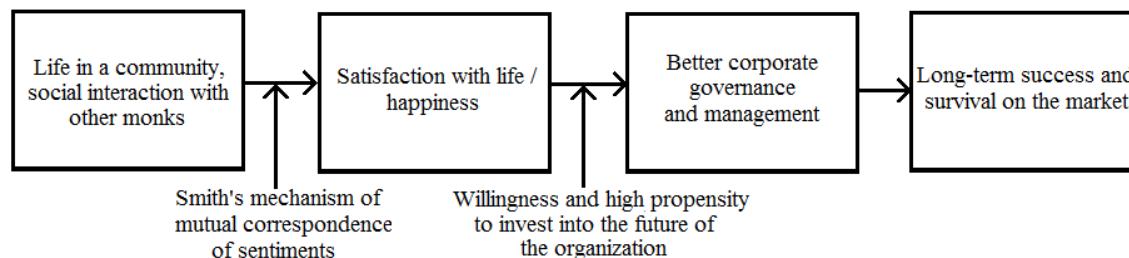
The average Benedictine monastery in this area is approximately 600 years old. Inauen and Frey also examined the reasons why monasteries ended or interrupted their existence. They found that Benedictine abbeys “went bankrupt” only very rarely. They analyzed discontinuities and reasons for closures in 119 monasteries. Of these institutions, 17% were never closed. There were temporary closures in 53% of them due to turbulent historical events (including forced closures during the Reformation or the Nazi regime). In these cases, the monastery management had no way of avoiding the closure. There were voluntary closures in 4% of the cases (usually as a consequence of a very small number of monks, who moved to other monasteries after the closure). Only in approximately 25% of all cases was the monastery closed due to economic distress or management failure (Inauen and Frey, 2008). The last such case occurred in 1862. Since that time, no monastery has been closed due to economic difficulties. This supports the claim that monastic corporate governance is very successful, and that this institution is very resilient.

How is this possible? We argue that Benedictine abbeys have succeeded in creating good environment for social interaction and communal life that had a positive impact on the

¹ Source: Inauen, E. and Frey, B.S. (2008) “Benediktinerabteien aus ökonomischer Sicht. Über die ausserordentliche Stabilität einer besonderen Institution” Institute for Empirical Research, University of Zurich working paper number 388

satisfaction with life (happiness) of Benedictines. To describe how social interaction leads to happiness, we use Adam Smith's concept of mutual correspondence of sentiments. Satisfaction with life in a community creates personal and emotional identification of monks with their monastery and thus increases the willingness of monks to invest their potential into the future of the organization. This manifests itself in better corporate governance and management and thus explains why monasteries are so successful. The main argument of this paper is schematically described in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Why are Benedictine monasteries successful?



Chapter 2 presents Adam Smith's concept of mutual correspondence of sentiments and uses it to describe how social interaction of monks is associated with satisfaction with life. How satisfaction with life leads to better corporate governance will be discussed in chapter 3. Chapter 4 comes up with ideas for future empirical investigations in this area. The final chapter concludes.

2. Social interaction as a determinant of happiness

Our most important hypothesis is that the success of Benedictine monasteries was possible because they managed to create good environment for social interaction and communal life. There are many authors in happiness economics and modern psychology who consider social interaction with other people to be a crucial determinant of subjective satisfaction with life. We build our explanation on the concept of mutual correspondence of sentiments, which was originally developed by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The main idea is that people derive pleasure from mutual sympathy and fellow-feeling. The concept was re-discovered and brought back to economics by Robert Sugden, a happiness economist, who showed that it can provide interesting insights about the nature of social interaction and explain a significant part of human behavior. It provides a powerful demonstration of how and why social interaction with other people affects happiness.

Sugden links his ideas to Adam Smith's notion of *fellow-feeling*. According to Smith, fellow-feeling occurs when one person A has a lively consciousness of some affective state experienced by another person B, and when A's consciousness has similar affective qualities to B's state, as perceived by A (Sugden, 2005). In other words, it is as if the emotions experienced by one person were copied into the brain of another person, causing the other person to feel the same emotions. Psychologists sometimes describe this phenomenon as *emotional contagion*. People begin to feel the same emotions that another person or persons around them feel. We can also use the term *empathy*. People's own emotions can be brought into being by other people's emotions. Sugden illustrates this by this Adam Smith quote:

“When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer.” (Smith, 1759)

Smith claimed that there is a general tendency for fellow-feeling among people. This hypothesis seems to be supported by the most recent research in neuroscience. In particular, our ability to feel sympathy for other people is closely linked to the functioning of a specific type of neuron in the brain. In the 1980s, a group of Italian scientists (Di Pellegrino, Rizzolatti, Fadiga, and others) discovered these neurons in the ventral premotor cortex of monkeys (Šebej, 2008). In their research, they measured the neural activity in neurons and found that a certain group of neurons responded the same way when a monkey observed another monkey performing a certain task (e.g., grasping pieces of food) as when the monkey performed the task itself. These neurons were later found in the human brain. They are now known as *mirror neurons*. Mirror neurons have the ability to activate physiological reactions in our body (McCabe, 2008). For instance, if we observe certain emotion expressed by another person (e.g., laughter), the mirror neurons can “copy” this emotion into our brain and we begin to feel it, too (e.g., we start to laugh even if we don’t know why the other person is laughing). Feelings are “mirrored” from person to person.

Adam Smith’s most important observation is that humans derive pleasure from mutual sympathy and fellow-feeling. For instance, if one person is in pain, another person can experience fellow-feeling for his pain. The nature of fellow-feeling implies that this is painful for the second person. However, when the first person becomes conscious of another person’s fellow-feeling, his pain will be relieved. Smith claims that the pleasurable consciousness of fellow-feeling and sympathy (correspondence of sentiments) is a source of satisfaction. Sugden (2005) wrote:

“Smith seems to be proposing the following general mechanism. Whenever one person A is conscious of a correspondence between his own affective response to some state of affairs and the response of another person B, that consciousness in itself has a positive quality for A. Adam Smith thinks that the pleasure derived from the correspondence of sentiments (and pain induced by dissonance) is sufficiently strong that we are pleased when we are able to feel sympathy for the painful feelings of others and we are hurt when we are unable to do so.” (Sugden, 2005)

Furthermore, Smith claimed that there is a universal desire for the correspondence of sentiments among people:

“When we have read a book or poem so often that we can no longer find any amusement in reading it by ourselves, we can still take pleasure in reading it to a companion. To him it has all the graces of novelty; we enter into the surprise and admiration which it naturally excites in him, but which it is no longer capable of exciting in us; we consider all the ideas which it presents rather in the light in which they appear to him, than in that in which they appear to ourselves, and we are amused by sympathy with his amusement which thus enlivens our own. On the contrary, we should be vexed if he did not seem to be entertained with it, and we could no longer take any pleasure in reading it to him.” (Smith, 1759)

Therefore, mutual sympathy, fellow-feeling, and correspondence of sentiments are also closely linked with approval and disapproval. When we know that someone else shares our emotions, views, and opinions, we feel more justified and more confident in our actions. Knowing this confirms, validates, and authorizes our own emotions and sentiments. This is a

very important aspect in the life of Benedictine monks. The fact that they live together in a community and share their everyday experiences and way of life serves as a confirmation that the way they have chosen and the decision they've made to live in cloister were right and correct. Knowing that we are not alone, that there is someone else who has the same sentiments, attitudes, and way of life is always pleasurable. It confirms the validity of our own sentiments, reinforces our sense of self-worth, and thereby also assures us that our life is composed up of worthwhile activities. On the contrary, when we realize that there is a dissonance between our affective states and the affective states of others, we feel uncomfortable and less happy. If we live in an environment that creates good conditions for experiencing the correspondence of sentiments, we will very likely exhibit higher levels of satisfaction with our life, and vice versa. Therefore, we can conclude that the correspondence (dissonance) of sentiments is an important determinant of happiness (pain). Let us once again quote Robert Sugden:

“If Smith’s hypothesis is right, social interaction tends to generate happiness when it provides an environment in which participants become aware of shared affective states, or (in longer term) when it provides a medium for the cultivation of such states.” (Sugden, 2005)

In chapter 3 we demonstrate that it is precisely this upon which Benedictine monasteries have based their success in the past. Their focus on communal life, strong emphasis on the creation of collective identity, and their sharing of their everyday life experiences with other monks might be one of the most important reasons this institution managed to provide satisfaction to so many generations in the past.

2.1. What does the happiness research in economics reveal about the relationship between religion, social interaction in a religious community and happiness?

The link between religiosity, communal life and increased happiness is confirmed by relatively broad variety of research in economics and psychology. The findings of happiness research can shed more light also on the life of Benedictines and on the link between social interaction in their communities and happiness. It is useful to distinguish between two aspects of religiosity - external and internal. External religiosity refers to activities that are observable, e.g. going to the church, attendance of religious rituals and community participation. Internal religiosity includes spiritual aspects, such as prayers, belief in God and relationship with Him (Steiner et al., 2010).

As far as external religiosity is concerned, the literature shows a positive correlation of church-going and community life with happiness. The higher is the frequency of attending religious rituals and community events, the higher is also reported life satisfaction of individuals (Greene and Yoon (2004), Pollner (1989)). Therefore, an important part of the increased happiness as a result of religion is gained from socializing with others and from common attendance of religious ceremonies and events. Since these events provide a good environment for the correspondence of sentiments, Smith’s arguments can explain why researchers observe these results.

According to the research on subjective well-being, internal religiosity is also associated with increased happiness and the faith itself has a positive impact on life satisfaction. Pollner (1989) and Myers (2008) show that people who believe in God report higher satisfaction and suffer from fewer depressions and negative psychological conditions. Their happiness is increased as a result of a relationship with supernatural imaginary being, strong sense of meaning and greater purpose in life (Steiner et al., 2010). These factors also contribute to easier handling of every-day problems and difficulties, thus leading to lower levels of stress

(Lewis et al., 2005). Therefore, religion correlates not only with subjective measures of well-being but also with variables that are more objectively measurable, such as health and age. Levin (1994) and Tao (2008) find that religious life increases health. Consequently, religious people also live longer. This seems to be confirmed in Benedictine monasteries where the average life span is much higher than in the rest of the population (with 25% lower mortality rate (Dobson, 2002)).

The happiness research demonstrates a strong link between religious or communal life and happiness. All above mentioned factors are also present in the life of Benedictine monks and in the functioning of monasteries. These aspects together with Smith's mechanism can help explain why Benedictine monks derive greater satisfaction from their way of living. The following chapter shows how increased well-being causes the long-term success of monasteries through better corporate governance and management.

3. Personal and emotional identification with a community, social interaction and corporate governance in Benedictine monasteries

*“Men did not love Rome because it was great.
It was great because they loved it.”*
(G.K. Chesterton)

The aim of this chapter is to describe how Smith's mechanism increases happiness of monks in the monastery and thus causes better functioning of the organization and its successful historical performance.

First of all, Benedictines try to create common value systems and emotional identification with the community and place where they live. In other words, they pay very strong attention to the process of socialization. The Benedictine value system is based on The Rule of St. Benedict which provides a very detailed set of universal rules that are applicable in many everyday situations. Due to its universality and the fact that monks are very familiar with the rules and do their best to follow them, there is rarely any need to apply bureaucratic decision making (Rost et al., 2010). Therefore, we can say that life in a monastery has a self-regulating character because monasteries focus primarily on the implementation of informal value systems instead of building formal control mechanisms:

“Individuals react to a large extent based on their beliefs about other people's intentions. From this perspective, common value systems signal friendly intentions and people feel obligated to respond to positive behavior received with positive behavior in return (Groves et al., 1992). Control and supervisory institutions, on the other hand, are more likely to signal neutral (economic exchange related) or even ‘unfriendly’ intentions, in the sense that these might signal distrust or insinuate the selfish nature of the employees. (...) The effect of social (dis)approval and its interaction with social norms and incentives has to be mentioned. An appropriate design of values, which fosters social approval, makes individuals happier and affects their behavior.” (Rost et al., 2010)

This implies that social approval and Smith's mutual correspondence of sentiments are important characteristics of socialization and life in the monastery. The creation of collective identity begins with the process of selecting and integrating new members of the monastic community. This process is standardized and has several stages. At the beginning, a candidate lives in a monastery for a couple of months. During this time, he can observe life in the monastery, learn about the value system of the monks, and further evaluate his decision to

join the community. It is very important that Benedictines promote equality of treatment in daily life when integrating new members – novices engage in the same activities and follow the same daily routine as monks. Equal treatment makes the adoption of common values easier and quicker. The second stage is one year of probation. Successful candidates can then enter the period of “temporary” profession, which lasts three years. Only then do candidates become full members of the community (solemn profession of vows). However, the process of socialization and learning does not end with the selection process:

“Apart from joint prayers, monasteries have implemented other learning practices, such as daily readings at the communal dinner table. These readings deal with diverse topics, like the bible, politics, philosophy or the history of the Benedictines and the respective monastery. Besides education, these practices strengthen the awareness of belonging to something bigger than the particular monastery. The socialization lasts a lifetime and encourages an intrinsic transfer of the overall value system.” (Rost et al., 2010)

Monks continuously learn about the Benedictine way of life, the Order and its history. This creates an environment with common and similar stimuli for all participants in the community. They share with their brethren basically all their daily experiences. Smith’s mechanism of mutual correspondence of sentiments can work because all members of the community follow the same daily schedule and almost continuously share the same or very similar affective states. Moreover, the strong emotional and value identification of monks with their monastery increases their propensity to invest their potential into the future of the organization and thus contributes to its economic success. In other words, this fact together with their religious beliefs influences their discount factor and their time preference. It is possible to say that they make their decisions *sub specie aeternitatis* (from the point of view of eternity). They are willing to invest more time and effort into the future of the monastic community. Their ethics, attitude to work (*ora et labora*), and intrinsic motivation can explain why monasteries were so successful and so resilient in the past. This strong sense of belonging to a community and sharing everyday experiences increases life satisfaction (happiness), encourages organization-specific investments and directly leads to better corporate governance and management of the institution.

The origins of monastic corporate governance can be dated back to the first millennium. It evolved spontaneously in reaction to problems that Benedictines had to solve over the centuries. The hierarchical organizational structure of a monastery consists of the following positions: abbot and prior (they have the leading position, similar to “CEOs” in modern corporations), officials (their counterpart in modern corporations is “executive board”), the convent (a community that includes all the monks who have made a solemn profession; the role of the convent is similar to the role of a parliament), the consilium (the “advisory board”), donors, and employees (Rost et al., 2010). A strong emphasis on conformity with the Rule of St. Benedict and with Benedictine values makes this organizational structure very stable, and changes are very rare. A typical feature in monastic corporate governance is that the abbot doesn’t make important decisions alone: all monks can participate in decision making. The role of the convent, which elects and controls the abbot, officials, and the consilium and decides in important economic issues (i.e., the abbot cannot decide alone) is crucial. The abbot or prior can make decisions on their own only in less substantial matters. Therefore, it is possible to say that the functioning of monastic corporate governance gives strong participation rights to all monks, and that all decisions about the monastery and its future are the result of internal democracy. Problems are solved in an open discussion among monks and always shared with all monks, i.e. with all members of the convent. The functioning of the convent provides a medium for solving everyday problems, sharing all

important issues and cultivation of shared affective states in the long term. Therefore, it directly contributes to the process of socialization and also to the increased life satisfaction of monks (Smith's mechanism). This is very crucial for the convergence of individual interests of the constituents of the organization with the interests of the whole organization. In other words, it prevents agency problems that are typical for modern corporations (divergence of interests of managers or employees and their firm) and thus contributes to the long-term economic survival of the institution. The monks know that their voices are always heard and that they can influence the future of the monastery and promote their own visions or projects (and this thereby improves the quality of social interaction in the community and the Smithian mutual correspondence of sentiments among monks). This encourages crucial organization-specific investments that are necessary for long-term economic success. The fact that monks are satisfied with their life and are emotionally identified with their community creates the intrinsic motivation to participate in shaping the future of the monastery and to give their best into realization of their intentions and visions in the convent. Democratic decision making and discussions in the convent make this possible and thus create a management system which can serve as an inspiration even to modern corporations (Inauen and Frey, 2008). Thanks to this, monasteries are better at avoiding bankruptcy as a result of management failure or economic distress. It also explains why we observe their unusual historical performance.

We can conclude that social interaction in Benedictine monasteries provides an environment in which all participants can become aware of shared affective states and in the long term an environment where cultivation of such states is possible. If Smith's hypothesis is correct, this implies that life in a religious community such as monastery will generate happiness. It can also explain why monks decide to join the monastery and spent their life there:

"Humans have a desire to understand themselves, the world around them, and to evaluate and justify their actions. This 'quest for sense' leads to specialisation in religious activity and to the formation of religious organisations." (Schlicht, 1995)

Satisfaction with life, solving the problems in open discussions and intrinsic motivation of monks to fully invest their potential and to give their best into the future of their community then leads to better management of the organization from the economic point of view. These factors have created a unique organizational structure where important issues are solved by democratic discussion and active participation of monks following the long-term interests of the organization. These attributes of monastic corporate governance are the most important reasons why this remarkable organization has managed to remain on the market for centuries.

4. Future empirical research

To investigate our hypotheses about Benedictines, the methodology of happiness economics could be used. This methodology is based mostly on the concept of subjective well-being (SWB). There are several ways that SWB can be measured in practice. The most common approach uses statistical inquiries in which respondents are directly asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they feel with their lives. A typical question may be: *"How satisfied do you feel with your life in general?"* (Frey, 2008). Respondents are usually asked to self-report their well-being as a number on some scale (for example from 1 to 10, where 1 means "very dissatisfied" and 10 means "very satisfied"). This method allows happiness to be quantified and then statistical and econometric tools of analysis can be applied. In future we plan to conduct this kind of research directly in monastic communities.

To verify our argument about higher life satisfaction in monasteries, it will be necessary to test our most important claim – that life in the monastery has provided high life satisfaction to many generations of monks. If this is true, the self-reported SWB of monks should be statistically significantly higher than it is in the rest of the population. We will measure the SWB of monks by a statistical inquiry directly in monastic communities, compare the results with the publicly available data for the rest of the population, and test the validity of our hypothesis.

It will also be necessary to investigate the relationship between SWB of monks and social interaction in their community. A very good tool for this investigation is the “moment-based approach” proposed by Daniel Kahneman (2004). In this approach, respondents self-report their affective states separately for each moment and each episode of an actual day (i.e., the level of satisfaction when working, reading a book, dining, etc.). They are asked to decompose the day into episodes and assign to each episode their feelings (positive/negative) and their intensity (on some scale, for example from 1 to 10, where 1 = not intense, 10 = very intense). This method is also known as the “Day Reconstruction Method” and can be very useful for determining the impact of social interaction on affective states and SWB. It also allows quantification and applying econometric tools. We intend to do a similar kind of research in monastic communities. The monks will be interviewed and asked to break their day into episodes and assign each episode their feelings and intensity of the feelings. If episodes with social interaction and episodes with the correspondence of sentiments between monks are associated with systematically higher satisfaction than episodes in which monks are alone, we should consider it as evidence in favor of our hypothesis about social interaction.

Finally, it would be possible to determine the extent to which various factors contribute to SWB by coming up with a regression analysis in which we would analyze how the SWB of monks depends on the various variables (age, years spent in the monastery, extent of voluntary work, etc.). Very interesting line of research would be to investigate the effect of absence of marriage in monastic life. There are a lot of studies which compared SWB of married and unmarried people (Easterlin (2005), Frey (2008)). We will determine how the absence of marriage and family life correlates with SWB in the case of monks and compare it with the findings in these studies.

We believe that the type of analysis proposed in this chapter would be very insightful and would reveal a lot of interesting findings about life in monastic communities.

5. Conclusion

Happiness research in economics has revealed that social interaction has a profound impact on happiness. The concept of the mutual correspondence of sentiments developed by Adam Smith and re-discovered by Robert Sugden can help us understand how social interaction influences our well-being. Smith’s mechanism is also supported by the most recent findings in neuroscience. In this paper, we applied this concept to Benedictine monasteries. Since the way of life of monks and the way monasteries function both create an environment with favorable conditions for a certain kind of social interaction, Smith’s mechanism can help us understand how and why Benedictine abbeys became successful, managed to stay on the market for centuries, and still attract new members to their communities. We also came up with ideas for future empirical research in monastic communities.

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The Holy Rule of St. Benedict