

The Executive Dean of the Faculty of Humanities

Prof. Dumisani Moyo

cordially invites you to the Inaugural Lecture of

Prof. Anné Hendrik Verhoef

Transcendence, Chance and Happiness



Date: 24 June 2021

Time: 18:00

**No RSVP and registration needed –
open for all to attend online**

Event will be live streamed at:
<https://youtu.be/-JM0EcTMay8>

Program

Academic Procession

University Anthem

Word of welcome

Prof. Tobie van Dyk

Music Item

Jan-Meyer & Sunet Verhoef

Introduction of Prof. Anné Hendrik Verhoef

Prof. Dumisani Moyo (Executive Dean, Faculty of Humanities)

Inaugural Lecture

Transcendence, Chance and Happiness

Word of Thanks

Presentation of certificate and congratulations

Prof. Frans Waanders (Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research & Innovation)

National Anthem

Academic procession

Dinner at Crista Galli

Prof. Anné H. Verhoef

Biography

Anné Hendrik Verhoef was born in Komani (Queenstown) in the Eastern Cape in 1972 as the fourth of six children. His father, Anné Johannes Verhoef, was a pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church and his mother, Cobie Verhoef, was a trained nurse. Anné matriculated at Huguenot High School in Wellington in 1990. He then studied Philosophy and Literature at Stellenbosch University and completed his BA in 1994. In 1997 he obtained a bachelor's degree in Theology (*cum laude*), whereupon he enrolled for an honours degree in Philosophy. As part of an exchange student programme he studied at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium for six months and obtained an honours degree in Philosophy in 1999 (*cum laude*). In 2000 he was ordained as a pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church in Amanzimtoti, where he worked until 2009. In 2003 he obtained a master's degree in Theology (*cum laude*) and in 2008 a doctoral degree – both from Stellenbosch University. Prof. Dirkie Smit was his promotor and his thesis focused on the relation between the Trinity and time.

Anné began his academic career in 2010, when he was appointed as senior lecturer at the School of Philosophy at North-West University. In 2011, 2012 and 2013 he received the Faculty of Arts “Top Ten Researcher” award, and the NWU “Top 20% Achiever” award. In 2013 he received the NWU Institutional Teaching Excellence Award (A-Category), and in 2014 he was promoted to Associate Professor in Philosophy. In 2014 he received a research award to study in Belgium, and in 2016 he received the award for the third most productive researcher in his faculty. In 2017 he received an NRF research grant, and the following year he received the NWU Institutional Teaching Excellence Award again. In 2019 he received a C2 National Research Foundation rating as researcher in Philosophy, and in 2020 he was promoted to Professor in Philosophy. He is currently the director of the School of Philosophy and serves on the Senate of the NWU.

Anné's academic interests are in philosophy of religion, the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, ethics, and the philosophy of happiness. His research focuses mainly on transcendence and the transcendent in contemporary culture, and its relation to ethics, education, meaning of life and happiness. His academic record testifies to his significant achievements as scholar in his field. He published 36 peer-reviewed articles, 5 peer-reviewed book chapters, and 1 co-edited book (MDPI Publishers, Switzerland). He also wrote 13 popular academic pieces, editorials and articles which were published on various platforms, like *The Conversation*. As a subject specialist he peer-reviewed articles for more than 24 national and international academic journals, and acted as specialist peer-reviewer for 8 academic books (national and international). He furthermore acted as external examiner for 21 master's and PhD dissertations in total, nationally and internationally. He delivered 5 PhD students (two from the USA) and 14 master's students so far, with a further 3 PhD students and 4 master's students in process. He supervised 4 postdoctoral fellows, of which one was from the USA and another one from the Netherlands.

Anné has an outstanding record as innovator and international collaborator in his field of expertise. He gave 8 international guest lectures on invitation and had three international research visits sponsored by various universities (Loyola, USA; Free University Amsterdam; Tumaini University Makumira, Tanzania). He delivered 18 papers at international conferences and 19 papers at national conferences. Furthermore, he has organised 7 conferences and/or symposiums, nationally and internationally. He has been part of various international research projects, like *Metamorphoses of Christianity in Art, Literature and Philosophy* (Universiteit voor Humanistiek, Utrecht & ACCORD, Amsterdam). Anné is also the co-founder and co-editor of the journal *Transformation in Higher Education*.

Anné is married to Petro du Preez, professor in Curriculum Studies at NWU, and has two children, Jan-Meyer (21) and Sunet (19). He is privileged to have his mother (81) and all five of his brothers and sisters present at this inaugural lecture.

Transcendence, Chance and Happiness

Abstract

When happiness is understood as the overcoming of the fundamental lack or negative of our existence, then we remain stuck in the endless cycle and effort of trying to overcome unhappiness. We can try to do this in so many ways we want, but it remains fundamentally impossible. We remain stuck in negation and eventually unhappiness. Unhappiness remains here a problem for happiness.

When happiness is seen as the negation of negation with the embracing of affirmation, unhappiness is robbed of its creative and meaningful potential. In other words, if unhappiness is rejected as something life-denying (as negation), and one only embraces the positive forces, powers and energies of life and nature – of chance – the potential positive meaning and power of unhappiness is denied. It becomes an unhappy task to suppress unhappiness at all cost.

Within a dialectical notion of negation and affirmation the potential positive in negation is appreciated. There is a recognition that unhappiness is fundamentally part of happiness. We lack nothing at the core of our existence. There is not an emptiness determined by chance, or fallenness determined by transcendence. There is nothing to fundamentally overcome, not even unhappiness. This is however not a mere acceptance of unhappiness, but a creative tension between negation and affirmation, a complex negotiation between happiness and unhappiness where we have the potential to live with ethical responsibility – with a sense of meaningfulness and a much more happy understanding of happiness.

Prof AH Verhoef

Transcendence, Chance and Happiness

24 June 2021, AH Verhoef

PROTOCOL AND THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING

PAPER

Introduction

As you heard, I was born in Komani, the former Queenstown. My father was at that time a missionary in the Cala in the former Transkei and the closest whites only hospital was in Queenstown. My life began thus as a baby of apartheid. It is a complete arbitrary fact of my life, but one with such huge consequences. Apartheid, which originated as an idea, influenced, and determined my birth, but also so much of South Africa's history.

- *Question this idea of apartheid – needed to be rejected because of its destructive consequences*
- *Question all ideas that structure and influence our lives, also on a fundamental level*
- *This is what philosophy does and why I love to be a philosopher... This is also a painful and disruptive enterprise – questions all certainties, knowledge, beliefs, while it is at the same time extremely emancipating*
- *In the words of Deleuze: "Philosophy does not serve the State or the Church, who have other concerns. It serves no established power. The use of philosophy is to sadden. A philosophy that saddens no one, that annoys no one, is not a philosophy."*
- *At the same time philosophy is also about the highest goals in life, the 'highest happiness' (summa felicitas) as Spinoza said, or the highest good (eudaimonia) as Aristotle said*

Happiness is for the last few years also my philosophical project and it gives me great joy (happiness) to share some of my thoughts on this theme with you tonight...

1. Relation between Transcendence, Chance and Happiness

The theme, *transcendence, chance, and happiness*, immediately presents the question of the relation between these philosophical loaded words. The focus here will be on happiness and how it relates to notions of chance and transcendence. A preliminary definition of these terms is needed to start this discussion. I will use these terms in their broadest sense:

- Transcendence refers to the fact that certain boundaries are exceeded (from the Latin *transcendere*: "to climb across, surmount, transcend"). The transcendent is what lies beyond and stands over against the immanent. Transcendence indicates a "border experience" – we experience things as ending and limited, but sometimes as something that lies on the other side of this border. Things on this side of the border we call "immanent" and things on the other side "transcendent" (Stoker 1990:199).

Transcendence refers thus in religious terms to the super-sensory, God, the divine, or the absolute. In this paper transcendence is viewed existentially and metaphysically, as the crossing over from the sensorily observable (immanence) to the super-sensory (transcendence).

- Chance refers in this paper to our experiences of events, and of our lives, as being random, arbitrary, and haphazard. It is the experience of the effects that seems to exceed its causes (Zizek 2014:3); something we are not in control of. In my argument *chance* fulfils the immanent pole of the randomness within our *real* world and lives.
- Happiness refers to more than just a state of mind like joy, pleasure, or satisfaction. It is also more than just human well-being or flourishing. Something more than just the absence of pain. It includes the ethical, meaning, fulfilment and luck.

With these definitions in mind, I want to complicate matters a little bit more. I will specifically look at the relation between *unhappiness* and happiness, to determine where unhappiness links with our understanding of transcendence and chance and link it then back to happiness.

Philosophy can often sound – and look like from the outside – like a lot of talk with no real goal, no real outcome, even as disconnected with the world and sciences that works with hard facts. But hopefully these definitions that I just gave helped you to understand the magic of philosophy – that some words, if you start to define them and to discuss the ideas behind them, – open up a whole new world. It is like a door that opens into an unknown universe – a world to be explored, to be understood, to be described not in an esoteric sense, but to understand who and what we are better. To live better. To possibly find such a seemingly mundane thing such as happiness.

2. Happiness and existence

My paper is thus on much more than happiness. It is about our lives, in its fulness, the reality of it, the embodied nature of it. If we think about happiness in these broad terms it is to think about our existence itself. So, the question moves to how our existence relates to transcendence and chance. It is to think about existence in its most fundamental sense. It is not only about the description of existence, but rather an attempt to focus on the fundamental core of human existence.

It is on this point where my questions link to age-old philosophical traditions and theories. I will therefore narrow my discussion down to the question: Is there something positive or negative at the core of human spirit, character, and existence? Or is it a combination of both?

Let me explain: If we ask what the fundamental core of human existence is, but for that matter all existence, two options are dominant in philosophical and theological traditions, namely negation (something negative) and affirmation (something positive): that there is

something meaningless and unhappy OR something meaningful and happy at the core of our being.

- Advocates of *negation* will emphasise the arbitrariness of our existence, the fundamental emptiness or nothingness of it, the fact that we are lacking in our being, and/or sinfulness. This negation, or fundamental lacking, is often interpreted as something bad.
- Advocates of *affirmation* will emphasise the creative power of our existence, our freedom and creativity, a praise of our luck, *amor fati*, and that our existence is part of the life affirming forces of nature. This affirmation is normally interpreted as something good.

Interesting enough, in the history of philosophy (and theology we can add) there was an overwhelming acceptance (and even obsession) with negation (the negative) as the core of our existence. We were always lacking something in our being. For Plato the true fullness lied in the metaphysical. For Aristotle humans always strive towards goodness, *eudaimonia*, for completion. In African philosophy it is the completion of the community that we fundamentally lack, and we cannot be human or complete without others. For Hegel we are as individuals lacking the fulfilment of freedom as the World *Geist's* history.

If negation, this unhappy negative, is accepted as the core of human existence, then we are doomed from the beginning of our lives to overcome this negation or lack, this fundamental existential negative (emptiness, or sinfulness), in our attempt to find meaning, fulfilment, completion, and finally happiness. So, happiness is nothing more as the endless impossible task wherein we try to negate negation, where we want to lack the lack, where we strive for contentment and fulfilment, but 'the bucket of our being is constantly leaking as we try to fill it up with whatever satisfy our lives. The thirst is fundamental'. Happiness becomes then frustrating and futile dream and endless task of our lives.

It is no wonder that so many people give up on happiness. They do not think it is worthwhile to try to be happy. They become cynical, depressed, old, irritated and lose their vital gist, their energy for life. We know them. Perhaps we cannot blame them, but at least we should see if there are alternative ways to think about happiness, life, our existence on a fundamental level...

3. Negation, chance, and transcendence

Why, should we ask, should we be happy with negation as the fundamental core of our existence? Why should we accept or even promote negation as so many philosophers and theologians did? Here the link to transcendence and chance becomes crucial because people will argue on this basis that "this is just how life is". They accept a higher authority, like God, that determined life like this, or they will accept Chance and the concrete facts of life to proof their point. Let me rephrase this:

Negation, the negative core of our existence, can be described as the fact that we are not in control of our lives, that we so to speak (but also literally), *suffer* live. Just think about the arbitrary nature of our lives, our birth, our death, the ravages of time in ageing, the experience of pain, a scratched wound, a sting, pain, an amputation... Is all of this a matter of chance? Or is it linked to a transcendent Being?

To embrace chance as an answer has its unique problems. Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy is perhaps the best example of this. Existence, as chance, is fundamentally empty. There is a nothingness at the core, or underneath, our existence. The negation of our existence lies in nihilism. We are trapped in the endless creation of the essence of our existence amid the emptiness thereof. The only comfort we can find in this effort is that we have at least the freedom to create the lives we live.

On the other hand, to embrace transcendence, or a transcendent Being, as the explanation of negation of our existence, is also problematic. For example, the negative core of our existence can be described, for example in Protestant terms, as our "fall from grace, our loss of purity, our loss of oneness with God, our loss of paradise and innocence". In short: sinfulness. Here negation (or the fundamental lack of our existence) can be summarized as our loss of goodness, of our oneness with God (or the transcendent). To make it worse, this lack or loss is due to our own working, it is our fault (at least through Adam and Eve).

How does happiness relate to these forms of negation, based on transcendence and chance?

Sartre's emphasis on nihilism makes it difficult to overcome negation and to find any happiness. Negation is the only option with affirmation negated. There is finally no happiness to be found, only fundamental lacking of our being and the emptiness of our existence. By chance we are stuck in negation and consequently unhappiness.

For the theologian Søren Kierkegaard happiness is found in submission to God's will – the negative must be overcome by unification or completeness by God. The transcendent is needed to help us, or to redeem us, to negate negation, but unfortunately this will not happen in this unhappy life. We are stuck in negation on this earth with only complete happiness to be received in an after-life.

These understandings of negation may lead eventually to a giving up on happiness. We understand this world, and even ourselves, as evil and corrupt. A world and existence that must be overcome. A negation of the negation is needed, and it is found in an escape from this world. Such an escape to an outside/better world is not only common in religious language as, but also from people who want to escape the painfulness of life through work, money, sport, computer games. It becomes an escape from this world in this world. A giving up on the world in its fullness, on happiness in its complexity.

4. Are there other options?

Of course, chance and transcendence have many more representatives than Sartre and Kierkegaard. There are some variations on these themes of transcendence and chance to keep in mind, but in general, the stuckness in negation – when linked to transcendence – removes the possibility for happiness outside this world: to God, to heaven, to an after-life, to deification, etc. Happiness in this immanent world, in our embodied lives, remains an impossibility. A danger lurks here that only resentment for this life and world will follow, with a longing to escape to another/outside-world or transcendent.

So, will a less transcendent or other-worlds concept of God or the transcendent perhaps help to overcome this problem not to escape this world? Here one can look at the ‘weak theology’ of **John Caputo** as an example. Caputo developed his weak theology from the deconstruction of Derrida. It is much less focused on the transcendental nature of God than on the uncertainties and language about God, which is always captured in our human, or immanent, language. His proposal of a theopoetics, instead of a theology, implies that talk about God (or the transcendent) is best captured in immanent poetical language and not in literal terminology.

The problem here is that theopoetics is still *theo*-poetics where the theos or transcendent can easily become dominant, or on the other hand where the theos can disappear in the poetics (as art). It presents thus the two options Kierkegaard and Sartre represented to overcome negation: either in the transcendent, or in the creative. Negation is still to be negated. The fundamental core of our being or existence remains negative and unhappiness a problem for attaining happiness. Finally, a weak theology, or a weak God, undermines the hope to find happiness in the transcendent.

Perhaps a more immanent approach might offer some hope. One that differs from Sartre’s negation as nothingness. In other words, is there a chance that chance (in its fullest immanent sense) can offer some affirmation and happiness?

The philosophy of **Gilles Deleuze** can be explored here as an immanent philosophy. Deleuze says, ‘to be actualised means to extend over a series of ordinary points; to be selected according to a rule of convergence; to be incarnated in a body; to become the state of a body; and to be renewed locally for the sake of limited new actualizations and extensions’ (Deleuze 1990:110). Chance plays a fundamental role here. It is a fundamental part of our existence, but not in a bad way. It does not represent negation, but affirmation. The experience to exist, is the experience of the potential of every moment. Life is to actualise this potential. A potential given by the world, nature and/or chance which changes again the world/nature and/or chance so that we are always in becoming. There is nothing negative here and there is no transcendence.

This means that there is not something negative or an emptiness at the core of our existence, but rather affirmation in the fullest sense. We can and should praise our luck that we are here, that we exist! There is not for Deleuze any negation, but only affirmation, the positive embracing of the positive forces of life. We should align ourselves with it, become fully part of it, not resist it, but enjoy and celebrate it. For example, the forces of nature

should carry us as the waves carry a surfer or the wind the hang-glider. This is the wonder of existence to be lived to its fullest.

In effect it means that not only negation is denied, but also, so to speak, unhappiness. The negative is seen as “bad and counterproductive... and destructive” (2013:111), but with this fundamental choice of affirmation (and the negation of negation), the complexity of our existence is denied. Furthermore, the creative and productive potential of negation is lost. To rephrase this: there might be something valuable, meaningful, and creative in unhappiness which can be lost if it is denied as fundamentally part of the core of our existence.

There is yet another way of saying this: In sadness, in unhappiness, something of the fullness of life is experienced. It shows us some of the wonder, the complexity of life. It is linked to unbelievable creativity as so many artworks and music testify. These intense emotions and experiences should not be denied or rejected just because there are melancholic, connected to the sad part of our lives. To be depressed, to be sad, is not just bad. Thereby I am not trying to naively glorify pain and sadness but want to recognise its potential value for the fullness and complexity of our existence.

5. Move to Paul Ricoeur’s thought on this point

Ricoeur keeps the idea of negation as “potentially productive and arguably a core component in our identity as functioning humans” (2013:111), in a dialectical tension with affirmation. Negation cannot be ignored or denied in favour of affirmation and must remain part of the complexity of our existence. Ricoeur sought in his understanding of negation an affirmation, not a “negation swallowed up in dialectic” (2013:32) as for example with Hegel.

The Hegelian dialectic would lead for him ultimately to an understanding of “my existence is an accident and my freedom is nothing; no-thing, ‘the ultimate triumph of the Hegelian unhappy consciousness’” (2013:39). Within such an unhappy consciousness “I measure myself against what I do not have, the person I am not and the losses I have sustained” (2013:79). Within a consumer culture, this unhappy consciousness has huge influence over my ability to “buy happiness, to buy drugs for happiness and to shop for normality” (2013:79).

In contrast Ricoeur argues that the negative is crucial to the positive and that there should be “an affirmative core at the heart of negation” (2013:28). He sought therefore to move beyond the polarisation of negative and positive as some sort of good and evil. Happiness is not the overcoming of unhappiness, but always in relation to unhappiness.

So, Ricoeur does not want to deny negation, but rather want to think about it in a non-binary, non-contradictory way. He combined Aristotle’s sense of negation as either willed or suffered in the combination of willed *and* suffered. He does this to demonstrate that “the affirmation of will is at the core of the negative” (2013:11). The implication is then that the

negative is crucial for our self-realization, because it shows our limitations and our potential. Negation is thus acknowledged within this affirmation and it becomes both limitations and possibilities. This is crucial in terms of the ethical and practical approach Ricoeur then further sought in his philosophy.

Again, negation is not to be negated, denied, or erased, but rather to be acknowledge in the hope that its potential to create and show us our limitations and potential will be explored. Negation is willed *and* suffered. It should however not be the only or overwhelming understanding of our existence (as nihilism for Sartre) and/or something to be overcome as being individually suffered for a bigger goal (as *Geist* or Spirit for Hegel). Such a more dialectic notion of negation might, he argues, allow one the possibility to become the person one might be. To explain: the possibility, the potential to negotiate one's life within the tension of negation and affirmation is crucial, because it allows for the freedom to pursue meaning and happiness, to live an ethical life.

A more hopeful picture is given here. One wherein happiness will not disappear as the aim of happiness. It is a much more complex acknowledgement that at the core of our being is both negation and affirmation, both meaningfulness and emptiness, both happiness and unhappiness. This is a much complex understanding of our existence, but one redeemed from the determinism of transcendence and chance, one with much more possibilities!

6. How does this link back to happiness, chance, and transcendence?

If we argue that we “can accommodate the negative in a strong and creative way into new ways of achieving this acceptance of our own complexity” (2013:6), it has crucial implications for understanding something like happiness. It is a direct challenge to certainty of happiness and despair of unhappiness. It implies to face the world and my existence with its negation and affirmation, so that we do not want to escape the false security that happiness that negate negation offers. It offers the ability to be one with myself – as happy and unhappy, as negation and affirmation – to be one with others (all others – also those who suffer), and with the suffering physical world. It asks to acknowledge negation as part of the core of my existence, because the negative can be understood as “an empowering, positive force that presage in-completion and uncertainty, yet show us who we are and helps us to face the truths of famine, excess, despair and delight, in each of us as also in the wider world” (2013:147).

To conclude:

1. When happiness is understood as the overcoming of the fundamental lack or negative of our existence, then we remain stuck in the endless cycle and effort of trying to overcome unhappiness. We can try to do this in so many ways we want, but it remains fundamentally impossible. We remain stuck in negation and eventually unhappiness. Unhappiness remains here a problem for happiness.

2. When happiness is seen as the negation of negation with the embracing of affirmation, unhappiness is robbed of its creative and meaningful potential. In other words, if unhappiness is rejected as something life-denying (as negation), and one only embraces the positive forces, powers and energies of life and nature – of chance – the potential positive meaning and power of unhappiness is denied. It becomes an unhappy task to suppress unhappiness at all cost.
3. Within a dialectical notion of negation and affirmation the potential positive in negation is appreciated. There is a recognition that unhappiness is fundamentally part of happiness. We lack nothing at the core of our existence. There is not an emptiness determined by chance, or fallenness determined by transcendence. There is nothing to fundamentally overcome, not even unhappiness. This is however not a mere acceptance of unhappiness, but a creative tension between negation and affirmation, a complex negotiation between happiness and unhappiness where we have the potential to live with ethical responsibility – with a sense of meaningfulness and a much more happy understanding of happiness.

Practically this means not giving up on who we are, on what we can achieve, and to – despite various notions of transcendence and chance – find and contribute meaning and happiness in this immanent life and world.
