

Happiness

Reading 11 – Xenophon & Socrates

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"He who lives well is blessed and happy." —Socrates

"Long is the path that leads to happiness through words alone. But the path that leads to happiness through the practice of daily deeds is short." —Crates of Thebes

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This reading comes from the Cave's
Happiness—What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Happiness.

As the title indicates, this reading, after a brief introduction, presents what Xenophon (and Socrates) thought and said about happiness as the goal of life.

"Xenophon was a modest man and quite handsome. . . . In general, he was a good man, who liked horses, hunting, and military tactics. . . . He was religious, with an affection for making sacrifices to the gods and a competency in discerning signs in the victims. He was also a zealous admirer and follower of Socrates."

—Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*

LIKE PLATO, XENOPHON (C. 430-354 BC) was an Athenian citizen born during the first few years of the Peloponnesian War. Unlike Plato, however, he was not in Athens when that politically turbulent city put Socrates to death. Instead, he was off with a large Greek mercenary force, the Ten Thousand, fighting for the Persian throne on behalf of Cyrus the Younger

against his brother Artaxerxes II. Things didn't go so well. Though the Greeks and their Persian allies fought well enough during the Battle of Cunaxa (401 BC), Cyrus was killed. After, when the Persians slaughtered the higher-ranking Greeks, Xenophon boldly stepped up to lead the remaining men northward to the Black Sea. This harrowing march is the subject of

his later account, the *Anabasis* or *The Expedition Up*. In the years that followed, Xenophon battled on in Asia Minor, allied with the Spartans against the Persians. His association with Sparta eventually resulted in his exile from Athens. He consequently spent the next few decades supported by the Spartans, living and writing on a country estate near Olympia in the Peloponnese.

It was an unfortunate turn of events for Xenophon but fortunate for us since, during those years, he authored a few histories, an array of essays, and the *Cyropaedia* or *The Education of Cyrus*. Otherwise, he wrote several memoirs featuring Socrates—a point that returns us to the Socratic problem mentioned in the introduction to the last chapter (“Plato & Socrates”).

The problem? It is that the Socrates in Plato’s dialogues is different—at least *somewhat* different—from the Socrates in Xenophon’s memoirs. And to add to the problem, the comic playwright Aristophanes presents a very different Socrates from both in the *Clouds*.¹ So which Socrates is the *real* Socrates? What did he actually feel, think, say, and do? The short answer is we can’t say for sure. That admitted, and assuming that Plato and Xenophon both present Socrates as they actually experienced him in their works, we may conclude we are getting therein something that approximates the *real* Socrates through two sets

of spectacles, as it were—those of Plato and Xenophon.

If this conclusion is something close to the truth, then what we have with Xenophon is the presentation of a man he greatly admires. In fact, at one point Xenophon declares that “Socrates seemed to me the best of men, a truly happy man.”²

To conclude, let’s hear Diogenes Laertius’ account of Xenophon’s introduction to Socrates in Athens. “The story goes,” he reports,

that Socrates met Xenophon in a narrow passageway in the marketplace. Holding out his staff to prevent him from going on, Socrates asked him where each kind of food was sold. Upon receiving an answer, he further inquired, “And where do men go to become noble and good?” Puzzled, Xenophon had no idea. “Then follow me,” Socrates responded, “and learn.” From then on he was Socrates’ student.³

Let’s imitate Xenophon. Let’s hear Socrates—at least Xenophon’s Socrates—talk about how we can become “noble and good.” In doing so, we’ll learn about happiness.

One final note. As with Plato, all passages are from Xenophon’s own work unless otherwise noted.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The following are Socratic conversations recorded by Xenophon. In the first, the sophist Antiphon criticizes Socrates’ approach to philosophy and happiness as unduly harsh. In defense, Socrates suggests that training to endure hardship and to go without things is the only way to reduce our needs or what we lack—our wants or desires. This needs-reduced life, he argues, approximates that of the gods, who have no needs. As such, Socrates’ training program in enduring hardships and going without things, and thereby reducing needs and desires, is a sensible path to happiness.

The sophist Antiphon came to Socrates wishing to lure his students away from him. Therefore, in their

presence he said, “Socrates, I thought that philosophy necessarily produces happiness. But the benefit you get from philosophy seems the opposite to me. For example, you’re living a life that would drive even a slave to abandon his master. Your meat and drink are cheap and second-rate. And the outer clothing you wear is not only in a sorry state, but you never change it, whether it be summer or winter. And you never wear shoes or underclothes.⁴ Moreover, you refuse to take money—something that, merely to get it, causes good cheer, while having it makes one freer and life pleasanter. If students are meant to copy their teachers, . . . then you must think of yourself as a teacher of unhappiness.”

Socrates responded, “Antiphon, it seems you suppose that my life is troublesome and painful. I’m convinced that you’d rather choose death than a life like mine. Come on, then, let’s examine what hardships you’ve observed in my way of life.

“Is it that those who take money are obliged to carry out the work for which they’re paid—while I, because I refuse to take it, am not compelled to engage with anyone if I do not want to? Or do you think my food is second-rate because it is not as healthy as or less nourishing than yours? . . . Or less enjoyable? . . .

“Do you not know that the more one takes pleasure in eating, the less is his need for seasoning and sauce? And the more one enjoys drinking, the less is his longing for drinks that are unavailable? As for outer clothing, we change it, as you know, due to cold or hot weather. And shoes are worn to protect the feet from pain and to provide greater convenience in walking. Now, let me ask you, have you ever seen me staying inside more than others because of the cold?—or scuffling with anyone for a shady spot on account of the heat?—or failing to walk anywhere due to sore feet?

“Do you not know, Antiphon, that by training, practice, and exercise, those who are by nature weak in the body grow mightier than the very strongest man who doesn’t train, practice, and exercise? And that the training itself becomes easy and bearable? Since, then, I am always training my body to bear patiently whatever happens, don’t you think that I am more able to bear everything with ease than you are without training? . . .

“My dear Antiphon, you seem to imagine that happiness is living luxuriously and with extravagance. As for me, I hold that it is divine to lack or need nothing. And so that which has the fewest needs is nearest to God. And since that which is divine is the best, then that which is nearest to God is nearest to the best.”⁵

In the second conversation, Socrates attempts to convince his friend and follower Aristodemus that, relative to other animals, the gods have given human beings many good things for living well and happily. Among them are an erect posture, hands (“the very things that bring our superior

happiness to completion”), speech, the life-long enjoyment of sex, and an excellent soul that is skilled at living and cognizant of the gods. All in all, thanks to the gods’ care for us, “we humans live like gods.” We are by nature “the most excellent creatures both in body and in soul.”

Aristodemus said, “Truly, Socrates, I don’t despise the divinity. But I judge it too great to need my attention or service.”

In turn, Socrates said, “Certainly, then, the greater the being that judges it worthwhile to attend to and serve you, the more you should honor it.”

“I assure you,” Aristodemus said, “that if I believed the gods cared about humans, I would not neglect them.”

“So, you think they do not care for humans? First, humans are the only living creature that the gods have made to stand upright. And this upright position gives a man a wider view in front of him and a better vantage point for things above, and it exposes him less to injury and suffering. Second, whereas the gods give feet to other animals, feet that allow them to move from one point to another, they endow humans with hands, the very things that bring our superior happiness to completion. Third, though every animal has a tongue, the human tongue is the only one made by the gods that can touch different parts of the mouth, enabling us to articulate the voice and indicate our wishes to one another. Fifth, whereas a fixed time is given to other animals for the enjoyment of sex, old age is our only limit.

“Moreover,” Socrates said, “the gods are not merely content to care for and manage the human body. What’s even greater and far more important is that the gods implant a first-rate soul in human beings. What other animal’s soul is there that perceives the existence of the gods who order the cosmos—the greatest and most beautiful of things? And, besides human beings, what other group of animals attend to and serve the gods? And what soul is more competent than the human soul to make provision against hunger and thirst, cold and heat? And to help in times of sickness? And to exercise toward bodily strength? And to work hard to learn things, and then to remember all that is heard or seen or learned?

"Therefore, is it not obvious to you now that, relative to the other animals, we humans live like gods—that by nature we are the most excellent creatures both in body and in soul?"⁶

In the third conversation, Socrates attempts to convince the hedonist Cyrenaic philosopher Aristippus that self-control and the ability to endure hardship are better than an unrestrained life of pleasure.⁷ His case hinges upon the fact that well-trained leaders or rulers are disciplined and able to put up with hunger, thirst, and other wants. Socrates finishes by citing Hesiod on the way of virtue and vice, and by recounting Prodicus' story about Heracles, who, as a young man, had to choose between Lady Virtue and Lady Vice and their corresponding ways to happiness.

(Xenophon is speaking) In other conversations, Socrates encouraged his companions to practice self-control relative to a longing for food, drink, sex, and sleep, and the experience of cold, heat, and hard work.

Observing that one of his associates was rather unbridled in such matters, Socrates said, "Tell me, Aristippus, if you were required to take charge of two youths in order to train them so that the one would be competent to govern—to lead or rule others—while the other would never even seek an office, how would you train them?"⁸ Shall we contemplate this question together, beginning with the fundamental question of their food?"

"Yes," Aristippus said, "it seems to me that food does come first—since we can't live without food."

"Well, now, won't the desire for food naturally take hold of both of our youths at certain times?"

"Yes, it seems likely."

"Which of the two young men, then, should we accustom to plodding on with pressing business before satisfying his own hungry belly?"

"Clearly the one who is being trained to govern," Aristippus said. "Otherwise, the affairs of the city might be neglected during his rule."

"What about thirst? Should the same one be given power to endure thirst when both want to drink?"

"Doubtlessly," he said.

"What about training with sleep? Which young man should receive the capacity to limit his sleep so that he can sleep late and rise early—and even go without sleep, if such is the need?"

"The same one again," he said, "the would-be ruler."

"What about sex, the business of Aphrodite? Who should have self-control regarding sexual pleasures, so that he won't be hindered in doing what is necessary?"

"The same one again," he said.

"Well, what about this point—not fleeing from hard work but willingly taking it on? To which youth should we make this addition?"

"We'll add that one as well to the one we're training to rule." . . .

"Tell me, Aristippus, does it seem to you that with this training our youth will be less likely to be caught by the enemy in comparison with other animals? As you know, some of these animals are so greedy and grasping that . . . they cannot resist their longing for food, and so they are caught in traps, while others are taken with drink."

"Doubtlessly," he said.

"And does it seem to you that other animals—consider quails and partridges, for example—are so sex-crazed, that when they hear the call of the female, they are so carried away by yearning and a hope for Aphrodite's gifts, that they lose all sight of danger and fall into the nets?"

Aristippus agreed to this as well.

"Tell me, then, what you think. Is it shameful that a man would find himself in the same predicament as a mindless wild animal? But isn't this what happens with an adulterous man? He slips into a woman's bed in the same way, knowing he's in danger of being punished by the law, and so he's in danger of being trapped, caught, and mistreated. Must not such a man be out of his mind, considering the fact of impending misery and shame, and the fact that, if he so desired, he could find a way to satisfy his longing for sex without any danger?"

"So it seems to me," he said.

"More. Since the most important human

occupations—fighting, farming, and many others—are done outside in the open air, then do you think it the height of carelessness that so many men are untrained to endure cold and heat?”

He agreed.

“Don’t you believe, then, that our would-be ruler should train so that he is able to bear them with ease?”⁹

“Doubtlessly,” he said.

“If then we judge those with self-control in all these matters as fit to rule, then should we not judge those who cannot control themselves as men with no prerogative to rule?”

He agreed.

“Well, then, since you now know each category and which one belongs where, have you ever thought about where you belong? That is, where would you put yourself?”

“I have considered it. And let me say that the last place I see myself is with the rulers—those who actually want to govern. Considering how challenging it is to provide for my own needs, I judge it no less than crazy for someone to want to supply the city’s wishes in addition to his own. Again, it is the height of thoughtlessness for anyone not only to go without much of what he wants but also to submit himself to the city’s judgment merely because he hasn’t satisfied the preferences of the city’s citizens. I tell you, Socrates, city-states assert the right to deal with their leaders just as I deal with my own household slaves. I expect them to furnish me with abundant provisions. At the same time, I demand that they keep their hands off these goods. That’s how it is with city-states. It’s the business of the rulers to supply the city-state with everything good and beneficial without enjoying these same things themselves. To conclude, Socrates, I’ll say this. If anyone wants a great deal of trouble—for himself and for others—, then I would train him as you suggest. And I would categorize him with those fit to lead—yes, with the rulers. On the other hand, I place myself with those who desire to live in the easiest way possible and with the greatest pleasure.”

Socrates said, “Now, then, should we look at which of the two men lives a more pleasant life? Is it

the ruler or the one ruled?”

“Let’s do it,” Aristippus said.

Socrates mentions the ruling Persians in Asia, Scythians in Europe, and Carthaginians in Africa, and those they rule, before passing to the Greeks. “And what about the Greeks? You’re one. Which group among us Greeks seems to enjoy a more pleasant life—those with the power to rule or those ruled by the powerful?”

“Don’t look at me!” Aristippus objected. “I wouldn’t put myself with the slaves either. As for me, there’s a middle path that I try to walk. It is a path that goes neither through rule nor through slavery but through freedom, which surely leads one to happiness.”

Having observed how human beings behave in the real world, particularly the strong relative to the weak, Socrates is doubtful about Aristippus’ path to happiness. Still, Aristippus attempts to defend himself by declaring that he remains aloof and a “stranger” everywhere. We might today say “off the grid” or “below the radar.” Socrates is not convinced.

Finally, Aristippus asks, “What about those, Socrates, who are trained in the art of ruling or kingship, which you seem to identify with happiness? How are they better off than those whose distress and suffering come about by the force of necessity?” . . .

“Don’t you think, Aristippus,” Socrates said, “that there is some difference between voluntary and involuntary sufferings? For example, if you willingly endure hunger or thirst, you can eat and drink and do whatever you like whenever you want to, whereas the man who suffers against his will cannot end the suffering whenever he wants. Not only that, but the one who voluntarily endures hardship is heartened in his work by hope. To give an example, men who hunt enjoy their weary toil because they hope to ensnare wild animals.

“Sure, prizes like these are worth little after all that work. But what about those who toil to win good friends?—or to conquer enemies? Or what about those who train their bodies and souls in order to manage their own households well—or to help their friends?—or to serve their own homeland? Doubtlessly these men find pleasure in toiling for these goals. And

doubtlessly they live a happy life, content with themselves, approved and envied by others.

“Moreover, self-indulgence and enjoyment will never have the power to bring the body into its highest conditioning and health, as the trainers of athletes say. Nor does such sluggish satisfaction produce any knowledge in the soul worth talking about. Rather, as good men say, it is patient, enduring attention and work that leads to noble and good results.

“For instance, Hesiod somewhere says, ‘It is easy to have Vice. She’s there in abundance for you. The way to her is smooth, and she dwells very near to you. But the immortal gods have put sweat in front of Virtue. The path to her is long and steep, and so it is rough going at first. Nevertheless, when one comes to the highest point, then the path becomes easy—however hard it is at first.’¹⁰

“We also have the witness of Epicharmus’ with the line, ‘The gods ask for toil as the high price of every good thing.’ . . .

“Yes, and the wise man Prodicus makes the same point regarding virtue in his tale about Heracles. When Heracles was making his way from boyhood to young manhood, and so he was on the path to becoming his own master, he came to the point where he had to choose between a life of virtue or one of vice. So, he went out to a quiet spot and sat there puzzling over which path he should take. Sitting there, two very tall women appeared and walked up to him. One was fitting and noble in appearance—her body ordered with purity, her eyes adorned with modesty, and her bearing generally expressing discretion. She wore a white robe. But the other! She was plump and soft, with an unnatural pink and white face all made up, and an upright spine to exaggerate her height, and eyes wide open. As for her robe, it hung so as to reveal everything—all her charms. She eyed herself and looked away to see if anyone noticed her. She would also glance at her own shadow.”

Socrates explains that it is these two women who approach Heracles, each making their case to him. The latter woman speaks first. Heracles should be her friend, she urges—if, that is, he wants to follow along the easiest and most pleasant road. He’ll have the best of everything—food,

drink, sex, sleep, scents, and every other pleasure. All sweets! No hardship! No war or worries! And no toil because he’ll simply seize what he wants from others.

“So then,” Socrates said, “when Heracles had heard her claims, he asked, ‘Lady, what is your name?’ She responded, ‘My friends call me Happiness, but those who hate me have nicknamed me Vice.’”

Now the other woman speaks. She promises a good result if Heracles will only follow her path. Yet, she says, it won’t be easy.

“She said, ‘Of all that is truly good or noble, the gods give nothing to men without toil and effort.’”

This woman goes on to explain what a man must do to get various goods. Favor from the gods requires worship. Goodwill from friends calls for kindness. A city’s honor demands service. Greek admiration involves the hard work of virtue. Fruits require cultivation; an increase in flock numbers, shepherding; and defense and power, training in the art of war. Lastly, a strong body demands the mind’s command and much toilsome, sweaty training.

Socrates went on, saying, “As Prodicus tells it, Vice here interrupted and said, ‘Have you considered, Heracles, how long and hard this road to enjoyment is that this woman Virtue is mapping for you? I will lead you along a short and easy road to happiness.’”

Virtue strongly disagrees and declares, “But I associate with the gods and with good human beings, and no fine action, whether the deed of a god or of a human being, is done without me. . . . So, Heracles, child of good parents, if you toil hard along the path that I, Virtue, have mapped for you, you can acquire the most blessed happiness.”

Finishing Prodicus’ story, Socrates said, “In any case, Aristippus, you would do well to think about these matters and consider the life ahead of you.”¹¹

In the fourth conversation, Socrates works to persuade Euthydemus that happiness, as an indisputable good, should only include that which is truly good. Consequently, things such as beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, and the like should not be included in one’s understanding of true happiness.

Euthydemus said, “It seems that happiness is an

indisputable good, Socrates.”

“It is, Euthydemus, as long as it’s not made up of disputed goods.”

“But what part of happiness is disputed?”

“No part—as long as we do not include in it beauty or strength or wealth or reputation or any other things such as these.”

“But my god—of course we’ll include them!” Euthydemus said. “How can anyone be happy without them?”

Sighing to god, Socrates said, “By including them, we’ll be including that which causes a great deal of trouble to human beings. Beauty—in the form of a pretty face, for example—frequently brings destruction to those who steal a look at it. And strength leads many to overestimate themselves and engage in tasks that are truly too much for them. And wealth destroys others with all the plotting it demands. Finally, reputation and political power cause many to suffer great misfortune.”

Euthydemus said, “Well, Socrates, if I’m wrong to praise this manner of being happy, then I must say that I don’t even know what to pray to the gods for!”¹²

In the fifth conversation, Socrates tells Critobulus a story about the Spartan naval commander Lysander and his visit to Cyrus the Younger’s gardens. There he declares the nature of Cyrus’ happiness, which has to do with being a good man, which in turn involves discipline and hard work.

Socrates explains that when Lysander visited the Persian prince Cyrus the Younger in Sardis, he was amazed by his extensive, well-ordered, and beautiful garden. And so, when he heard Cyrus claim that he had planned and planted much of it himself, Lysander looked at all his jewelry and fine clothing and protested—

“Did you truly plant this garden with your own hands?”

Defending himself, Cyrus said, “Does that astonish you, Lysander? I swear by the Sun god Mithras that whenever my health is good, I never sit down to eat without first sweating by working hard at some task, something I take pride in—whether it be something related to the art of war or farming.”

To congratulate him, Lysander declared, “It seems to me, Cyrus, that you deserve to be happy. You are happy because you are a good man.”¹³

We’ll end with a brief selection from Xenophon’s On the Cavalry Commander that ties a city’s happiness to training for war. To state the obvious, perhaps, Xenophon is speaking.

Far more honor is won with victory in war than with boxing with your fists. Here’s why. Both the city-state and the warriors share in the glory since the gods usually crown such cities with happiness in prosperity. It is fitting, then, for men and cities to train in the art of war.¹⁴

SUMMARY OF HAPPINESS FOR XENOPHON & SOCRATES

For Xenophon (and Socrates), happiness is a matter of desire, wants, or needs reduction. The fewer things a person needs or wants, the more that person is like the gods, who need nothing and are perfectly happy (in keeping with Greek tradition positing happy and immortal gods). Therefore, as the person’s desires, needs, or wants decrease, happiness increases.

But how can a person curb his or her desires, needs, or wants? The answer is a program of rigorous training that will help the person learn how to endure

hardship—little food, little wine, in short, little that affords pleasure. Not only that but such a program will also accustom such a one to pain.

The key to happiness, then, is strength—it is self-control and the ability to endure. This is the path that leads to virtue, the path that the hero Heracles chooses to follow. This is also the way of life that Cyrus the Younger exemplifies in his choice to work hard before eating or relaxing.

So ends Reading 11. See you in Reading 12, “Aristotle.”

NOTES

¹ The *Clouds* was first performed in 423 BC, making Aristophanes’ presentation of Socrates the earliest we have in writing. How accurate was it? It’s hard to know. But it seems to represent what some in Athens, including those who brought him to court in 399 BC, believed about him. That said, Plato has Socrates deny the Aristophanic, as we may call it, presentation. “None of it is true,” asserts Socrates before the men of Athens in Plato’s *Apology*. For the Aristophanic presentation and Socrates’ denial, see Aristophanes, *Clouds* 188 ff., and Plato, *Apology* 19a-e.

² Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.8.11.

³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.48.

⁴ The difference between “outer clothing” (often given as a “cloak”) and “underclothing” (often given as a “tunic”) is that between the *himation* and *chiton*.

⁵ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.1-10. The notion that “it is divine to lack or need nothing” has a long history in ancient Greek philosophy.

⁶ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.4.10-14.

⁷ For more on Aristippus of Cyrene, see Chapter 12, “Aristippus & Cyrenaicism.”

⁸ When you read “train” or “to train” (*paideuō*) in this selection, know that it also means “to raise” or “to educate.”

⁹ In this instance, “train” or “to train” is *askeō*, which means to practice, exercise, train — as in the training of an athlete and, much later, the training of a monk. It (*askeō*) is behind the term “asceticism.”

¹⁰ See Hesiod, *Works and Days* 287-292.

¹¹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.1-34 (parts).

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.2.34-35.

¹³ Xenophon, *Economics* or *The Estate-Manager* 4.20-25. The Greek word for “garden” here is *paradeisos* or *paradisos*, which may also be given as “paradise.”

¹⁴ Xenophon, *On the Cavalry Commander* 8.7.

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