

Happiness

Reading 1 – Happiness Formulas – Happy the Man Who

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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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Reading 1

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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 various Greeks thought and said about a range of ancient Greek formulas for happiness.

"Instant happiness" —the assertion appearing above a foil-wrapped burrito on a \$25.00 Chipotle gift card (happiness = a burrito)

GO TO THE papyrology room of the Sackler Library at Oxford University and you'll find a remarkably small, sack-brown scrap of papyrus that is mostly unintelligible but for a few divine nicknames and a reference to a big heart or mind. Discovered late in the nineteenth century deep in the sands of Egypt not much more than ten miles from the Nile, the second century AD fragment is part of a song belonging to the sixth century BC Greek poet Stesichorus.

The song, whatever it was about, was popular—so much so that later Greeks and Romans reproduced it for nearly a thousand years. Then, at some point in the second century AD, a scholar brought a copy of the song to Oxyrhynchus, a large provincial capital in the Roman province of Egypt some one hundred miles south of modern Cairo. Or possibly it was a merchant who carried it along with other songs for trade. Or perhaps a boy copied it there in school as

an exercise to satisfy the demands of his pedagogue. Whatever the case, the copy ended up preserved in the city's dump.

However it got there, the papyrus copy of the song we now possess is regrettably only a fragment of the original whole. And it is tiny, measuring one inch in length by three quarters of an inch in width. Nevertheless, its sloppily written script—favoring, by the way, the schoolboy theory—announces something very large relative to its small size. After obliquely referring to Ares, Athena, and another god—possibly Artemis or “horse-driving” Poseidon—the mostly all-caps fragment tantalizingly declares, “HAPPY THE MAN WHO . . . ,” before ending in an angled and slightly jagged tear that, with a little imagination, looks like a man in silhouette shouting.

Cupping our hands together, we may call back through time to Stesichorus himself, begging, “Happy the many who *what?*” After all, if only we had the remaining part of that line, we would have a very old happiness formula. For whatever reason, though, it's gone.

It's possible the *what* was so life altering that the Oxyrhynchian boy or girl or man or woman who threw the copy away tore off the important part, the post-ellipses *what*, and stuffed it into a fold of his or her tunic before tossing the rest in the city dump.

Happy the man who . . . *what?*!

But *sigh*—we'll likely never know.

Not all is lost, though. Fortunately, we have many early Greek statements summarizing the nature of happiness. So even if we've lost Stesichorus' formula, we'll let the others suffice.

What follows is a variety of happiness formulas organized into broad categories (formulas that zero in on avoidance, for instance, or on being god-favored, or experiencing pleasure, or possessing wealth and success).

As you'll see, the formulas take on many forms. Some follow the Stesichorus pattern: “Happy the man who . . .” Others assume a different structure. Regardless, each statement conveys the essence of happiness: H = X, Y, or Z.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The first category to note is negative in nature, that is, what a person must go without or avoid to be happy. Let's call it the avoidance formula, one that many ancient Greeks felt and expressed.

Alcman Happy the man who cheerfully finishes his life without weeping.¹

Theognis of Megara Ah! Blessed, fortunate, and happy is he who goes down to the dark house of Hades without knowing trouble.²

Bacchylides There is one path to happiness for mortal men: the ability to hold on to a spirit free from grief and sorrow throughout life.³

Sophocles (the chorus is speaking) “Happy are they who have not tasted misfortune during their lives!”⁴

Euripides (the chorus leader is speaking) “Farewell! Happy is the mortal man who can manage life with gladness and without suffering misfortune.”⁵

Euripides (Hecuba is speaking) “Happiest is the man who, day after day, doesn't hit upon misfortune.”⁶

Plutarch (Plutarch is citing an unnamed author, possibly Epicurus) “Happiness and blessedness do not consist in a stockpile of property and money, great deeds, or the possession of exalted positions or powers. Instead, happiness is found in freedom from sorrow, calmness, and an ordered state of mind.”⁷

Most early Greeks kept in mind the gods when thinking about the nature of happiness. Whatever it was, they presumed that happiness must be something sanctioned by the gods, whether directly or indirectly. And so, the god-favored formula. Related to this is the fact that if the gods weren't pleased by human happiness in general or with a specific individual's happiness, then that happiness would likely vanish. Why? Because the gods could be very jealous. Moreover, if possible, many ancient Greeks wished to

receive the special protection of the gods both in this life and in the life to come. This divine protection was accomplished with the rites of initiation, giving rise to the initiation formula, a kind of happiness only available to the initiated.

Hesiod Divinely favored (or happy) and happy in wealth is the man who knows all these things and does his work, blameless before the immortals, distinguishing the birds of omen and shunning transgressions.⁸

Xenophon (the Spartan general Clearchus is speaking to the Persian satrap Tissaphernes) “Considering, then, that such misunderstandings are best settled by a discussion, I have come here because I wish to show you that it is a mistake to mistrust us. First and foremost, our oaths sworn before the gods stand in the way of our being enemies of each other. For my part, I would never call the man happy who has knowingly disregarded such oaths. The reason is simple. I know of no swiftness of foot that could save a man in a battle with the gods—or of some place of refuge where that man could flee, or of some darkness into which he could escape, or how he could withdraw into some stronghold. Again, the reason is simple. Everything everywhere is under the control of the gods. The gods rule all.”⁹

Homeric Hymn to Demeter (revealing the rites of Demeter, the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the blessings of the gods) Of all men on earth, happy is the one who has looked upon these mysteries. But the man who remains uninitiated in the sacred rites, the one who has no portion of them, he has no share in these same good things when he perishes and goes down to the gloomy darkness. . . . And of all men on earth, very happy is the one whom the gods readily hold dear, for very soon do they send the god Ploutos to his great house as that man’s guest—Ploutos, the god who gives wealth to mortal men.¹⁰

Pindar Happy is the man who beholds the mysteries at Eleusis before going beneath the earth. He knows the end of life and its god-given beginning.¹¹

Some, however, seemed to doubt the initiation formula. One, as reported by *Diogenes Laertius*, was the Cynic philosopher *Diogenes of Sinope*.

Diogenes Laertius The Athenians urged Diogenes to be initiated into the mysteries. They told him that in the netherworld, initiates enjoy special privileges. “It would be laughable,” he said, “if the Spartan king Agesilaus and the Theban general Epaminondas continue on in the mud while some worthless jokes who have been initiated will be in the Islands of the Blessed.”¹²

Knowing that the gods must somehow be with us is knowing something very significant about happiness. Still, it doesn’t offer much in terms of specifics. The question remains: What specific things—whether concrete or abstract, single or many—make for happiness?

Before looking at particular things, let’s note with the relativist formula that, at least for a few ancient Greeks, the nature of happy-making things is quite relative—relative to different humans and, in a few of the following cases, different animals.

Homer (Odysseus is speaking) “Different men delight in different things.”¹³

Archilochus of Paros There is no single kind of human nature, but different things warm different people’s hearts.¹⁴

Heraclitus of Ephesus Pigs delight more in mud than in clean water.¹⁵

Heraclitus of Ephesus If human happiness consisted in the pleasures of the body, we would declare cattle happy whenever they discovered a field of bitter vetch to eat.¹⁶

Moving on to specifics, there’s Epicurus’ basic needs formula, stating that happiness is the satisfaction of certain basic needs or wants (lackings).

Epicurus The flesh cries out, “No hunger! No thirst!

No freezing cold!” Whoever confidently has what it takes to satisfy these desires may rival even Zeus for happiness.¹⁷

Still, most Greeks wanted more. Most wanted success and wealth—all those things that lead to a luxurious life admired by others. Consequently, the wealth and success formula.

*Sappho of Lesbos Riches mixed together with success bring the highest happiness.*¹⁸

*Theognis of Megara Success and good looks fall to few human beings. Happy is the man who has a portion of both. Everyone honors him.*¹⁹

*Bacchylides Happy the man to whom a god has given a portion of fine things. He lives a wealthy life with happy fortune.*²⁰

Homeric Hymn to Earth, the Mother of All (the singer views Earth as the provider of all happy-making goods) I will sing of well-founded Earth, the mother of all and oldest of all beings.

She feeds everything that exists upon the earth—all things that move through the land and the sea, and all that fly. All these are nourished by your happy prosperity!

Through you, queen, men are blessed with good children and abundant harvests. It’s up to you to give mortal men what it takes to live, and to take it away.

Happy is the man you readily honor in your spirit! He has an abundance of everything. His fields are laden with life-bearing grain, his flocks and herds flourish, and his house is filled with good things. Such men rule well in cities full of beautiful women. Great wealth and much happiness follow after them. Their sons exult in thriving success and good cheer, and their daughters play and skip merrily over the soft flowers of the field, clad in flower-laden bands.

This is how it is for those you honor, holy goddess—the divine one who gives without grudge.

Rejoice, mother of the gods, wife of starry Sky! And for my song, readily give to me delightful wealth as my companion.²¹

*Xenophon (the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great is speaking) Cyrus said, “Let me tell you, Croesus, I don’t think those who have and guard the most are the happiest men. If that were so, then the happiest men would be those who have guard duty on the city walls! After all, they are the ones who guard everything in the city. Instead, the happiest man is the one who can justly acquire the most goods and use them for noble ends.”*²²

In addition to wealth and success, the Greeks discovered happiness in what we may generically label the many activities and other goods formula, something akin to “objective list theory” (see Introduction 15).

*Hipponax of Ephesus Blessed is the man who hunts.*²³

*Anonymous You women are happy in the delightful dance!*²⁴

*Theognis of Megara Happy the man who goes home and engages in love exercises, sleeping with a beautiful boy all day long.*²⁵

*Solon of Athens (also attributed to Theognis of Megara) Happy is the man who has dear boys, horses with hooves that are not cracked, hunting dogs, and friends that live in other lands.*²⁶

*Theognis of Megara My dear heart is always warmed whenever I listen to the aulos sounding its charming voice. I’m happy drinking well and singing along with the aulos. And I’m happy holding the pleasant-sounding lyre in my hands.*²⁷

*Strabo Although it has been said that human beings act most like the gods when they’re doing good to others, one might better say that this is true when they are happy. And such happiness entails rejoicing, celebrating holy days, studying philosophy, and engaging in music.*²⁸

Socrates didn’t accept the claim that having and enjoying many things was the same as happiness. In fact, Diogenes

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Laertius tells us that when Socrates was strolling through the marketplace full of things for sale in Athens, he would exclaim, “How many things I can do without!”²⁹ It’s what we may call the simplicity formula, a happiness formula others also adhered to.

Xenophon (Socrates is speaking) “My dear Antiphon, you appear to imagine that happiness is living luxuriously with extravagance. As for me, I hold that standing in need of nothing is divine.”³⁰

Diogenes of Sinope (addressing Monimus) I said to my host Lacydes, “But let the drinking cups from which we drink be of clay, small, and cheap. And may our drink be spring water, and our food a loaf of wheat bread, and the seasoning be salt or cardamom. I learned to eat and drink these things from Antisthenes, . . . things one is quite able to find on the path leading to happiness.” . . .

Diogenes goes on to describe the nature of the path leading to happiness and how he quickly arrived.

“And coming to the place where happiness exists, I said, ‘Because of you, Happiness, and the greater good, I persisted in drinking water and eating cardamom and sleeping on the ground.’ Responding to me, Happiness said, ‘But rather than a hardship, I will make these things sweeter to you than the goods of wealth that human beings honor before me. But they do not understand that they are nourishing a tyrant for themselves.’ And from that point on, when I listened to Happiness talking about this, I no longer ate or drank these things as a matter of practice, but as a pleasure.”³¹

Regardless of the many goods a person possessed, the poet Ariphron recognized that without health, happy-making things were worthless. Hence, the health enthusiast formula.

Ariphron Health! Of all the blessed gods, mortal men honor you most. May I abide with you for what remains of my life! And may you readily live with me! For if there is any joy in wealth or children, or delight in godlike royal rule over men, or in the yearnings by which we hunt with the hidden snares of Aphrodite,

or if there is any other pleasure or relief from toil that has been made manifest by the gods to human beings, it thrives and shines the light of life with you, blessed Health, and with the soft voices of the Graces. Apart from you no man is happy.³²

With the pleasure formula, some Greeks simply identified happiness with pleasure. For Plato, however, it had to be the right pleasure. Others insisted happiness was neither a matter of “excessive pleasure” nor of “a pleasure that requires external things.” We’ll begin with these last ones first, ones who doubted that pleasure actually made for happiness.

Teles the Cynic I do not see how someone will live a happy life if he really must measure it by an excess of pleasure.³³

Teles the Cynic If the happy life must be measured by the yardstick of excessive pleasure, then no one, says Crates, will be judged happy. Rather, if anyone wishes to weigh every stage in the whole of life, he will discover that there is a far greater quantity of pain and suffering.³⁴

Crates of Thebes Take care of your soul—but your body only so far as what is necessary, and externals not even that much. I say this because happiness is not a pleasure that requires external things.³⁵

The Contest of Homer and Hesiod. Hesiod asks, “What is it that humans call happiness?” Homer responds, “Dying after living a life with the least possible pain and the most possible pleasure.”³⁶

Diogenes Laertius (stating the Cyrenaic philosopher Aristippus’ position) Happiness as a whole is made up of particular pleasures.³⁷

Epicurus There are two kinds of happiness. There’s the happiness of the god, the highest kind, which cannot be increased. The other kind may increase or decrease in terms of pleasures.³⁸

Plato (the Athenian is speaking) “Pleasure and pain are

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two streams released by nature to flow. Whoever draws the right amount from them, at the right place and time, is happy.”³⁹

Many Greeks believed that happiness was more of an abstract possession—a quality, state of being, condition, or habit. Hence, the good, healthy, or beneficial quality, condition, or habit formula.

Diogenes Laertius (reporting the view of Thales of Miletus) When asked, “Who is happy?” Thales answered, “The man who has a healthy body, an inventive mind, and a well-disciplined constitution.”⁴⁰

Theognis of Megara Judgment, Cyrnus, is the best thing the gods give to mortal men. Judgment understands the proper measure of everything. Blessed is the man who holds it in his mind.⁴¹

Julian (the Roman emperor) We must say that happiness resides in our minds, in the best and noblest part of us.⁴²

Pythagoras The most important thing in human life is persuading the soul to be good or evil. Happy are those men who acquire a good soul.⁴³

Plato (Socrates is speaking) “Happiest is the man who has no evil in his soul.”⁴⁴

Plato (Socrates is speaking) “He who lives well is blessed and happy. It’s the opposite for the man who does not.”⁴⁵

Plato (the Athenian is speaking) “I would never agree that a wealthy man is truly happy if he is not also a good man.”⁴⁶

Aristotle Happiness is an activity of the soul that accords with perfect virtue.⁴⁷

Crates of Thebes We Cynics say that the good and excellent man, and no other man, is called happy.⁴⁸

Zeno of Citium Happiness consists in virtue, which is the state of the soul that tends to make the whole of life harmonious.⁴⁹

Plutarch Happiness is a kind of doing well. And doing well is found in a man when he alone is fulfilled.⁵⁰

Marcus Aurelius Happiness is a good and noble *daemon* or a good and noble *hēgemonikon*.⁵¹

Lastly, there was what we might call the only at the end formula. That is, a person’s happiness—or not—can only be determined and declared at the end, when he or she dies.

Aeschylus (the Achaean leader Agamemnon is speaking) “A man should only be pronounced happy when he has finished his life with welcome prosperity and well-being.”⁵²

Herodotus (the Athenian wise man Solon is speaking to the Lydian ruler Croesus) “Whoever goes through life with the most, and dies in an agreeable manner, is the one who deserves the name of ‘happy’—in my view, anyway.”⁵³

Diogenes Laertius (relaying an anecdote about the early Cynic Antisthenes) When someone asked him what the greatest happiness was among human beings, Antisthenes said, “To die happy.”⁵⁴

So ends Reading 1. **See you in Reading 2, “Happy Times & Places – The Ideal of Happiness.”**

NOTES

¹ Alcman, fragment 1, The Louvre partheneion 37-39.

² Theognis of Megara 1013-1016.

³ Bacchylides, *Processionals*, fragment 11 and 12.

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- ⁴ Sophocles, *Antigone* 583.
- ⁵ Euripides, *Electra* 1357-1359.
- ⁶ Euripides, *Hecuba* 627-628.
- ⁷ Plutarch, *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry* 37a.
- ⁸ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 826-828. “These things” refers to “how work fits together with the course of the year and with the favorable days of the month.” See The Classics Cave’s *The Best of Hesiod’s Theogony & Works and Days*, Introduction, 54. The translation “divinely favored” for *eudaimōn*—which is often simply given as “happy” and thus the “or happy” in parenthesis—is inspired by Cornelius de Heer’s arguments in *ΜΑΚΑΡ-ΕΥΔΑΙΜΩΝ-ΟΛΒΙΟΣ- ΕΥΤΥΧΗΣ: A Study of the Semantic Field Denoting Happiness in Ancient Greek to the End of the 5th Century B.C.* Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1969.
- ⁹ Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2.5.6-7. To state the implied god-favored formula positively, “Happy those who keep the oaths they have sworn before the gods.”
- ¹⁰ *Homeric Hymn 2 to Demeter* 480-482, 486-489.
- ¹¹ Pindar, fragment 137, in Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 3.3.17. Another reading of the end: “He knows the completion of life and its god-given origin.”
- ¹² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.39. To learn more about the Islands of the Blessed, turn to Chapter 6, “Happy Times & Happy Places.”
- ¹³ Homer, *Odyssey* 14.228.
- ¹⁴ Archilochus, fragment 25. “Warm” here essentially means “satisfy” or “make happy.”
- ¹⁵ Heraclitus, fragment 51, in Clement, *Miscellanies* 1.2.2.
- ¹⁶ Heraclitus, fragment 53, in Albert the Great, *On Vegetables* 6.401.
- ¹⁷ Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 33.
- ¹⁸ Sappho of Lesbos, fragment 148, in Scholiast on Pindar.
- ¹⁹ Theognis of Megara 933-935.
- ²⁰ Bacchylides, *Victory Ode* 5.50-53.
- ²¹ *Homeric Hymn 30 to Earth, Mother of All* 1-16. “Sky,” often translated as “Heaven,” is Ouranos (the Greek version) or Uranus (the Latin version).
- ²² Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus (Cyropaedia)* 8.2.23.
- ²³ Hipponax of Ephesus, fragment 43, in Choeroboscus on Hephaestion.
- ²⁴ Anonymous testimony 59 regarding Sappho of Lesbos, *Palatine Anthology*.
- ²⁵ Theognis of Megara 1335-1336.
- ²⁶ Solon, fragment 23, in Plato’s *Lysis* 212e. The identical fragment is also given as Theognis of Megara 1253-1254. Theognis goes on to say that the man who does not love these “has no good cheer in his spirit” (1255-56). There is discussion among scholars about whether the text should read “dear boys,” with a pederastic connotation, or “dear sons,” signifying something altogether different. See Douglas E. Gerber, *Greek Elegiac Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 145, where he suggests, “. . . A pederastic sense seems more probable.”
- ²⁷ Theognis of Megara 531-534.
- ²⁸ Strabo, *Geography* 10.3.9.
- ²⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.25.
- ³⁰ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.10.
- ³¹ (Pseudo) Diogenes of Sinope, *Letter 37 to Monimus*.
- ³² Ariphton, *Paean to Health*, in Athenaeus, *Scholars at Dinner* 15.701f-702b.
- ³³ Teles the Cynic, *Discourse* 5, 51H (“On Pleasure not Being the Goal of Life”).
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 49H. “Crates,” here, is the Cynic Crates of Thebes.
- ³⁵ (Pseudo) Crates of Thebes, *Letter 3 to His Students*.
- ³⁶ *The Contest of Homer and Hesiod (the Certamen)*, 1.11 or 321 in other editions. Homer’s response, “Dying after living a life with the least possible pain,” could have also been included under the “avoidance formula.”
- ³⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.87.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.121.
- ³⁹ Plato, *Laws* 1.636d-e.
- ⁴⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 1.37.

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⁴¹ Theognis of Megara 1171-1173.

⁴² Julian (the Roman emperor), *Oration* 6.194 (“To the Uneducated Cynic”).

⁴³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 8.32.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Gorgias* 478d.

⁴⁵ Plato, *Republic* 1.354a.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Laws* 5.743a.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.8.1 (1098b). “Virtue” (*aretē*) may also be read as “excellence.”

⁴⁸ (Pseudo) Crates of Thebes, *Letter* 36 to Dinomachus. The “good and excellent man” is the *spoudaios* man.

⁴⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.89.

⁵⁰ Plutarch, *On Fate* 7.

⁵¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 7.17. *Daemon*, here, means something like a guardian angel in the sense of a guide. But in this case, it is one’s innermost self or spirit or even conscience. This understanding of *daemon* likely goes back to Socrates, who spoke of the *daemon* that led him, forbidding him to do one thing or another. That said, the phenomenon is present from the earliest Greek literature. The *hēgemonikon* is the “leading part of the soul,” which is the same as reason.

⁵² Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 928-929.

⁵³ Herodotus, *Histories* 1.32.

⁵⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.5.

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