

Happiness

Reading 2 – Happy Times & Happy Places – The Ideal of Happiness

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

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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 the ideal of happiness in terms of its when and where, time and place.

"O happy age, O truly golden century that nourished humanity with fruits produced spontaneously, without effort or care, and . . . without superfluity!" —Coluccio Salutati, *Letter to Leonardo Bruni*

THE POET HESIOD, known for his *Theogony* (*Birth of the Gods*) and his *Works and Days*, was a pessimist.¹

To understand why, let's journey on a brief voyage of imagination to the year 700 BC, nearly three millennia ago. Landing in that year by some miracle of time travel, we venture down from Mount Helicon, home of the Heliconian Muses, to Ascra, a small farming village in Boeotia, located in central Greece,

northwest of Athens. It's where Hesiod lived during what he called the Iron Age.²

When we arrive in Ascra, the villagers stare us down like the strangers we are. They notice our soft hands, odd clothes and shoes, and when we attempt to speak, our non-Greek accents. Even so, they are exceedingly kind, knowing full well how Zeus *Xenios*, the god of strangers, demands foreigners be treated.

After getting to know the inhabitants, we form a focus group with Hesiod and some of the other men and women who dwell in the village and farm its surrounding fields. A “focus group?” they will have asked with a good measure of skepticism showing on their weathered faces. But after spreading a mid-summer style feast before them, replete with Bibline wine, barley cakes, goat cheese, and roasted meat, the group warms up to answering a few questions. So, here goes.

Number one. Please raise your hand if you enjoyed the feast. All hands go up.

Two. Raise your hand if farming is going well for you this year—your fields are blooming with grain and your sheep are growing heavy with wool. Most hands go up since it has, in fact, been a good year.

Three. Now for a more general question, we say. How many of you are pleased to be living right now during the Iron Age?

The participants of the focus group look at one another, silently motioning with their eyebrows, *Now?*

After a few moments, one whispers, “Are you kidding?”

Finally, a hand goes up halfway, gesturing to get our attention. When called on, she curses her luck, saying, “I’d rather live in the halls of Hades than in the Iron Age!”

Another calls out, “She means she’d rather be dead!”

Hearing this exchange, Hesiod stands. “If you don’t mind,” he says, “I’d like to deliver a few lines I’ve been working on about the iron race of men.”

Given his excellence as a poet, one graced in recent years by the Heliconian Muses, everyone readily agrees. And so, he recites:

If only I were no longer obliged to be part of the fifth kind of men but had died before or been born afterward. For presently the race of men is truly one made of iron. Oppressed by wearisome work and suffering, men will not rest day or night. And the gods will give them anxious thoughts that are hard to endure. Yet for these people, too, the good will be mixed with the bad—the noble with the ignoble, the fortunate with the unfortunate.³

After everyone expresses their approval of Hesiod’s lines, we decide to ask an impromptu question. How many of you feel as Hesiod feels? All hands go up.

Then, turning to Hesiod, we ask him to speak about the period of time he’d rather live in and about the humans who lived during that time.

The poet smiles as he begins to tell us about what he calls the “golden race of men,” those who lived during the Golden Age under the direction of the Titan god Kronos. “They lived like the gods,” he explains, “with carefree spirits, far away from toil and suffering. Wretched old age never overtook them. . . . They delighted in abundant feasts, apart from every evil.”⁴

Everyone applauds. This is what they want, too. And so, we get some idea about the happiness ancient Greeks pined for—that of the Golden Age and its easy, carefree, ever-youthful life of abundance.

Along with the Golden Age, we’ll visit other happy times and happy places in this chapter, including the Age of Kronos, the Heroic Age, the Islands of the Blessed, Mount Olympus, the Elysian fields, and more. In doing so, we’ll form an idea about the ancient Greek ideal of happiness consisting of distant times and faraway places.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Many ancient Greeks—including Hesiod, as we’ve seen—believed the Golden Age was a happy time. The Golden Age was a time when the god Kronos (or Cronus) ruled. Who was Kronos? According to Hesiod, he was the son of Ouranos (Sky), who was the husband-son of Gaia (Earth). Otherwise, he was the husband-brother of Rhea, and with her, the father of Zeus, Hera, and other gods and goddesses. Hesiod tells Kronos’ story in the Theogony and in the Works and Days.⁵ But we also find hints elsewhere about Kronos and the particularly happy age over which he presided, a time of ease, peace, and abundance.

Hesiod (the poet is singing of the Golden Age during Kronos’ rule) First of all, the immortals who have houses on Olympus made a golden race of speech-endowed human beings. They existed at the time of Kronos,

when he was king in the sky. And they lived like the gods, with carefree spirits, far away from toil and suffering. Wretched old age never overtook them, but they were always the same from their feet up to their hands. They delighted in abundant feasts, apart from every evil. And when they died, it was as though they were overcome by sleep. They had all good things. For without envy, the grain-giving field spontaneously bore many fruit and grain crops. And willingly and peacefully they distributed the results of their work along with many good and noble things. Rich in sheep, they were dear to the blessed gods.⁶

Philodemus Life in the time of the god Kronos was happiest—as Hesiod and the poet of the *Alcmeonis* and Sophocles have written.⁷

Unknown (a late Greek interpolation within Hesiod's Works and Days that describes Kronos' rule among the "happy heroes" who lived on the Islands of the Blessed.) Kronos is king among the heroes. For Zeus himself, the father of men and of gods, released him. And now, as is fitting, Kronos perpetually has honor among them.⁸

Plato (the Athenian is speaking) “Long before those cities existed, the ones we’ve just discussed, it is said that during the Age of Kronos there was a very happy settlement and government. . . . Tradition lets us know that life during that time was blessed. Men were furnished with everything in abundance and spontaneously. The cause of this abundant bliss is said to be this. . . . The god Kronos, in his love and affection for human beings, set over us at that time a better race of daemoniac spirits. And they, in a way that was easy for them and for us, took charge of us and supplied us with peace and reverence and good law and justice lacking envy. As a result, Kronos brought humankind to perfection in terms of freedom from political faction, and happiness.”⁹

Plato (the Stranger is speaking to a young Socrates) “All these stories [about the rule of Kronos and how earlier people were earthborn rather than born from another

human], and others even more astonishing than these, have their source in the same event. But in the lapse of time, some of them have been lost to memory. . . .

“The life and time about which you ask, when all the fruits of the earth sprang up spontaneously for men, did not belong to this present time and this present revolution of the cosmos. Rather, it belonged to the previous time. For then, before this time, the god Kronos ruled and supervised the turning of the cosmos as a whole. . . . No creature was wild. And creatures didn’t eat one another. And war didn’t exist or civil strife. . . . Under the god’s rule, there were no states or separate citizenship. Nor did men possess women as wives or children. . . . They had fruits in abundance from trees, other bushes, and plants. The earth yielded these spontaneously, producing them without the work of farmers. And they lived for the most part in the open air, without clothing or beds. The climate was regulated for their comfort, and the abundant grass that grew up out of the earth made for them soft beds.

“That, Socrates, was the life of men during the Age of Kronos. As for life during this present time, which is said to be the Age of Zeus, you know it by your own experience.”¹⁰

Plotinus (Plotinus is discussing the archetypal world of Intelligence, the realm of eternal intelligibles) Over them rules pure Intelligence with extraordinary wisdom. There is the true realm and life of Kronos, whose very name suggests abundance and intelligence. It encompasses all that is immortal, everything intelligent and divine, every soul. There is eternal stability, eternal rest.¹¹

Apart from happy times, the ancient Greeks mapped out a geography of happy lands and happy places. Prominent among them are the Islands of the Blessed where there is an abundance of all good things.

Hesiod (Of the Heroic Age, Hesiod explains that some heroes perished fighting before the walls of Thebes and Troy, and so “terrible battle destroyed these men-heroes” as “the end of death covered over . . . them.” As for the rest, he says the following.) Father Zeus, the son of Kronos, granted

the other heroes life and an accustomed abode far apart from human beings, and he made them dwell at the limits of the earth. And these dwell with care-free spirits on the Islands of the Blessed by deep-edging Ocean. They are the happy heroes for whom the grain-giving field bears honey-sweet fruit, flourishing three times per year.¹²

Pindar But those . . . preserving their souls from all unjust acts, follow the way of Zeus to the tower of Kronos. There, ocean breezes blow around the Island of the Blessed, and flowers of gold light up like fire . . . And with these flowers they weave bracelets for their wrists and crowns for their heads.¹³

Drinking song O dearest Harmodius! You can't be dead! They declare that you are in the Islands of the Blessed, where swift-footed Achilles is, and—they declare—Diomedes, the son of Tydeus.¹⁴

Plato (Socrates is speaking) "Every human who has lived a just and holy life departs when dead to the Islands of the Blessed, and he dwells there in all happiness apart from misfortune."¹⁵

Plato (Socrates is speaking) "Delivered from such things as gluttony and similar pleasures, the soul turns its vision from things below toward things that are real and true and thus a vision of higher things. . . . *The soul does so* in the pursuit of education and training. . . . *Consequently, these souls* will not willingly engage in practical activities such as the governance of a city-state. Why? It is because they believe they've been settled in the Islands of the Blessed while still alive. . . . *This education and training consists in studies having to do with* perceiving the idea of the Good, which is found in those studies that force the soul to turn itself to the place that is the happiest part of reality. . . . If the soul contemplates Being itself, it is doing what is proper. . . . *And finally,* the soul turns its vision upward to the goal of education. There it fixes its gaze on that which sheds light on all, . . . the Good itself. *And after governing the city-state and educating others, such souls will dwell in the Islands of the Blessed.*¹⁶

*In Lucian of Samosata's The True History (or The True Tale), the narrator explains that the "Island of the Blessed" is ruled by Rhadamanthus of Crete. Entering the island's city, the narrator is taken to the drinking party of the blessed. . . . The whole city, the narrator explains, is built of gold. Its wall is constructed of emerald. And each of its seven gates is made of a single plank of cinnamon. The ground within the walls, foundations and all, are ivory. The temples of all the gods are built of beryl, and the altar in each is a great monolith of amethyst upon which the inhabitants offer hecatombs. Around the city flows a river of the finest perfume, . . . in which there is pleasant swimming. The baths are in great crystal houses heated by fires of cinnamon. Rather than ordinary water, though, these long tubs are filled with warm dew. The people within this city wear purple clothes made of the finest material (like that of a cobweb). Strangely, though, they do not have bodies. Therein a man does not grow old. As for seasons, it is always spring, with Zephyrus, the West Wind, cooling the inhabitants. As for refreshment, there's abundant food and wine, with bread-producing plants, ample fruit trees, and rivers flowing with milk and wine. During each meal, there is music and singing. And nearby, there are two springs—one of laughter and one of pleasure. These add a great deal to the inhabitants' enjoyment.*¹⁷

Diogenes Laertius (reporting the response of the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope) The Athenians urged Diogenes to be initiated into the mysteries. They told him that in the nether world, 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."¹⁸

Staying with the Islands of the Blessed for a moment, the following selections attempt to pinpoint where they are. Whereas Hesiod declares they are "far apart from human beings . . . at the limits of the earth," these other authors locate them in Africa or in the sky.

Herodotus As for those in Cambyses' army who were sent against the Ammonians, they set out from Thebes [in Egypt] and traveled with guides. What is known is that they came to the city of Oasis, a city inhabited by Samians, who are said to be of the Aeschrionian tribe. The city itself is a seven-day march from Thebes through the sand. This place is called the Island of the Blessed in the Greek language.¹⁹

Strabo The Islands of the Blessed are found at the extreme western edge of Maurusia [Morocco], near where its shore runs parallel to the opposite coast of Iberia [Spain]. It is clear Homer considered these regions happy given their contact with the Islands.²⁰

Iamblichus (from his work, *On the Pythagorean Life*)
Question: What are the Islands of the Blessed? *Answer:* The sun and the moon.²¹

Moving on, most Greeks identified Mount Olympus, the abode of the Olympian gods, as a place of perfect happiness.

Pseudo-Hesiod (describing the shield of *Heracles*) And upon the shield there was the holy dancing place of the immortal gods. And in the middle, Apollo, the son of Zeus and Leto, played a golden lyre so as to excite desire. There was also the dwelling place of the gods, holy Olympus, and their assembly place. And an unlimited abundance of wealth and happiness surrounded the immortals in their gathering. And just now, the goddesses, the Muses of Pieria, were beginning a song in the manner of clear-voiced singers.²²

Homer Bright-eyed Athena departed for Olympus, where, they say, the abode of the gods stands firm, immovable forever. Neither is it shaken by wind, nor drenched with heavy rain, nor does snow fall there. But a clear sky spreads out cloudless like a great white sail, and the bright sun fills the sky. And there upon Olympus the blessed gods are delighted every day.²³

Diogenes Laertius (reporting two epigrams carved on *Plato's tomb*) Here in the hollow of the earth, Plato's

body is hidden, while his soul has its immortal station with the blessed.

And: I, a flying eagle, am the image of the soul of Plato that has flown off to Mount Olympus, while Attic soil holds his earth-born body.²⁴

Another happy land was the Elysian plain or the Elysian fields, also known as Elysium.

Homer (*Proteus, the old man of the sea, is speaking to the hero Menelaus*) "As for you, god-nourished Menelaus, it is not decreed for you to die and meet your destined doom in horse-grazing Argos. Rather, the immortals will escort you to the Elysian plain and to the limits of the earth where yellow-haired Rhadamanthus is. Here, life is the easiest for men. There's no falling snow or much of winter or thunderstorms. But a clear West Wind always blows—sent up by Ocean to cool and refresh the men there. You will not die because you hold Helen as your wife and so are the son-in-law of Zeus."²⁵

As with the Islands of the Blessed, some attempted to locate the Elysian plain in the real world.

Strabo As for the people of the west, Homer makes it clear that they were happy and that they lived in a temperate climate. Homer had doubtlessly heard of the wealth of Iberia [Spain], and how, in pursuit of that wealth, *Heracles* invaded the country, and after him the Phoenicians—the people who in earliest times became masters of most of the country. . . . The gentle breezes of Zephyrus, the West Wind, blow in the west, and it is there that Homer locates the Elysian plain itself, where, he declares, Menelaus will be sent by the gods.²⁶

We close with a number of other happy lands and cities, including the land of the Hyperboreans, the Lacedaemonians, and the Thessalians, as well as Libya, Troy, a city called "Happy City," various lawful cities, and what may be called "the city of Justice."

Pindar Neither by ship nor on foot will you find the

fabled path to the land and assembly of the Hyperboreans. . . . Led on by Athena, Perseus, the son of Danae, once went to the land of these blessed men, the Hyperboreans.²⁷

Pindar Happy is Lacedaemon! Blessed is Thessaly! The descendants of Heracles, best at fighting, reign over both lands.²⁸

Homer (Menelaus is speaking) “I came to Libya where the lambs grow horns as soon as they are born and where the sheep bear their young three times per year. And whether he is a lord or a shepherd in that land, every man has plenty of cheese, meat, and sweet milk, for the ewes give their milk throughout the year. No one goes without.”²⁹

Ibycus The Achaeans . . . destroyed the great, glorious, happy city of Priam, the son of Dardanus.³⁰

Herodotus The Greek colonists who live on the Hypanis River call themselves citizens of *Olbia*, Happy City.³¹

Diogenes Laertius (giving basic facts about the early wise man Bion) Bion was by birth a citizen of *Olbia*, Happy City.³²

Xenophon (describing happy lawful cities) Those cities that live by and stay true to their laws are always the strongest and happiest cities.³³

Hesiod (describing the happy city of Justice) Weeping and clothed with occluding mist, Justice follows along to the city and to the abodes of the people, and she brings evil to those human beings who drive her out of the city and do not make straightforward distributions. But those men who give straight judgments to foreigners and to those who live within the city and the surrounding land and do not swerve from justice at all, their city thrives and the people in it flourish. Then does Peace, who safeguards young men, come upon the earth, and far-seeing Zeus does not ordain painful war for them. Neither hunger nor bewildering blindness haunt straight-judging men, but in abundance they distribute every valued thing. For them, the earth bears much of what it takes to live. And upon mountains the topmost part of the oak tree produces acorns, and the middle part yields the bee’s honeycomb. And wooly sheep are weighed down by wool. And the women give birth to children who are like their parents. Having good things, they thrive in every way and at all times. And they don’t go away on ships, but the grain-giving field bears crops of fruit and grain.³⁴

So ends Reading 2. **See you in Reading 3, “Aristotle.”**

NOTES

¹ Perhaps “realist” is a better descriptive. Prior to being a poet, Hesiod was a shepherd and a farmer.

² “Iron Age,” as well as “Golden Age” and “Heroic Age,” is actually more a common extrapolation from Hesiod, who only refers to the “iron race or kind of men” — or golden, silver, bronze, and heroic race or kind of men.

³ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 174-179. To some extent, Hesiod’s vision of the Iron Age or iron race of men is no different from the voices we heard in Chapter 4 relative to “the problem with happiness.”

⁴ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 112-115.

⁵ Kronos’ nature is paradoxical in Hesiod’s poems. On the one hand, he is “the one whose counsels are crooked, the most terrible of [Ouranos’ and Gaia’s] children”; he is the one who “hate[s] his expansive father,” lopping off his penis with a sickle made of adamant; he is the one who swallows his own children, eventually battling them in the Titanomachy. On the other hand, he is “the king in the sky” during the Golden Age, the happiest of all times for human beings. Kronos’ paradoxical nature is a mystery the ancient Greeks explored and gained much from — particularly those of the Orphic tradition.

⁶ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109-120.

⁷ Philodemus, *On Piety* B 6798 Obbink. For the Greek text, see Martin L. West, *Greek Epic Fragments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 62-63.

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⁸ The interpolation, which appears in two papyri, occurs after line 173 of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Of the heroes, Hesiod explains in lines 170-173: "And these dwell with carefree spirits on the Islands of the Blessed by deep-eddying Ocean. They are the happy heroes for whom the grain-giving field bears honey-sweet fruit, flourishing three times per year." For the interpolation, see Glenn W. Most, *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 100-101.

⁹ Plato, *Laws* 4.713a-e.

¹⁰ Plato, *Statesman* 269b, 271d-272b.

¹¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.1.4.

¹² Hesiod, *Works and Days* 168-173.

¹³ Pindar, *Olympian* 2.69-74. Note that this place of happiness or blessedness sometimes shows up in the plural (islands) and sometimes in the singular.

¹⁴ *Drinking song* 894.

¹⁵ Plato, *Gorgias* 523b-c.

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic* 7.519b-c, 7.526e, 7.540a-b. Reading these parts of the *Republic* together, the Islands of the Blessed may be understood as having to do with the "idea of the Good" and with Being itself (*ousia*) or the "happiest part of reality." Thus, the islands are an abstraction or a state of mind or soul. As such, Socrates himself sometimes experienced the Islands of the Blessed—or moods of thought or abstraction. We see this, for example, in Plato's *Symposium* 174d, 175a-b, and 220c-d. The Victorian classics scholar and translator Benjamin Jowett translated these experiences or moods as "fits of abstraction."

¹⁷ Lucian of Samosata, *The True History* 2.6, 11-16. Though the description is meant to be humorous, exaggerated, and even deceptive (see Lucian's Introduction, where the narrator admits that he is a liar, and that his work relates what he has neither seen nor heard), it nevertheless resembles what many would have believed about the Islands of the Blessed—something like it, anyway.

¹⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.39.

¹⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* 3.26.

²⁰ Strabo, *Geography* 1.1.5.

²¹ Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life* 18, in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, 77.

²² Pseudo-Hesiod, *The Shield of Heracles* 201-206.

²³ Homer, *Odyssey* 6.41-46.

²⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 3.44.

²⁵ Homer, *Odyssey* 4.561-569.

²⁶ Strabo, *Geography* 1.1.4.

²⁷ Pindar, *Pythian* 10.29-30, 45-46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.1-3. Lacedaemon is Sparta.

²⁹ Homer, *Odyssey* 4.85-89. As a place of abundance, Libya, or northern Africa, is a happy place. As it is described in the *Odyssey*, the swineherd Eumaeus' home island of Syria is similar: "There's an island called Syria," he explains to Odysseus. "Perhaps you've heard of it? It sits above Ortygia, where the sun turns. Even though the island is not densely populated, it is nevertheless a good land—good for cattle and sheep, full of vines for wine, and rich in grain. Hunger and famine never enter the land, nor does any other hateful plague fall on wretched mortals. But when the tribes of men grow old throughout the city, Apollo of the silver bow arrives with Artemis, slaying them with their gentle shafts" (*Odyssey* 15.403-411). Compare Syria to the Golden Age, the Rule of Kronos, and the Islands of the Blessed.

³⁰ Ibycus, fragment 282. The city is Troy. When speaking to Priam, the ruler of Troy, in Book 24 of Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles says, "And you too, old man, I have heard that you were once happy. They say that in wealth and number of offspring you surpassed the rulers of all the lands surrounding your own. . . . But from the day when the Uranian gods unloaded this misery on you, war and slaughter have surrounded your city."

³¹ Herodotus, *Histories* 4.18. The remains of the city are in present-day Ukraine on the Black Sea.

³² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 4.46. This Olbia is the same as the Olbia mentioned by Herodotus.

³³ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.4.16.

³⁴ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 222-237. We know the city of Justice or the just city is happy because of the peace and the abundance of good things it has. For Hesiod, happiness or happy prosperity is the same as working hard, "shunning transgressions," and living in a state of "blameless[ness] before the immortals" (see *Works and Days* 826-828).

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