

Happiness

Reading 2 – The Happiness Goal – We Act for Happiness

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

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Reading 2

The Happiness Goal – We Act for Happiness

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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 happiness as the goal of life.

"All men desire their own happiness." —Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

IMAGINE THE GODS Apollo and Athena perched high up in an oak tree. According to Homer, they've taken on the "likeness of vultures" in order to amuse themselves with the drama that's playing out on the battlefield below, where the Greeks are fighting the Trojans. There, warriors are lined up, one against another, struggling bravely, their bronze helmets, shields, and greaves gleaming in the bright light of the morning sun. Spears fly with other

missiles—stones and arrows—punching into flesh. One man falls, while another glory-boasts over his bloodied corpse that will soon serve as carrion for hungry dogs and birds.

Why are all the men fighting? Homer's *Iliad* indicates the goal is anger-fueled revenge. As Menelaus puts it, Paris must "pay the penalty" for what he's done—for taking Helen from him. But what else? Glancing through the *Iliad*, we see that men—both

leaders and followers, heroes and not—are motivated by desire, fear, anger, freedom, excellence, friendship, wealth, power, shame, honor, and glory. But is there some one goal that unifies these many ends?

Writing centuries after Homer, the Greek philosopher Aristotle considered the *why* of human activity in his introductory work on ethics. Why do we humans get angry? Seek revenge? Long for wealth and honor? Form friendships and city-states? Why do we humans do anything at all?

Aristotle observed that when we act, we do so with a variety of goals in mind. (The Greek for goal, end, or purpose is *telos*.) But there are different kinds. Some goals are means to achieve other goals. Others are final in themselves. Yet even these often point to some other objective. We drag ourselves out of bed to

work for money to buy a car to go out with people to get married to have children to . . . what? Is there some ultimate goal—some overarching, unifying objective, end, or good—toward which we act? For Aristotle, the answer was clear. We act for happiness.

Aristotle wasn't the only Greek that believed this. Rather, it is a common assumption that shows up again and again in Greek literature, history, and philosophy. This doesn't mean, of course, that every Greek poet, philosopher, politician, orator, or otherwise agreed about the nature of happiness, or that they all employed the same terms to describe it. Nevertheless, they all felt and thought it was true. Basic fact: we humans act for happiness.

With this in mind, let's listen to the Greeks talk, whether explicitly or implicitly, about happiness as the goal of life.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Aristotle It is evident that all men shoot to live well and to be happy.¹

Aristotle Happiness is the goal of human life.²

Aristotle What is the highest good that action can achieve? As for its name, nearly everyone is agreed. Both the crowd of men and the few who are educated and refined call it happiness, and they assume that "living well" and "doing well" is the same thing as "being happy." But they argue about what happiness is. The account given by the many is not the same as that given by the wise.³

Julian (the Roman emperor) The aim and end of the Cynic philosophy, as with every philosophy, is to be happy.⁴

Johannes Stobaeus The Stoics say that being happy is the goal of every human action.⁵

Plotinus If we suppose that being happy is the supreme end to which all nature aspires, then we must assume that all animals are able to reach this goal.⁶

Archytas What goods are naturally desired for themselves and not for anything else? Evidently they include happiness since happiness is the end for which we seek everything else, while we seek happiness only for itself and not for anything else.⁷

Epictetus God made every human being to be happy, to be steady and calm.⁸

Hippodamus the Thurian In point of fact, happiness is the perfection of life.⁹

Plato (Socrates is speaking) "The most important thing is not merely to live, but to live well."¹⁰

Plato (Socrates is speaking) "He who lives well is blessed and happy."¹¹

Epicurus Let no one put off studying philosophy when he is young, nor become weary of it when he is old, for no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul. To suggest that the time for studying philosophy has not yet come or that it is long gone is like saying that it is too early or too late for happiness. ...

READING 2 ▪ THE HAPPINESS GOAL – WE ACT FOR HAPPINESS

We must practice those things that produce happiness since if happiness is present, we possess everything, and if it is not, we do everything to acquire it.¹²

Plato (the Mantinean wise woman Diotima is speaking to Socrates) “Our yearning for good things and to be happy is the expression of desire.”¹³

A few of the Homeric Hymns end with a prayer for happiness. For instance, the singer of the Hymn to Athena implores, Grant me good fortune and happiness. The two hymning Heracles and Hephaestus request, Grant me both excellence and happy prosperity.¹⁴

Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite (Anchises, the father of Aeneas, is praying to the goddess Aphrodite after promising her an altar and sacrifices) “Be kind and grant that . . . I might live long and well, seeing the light of the sun. And may I reach the threshold of old age a happy man among the people.”¹⁵

Homer (the blind seer Tiresias is speaking, describing what will happen to the hero Odysseus after he returns home to Ithaca, when Odysseus is old) “And death will come to you away from the sea, a gentle death that will lay you low when you have grown old. And your people will exist in happy prosperity around you.”¹⁶

Pindar Let Chromius of Aetna know that the gods

have allotted him marvelous happiness—for if one wins splendid glory along with many possessions, there is no other high place on which a mortal man may stand.¹⁷

Plato (Socrates is reporting the hedonist Philebus’ view) “Philebus declares that the good for every living thing is enjoyment, pleasure, and delight, along with everything that agrees with these.”¹⁸

Diogenes Laertius Aristippus and the Cyrenaics held that there is a difference between “the goal” and “happiness.” The goal is a particular pleasure, whereas happiness as a whole is made up of all the particular pleasures.¹⁹

Diogenes Laertius (reporting the view of Theodorus, “the atheist,” who was a Cyrenaic philosopher) Theodorus understood joy to be the goal of life and pain or grief to be the greatest evil.²⁰

Epictetus People want things that produce happiness, but they search for them in the wrong place.²¹

Diogenes of Sinope Why, then, do you live if you do not care to live in a noble manner?²²

Julian (the Roman emperor) Every living thing naturally yearns and stretches out for happiness.²³

▪ ▪ ▪

Aristotle was right. Humans do act for happiness. At least that’s the goal stated time and again in ancient Greek literature.

Still, we are left with an enormous question. If happiness is the goal, then what is happiness? In the next few chapters, we’ll explore how the Greeks answered this question.

So ends Reading 2. **See you in Reading 3, “Happiness Formulas – Happy the Man Who.”**

NOTES

¹ Aristotle, *Politics* 7.1331b.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6.1 (1176a).

³ *Ibid.*, 1.4.2-3 (1095a).

READING 2 ▪ THE HAPPINESS GOAL – WE ACT FOR HAPPINESS

- ⁴ Julian (the Roman emperor), *Oration* 6.193 (“To the Uneducated Cynics”). Though Julian was Roman, he was educated in Athens (among other places) and wrote in Greek. Therefore, we may include him among the Greeks since he is culturally Greek.
- ⁵ Johannes Stobaeus, *Anthology* 2.6.
- ⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.4.1.
- ⁷ Archytas, in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, 186 (modified).
- ⁸ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.2-3.
- ⁹ Hippodamus the Thurian, in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, 215 (modified). As the “perfection,” it completes life. As such, happiness is the goal.
- ¹⁰ Plato, *Crito* 48b.
- ¹¹ Plato, *Republic* 1.354a.
- ¹² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 10.122 (from here on, *Lives*).
- ¹³ Plato, *Symposium* 205d.
- ¹⁴ *Homeric Hymn* 11 to Athena 5; *Hymn* 15 to Heracles 9; *Hymn* 20 to Hephaestus 8.
- ¹⁵ *Homeric Hymn* 5 to Aphrodite 102-106.
- ¹⁶ Homer, *Odyssey* 11.134-137.
- ¹⁷ Pindar, *Nemean* 9.45-47.
- ¹⁸ Plato, *Philebus* 11d. These—enjoyment, pleasure, delight—are the good or goal of life for Philebus. They are happiness.
- ¹⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.87.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.98.
- ²¹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.23.34-35.
- ²² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.65. For Diogenes and other Cynics, to live in a noble manner is to live in a happy manner.
- ²³ Julian (the Roman emperor), *Letter to Themistius the Philosopher* 256b-c.

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