

Happiness

Reading 5 – Plotinus & Neoplatonism

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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 5

Plotinus & Neoplatonism

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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 Plotinus (and Neoplatonism) thought and said about happiness, including a summary at the end.

"Now, Plotinus, you have set aside the body, the tomb that held your soul. You have entered the assembly of divine beings, where delightful breezes blow, . . . and where Minos and Rhadamanthus dwell, the brothers of the golden race of mighty Zeus, and where just Aeacus and Plato dwell, . . . and noble Pythagoras, and the others who form the choir of immortal love, who share a family in common with the happiest of divine beings. There, O blessed one, your heart is always warmed with abundance and good cheer!" —Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*

PLOTINUS (c. 205-270 AD) WAS ENAMORED with ideas. That's the clear report that Porphyry of Tyre (c. 235-305 AD), his student and literary executor, makes in the short biography he wrote about him and appended to the *Enneads*, Plotinus' philosophical essays. Ideas were Plotinus' life. He wanted to capture

reality with ideas. Most significantly, he desired to understand the nature of reality up to the absolutely transcendent, ineffable One, from which emanates the rest—Thought or Mind; Soul; and individual souls plunged into the material world of matter and bodies.

Why the desire to grasp reality, to capture it in the

form of ideas? It was for life and living. Plotinus wanted to understand reality so that he would know how best to live, to *be*—and that in order to be mystically joined with the One. In short, Plotinus was “carried along by an urge for philosophy.” Thinking about and living by these ideas drove Plotinus from the time he was twenty-seven years old to the end of his life nearly forty years later.

After a decade of studying with the Alexandrian philosopher Ammonius Sacca,¹ Plotinus departed from his native Egypt for an adventure abroad. He traveled with the Roman emperor Gordian to Mesopotamia on his campaign against the Persian ruler Shapur. Porphyry explains that Plotinus’ goal was to investigate Persian and Indian philosophy. The plan didn’t work out, however, since Gordian was violently supplanted by the praetorian prefect Philip the Arab. Consequently, Plotinus and the other Romans fled. So it was that Plotinus journeyed to Rome when he was forty.

In Rome, Plotinus set up a school and began to attract students to his “conferences” or “talks.” According to Porphyry, he had a large following that included both men and women. The latter—Porphyry names three (Gemina; her daughter, who was also called Gemina; and Amphiclea)—“were very devoted to philosophy.” As for the men, they practiced a range of occupations, including politics, medicine, poetry, oratory, and literary criticism, to give those Porphyry mentions. There were a number of senators (Marcellus Orontius, Sabinillus, and Rogatianus among them) and several doctors (Paulinus of Scythopolis, Eustochius of Alexandria, and Zethos the Arab). The latter names indicate the far-flung constituency of Plotinus’ school. If we include Porphyry of Tyre, they came from present-day Lebanon, Israel, Jordan or Saudi Arabia (depending on where, exactly, Zethos the Arab was from), Egypt, and Italy. And doubtlessly there were other followers from other places.

Plotinus encouraged his students to ask questions during these conferences. In other words, these talks were not merely the philosopher pontificating about one topic or another. He and his students also read

aloud philosophical papers by other philosophers—though mostly by Platonists. The choice to read Platonist philosophers made sense considering that Plotinus judged himself a Platonist—and this nearly 600 years after Plato had died.

Following his own teacher, Ammonius Sacca, Plotinus was a “new Platonist,” what historians now call a “Neoplatonist.” Even so, he was influenced in one way or another by much of the philosophy that had been developed in contemplation and practiced in word and deed over the long centuries before he lived: Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism, Pythagoreanism, and the many moods of Platonism.

Whatever his precise philosophical outlook, one thing is certain. Plotinus agreed with all prior Greeks—most, anyway—that happiness is the goal of life. And if we can trust Porphyry (see the above epigram), we can assume that Plotinus was happy in life and even happier after he died, when he “entered the assembly of divine beings, where delightful breezes blow.”²

But what, exactly, did Plotinus think about the good life and happiness? In what follows, mostly from his treatise *On Happiness* (found in *Enneads* 1.4), we’ll find out. All other selections are also from Plotinus’ *Enneads*.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Plotinus begins by examining the scope of happiness (the sort of things or beings that can be happy—whether plants, non-human animals, or humans) and the basis of happiness (for instance, the fulfillment of being, impulse, pleasure, tranquility, sense perception, or reason).

What? Are we to make happiness the same thing as living well, or well-being, and, therefore, within the reach of other living beings—including plants and all animals, as well as ourselves?³

Even if we make happiness some goal pursued by in-born tendency, even then we must allow animals to be happy from the moment they reach this ultimate.⁴

If pleasure is the goal, that is, if pleasure is the same as living well, then it would be impossible to deny living well to any other kind of living being (apart from human beings). If the goal is tranquility, it would likewise be impossible to deny it. The same goes for the equation of living well with living life in accord with nature.⁵

Those men who deny living well, or well-being, to the whole range of plants, and those who make living well consist in some kind of sense perception, are actually seeking a grander sort of well-being. . . . They categorize the better—that is, the grander sort of well-being—with a more complete life, one that is somehow clearer and more distinct.

Perhaps, then, those are right who base happiness not on mere existence and living, or even on sense perception, but on the life of reason. If so, then they must explain why happiness should be restricted in this way, and why happiness is only found in the life of reason or the rational life.⁶

But, Plotinus says, there are also problems with this approach—that is, identifying happiness with the life of reason. He goes on to argue that happiness is fullness of life—a fullness relative to each living thing or being. Such happiness consists in what may be termed an intrinsic fullness rather than one extrinsic, imported from the outside. The happy man is “self-sufficient in terms of happiness and good things.” So it is that “adverse fortune does not diminish his happiness.” This is so because all fortune is extrinsic to the intrinsic fullness of life the happy man lives. “He himself is the good by what he is and by what he possesses.”

What, then, is happiness? Let us try basing it on life itself.

Now, if we draw no distinction as to kinds of life, then every living thing will be capable of happiness, and those living beings will be effectively happy that possess the one common gift of which every living thing is by nature receptive. We could not deny happiness to non-rational beings while allowing it to rational beings. If happiness were intrinsic to bare being-alive, then the common ground in which the

cause of happiness could always take root would be life itself—simply life.

Those philosophers, then, who place happiness not in life itself, or bare living, but in the life of reason, seem to overlook the fact that they are not really making it depend on life at all. They admit that this reasoning faculty upon which they base happiness is a property rather than the subject of a property. To them, the subject of the property must be life—that-reasons or the reasoning-life. . . . Consequently, they are basing happiness not on life but on a particular kind of life.

Now, in many ways this term “life” embraces many meanings and forms with varying degrees—first, second, and so on, all included under the common term “life.” There is plant life and animal life, each kind of life more or less complete. Quite plainly, the same is analogously the case for living well. If one living thing is the image of another living thing, then manifestly one kind of living well will once again be an image of another kind living well.

If mere being, or mere living itself, is insufficient for living well—that is, if happiness demands fullness of life, and if happiness exists where nothing of the best life is lacking—, then happiness can exist only in a being that lives fully. And such a being will possess not merely the good but the supreme good—if, that is, in the realm of existents, the supreme good can be none other than the authentically living, none other than life itself in its greatest fullness, life in which the good is present as something essential and not as something imported, a life requiring no foreign substance called in from a foreign realm to establish it in good. After all, what could be added to the fullest life to make it the best life?⁷

If, therefore, the fullest life is within human reach, then the man who possesses this life is happy. If this is not the case, then we must cede happiness to the gods, for the perfect life is for them alone. But since we say that happiness is also available for human beings, we must consider what this *full life* is.

We may consider it this way. It has been shown elsewhere that a man possesses fullness of life, or the

fullest life, when he possesses not only the life of sense perception but also a life of reason and a mind in harmony with truth.

But are we to picture this kind of life as something foreign, something imported into its nature? No. There exists no single human being who does not either potentially or actually possess this thing that we hold to constitute happiness.

Are we, then, to think of man as including this kind of life, the full and perfect life, as if it were a portion of him? The answer is twofold depending on the man. On the one hand, it is present in some men as a mere portion of their whole being. This is the case for those men who possess it potentially. On the other hand, there is the man who is already truly happy. This man has passed over into actually possessing it. Everything else is now mere clothing upon the happy man. We do not call all of this part of the man since, unsought, it is upon him—he never actively wished for it or willed it.

What is the good to the man in this state? He himself is the good by what he is and by what he possesses. And the cause of what he is and has is the supreme good in itself. The proof that this state has been achieved is that this man seeks nothing else. What else, after all, could he possibly seek? Certainly none of the less worthy things. Rather, he is always linked with the best. The man who lives life in this manner is self-sufficient.

Once the man is a sage, that is, an excellent man,⁸ he is self-sufficient in terms of happiness and good things. He lacks nothing good. Whatever else he seeks, he seeks as a necessity—not for himself but as for a subordinate, for the body bound to him. Since the body has life, the sage must furnish the needs of life—not the needs, however, of the true man. This man knows that he himself stands above all such needs, and what he gives to the lower, he gives in order to leave his true life undiminished.

Adverse fortune does not diminish this man's happiness. Rather, the happy life remains. Suppose death strikes his household or his friends. The sage knows what death is. Those who die also know what it is if they are wise. And if the death of family members and friends does cause grief, the sorrow will not reach the

innermost part of his being. Instead, it is the non-rational part of him that suffers.⁹

But what about sorrow, illnesses, and everything else that hinders the activity? . . .

Now, if happiness does in fact require freedom from pain, sickness, misfortune, or disaster, then it will be utterly denied to anyone who is confronted by such trials. But if happiness is the possession of the true good, then why turn away from this true good to seek mere accessories? Why imagine that, to be happy, a man needs a variety of things—none of which is part of the essence of happiness? If, in fact, happiness consists in heaping together all that is at once desirable and necessary, then we must also seek to attain these. But if the goal is one and not many—otherwise a man would be seeking not one goal but many goals—, then we must seek the ultimate and most valued goal, that which the soul must conceive within.¹⁰

Plotinus contrasts happiness, the goal itself, with things that may be called necessities, things like health and freedom from pain and suffering.

We generally avoid what is bad. But such an avoidance is not what we would have willed. Rather, we would rather not need to avoid the bad. This is what happens, for example, when one possesses health and is free from pain and suffering. Which of these is alluring in itself? We attach very little value to these states as long as we are healthy and do not suffer. But that which, when present is not alluring in itself and adds nothing to happiness, and when absent is sought because of the suffering that arises from the presence of its opposite—that may reasonably be called a necessity but not the good. Such things can never be counted as part of the goal. Instead, even though things like health and freedom from pain and suffering are absent and their opposites are present, our goal is nevertheless the same.¹¹

Though the wise and happy man has good will to all men, his own happiness remains whether or not they are happy.

The sage prefers that all men do well and do not experience misfortune. Still, even if it happens otherwise, he is happy.¹²

Plotinus explores the pleasure of the wise and happy man. It is a stable and ongoing pleasure.

The pleasures demanded for the sage's life are not found in the enjoyments of the licentious or in any gratifications of the body since there is no place for these, and they stifle happiness. Nor are they found in any violent emotions. After all, what could move the sage in this way? Instead, the sage's pleasure is the same as that which is the good's pleasure—pleasure that does not result from movement or from some process. For all that is good is immediately present to the sage, and the sage is present to himself. His pleasure, his contentment, stands immovable. Therefore, the sage is always cheerful and content; the state of his life is always still and quiet. Nothing evil can upset his life since he is a sage.¹³

Though happiness is fullness of life or "living well," for the human being it has nothing directly to do with the body; rather, happiness has everything to do with the soul, with "the man behind the appearances." Happiness "is an act of the soul." More specifically, it is an act of the highest part of the soul. Therefore, the wise and happy man will "desire nothing of this world, whether pleasant or painful." As Plato taught, the happy man "draws his good from the supreme good." As for the body, he will relate to it and care for it as a musician cares for his lyre.

Man is not the complement (the coupling) of soul and body. This is particularly true for the sage. The proof of this is that man can be disengaged from the body and disdain its so-called goods. It would be absurd to think that happiness begins and ends with the living body. No, happiness is living well. It is associated, therefore, with the soul. It is an act of the soul. It is not an act of the whole soul, however. This is so because it is not characteristic of the vegetative or plant-like soul, the soul of mere growth. If it were, then that would connect happiness with the body. . . . No, the body

must be reduced so that the true man might show up, the man behind the appearances.¹⁴

The sage will desire nothing of this world, whether pleasant or painful. His one desire will be to know nothing of the body. If he encounters pain, then he will pit against it the powers he possesses to meet it. But pleasure and health and ease of life will not amount to any increase of happiness for him, nor will their contraries destroy or lessen his happiness.¹⁵

Someone might say, "Suppose there are two wise men. And suppose one of them has every so-called good, and the other has nothing. Are they equally happy?" The answer: "Yes, they are equally happy if they are equally wise."¹⁶

The life of true happiness is not a thing of mixture. And Plato rightly taught that the man who is wise and possesses happiness draws his good from the supreme good, fixing his gaze on it, becoming like it, and living by that supreme good.¹⁷

The sage will relate to the body as a musician relates to and cares for his lyre. He will tend to its needs as long as it can serve him just as a musician will care for the lyre as long as it can serve him. When the lyre fails him, he will exchange his lyre for another one. Or he will give it up, along with playing the lyre. He'll do this as though he is now practicing a new art, one which does not require a lyre. And then he will let it sit there at his side, not looking at it, while he sings without an instrument. Nevertheless, the instrument was not originally given without a point. Until the moment he set it aside, he found it useful on many occasions.¹⁸

Happiness itself is not caused, augmented, or lessened by anything else that is not part of its essence. The happy man, thanks to his virtue, is unshakeable in his happiness. He remains happy in all situations, whether or not he senses or is aware of his happiness. This is due to his essential tie to wisdom itself, which is the "authentic existence" in act.

If the happy man encounters some turn of fortune that he would not have chosen, there is nevertheless not even the slightest decrease in his happiness. If there were, then his happiness would be shifting and lessening from day to day. The death of a child would bring him down or the loss of some trivial possession. No—a thousand mischances and disappointments may befall him without disturbing the good he has achieved.¹⁹

We must remember that the sage sees things very differently from the average man. Neither ordinary experiences nor pains and sorrows—whether touching him or others—pierce his inner self. To allow this would be weakness of soul.²⁰

We cannot be negligent or indolent. This is an arena for the powerful combatant holding his ground against the blows of fortune. And knowing that, as painful as they are to some natures, these blows of fortune are hardly painful to the sage's nature. They are nothing dreadful. They are no more than nursery terrors. . . . When they come, they come up against the virtue that gives the sage his passionless, unshakeable soul.²¹

Some may say, "Sure, let him remain a sage. Still, having no sensation and not expressing his virtue in act, how can he be happy?"

The answer: a man who does not sense his own health may nonetheless be healthy. Or again: a man may not sense his own attractiveness, but he may be handsome. Or he may not sense his own wisdom, but he may be wise.

Perhaps it may be urged that sensation is essential to wisdom and that happiness is only wisdom brought to act. Now, this argument might have weight if understanding and wisdom were something externally obtained. But this is not the case. Wisdom itself, in its essence, is some being in itself, some authentic existence. More: wisdom is being itself, *the* authentic existence. And this being, this existence, does not vanish when a man is asleep. Nor does it vanish for the man who is not aware of it. The act of this existent

being is continuous within him. It is a sleepless activity. The sage, therefore, even when unaware, is still a sage in act.²²

Plotinus explores why it is that the "continuous activity" of happiness, that is, wisdom's ongoing activity, might remain unperceived. He compares it to the intellectual act, of which we are often unaware, even though we are in the middle of the act.

Perhaps the reason this continuous activity remains unperceived is that it has no connection with things of sense. Doubtlessly action upon material things, or action dictated by them, must proceed through the sensitive faculty that exists for that use. But why shouldn't there be an immediate activity of the intellect and of the soul that attends it, the soul that is prior to sensation or any perception? For if understanding and authentic existence (existent being itself) are identical, this prior-to-perception must be a thing in act.

Let us explore the conditions under which we become conscious of this intellectual act. When the intellect is in upward orientation, that (lower part of it) which contains (or corresponds to) the life of the soul, is, so to speak, flung down again and becomes like the reflection resting on the smooth and shining surface of a mirror. In this illustration, when the mirror is in place, the image appears. Nevertheless, even when the mirror is gone or poorly disposed, all that would have acted and produced an image still exists. The same is the case for the soul. When there is peace and calm in that within us that is capable of reflecting the images of ratiocination and the intellect, these images appear. Then, side by side with the primal knowledge of the activity of the intellect and ratiocination, we also have, as it were, a sense perception of their operation. When, on the contrary, the mirror within is shattered through some disturbance of the harmony of the body, ratiocination and the intellect act without being imaged. In that case, the act of understanding has no corresponding mirror image.

In summary, we may safely gather that while the intellectual act may be attended by the image, it is not

to be confused with it. And even in our waking life we can point to many noble activities, whether oriented to thinking or acting, which at the time in no way compel our consciousness or awareness. A reader will often be quite unaware when he is most intent upon reading. Or, to take another example, in an act of courage there may be no awareness either of the brave action or of the fact that all that is done conforms to the rules of courage. And so on in cases beyond number. Moreover, it seems that awareness tends to actually blunt the activities upon which it is exercised, and that in the degree to which these activities pass unobserved, they are purer and have more effect, more vitality. Consequently, the sage who has arrived at this state has the truer fullness of life—life not blunted by sensation but gathered closely within itself.²³

One last point. Final happiness—that is, complete union with the One—is never quite complete in this life. It requires the ongoing effort of virtue, an effort that reorients the individual toward the highest manifestations of reality and toward the One itself. It is the movement away from “non-being” to the soul’s “very self”—a flight away from “this realm” in order to “become like god.” Plotinus compares it to Odysseus’ journey home in Homer’s Odyssey—and so we see that Plotinus is a kind of recapitulation or reinterpretation of the whole of Greek thinking on happiness.

The man formed by this mingling with the Supreme must, if only he will remember, carry its image impressed upon him. He is to become the One, nothing within him or without inducing any diversity—no movement now, no passion, no outward-looking yearning, once this ascent is achieved. . . .

Moving in the opposite direction of non-being, the soul comes not to something other than itself but to its very self. . . .

When the self is lifted in this manner, we are in the likeness of the Supreme. If from that heightened self we pass still further, from image to archetype, we have won the goal of all our journeying.

Yet fallen back again from the vision, we awaken again the virtue within until we know ourselves to be

wholly ordered again. Once more, then, we are released from the burden and move by means of virtue toward the intellect by means of wisdom to the self.

This is the life of the gods and of divine and happy human beings—release from other things here, a life beyond pleasure, a flight of the alone to the alone.²⁴

Since evils are here in this realm, and since these evils “prowl about this realm by necessity,” and since the soul wishes to flee these evils, then “we must flee from this realm.”

But what is the nature of this flight we must take? Plato says that it is in becoming like god—like the divinity. And this, he says, is found if one “is becoming just and holy, and in one who is beginning to live by means of practical wisdom”—which is to say the whole of virtue.²⁵

“Let us flee, then, to the beloved homeland.” This is unerring counsel. But what is this flight? And how do we flee? It seems to me that Odysseus is a hint or parable for us when he talks about his flight from the sorceress Circe or from Calypso. He is not satisfied to remain even given all the pleasure presented to his eyes and all the sensual beauty he experienced. The “homeland” for us is where we have come from. And there in that place is the father. What, then, is our journey? And what is the nature of the flight? We should not go by means of our feet, . . . or by horse, or by some ship belonging to the sea. We should let go of these and not think of them. Rather, we should close our eyes, exchanging this way of seeing for another, waking up. Everyone possesses this way, but few use it.²⁶

HAPPINESS FOR PLOTINUS

For Plotinus, happiness is fullness of life; it is living well. In its ultimate sense, happiness is full union with the One—not merely with one of the highest manifestations of reality but with the highest reality, that reality which is itself manifested.²⁷

The problem is this life is far from that supreme, highest reality, in that we have fallen, as it were, into

a far lower reality, one associated with the body and other material realities. During this life, therefore, the wise and virtuous person will act to orient—or reorient—him or herself toward the Supreme. In this sense, then, happiness is the ongoing act of the highest part of the soul toward the supreme good. This good

is the soul's own good, its true fullness.

Seen in this way, happiness is an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic good. In the final analysis, anything else such as health or pleasure is extrinsic to the wise and happy man's happiness.

So ends Reading 5. **See you in Reading 6**, which is on the way.

NOTES

¹ Many credit Ammonius Sacca with the inspiration of Neoplatonism. His philosophy was, according to Plotinus' own declaration, the philosophy that Plotinus "had been seeking all along."

² It is a place that sounds like Homer's Elysian plain. See Homer, *Odyssey* 4.561-565: "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."

³ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.4.1. The translation presented in this chapter is a modified version of that of Stephen Mackenna.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.4.1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.4.1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.4.2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.4.2-3.

⁸ "Sage," here and elsewhere, is the good, excellent, serious (*spoudaios*) man.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.4.4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.4.5, 1.4.6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.4.6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.4.11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.4.12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.4.14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.4.14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.4.15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.4.16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.4.16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.4.7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.4.8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.4.8.

²² *Ibid.*, 1.4.9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1.4.10. Modern psychologists call this, when we act and are not immediately aware, or something very like this, "flow." In sports, it is called "being in the zone." See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).

²⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.11. For Plotinus' view of virtue (*aretē*), see Chapter 14, "Plotinus," in the *Cave's Aretē: Excellence or Virtue—What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē*.

²⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.2.1.

²⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.8. The "father" may be understood as the intelligible world—that is, the spiritual world of Forms or Ideas, which is itself an emanation of the One, the Absolute or God.

²⁷ For an excellent collection of passages exploring Plotinus' understanding of the nature of reality, see *The Essential Plotinus*, trans. Elmer O'Brien (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1964).

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