

# The Enigma of Happiness

## And Why It Is So Elusive

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What does it take to be happy? How can we characterize what it means to live a happy and contented life? What's more, how do you know when you're happy? What criteria do we employ when we try to determine whether we are on the right track, that we are conducting our life in such a way that suggests we are living it to the fullest, that we are leaving no stone unturned, that we have no regrets for what might have been? How do we even know what happiness is? Could we be living our lives under a grand misconception, assuming, for example, that wealth will bring us happiness, or lots of sex, or frequent vacations to the Bahamas, or the Mediterranean, or wherever, with the biggest bank account and grandest home among my contemporaries?

These are some of the questions I want to explore with you this evening. I will admit at the outset that this is no easy task. The problem of happiness has been explored for millennia, by virtually every culture in the world, and we have yet to arrive at a universally embraced definition. Yet, everyone has an opinion on the matter, and lives their lives according to what they presume happiness is. You could say that each and every

one of us has a rough and ready notion of what we aim for in life, what we strive for, what we want to accomplish. The things we set out to achieve presuppose the definition of happiness we adhere to, even if we cannot articulate precisely what that is. Wouldn't you agree that if my conception of happiness is wrongheaded and completely off the mark, I don't have a chance in hell of obtaining it? This implies that we had better be careful about how each of us defines happiness, and that we know exactly what it is we are up to.

My talk is divided into three sections. The first explores Plato's conception of happiness and what other Greek philosophers contributed to this question. The second will examine what Sigmund Freud has to say about the relation between psychoanalysis and unhappiness. And finally, I will share some of the observations that Friedrich Nietzsche entertained about how to best live the good life, which is to say, a life that is not a waste of time, but a life worth living. I will close with some remarks about love.



## I. Plato:

The Greeks were obsessed with the quest for happiness and explored how best to obtain it for more than seven hundred years. Since Plato was the person that got the ball rolling I will focus most of my attention on him. Yet, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, and the sceptics all contributed fundamental and lasting observations about how to best obtain this elusive goal.

Plato is the most important philosopher in history. Though his many dialogues are devoted to Socrates, Plato's teacher, there is no way of knowing how much of Plato's thought derives from his mentor, and the extent to which Plato used Socrates as a proxy for his own ideas. Many of Plato's dialogues touched on happiness, but three in particular were devoted to distinct conceptions of it. In the *Euthydemus* (1961), for example, Plato

argued that happiness should be equated with wisdom, because only the wise person is capable of obtaining it. This doesn't just happen, though the words "happen" and happiness have the same root. Etymologically, the word happy means luck or chance, but this can be misleading because you have to devote your entire life to obtaining it. In order to be happy you must also be a good person and live a virtuous life. This isn't easy, which is why Plato believed that only the wise are capable of it. Wisdom and virtue go together. This conception of happiness had a profound effect on Plato's most celebrated student, Aristotle, though not everyone agrees that virtuous people are necessarily or always happy.

Another dialogue devoted to happiness was the *Protagoras* (1961), where Plato equates happiness with pleasure. Throughout history this notion of happiness has been the most popular. It had an enormous impact on the philosophy of John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth-century British philosopher who, with Jeremy Bentham, promoted utilitarianism, as well as Sigmund Freud. Here Plato argues that all human beings seek pleasure as a matter of course while avoiding unpleasure, or pain. This was the foundation for Freud's Pleasure Principle, a thesis he rejected later in life. For the most part Greek philosophers renounced this thesis as too simplistic. Greek scholars today even question Plato's sincerity in offering this theory because it is so contrary to his other dialogues. Why he wrote it remains a mystery, but I mention it because most people today tend to reduce happiness to pleasurable experiences.

The third dialogue where Plato offers a conception of happiness is the *Symposium* (1961). This is one of Plato's most famous dialogues and, after *The Republic*, the most important. As some of you may know, this dialogue is devoted to Plato's conception of love, and is perhaps the most influential work in history to explore the meaning of love, in all its complexity. The reason I mention it is because here Plato argues that only love can bring happiness. This is the dialogue where Plato examines the notion of *Eros*, one of several Greek terms for love. In Greek mythology, *Eros* was neither human nor a god but a *daimon* spirit, something between mortals and deities. In fact, the most common Greek word for happiness is *eudaimonia*, which contains the word *daimon* in it. *Eudaimonia* literally means "to be with your *daimon*." If Aphrodite, for example, the goddess of love, wants you to fall in love with someone, she dispatches *Eros* to shoot you with one of his golden arrows, the primogenitor of the later Cupid. On the other hand, she may also

dispatch *Eros* to deprive you of a love you already enjoy, as punishment for displeasing her. So there is a dark side to *Eros*, it isn't all lovey-dovey.

Keep in mind that Plato's characterization of *daimon* spirits at the service of gods and goddesses is strictly metaphorical, not literal. Socrates, the principal character in this dialogue, didn't take Greek myths all that seriously. He utilizes them as analogous to how love may suddenly appear out of nowhere, as though a mysterious power or agency is orchestrating it. It just "happens." Plato uses this device to make an important point about the relationship between love and happiness. He suggests that if you wish to achieve *eudaimonia*, you must first fall in love, with yourself as well as with another person, but ultimately with life itself. Plato also says that in order to enjoy happiness you have to endure hardship, it never comes easily. Plato's most important observation is if you want to be happy you must learn how to play the game of life, win or lose, and not play the role of bystander who lets life pass her by. Whether you win or lose this game is beside the point. Winning, in itself, does not insure happiness, because it's how you play the game where the payoff lies. We will come back to the relation between love and happiness later.

Aristotle also devoted a lot of attention to happiness, especially in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1915). As we have seen, Plato sometimes characterized happiness as a matter of fate, or luck, which is alluded to in Plato's *daimon* spirit. In another context he holds that we should equate happiness with pleasure. And yet again he insisted that only the virtuous are capable of achieving happiness. Aristotle synthesized Plato's multifaceted conception of happiness into a formula that has enjoyed the greatest influence by far on contemporary philosophers. He concluded that in order to be happy you need to be all of the above: virtuous, lucky, and wise. He also agreed that pleasure is a necessary constituent of happiness, but not sufficient for it. But Aristotle's greatest insight into the nature of happiness was to equate it with a state of *flourishing*, a concept embraced by positive psychology.

But what does it mean to flourish? According to Aristotle, it means that your life is a success. Yet most Greek philosophers were looking for ways to become happy that would insure its longevity. They wanted to make it permanent. This is why so much attention was placed on virtue, because virtue is something that no one can take away, except maybe yourself. So if virtue is the key to happiness, once you have become virtuous you will always be happy. Yes?

Well, not exactly, at least according to Aristotle. Every life has peaks and valleys, it flows and ebbs. Nothing remains constant. We live our lives as virtuously as we can, devote ourselves to our ambitions, and if we are lucky opportunities come our way. The wise person seizes those opportunities when they happen and gives his or her heart to them. This takes courage, perhaps the most important of the Greek virtues, because when you give your heart to something or someone you are putting your desire on the line and, as Plato argues, you're playing the game of life, but you're playing it for keeps. Not everyone is willing to risk failure, and such a person – the contemporary neurotic – has lapsed into becoming a bystander in life, not an actor.

But here lies the rub. Just because everything has come together for you in an amazing confluence of all the elements that Aristotle says are necessary for happiness, that doesn't guarantee it will last forever. We cannot, no matter how virtuous or industrious or daring, inoculate ourselves from disaster, hardship, and failure. This too is an aspect of the game of life, but the wise person accepts that the risk is nevertheless worth taking. Even if my life is flourishing, I still need to reconcile myself to the impermanence of circumstance, that I am always at the mercy of events I cannot control. This is where fate enters the picture. No matter how virtuous a person you are, bad things happen to good people. You have to accept that a lot of your life also occasions a considerable amount of pain and anguish. As we will see, suffering is the price of admission that you must pay for even a chance at happiness.

And what about those moments when your life is not flourishing? Are you going to let yourself be miserable and so unhappy that you become neurotic, and erase all the goodness you enjoyed? This is the question that later Greek philosophers, such as the Stoics, Epicureans, and sceptics wanted to explore. This is as good a time as any to introduce that other Greek word for happiness, *ataraxia*, which was embraced by these same Hellenistic philosophers. The literal translation of *ataraxia* is to be without turmoil, what the sceptics called a state of *unperturbedness*. *Ataraxia* is essentially a state of serenity, or equanimity, in the face of anguish or hardship. It has parallels with the Buddhist concepts of Nirvana and satori. The British stiff upper lip epitomizes the Stoic interpretation of *ataraxia*, which is why Freud suggested that the British have the most refined character of all the European cultures. This is stoicism in its essence: to not

complain when things are not going your way, and to accept this momentary state of affairs graciously, and without bitterness.

Though the three Hellenistic schools disagreed about the nature of *ataraxia* and how to obtain it, what they shared in common was the conviction that when *eudaimonia* is not available you need to fall back on something that will give you peace of mind. But how? The Epicureans thought that the best way to circumvent anguish in life is to avoid any undertaking that may result in failure or disappointment. They chose an ascetic life that rejected the kind of ambition that invariably leads to heartbreak, loss, and turmoil. They were minimalists. The Stoics believed that we must employ our rationality to guide us through life's slings and arrows and to not let our feelings get the better of us. They saw *ataraxia* as a contemplative device that helps us rise above troublesome emotions. They were the first cognitive psychologists.

The sceptics adopted a different conception of *ataraxia*. They rejected the asceticism of the Epicureans and the rationality of the Stoics, and embraced instead the notion that life is about *chance*. We cannot control events, with our muscles or with our minds, nor can we predict the future. They were called sceptics because they adopted a state of *not-knowing*. Both Wilfred Bion and Sigmund Freud were profoundly influenced by this concept. If life is essentially about chance – the root meaning of the word happy – then we need to learn to take things as they come, the good and the bad, and trust that our lives are perfectly okay as they are, so long as we face things with courage. In fact, the sceptics defined *ataraxia* as a state of openheartedness, which goes back to Plato's definition of *eudaimonia*: to be with your *daimon* spirit, which is love.

We now turn to Sigmund Freud to learn how he envisioned a method that was designed to access this very state.



## II. Sigmund Freud:

Freud's notion of happiness was novel, yet indebted to Plato, Aristotle, and the sceptic tradition. The novelty of Freud's approach to the problem of happiness is epitomized by his admonition that, "Much will be gained if we succeed in transforming . . . hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health [my patients] will be better armed against that unhappiness."

Why did Freud suggest that the goal of psychoanalysis is to achieve *unhappiness* instead of happiness? Surely we go into therapy because we are already unhappy, and in order to become happy, or at least happier than we were. But no. Freud believed that therapy is about reducing our neuroses. We become neurotic in the first place because neurosis is a form of misery we ourselves orchestrate, one we can ostensibly, if unconsciously, control. We have more control over our ability to be less neurotic – after all, how else could we change? – than we do to become happier. That is why we prefer neurosis to the more helpless feeling of unhappiness, so we substitute one form of suffering for another, which somehow feels less onerous. Though therapy cannot make us happy, it may, like the concept of *ataraxia*, make the misery of unhappiness easier to take. Only when we have embraced our unhappiness are we in a more viable position to pursue happiness itself. Freud agreed with Aristotle and the sceptics who both believed that happiness is not something we can control or, once we have it, secure. Fate plays a – well – fateful role in how and when we have a chance at happiness. We cannot set out to secure it like building a therapy practice, or buying a house. Therapy cannot bring us *eudaimonia*, but it can help us to achieve *ataraxia*. Like the sceptics, Freud was convinced that if you want to court *eudaimonia*, you must first achieve a measure of *ataraxia*, or at least a working relationship with it. This means learning to embrace the life you are already living, and accept yourself, as well as others, non-judgementally. How is this possible?

The two cardinal principles of psychoanalysis that Freud embraced in his technique were free association and neutrality. Free association is the mindset of the patient, whereas neutrality is the mindset of the therapist. What they both have in common is the adoption of a non-judgemental attitude that is foreign to the neurotic, because our neuroses are full

of judgements that are persecutory and resentful in nature. When I free associate I simply share my experiences with my therapist and listen to what I am saying as though I am hearing it for the first time. Of course, this is nearly impossible to do, because I am usually too anxious to suspend judgment and I want answers, now. Similarly, the therapist listens to what I have to say without judgement or condemnation. In a perfect world such an attitude becomes contagious.

One of the reasons that psychoanalysis takes such a long time is our stubbornness. We're convinced that if we can get the answers that we crave, then we will have the key to obtaining the happiness we so desire. But you can't go out and seek happiness, like a fruit that is ready to pluck from a tree. You have to let it come to you, and be ready and willing to take a chance when that happens.

I know this sounds like a hot of hooey, and way too zen and paradoxical to take seriously. But there is a logic to this thesis, if we are openminded enough to ponder it. Following Plato, Freud believed that our lives are rooted in desire, and the thing that we desire most of all is love, or *Eros*. But as Plato pointed out, love can make us happy, but it can also make us want to die, or kill, or drive us mad – what Freud calls neurosis. To love puts us in a very vulnerable position, and the neurotic in us avoids pain as a matter of course. Taking a chance at love is the riskiest endeavor any human being can entertain. So we play it safe, hold our desires in check, and try to get others to love us first. This is an edition of narcissism, a fundamental constituent of neurosis.

There is no way of exercising willpower to change this state of affairs. We have to sneak up on it, slyly and indirectly. This is the genius of the psychotherapy contract. You enter into a relationship with an expert who is ostensibly going to help you achieve your goals. But the goals we set out to achieve are merely a ploy, designed to lure us into a relationship with another human being, from whom we also want love. And, in a manner of speaking, we do get some love from this relationship, but that isn't what heals us. It simply keeps us interested.

Being loved never healed anyone, as satisfying an experience as this is. Instead, it's when we come out of the closet of our self-imposed fears and intransigence and begin to give ourselves, heart and soul, to another human being that we begin to play the game of life that Plato had in mind. Much to our surprise, we begin to love this therapist who says he or she is going to help us, but doesn't really appear to be doing much of anything than

just listening! Yes, some of us become exasperated with this arrangement and give up, just as we have with all our previous relationships. But if we are lucky – that word again! – we just might hang in there and, without even noticing it happen, find ourselves becoming more and more openminded, and non-judgemental. What happens then? We become more loving creatures, and less critical, at least in the context of this peculiar relationship.

Does that bring us happiness? According to Freud, no. It simply makes us less neurotic, and more willing to take chances. Happiness cannot occur in the context of psychotherapy, or psychoanalysis. But it just might occur outside the therapy relationship, where there is little recourse in the event that I take a fall. As Winnicott observed, when I leave my cozy and relatively safe haven of therapy I find myself in a world without a safety-net, on the high-wire of life, where the real game is played, win or lose.

What then? For the answer we must now turn to Nietzsche, who had some surprising things to tell us about this very question.



### III. Friedrich Nietzsche:

Nietzsche came before Freud, but I have saved him for last because Freud is a good preparation for what Nietzsche has to say. Their lives briefly overlapped. Nietzsche died in 1900, Freud was born in 1856, so he was forty-four when Nietzsche passed away, the same year Freud published his monumental work, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Many have accused Freud of stealing most of his ideas from Nietzsche, because they are so similar. But Freud claimed never to have read him. Some of us find this hard to believe.

In any case, Nietzsche was the father of both existentialism and postmodernism. He was a rebel and a misfit and never married. Apparently he died a virgin. He fell madly in love with Lou Andreas-Salomé, who rejected him. But then, everyone was in love with

Salomé, including Freud who was her analyst, and Rilke. Nietzsche was a loner, suffered terribly from migraine and all manner of psychosomatic illnesses, and went mad ten years before he died, never to recover. This is hardly the picture of an enlightened human being who has much to tell us about the concept of happiness. This just goes to show how paradoxical life can be. Though dismissed by everyone during his lifetime, Nietzsche is now considered one of the greatest geniuses who ever lived. He was a martyr to his ideas and gave his life to them.

So what did he have to say about happiness? Something very radical, to be sure. If you're not careful you may take Nietzsche at his word when he says he rejects the concept of happiness as banal. You would be better advised to read between the lines. The concept of happiness that Nietzsche rejects is the one embraced by John Stuart Mill, who reduced it to pleasure. Nietzsche was correct in rejecting this. But in its place he embraces a notion of "the good life" that is rooted in the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and the sceptics, the very same rogues gallery that was embraced by Sigmund Freud.

Perhaps the most famous phrase identified with Nietzsche is THE WILL TO POWER, an enigmatic expression that Nietzsche repeated over and over again as the essence of his philosophy. A book of Nietzsche's notes was even posthumously published with that title. It is a phrase that invites misinterpretation. Hitler was so taken with it that he adopted it as the motto for the Third Reich. A famous documentary that Hitler commissioned to celebrate his brand was even titled *Triumph of the Will*, an obvious homage to Nietzsche. But Nietzsche was no Nazi. He died decades before Hitler rose to power, who was only eleven when Nietzsche passed away.

What does this expression mean? No one can say exactly, but I take it to mean *desire to passion*. He was a very passionate man and, like Freud, put desire at the forefront of the human condition. Another famous expression of his was "God is dead." Though he loathed religion as "the opiate of the masses," he held a special condemnation for the Judeo-Christian tradition. Nietzsche rejected the morality that derived from that tradition, especially the notion of turning the other cheek, and argued instead that each person must choose for herself what her morality should be. If you live your desire, then you mustn't allow others to decide which desires are acceptable and which are not. Like Freud, Nietzsche believed that conventional society has as its aim to make every one of us ashamed of ourselves and neurotic, in order to keep us in line. The weak person resents

those who are passionate will do everything in their power to punish them for it. The title of his most influential book, *Beyond Good and Evil* (2002), says it all.

So what does Nietzsche have to tell us about happiness? One of the underlying themes in all the versions of happiness we've been exploring is that the truly happy person is *contented* with his or her life, that such a person has found peace of mind in their *ataraxia*, and that the key to achieving such a condition presupposes a capacity for contemplation. Recall Freud's notion of free association, and that the Greek word *ataraxia* literally means to be without turmoil. Yet for Nietzsche turmoil and strife are not emotions to do away with or surmount, but occasion our very experience of happiness itself. He seemed to suggest that if we're not careful we may lapse into *ataraxia* so contentedly that we forget all about *eudaimonia*!

We're not put on this earth to live a life of contentment and leisure. As Jacques Lacan would say, desire is not supposed to bring satisfaction. We desire for the sake of desiring, an openended state of vulnerability. This reminds me of William Blake's admonition in his great work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1975), that "Those who restrain their desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained . . . until it is only the shadow of desire." Whereas Plato, Freud, and the other Greeks we reviewed would all concur that a precondition for happiness requires considerable effort and pain, none of them would go as far as Nietzsche in this regard.

Freud, for example, juxtaposes happiness against unhappiness, lamenting the latter as an unfortunate but realistic aspect of our all too human condition, interrupted by occasional episodes of *eudaimonia* . . . *if you are lucky*. But Nietzsche says something far more radical. He insists that it is those moments of our greatest strife and difficulty, when it may seem that all is lost in our inexact quest for this or that objective, that I am happiest! Typical of Nietzsche, he turns everything on its head by suggesting it is when we are most desperately up against resistance to our aims that we are living our lives to the fullest, NOT those moment when we are relaxing by the fire, or gazing at the ocean waves, enjoying the afternoon sun. Those latter moments are not unlike being asleep, or in a trance. You might as well be dead! In fact, Nietzsche would suggest you are already dead, you just haven't been buried.

You can't help but think of Freud's famous Nirvana Complex, as an apt synonym for the death of desire, when you hear Nietzsche declare, "I am bitterly opposed to any

teaching that takes as its end a peace, a Sabbath of Sabbaths . . . [that accomplishes] nothing more than . . . [an increase in] suffering” (2003). What Nietzsche is offering is a life that is devoted to constant and unadulterated risk, a life dedicated to a kind of greatness. Not the greatness of fame and fortune. These goals are too conventional. The greatness Nietzsche has in mind is the project of becoming the person you are, not the person others urge you to be. We’re talking about an obstinate refusal to conform to any standard other than the one you yourself design, devoted to the ceaseless call of desire for *authenticity*. Like Plato, he sees this devotion as nothing more than playing the game of life, to the fullest. The higher the stakes, the greater the reward. This is *eudaimonia* in its essence. Apparently, Nietzsche was no friend of *ataraxia*.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

In conclusion, I want to say a brief word about the role of love in all this. Nietzsche doesn’t have a lot to say about love, but he has a great deal to say about passion and desire. He fell in love with one woman, and when she rejected him he gave up on finding a substitute. He apparently never stopped loving her, but he could never have her. I don’t think that made him bitter, as it might most of us. His love was for his writing and his ideas. Though ignored in his lifetime, he somehow knew that he would one day become immeasurably famous and that he would have a monumental impact on the world, and on history. He certainly has. Like many artists before him, he had to die to be recognized. Was he happy? By his definition, yes.

The parallel with Freud is amazing. He too put aside the simpler pleasures of sexual congress with his wife once they had children and devoted all of his *libido* to his true child, psychoanalysis. Like all parents, the day came when he had to let go of this child and let it find its way in the world, even when he didn’t entirely approve of the direction it was taking. And today? With the exception of Lacan, psychoanalysis has little to say about desire, or passion, or even happiness. Perhaps it’s time we resurrected this missing legacy? After all, its been the undercurrent of our civilization for more than two thousand years. Perhaps there is still time to give it new blood?

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