

On Happiness: Aristotle and Epicurus

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We all seek happiness. We devote the vast majority of our time to attaining happiness and all that comes with it—a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment, completion of goals or tasks, and pleasure. The many kinds of happiness include the “quick fix” that comes in short bursts, moments of pleasure when our needs or desires are momentarily satisfied; think being hungry, hot or cold, or on a more sinister note, doing drugs. Once we complete whatever it is that was necessary for us to be satisfied for the moment, we experience happiness, but it does not last very long compared to the span of a person’s entire life. Long-term happiness, on the other hand, is achieved by the completion of goals over the course of time—finishing school, staying in good health, being helpful to others. These goals lead to a pleasure that satisfies both the body and the mind. We obtain true happiness from fulfilling goals and being satisfied with our character. This essay will look at happiness through the views of two philosophers, Aristotle, who believed that true happiness comes from accomplishing goals and living a virtuous life, and Epicurus, who thought of true happiness as something that is derived from pursuing pleasures. Both philosophers’ positions will be evaluated.

Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.E.) was a Greek philosopher who believed that humans are rational beings. We don’t behave in a random or aimless manner; everything we do has some objective in mind. Aristotle also believed in teleology, the notion that in nature, there are final causes. These final causes, or *telos*, are defined as ultimate ends or goals. A smaller goal accomplished is a mean toward accomplishing a larger goal. For instance, we make it a goal to wake up early in the morning to go to work or school, and accomplishing that goal serves the greater goal of getting a promotion or graduating. Staying healthy is an overall goal that requires the completion of several smaller goals, e.g. eating a balanced diet, exercising, making time in your schedule to go to the gym. It is when we accomplish greater goals in our lives that we can begin to experience true happiness. Aristotle defines true happiness as attainable and final, allowing us to be self-sufficient. In his review of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Howard J. Curzer points out that “happiness is complete, self-sufficient, most choiceworthy, and ‘in accord with the best and most complete virtue.’” True happiness lacks nothing. If a person is leading a virtuous life, that is what allows them to be happy.

A virtuous life, in short, consists of living as a rational being. According to Aristotle, rationality means being goal-oriented; and rationality is also what sets us apart from animals. We set the concepts of good morals and good character as

goals to achieve in order to live a happy life. The completion of these goals leads to true happiness.

A person should have good character, be resolute, thorough, and responsible. Happiness comes from being satisfied with our character. A person who chooses to help others feels good about themselves. This leads to a satisfaction of the mind, making that person content with themselves. When a person exhibits kindness towards others, it signifies a selflessness that is not held by everyone else—as long as this kindness is genuine, being kind towards others strictly for the sake of being kind. A lot of time and effort must be spent on the path toward obtaining true happiness. This goal takes a lifetime to achieve.

Epicurus (341 – 270 B.C.E.) would have us believe otherwise. Epicurus was a Greek thinker who followed the hedonistic train of thought, that happiness is derived from the pursuit of pleasure. Epicurus was also an atomist; he believed that everything we know is made up of atoms that cannot be destroyed and come in an infinite number of forms and sizes and that our lives are just the sum total of our sensations. Epicurus said that we should give into our indulgences. If we develop a particular desire, it is our right to pursue the satisfaction of that desire. But because too much of anything can lead to displeasure, Epicurus proposed that we practice prudence while indulging ourselves. For example, if you get hungry, you eat. You do not eat until you are completely overfed to the point where you experience discomfort. If you have been prudent in satisfying your hunger, you are happy. But how long does this happiness last? Obviously, we need to keep eating to continue living, so in this case, the happiness lasts until you get hungry once again. On a hot summer day, if you get overheated, you will attempt to cool yourself. However, if you get too cold, you will try to warm yourself again. If life is just a sum total of sensations, then we try to have that sum skewed towards the side of overall pleasure.

Epicurus referred to the opposite of pleasure as pain. His philosophy emphasized avoiding pain. In fact, avoiding pain leads to overall pleasure. “Happiness in the Garden of Epicurus,” an article from the *Journal of Happiness Studies* says about Epicurus’ assumption of what leads to happiness, “The freedom from pain, which is, as we have seen, in itself a pleasant state, consists in the lack of pain in the body—*aponia*—and the non-disturbance of the soul, a state Epicurus called the tranquility of the mind—*ataraxia*...This state is also called static pleasure, because it is thought to arise from the stable atomic structure of our souls.”

This pleasure is described as arising from something stable. If something is stable, however, it indicates that it could be, or at one point was, unstable. A person who follows this ideal is continually working to end up in a place without pain. This notion of static pleasure differs significantly from long-term happiness. The problem I see is that there is no such thing as “freedom from pain.” Life includes pain; there will always be some form of discomfort or dissatisfaction that has to be dealt with, not avoided, to try to live a so-called happier existence. This could lead to another quandary—in constantly trying to avoid pain, one risks the chance of becoming dependent on the pleasures that are required to maintain that

static pleasure. We see this in the case of drug addicts; they always need to achieve their next high. That high is their static pleasure, but it is not permanent, so they continue to try to obtain the means to return to that state. There is no end; this state does not signify true happiness. True happiness is self-sufficient and therefore lacks nothing; instead of constant avoidance of pain, there is the happiness itself.

So where does true happiness come from? It comes internally, both from fulfilling personal goals and from being satisfied with your character. When smaller goals are accomplished, they become means for accomplishing increasingly larger and more difficult ones. By satisfying these larger goals, we derive a great sense of happiness; the more difficult a goal is, the more gratification we get from its completion. We dedicate much of our lives to achieving true happiness. With true happiness, you get what you give; there are no shortcuts. The effort and time you put into it, you get back.

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