

EPICUREAN RENAISSANCE
REDISCOVERING THE ART OF GOOD LIVING
or
THE HAPPINESS DILEMMA

We should be very happy – so why are we discontent?

Humankind has come a long way since our ancestors branched off to become the species that we call human. We mastered fire; invented agriculture; built shelters, then cities, great pyramids, then skyscrapers; we developed mass production, conquered diseases, and changed the courses of rivers. We navigated the oceans, the atmosphere, and space itself. We discovered the laws of nature. We peered out to the edge of the universe – to the beginning of time, and we looked into the interior of the atom. We have *almost* mastered the world – but have we mastered ourselves?

We have comfortable homes, warm clothes, rapid transportation, rich food, a variety of intoxicants, pain killers, and sleep inducers; we have entertainment available 24 by 7 on 300 channels; we have comedy, drama, music, and art, with sex sprinkled over all – we *ought* to be very happy. The only problem: Evidence abounds that we are not. Despite our comforts and material wealth we Americans lead the world in alcohol and drug abuse, child abuse, road rage, tranquilizer consumption, obesity – just a few of the indicators that we don't feel happy. I learned that at summer camp nowadays the first morning activity is for the camp nurse to dispense the prescription medications to as many as half of the young campers.

The phenomenon of discontentment is not that complicated. Discontentment is the key to the evolution of human culture. Our ancestors' sense of discontentment led to all the achievements of our species: discontentment with cold fostered the invention of fire, of clothing, shelter, and hot baths. Discontentment with hunger fostered our inventions of hunting, fishing, agriculture, microwave ovens, and cookbooks. Discontentment with boredom led to our inventions of music, drama, and religion. Discontentment with ignorance fostered our pursuit of discovery. Discontentment is endemic. To assuage our discontentment we need the new, the novel. But the downside of discontentment is that *persistent discontentment makes us think we are unhappy*. Mark Twain's character Sam Bartlett said:

“Happiness ain't a thing in itself – it's only a contrast with something that ain't pleasant.... And so, as soon as the novelty is over and the force of the contrast dulled, it ain't happiness any longer, and you have to get something fresh.”

The happiness dilemma

So, life becomes a search for happiness. How many self-help books have been written about *how* to be happy? Books, magazines, and TV programs tell us

“how to find the perfect man or woman,”
“how to improve your golf game,”
“how to make money in the stock market,”
“how to improve your sex life,”
“how to become beautiful,”
“how to make your home beautiful,”

And the list goes on and on. If you want to get published, write a book on how to achieve those elusive things that will make you happy.

Even while caught up in this endless chase, we have a sneaking suspicion that all of this acquisition and pleasure seeking may not really bring us happiness. In our more thoughtful moments we realize that we are letting ourselves be driven by popular but irrational culture. What we feel at the gut level is frustration – you just can't get to that perfectly happy place from here. John Stuart Mill wrote: "Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so."

In our daily lives we have constant examples of this dilemma.

- When we are hungry, food satisfies us and makes us feel "happy." When we feel unhappy we try eating more food, but then eating more doesn't make us happy. Then we become aware that we are unhappy because we overeat.
- When we enjoy a glass of wine we feel good. If we want to keep that feeling we drink more – until we find we are unhappy because we drink too much.
- Ken Nordine used to do a wonderful skit about the unhappy guy who goes to the psychiatrist because he is addicted to TV.
 - "Why do you watch so much TV?" the psychiatrist asks.
 - "Because TV makes me *happy*."
 - "Then what is your problem?"
 - "I watch too much TV."

Answers to the 'happiness dilemma' have been around for over two millennia

We are not the first to recognize the *happiness* dilemma. After our early ancestors began to live more abundant lives through the development of agriculture and the building of cities, and they had more time on their hands to think about their lives, they started asking – and answering these questions about who we are and how we should live. Perhaps coincidentally, it was in the centuries around 500 - 100 BCE that these philosophical questions were being addressed incisively in several separate regions of the civilizing world,

- In Asia by Confucius and Lao-tzu, resulting in Confucianism and Taoism
 - In South Asia by the Buddha and the elaboration of Buddhism, and by the Hindu philosophers
 - And at about the same time in the Mediterranean littoral by the Greek and Persian philosophers.
- Some of their concepts were later woven into Christian teaching.

Epicurus was such a philosopher; a prolific Greek author who formed a school of philosophy that came to be known, appropriately, as The Garden. Epicurus' philosophy concerns precisely the questions posed above about the happiness dilemma. In our quest to understand happiness, we have much to learn from Epicurus.

Epicurus was born in Greece, February 4, 341 BCE, seven years after the death of Plato. Epicurus began to study philosophy seriously at age twelve and he started his own school of philosophy at age 32. He lived his whole life in Greece, most of it in Athens. At age 72 he died, calmly, as he had taught his followers. Having acquired a fatal kidney disorder, one day he stepped into a bronze hot-tub, asked for a glass of wine, bid his friends farewell, asked them to remember his doctrines, and he died.

Apart from his philosophy of living, Epicurus also was a genius with great foresight in other disciplines. He made astute observations about the nature of the universe that have only been rediscovered in modern times. In *cosmology*, he regarded the universe as infinite and eternal, and as consisting only of bodies (or matter) and space. Anticipating 20th century *chemistry* and *atomic physics*, he wrote that some substances are compound and some are indivisible atoms from which the compounds are formed,. In *biology*,

Epicurus anticipated the concept of natural selection, contending that natural forces give rise to organisms of different types and that only the types able to support and propagate themselves survive. In *religion and psychology* Epicurus' teachings discounted the belief in supernatural forces controlling our actions (gods and demons).

In our culture, when we hear the word *Epicurean* we think first of food and wine. According to the dictionary, an *epicure* has come to mean a person with refined taste, especially in food and wine; or a person devoted to sensuous pleasure and luxurious living – hedonism. *What an irony!* The Epicureans in ancient Greece took the opposite approach in their prescription for happiness; they were devoted to simple food, watered-down wine, and simple living. Epicurus himself would strongly have disapproved of rich and complex “gourmet” foods. It is additional irony that the word *gourmet* comes from *gourmond* or glutton – the opposite of what Epicurus taught.

But this is not all about food. Epicurus wrote many books detailing his philosophy. Epicureanism regarded the purpose of human life as the attainment of pleasure – this is where contemporary minds associate Epicurean with Gourmet. But what Epicurus meant by pleasure was contentment and peace of mind in a frugal life – not hedonism.

Epicurus' philosophy

Here is the gist of the philosophy that Epicurus expounded. Epicurus wrote that if we have happiness, we have everything. If we do not have happiness, all of our actions are directed toward attaining it. Therefore we need to understand what happiness is so that we can know whether we have it or not.

Then he asked, *why* don't we know if we are happy or not. The answer, he said, is because we are surrounded by a culture that gives us constant, powerful messages of what we need to be happy. We let others define happiness for us. (Does this sound familiar? “Buy our 6.2 liter 4x4 and you will be the happy king of the road”). But to quote Epicurus:

“The wealth required by nature is limited and is easy to procure; but the wealth required by vain ideals extends to infinity.” And later,

“Of our desires some are natural and necessary, others are natural but not necessary; and others are neither natural nor necessary, but are due to groundless opinion.”

We recognize this today as consumerism, slavery to fashion, the desire for novelty, and for perceived status symbols. In today's economics terminology it is the difference between acquiring basic goods versus status goods. A few years back I traveled to the remote mountains of Myanmar. The tribal people we encountered were generally adequately fed, sheltered, clothed to the extent necessary – and they appeared as happy as any cross-section of Americans I know, if not more so. But in more affluent societies, once people have their basic needs met, there arises an apparent social necessity to acquire status goods that are priced by their scarcity – antiques, works of art, fashion by particular designers, high-status real estate, and so on. Watching TV commercials is an exercise in seeing all the things you “must have” to enjoy higher status and be happy. At the extreme, Ferrari's latest limited-edition model, selling for \$675,000 was recently eagerly ordered by a 50-year-old banker in Washington, D.C. His pleasure will not be that he will have the capability to get around at more than 200 miles per hour. His pleasure will be that he will possess what others cannot. He expects happiness to result from his one-quarter million dollar expense.

So for an Epicurean --what, then, is *happiness* and what are its sources? Here are five from the writings of Epicurus. They are not prioritized.

1. Have no fear or anxiety. No fear from what?

- Have no fear of death. Epicurus wrote: "Accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us... death is [merely] the privation of all sentience...a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable ... by taking away the yearning for immortality. ... Foolish is the man who says he fears death, not because it will pain him when it comes but because it pains him in the prospect. *When we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not*"

- Epicurus also taught that we should have no fear of myths or the supernatural. He wrote: "The chief cause of human misery is religion." In contemporary terms we would note that much religion thrives on inducing fear and guilt. Epicurus taught that we should not fear the gods; men invented them. People today who accept Epicurus teaching -- that there is not some big judgement day and horrible punishment awaiting them after death -- express a great psychological relief from anxiety.

- And Epicurus taught that we should have no anxiety about the lack of status goods. We need to reject outside messages that advise us on what we need to be happy.

2. Cultivating friendship. Epicurus wrote: "Of all the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is friendship."

A recent study noted that Americans are more isolated than ever before – many can not claim to have a single close friend outside their immediate family and others claim only one or two. Only 40 years ago the average person could count twice as many close friends that they could call on to share their deepest concerns. Have close friends been replaced with TV and video games in our lonely, big houses? Today about 12 million of us Americans are "bloggers," and almost half of those are personal blogs. We have this need to reach out to others, to tell them our story, but we sit alone at our computers hoping someone will read it on our web site.

3. Health. Eat, drink, and exercise to maintain good health.

Epicurus advised us to "...direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquility of mind."

Or consider this expression of the same idea attributed to Albert Schweitzer: "Happiness consists of good health and a poor memory."

George Bernard Shaw observed: "Give a man health and a course to steer and he'll never stop to trouble about whether he's happy or not."

4. Understand the relationship between pleasure and happiness. Here is what Epicurus wrote to Menoecus about pleasure:

"We call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good." ... "While therefore all pleasure ... to us is good, not all pleasure should be chosen, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned." ... "When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation." [Apparently Epicurean pleasure was misunderstood even in his day.] "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and [the absence] of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not sexual lust, not the

enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produces a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the ground of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul.” We have all been taught this lesson the hard way – but it’s difficult lesson to learn.

5. The importance of reason; living what we call an ‘examined life.’ Epicurus wrote: “Of all this, the beginning and the greatest good is wisdom. Therefore wisdom is a more precious thing even than philosophy; from it spring all the other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly; nor live wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly. For the virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them.”

Summing up Epicurus’ concept of achieving happiness, he wrote:

“Exercise yourself in these and related precepts day and night, both by yourself and with one who is like-minded; then never, either in waking or in dream, will you be disturbed, but will live as a god among men. For man loses all semblance of mortality by living in the midst of immortal blessings.”

Is it not interesting that Buddhism, developed during the same era, extols the same keys to happiness? The Noble Truths of Buddhism proclaim that

1. Life is suffering.
2. All suffering is caused by craving. Our wants are a bottomless pit. And,
3. Suffering can be overcome and happiness attained by giving up useless craving and restless wanting.

During the same era the Hindu world developed a similar philosophy that we call Yoga. Following the Yoga Path results in good health, tranquility, and peace of mind – just as Epicurus taught in Athens. The Upanishads teach that Brahmin is austerity and that Brahmin is bliss. Sounds like Epicurus.

The Christian world also contains some of this ancient wisdom. The *Christian writers* of the New Testament, Romans and Jews generally conversant with Hellenist philosophies, incorporated Epicurean concepts into their writing which was adopted as holy text. Note the strong Epicurean flavor of this passage attributed to Jesus. (Read Luke 12: 22-29.)

What does all this mean to us? Although we have more material comforts, more entertaining diversions, more opportunities for travel, more cures for diseases, more of almost everything than ever before in the history of the world, our culture is afflicted by anxieties, stresses, and worries as troublesome as ever. But Epicurus’ philosophy is as relevant for us today as it was when he taught it in The Garden some 2,400 years ago. As Unitarian Universalists, our fourth principle, is: “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” based on “Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” These ideas inherited from the Greek Epicureans, the Buddhists, the Hindus, the Christians, and others provide a true foundation for our spiritual life and healing for the damage wrought on us by a materialistic, lonely, self-centered culture.

Yes, it is easy for me to say: “seek pleasure by simplifying your life,” “make do with, and enjoy, the basic necessities,” “don’t worry about death,” “live one day at a time,” “don’t accept guilt and don’t worry about ‘Judgement Day,’” “give your health a high priority,” “live according to reason and wisdom.” But we all have trouble putting these principles into *practice*.

And we need to recognize that there is a subtle danger in consciously striving too hard to live according to these fine principles. We must avoid anxiety about not measuring up, about not being perfect. We should try to follow Epicurus' path in a relaxed and non-judgmental way. We should not focus on being perfect, and we should not look down on others for their imperfection. Most of us find people who think they are "perfect" boring. Thomas Mann wrote:

Perfection in life does not exist; and if it did, it would be – not lovable but admirable, possibly even a bore. Perfection lacks personality. ... What is lovable about any human being is precisely his imperfections.

So have no anxiety about your imperfections. They are what make you lovable. But perhaps recalling that Epicurus has been a good model for over two thousand years will inspire us live in a way that we permit ourselves to experience true happiness. (Whether we know we are happy or not.)

Bob Weekley

<http://www.kenleyweb.com/>

Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula, Newport News, Virginia

July 30, 2006