

What Is Happiness? How Does Our Conception of It Derive From Eudaemonia and Felicitas? Should Happiness Be The Goal of Life?

Post by "Cassius" of December 18, 2025 at 4:03 PM

[Don](#) The following is from Long and Sedley Hellenistic Philosophers. I emphasized the last part with italics. I don't know that Sextus is correct that the entire issue is circular, but it's interesting that he is connecting these two issues (the meaning of happiness and the meaning of blessedness) and maybe the fact that he is doing so means that Epicurus did as well. The view might be unthinkable for skeptics like Sextus, but Epicurus was taking the view that there is apparently an innate aspect to knowledge of the gods.

Quote

Sextus Empiricus, Against the Professors 9.43—7

The same reply can be made to Epicurus' belief that the idea of gods arose from dream impressions of human-shaped images. For why should these have given rise to the idea of gods, rather than of outsized men? And in general it will be possible to reply to all the doctrines we have listed that men's idea of god is not based on mere largeness in a human-shaped animal, but includes his being blessed and imperishable and wielding the greatest power in the world. But from what origin, or how, these thoughts occurred among the first men to draw a conception of god, is not explained by those who attribute the cause to dream impressions and to the orderly motion of the heavenly bodies. To this they reply that the idea of god's existence originated from appearances in dreams, or from the world's phenomena, but that the idea of god's being everlasting and imperishable and perfect in happiness arose through a process of transition from men. For just as we acquired the idea of a Cyclops by enlarging the common man in our impression of him, so too we have started with the idea of a happy man, blessed with his full complement of goods, then intensified these features into the idea of god, their supreme fulfillment. And again, having formed an impression of a long-lived man, the men of old increased the time-span to infinity by combining the past and future with the present; and then, having thus arrived at the conception of the everlasting, they said that god was everlasting too. Those who say this are championing a plausible doctrine. But they easily slip into that most puzzling trap, circularity.

For in order first to get the idea of a happy man, and then that of god by transition, we must have an idea of what happiness is, since the idea of the happy man is of one who shares in happiness. But according to them happiness (eudaimonia) was a divine (daimonia) and godly nature, and the word 'happy' (eudaimon) was applied to someone who had his deity (daimon) disposed well (eu). Hence in order to grasp human happiness we must first have the idea of god and deity, but in order to have the idea of god we must first have a conception of a happy man. Therefore each, by presupposing the idea of the other, is unthinkable for us.