

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

Post by “Joshua” of December 18, 2025 at 11:52 PM

And of course all of this is to forget the other side of the ledger, which Stephen Greenblatt cites here from Lorenzo Valla's *De Voluptate*:

Quote

At the center of his dialogue, Valla constructs a remarkably vigorous and sustained defense of key Epicurean principles: the wisdom of withdrawing from competitive striving into the tranquil garden of philosophy (“From the shore you shall laugh in safety at the waves, or rather at those who are wave-tossed”), the primacy of bodily pleasure, the advantages of moderation, the perverse unnaturalness of sexual abstinence, the denial of any afterlife. “It is plain,” the Epicurean states, “that there are no rewards for the dead, certainly there are no punishments either.” And lest this formulation allow an ambiguity, still setting human souls apart from all other created things, he returns to the point to render it unequivocal:

- According to my Epicurus . . . nothing remains after the dissolution of the living being, and in the term “living being” he included man just as much as he did the lion, the wolf, the dog, and all other things that breathe. With all this I agree. They eat, we eat; they drink, we drink; they sleep, and so do we. They engender, conceive, give birth, and nourish their young in no way different from ours. They possess some part of reason and memory, some more than others, and we a little more than they. We are like them in almost everything; finally, they die and we die—both of us completely.

If we grasp this end clearly—“finally, they die and we die—both of us completely”—then our determination should be equally clear: “Therefore, for as long as possible (would that it were longer!) let us not allow those bodily pleasures to slip away that cannot be doubted and cannot be recovered in another life.”

He is speaking here about death, but the real point is that there is nothing which marks humans out as special in comparison to other living beings (*animantem* in Valla's Latin). It did not require circular reasoning for Lucretius to notice the symptoms of grief and loss in the mother cow whose calf has been selected for sacrifice, and we don't actually need it now to observe in these lower animals the signs of the same feelings of joy, gladness, and pleasure that we feel ourselves.