

Is 'happiness' a proper translation of the term eudaimonia?

Post by “Peter Konstans” of March 25, 2024 at 6:35 AM

According to Michael Erler, professor of philology at the university of Würzburg, translating eudaimonia as happiness is not quite accurate. A more accurate translation would be flourishing.

Just like the Latin term 'augustus', the Greek term eudaimonia carried strong religious connotations which are already apparent from its etymology. Daimon translates to deity or divinity and eudaimonia is when a divinity is well disposed towards you, so the term comes pretty close to modern 'blessedness'.

The closest ancient Greek equivalent to 'personal happiness' would be 'eupraxia', a noun derived from the quite common expression 'eu prattein' meaning 'to be doing well in life' or 'to be successful'.

In modern Greek the general term for 'personal happiness' is 'eutychia' which in ancient times was more confined to the sense of 'good luck' which in modern Greek is simply tyche. In modern German, the term 'Glück' (related to English 'luck') is the standard term used both for the sense of 'personal happiness' and for the sense of 'good luck'.

Those in ancient Greece who taught people how to be 'happy' in the modern sense of 'doing well in life' were actually the sophists who professed to teach people how to be successful in both their public and private affairs for a price. It was not the philosophers. The philosophers were generally skeptical of such definitions and approaches to success and focused on teaching practical ethics.

Erler writes:

For Epicurus is convinced, as he says at the end of the Letter to Menoeceus as well, that whoever obeys his advice day and night will achieve freedom of pain with regard to the body, i. e. aponia, and freedom of pain with regard to the mind, i. e. ataraxia. In short, they will be happy. Happiness is feasible! That is Epicurus' message, which might sound strange to many because of our different understanding of 'happiness'. It is important to keep in mind that Greek eudaimonia (or happiness) has a meaning which differs from our modern understanding of happiness. For 'happiness' today is commonly regarded as a subjective mood, a feeling that can change from day to day and can be influenced by new situations. For the ancient Greeks, however, eudaimonia, which is usually translated by 'happiness' but which

rather should be translated by something like 'human flourishing', was not an emotional state, but rather about whether a human being had attained virtue and excellence, achieved his aims, and truly made the most of his life.

This understanding is well illustrated by Herodotus in his Histories where he tells the story of Solon making an important point about human happiness in a conversation with Croesus: Any human life according to him is filled with change, so that a person's life cannot be evaluated as 'eudemonic' properly until he or she has died. This remark follows from the understanding of happiness as a fulfilled life, which is the reason why Epicurus - and Plato for instance - can claim that he offered doctrines helping to become happy by helping to live a good and happy life. Only if eudaimonia is understood in terms of 'fulfilled life' does it really make sense to say, as Epicurus does, that one can teach someone to become 'happy'.

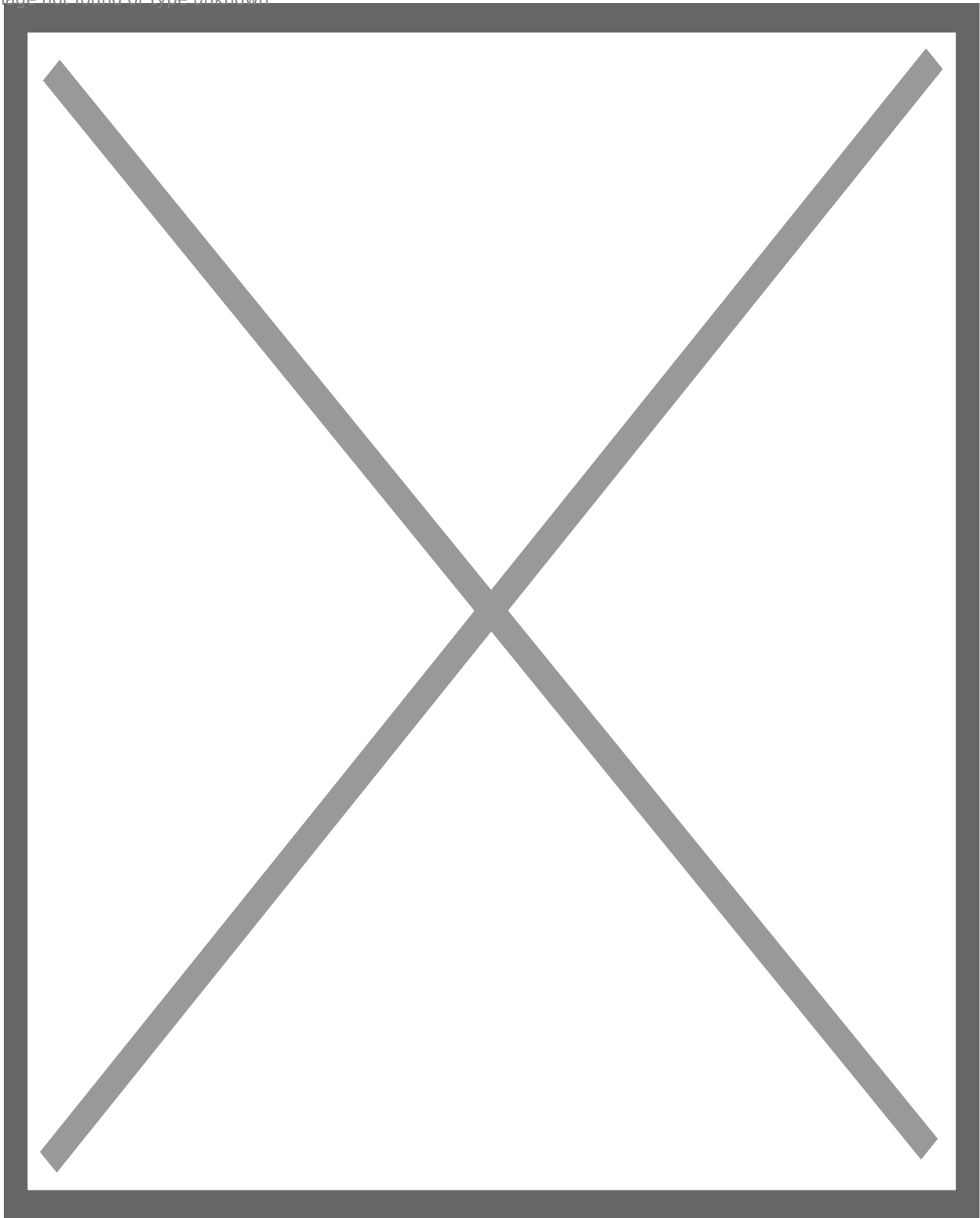
Post by "Don" of March 25, 2024 at 7:38 AM

I agree "happiness" is not an adequate translation of εὐδαιμονία eudaimonia. However, I also do not like "flourishing" as a translation of eudaimonia.

Flourishing is primarily defined as (Merriam-Webster) "marked by vigorous and healthy growth" (a flourishing garden); "very active and successful."

I could maybe accept it if one goes with the sense of "successful" as in "having attained a desired end or state of good fortune" but I don't normally get that sense from "flourishing." To me, that definition is better attached to "well-being" "the state of doing well especially in relation to one's happiness or success"

Image not found or type unknown



[Well-being - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)
en.wikipedia.org

I also like "well-being" because it wordplays off of eudaimonia itself: eu "well" + daimon "a being/god/deity".

Post by “Pacatus” of March 25, 2024 at 4:17 PM

To be unhelpfully repetitive, I translate as "happy well-being" -- if I translate at all. 🤔

Post by “Don” of March 25, 2024 at 7:02 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

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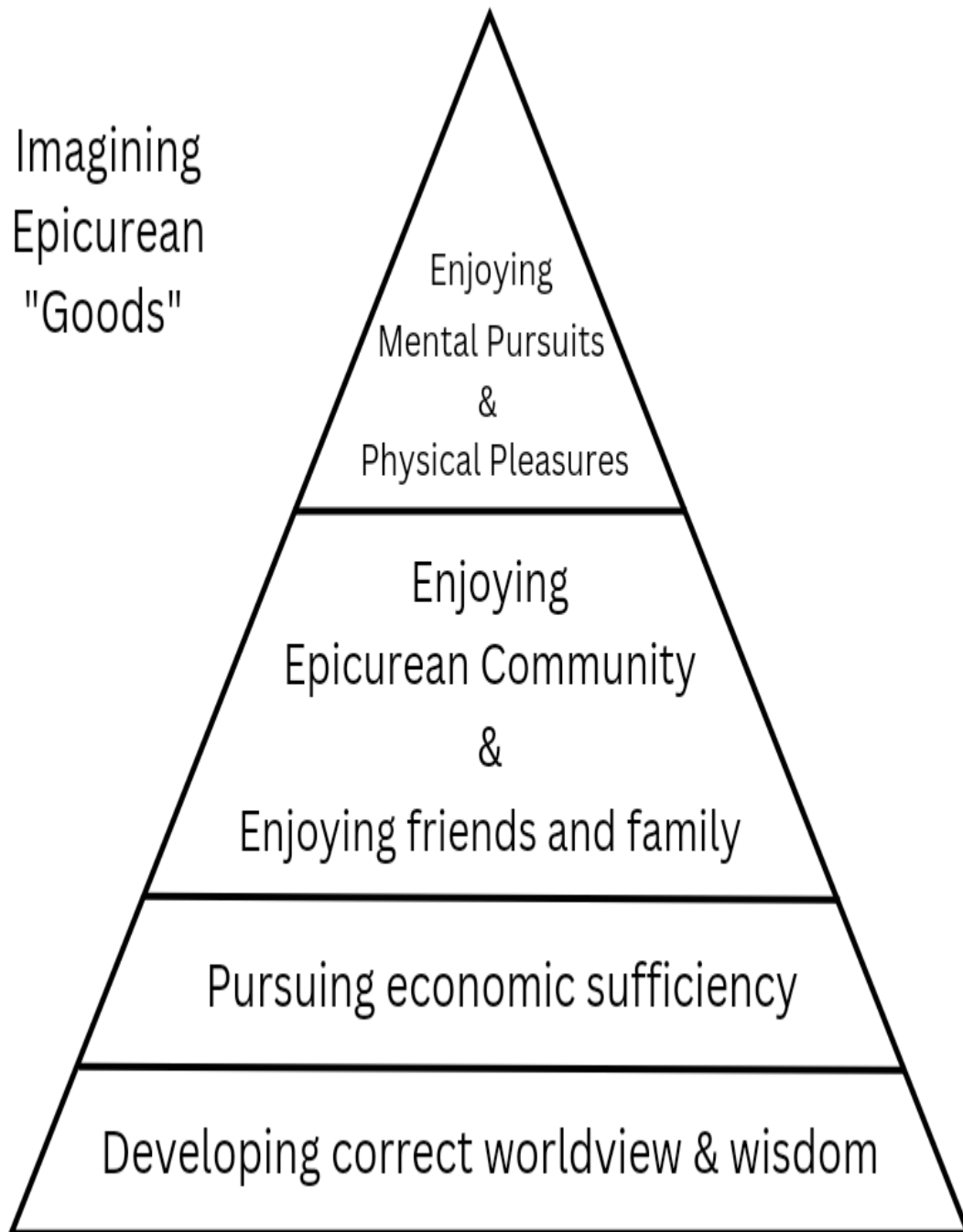
LOL! I'll see your repetition and raise you ad nauseum (for my post above) 😄 I've brought up "well-being" = eudaimonia so much even I'm tired of my rants!

Post by “Pacatus” of March 25, 2024 at 7:18 PM

[Don](#) 😄👍❤️

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 26, 2024 at 11:24 AM

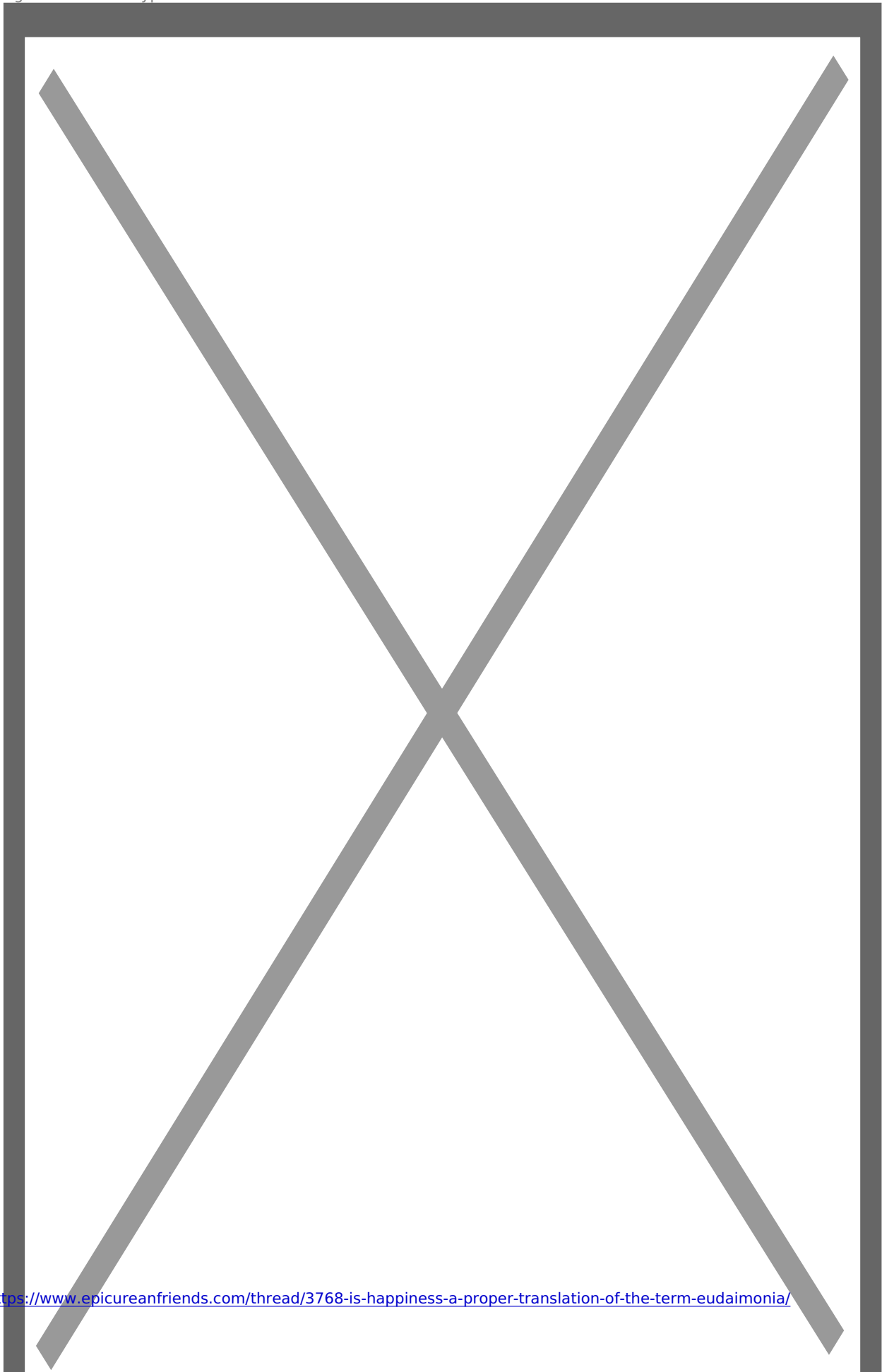
Thinking further about well-being, I made this very tentative graphic to think about the importance of "goods" in relation to happiness and well-being. The base of the pyramid is the most important, and the "goods" are pursued because they bring both "pleasure" and well-being.



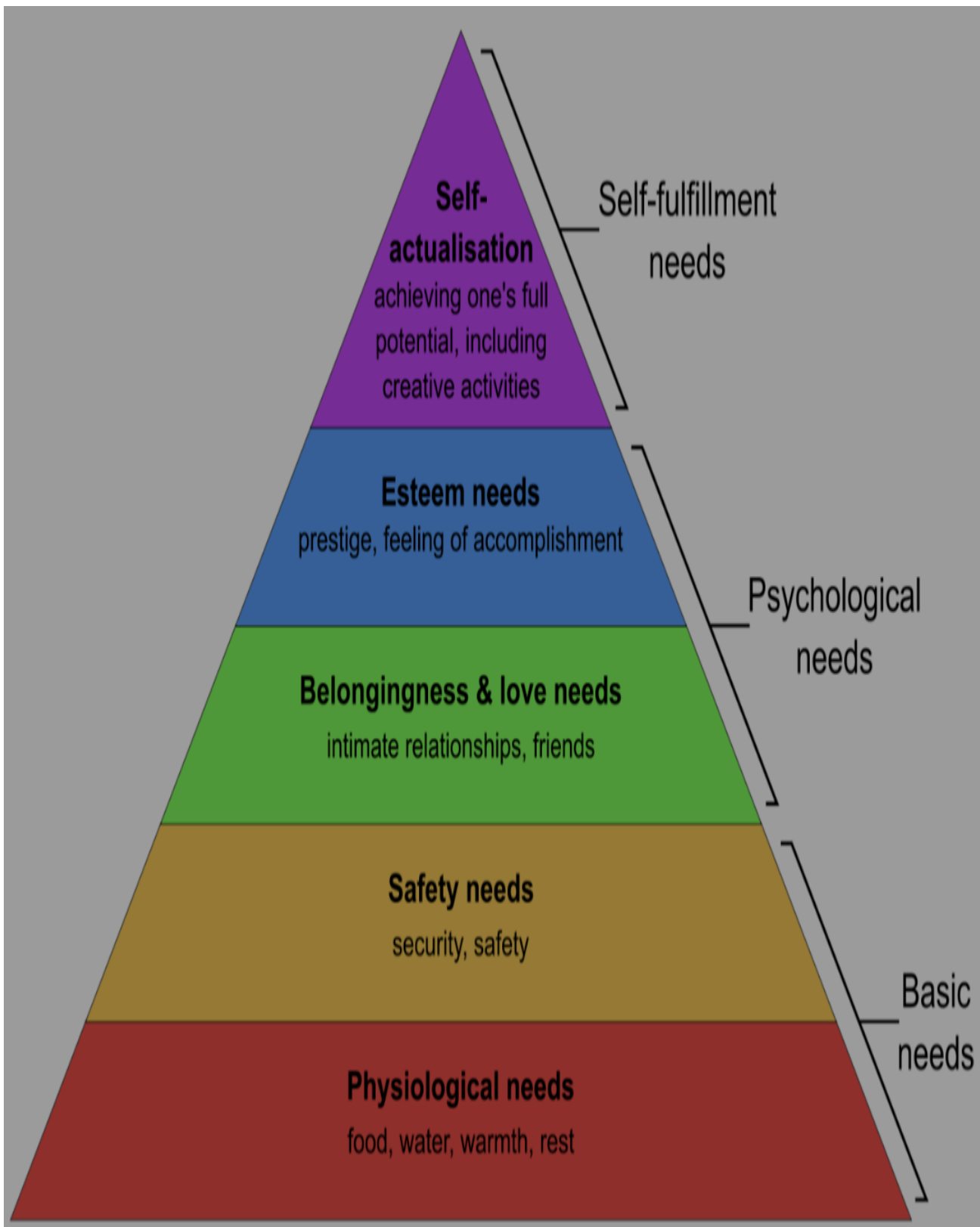
Post by "Don" of March 26, 2024 at 11:41 AM

Would these be akin to Maslow's hierarchy of needs?

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[Maslow's hierarchy of needs - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs)
en.wikipedia.org



Post by “Kalosyni” of March 26, 2024 at 12:22 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Would these be akin to Maslow's hierarchy of needs?

The idea of the pyramid is to present information in a manner which gives more weight and importance to the base, and each "good" builds upon the level below it. It is a guide to Epicurean eudaimonia, so different than Maslow's pyramid.

Post by “Don” of March 27, 2024 at 6:34 AM

I just came across these "Wellness Toolkits" from the National Institutes of Health. They seemed, from first glance, applicable to "well -being" in a general sense. So, for consideration:

[Your Healthiest Self: Wellness Toolkits](#)

Each person’s “healthiest self” is different. We have different bodies, minds, living situations, and people influencing our lives.

www.nih.gov

Post by “Godfrey” of March 27, 2024 at 12:31 PM

Peter St-Andre mentions in his blog post for today that he prefers "fulfillment" as an interpretation of *eudaimonia*. Any thoughts on this one? To me, fulfillment and happiness both seem particularly mental/spiritual whereas well-being seems to be more inclusive of mental/spiritual as well as physical. I can't say which approach is most in line with the original meaning of eudaimonia.

Post by “Cassius” of March 27, 2024 at 12:46 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I can't say which approach is most in line with the original meaning of eudaimonia.

Passing comment not meant to claim correctness: I think I remember from college philosophy that Socrates actually spoke about hearing or feeling the prompting of his personal "daemon" - perhaps I am wrong. But I wonder if it is getting far afield from the way the word was originally used to exclude connotations of "blessedness" from a "divinity" point of view. Or the opposite - was the whole meaning of the word just an "idiom" for them, with no specific clear meaning, just many of these words are for us?

I have no real clue, but then again I probably couldn't easily pin down what it means to be "happy" today either, without going off on all sorts of excursions into various perspectives and definitions.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 27, 2024 at 3:28 PM

Rereading post #1, I find that "blessedness" does have a certain attraction. That might relate it to the blessedness of the gods as in [PD01](#) and to Epicurus' comments about living like a god among men.

It seems to be pretty all-encompassing as well: not necessarily confined to mental/spiritual, but including physical and external. At least that's one (rather Aristotlean?) way to think about blessedness. The word has various connotations in modern English. Here we go again....

Post by “Pacatus” of March 27, 2024 at 3:29 PM

Are we to “*Fifty Shades of Eudaimonia*” yet? 🤔 😊 😄

Post by “Cassius” of March 27, 2024 at 3:37 PM

Given what we have been reading Cicero say in the podcast, apparently it was a major position at the time that one can't be deemed happy until a life is over and in retrospect. That's pretty clearly different than the "upbeat feeling" I think most of us first default to with "happy" today.

So somehow we have to set some terms on what is meant at a basic level. Are we talking something short term or much longer?

Post by “Pacatus” of March 27, 2024 at 4:14 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

So somehow we have to set some terms on what is meant at a basic level. Are we talking something short term or much longer?

Both. Behind my bad joke is the point that there are different shades of happiness: like pleasure/pleasantness (on which I think happiness is based – my Epicurean view), it can be both “kinetic” and “katastematic.” And I think we can identify those for ourselves experientially pretty readily, and I associate them with well-being as opposed to ill-being (though we can find happiness in mental pleasure/well-being, even with bodily ill-being – as Epicurus was able to do on his death bed).

For me, then, the problem is one of philosophical parsing (in order to communicate philosophically – not to imply that is a small matter) of something that does not seem problematic at all (to me) experientially. And that is where I think folks like Cicero get lost: they elevate (their) philosophical apparatus over plain experience, and then struggle to fit plain experience into that philosophical apparatus. Epicurus, it seems to me, takes the exact opposite (and natural, reality-based) tack. And that Epicurean tack seems far more relatable to everyday living – and finding eudaimonia therein.

Post by “Don” of March 27, 2024 at 11:09 PM

With talk of "blessed" which I can see as a component or adjacent to eudaimonia: the word in PD1 and elsewhere is μακαρίος which appears to have no certain etymology but seems possibly to be derived from the idea of being "wealthy" in a literal and/or figurative sense. The usual translation is something like "blessed, fortunate, wealthy, 'well-off'".

So, if you're leading a blessed life, you can say you're leading a rich life, you're a "rich" person (whether you mean that literally or figuratively), you're fortunate (though we don't trust to Fortune).

Post by "Titus" of March 28, 2024 at 6:02 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

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I could maybe accept it if one goes with the sense of "successful" as in "having attained a desired end or state of good fortune" but I don't normally get that sense from "flourishing." To me, that definition is better attached to "well-being" "the state of doing well especially in relation to one's happiness or success"

Although I assume a philologist to be sensible about words, this could simply be an issue of word games because Prof. Erler isn't a native speaker of English. I remember that the tenor in the German literature on eudaimonia tends to interpret the term as "living/having achieved the good life", which is close to your definition, Don.

Post by "Don" of March 28, 2024 at 6:18 AM

[Quote from Titus](#)

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But then you're back at square one in needing to define what the "good life" is. Trying to satisfy the translated meaning of a word as polysemous* as eudaimonia in any one single word in a target language is going to present problems.

I would agree that there may be some word games going on, but "flourishing" seems to be the *academic* consensus of what word to use for eudaimonia. I've seen it used by other professors and academics, including those involved with positive psychology research and promotion of that discipline (which I agree has some benefits and useful research to impart). I've just never got the same connotation from that word "flourishing" when it comes to applying it to eudaimonia.

*I can't stop using "polysemous" since, think, [Pacatus](#) used it in a recent post. It's a great word that conveys translation issues in one tidy word.

Post by "Titus" of March 28, 2024 at 7:15 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I would agree that there may be some word games going on, but "flourishing" seems to be the academic consensus of what word to use for eudaimonia.

Okay, so Prof. Eller relates to an already established term.

[Quote from Don](#)

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[Quote from Peter Konstans](#)

For the ancient Greeks, however, eudaimonia, which is usually translated by 'happiness' but which rather should be translated by something like 'human flourishing', was not an emotional state, but rather about whether a human being had attained virtue and excellence, achieved his aims, and truly made the most of his life.

The same question (what the good life is) hit my brain when I answered for the first time in this thread. I remember Prof. Malte Hossenfelder arguing, that eudaimonia was an unifying aim of all the Hellenistic philosophies (Epicureanism, Stoicism, Scepticism, Cynicism) to show a way to the "good life". Obviously, they differ in their methods and what they define as primary goal or content of the good life.

From my point of view, as a comparative term, taking different traditions into account and the possible motivation of a seeker and to-come disciple of a philosophical sect, *flourishing* doesn't fit so badly. Conversely, as a word defining the end of eudaimonia in itself as defined by a specific tradition, more substantive content is needed. For Epicureanism this might be defined as "*fullness of pleasure*".

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 28, 2024 at 11:46 AM

[Quote from Titus](#)

I remember that the tenor in the German literature on eudaimonia tends to interpret the term as "living/having achieved the good life"

Suddenly the phrase "La Dolce Vita" pops into my mind, and thinking there might have been an earlier Italian original meaning (not the current "English" meaning of a life of excess luxury).

Here is a fun clip with an Italian guy explaining it:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=2t26yOlzsUc>

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 28, 2024 at 11:58 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

Suddenly the phrase "La Dolce Vita" pops into my mind

But as Epicureans, we have Vatican Saying 81:

"One will not banish emotional disturbance or arrive at significant joy through great wealth, fame, celebrity, or anything else which is a result of vague and indefinite causes."

So the "good life" (the removal of emotional disturbance combined with the addition of significant joy) won't happen by itself (or through vague and indefinite causes) and it requires the implementation of certain actions (causes).

Post by “Godfrey” of March 28, 2024 at 12:06 PM

Eudaimonia features prominently in the ethics of Aristotle, and due to his prominence and resultant influence, each of the Hellenistic schools took it up. So the primary definition may come from him, but as [Titus](#) just mentioned, each of the schools tailored their definition to their own ideas.

Which doesn't help to clarify the meaning other than to say that I agree that it makes sense to examine it from an Epicurean perspective. As [Titus](#) has just pointed out, *the fullness of pleasure* is a good interpretation from that point of view. 👍

Post by “Godfrey” of March 28, 2024 at 1:02 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

each of the schools tailored their definition to their own ideas.

This is probably more accurately worded as:

Each of the schools built on the base that Aristotle had laid, in some cases refining, in others revising and/or correcting. Epicurus was of the refining/correcting persuasion. Authors such as Farrington have to various degrees minimized the work of Epicurus as being built from Aristotle, but this was actually the work of all of the Hellenistic schools. It could even be said that Epicurus was the most original in this regard, as well as being the most true to "the nature of things."

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 30, 2024 at 10:35 AM

Regarding other philosophies in ancient Greece, here is an excerpt from a class description: "CLASSICS 35: The Good Life: An Introduction to Ancient Greek Ethical Philosophy" [Stanford.edu](#)

Quote

The ancient Greeks longed for happiness, but life often led to suffering and anxiety. In ancient Greece, the traditional value system focused on gaining honor, wealth, power, and success - external goods that could be taken away at any time. The Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle set forth ethical theories designed to alleviate suffering and anxiety. They rejected the traditional Greek value system, focusing on inner goodness rather than on external rewards. Developing inner goodness was the only way to live a happy and fulfilled life.

Most importantly, Epicurus restores back into the eudaimonia-well-being-happiness equation the physical world, both in understanding the natural world as arising due to natural causes rather than due to the gods, --and-- in experiencing the pleasure that the natural world easily gives us in day-to-day experiences (food, friends, and sensory experiences which bring enjoyment). Epicurus labels wealth and fame as "unnatural and unnecessary". Also, Epicurus does not narrow down everything to inner goodness, rather he says (in PD5) "living wisely and beautifully and rightly" is for the sake of creating a pleasurable life.