

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

Post by “Don” of December 16, 2025 at 8:08 PM

ADMIN NOTE: This conversation was split off from a thread devoted to discussion of [Lucretius Today Podcast Episode 311](#). The title of the thread was added to indicate the content of the thread and was not originally associated with this first post.

I have to say that the word "happy" does not make me happy in these contexts. The connotations of "happy" in English - effervescent, transitory, fleeting - really don't convey what Epicurus wrote. I also know [Cassius](#) doesn't like using Greek words, and I can respect why. Saying "eudaimonia" doesn't really mean anything to many people. It can also be used to try to obfuscate and to give a woowoo mystical feeling to an otherwise ordinary word, ordinary to Epicurus and the ancient Greeks. Like using nirvana or samsara in a Buddhist context.

It's clunky, but I much prefer something like "subjective well-being."

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2025 at 9:42 PM

Yep, it's a Herculean task to communicate all the subtleties. i'm fairly comfortable with "happy" in the sense of the Declaration of Independence referring to the "pursuit of happiness" as if that word somehow embodies all the attributes of the best life. But you're right that the way it's interpreted today is much more fleeting.

I do think that a large part of the problem is that it probably also implies more than any single feeling, even "subjective well being." When I see how the translators are using that word to express what you're talking about in terms of blessedness, I don't know that any word or term that focuses primarily on any sort of limited experiences is good enough. I'm thinking more in terms of that Sedley article which compares Cyreniac to Epicurean happiness and talks about how the Epicurean view was more of a total evaluation than a temporary feeling. It also implies something that we'd likely consider to be "objective" in the sense that we can all understand and communicate that this is fundamentally the #1 goal of life. Calling it "subjective" is

certainly true in a sense, but it probably implies in English that we are very narrowly saying that we ourselves completely define what it is. Yes we do in a way, but the 'feeling of pleasure' that plays such a large role is given to all of us by nature, and there are "limits and boundaries" within which it operates. If there weren't, we'd never even be able to explain to each other what pleasure means.

In the end maybe I'd equate this to Torquatus saying that Epicurus held "pleasure" to be *the highest good*. We're talking about an evaluation of a full life, and I suppose that's necessarily an abstraction.

Unless and until we can communicate the seriousness and importance of the ultimate goal, how can we hope to begin to connect with the seriousness that comes through in Lucretius' poem and Epicurus' own work.

I think your comment hits hard on one of the big tasks facing us. We speak English and we have to convey accurately in English what the pursuit of Epicurean philosophy -- and of life -- is all about.

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2025 at 9:59 PM

And after responding to Don's very good comment I also want to repeat that I think one of the things Emily Austin points out is the importance of being able to articulate why don't want to die until "our time" arrives. Yes it's because we want "pleasure," but we have to convey the seriousness of what that means.

I'll cite again the understated line in the article I like so much:

Occupying an argumentative space in which one lacks reason to avoid easily and ethically avoidable deaths should, I think, be a last resort.

I think what we're talking about is sort of the same thing in reverse. What we want to identify is an argumentative space in which we clearly identify the positive reasons why we want to live, for motives other than that we are "afraid" of dying. "Fear" is not the primary focus of Epicurean philosophy. it's demoralizing and terrible "optics" to talk as if that were so. I read Lucretius and the other Epicurean texts as upbeat and positive, not as depressed in any way.

We've been robbed of the experience of talking about these things in both a serious and upbeat way, and that's what we have to get back. I doubt there's any way to do that other than to re-establish our own pattern of communicating about these things over and over ourselves.

Whatever the name we give to it, the phrasing has to convey how we can be so even while dying from kidney disease, or even while "on the rack." That's the level of seriousness we're talking about, as Don is correctly saying, its not "giddiness" at all.

Post by "Cassius" of December 16, 2025 at 10:02 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

It's clunky, but I much prefer something like "subjective well-being."

As per the thoughts I've already written, would Epicurus describe his condition on his last day as one of "subjective well-being?" In a way definitely yes, but we're not in a place in the world of 2025 where those two words are adequate, standing alone, to explain all of what needs to be said.

Post by "Don" of December 16, 2025 at 10:26 PM

As far as subjective vs objective, I do think it's up to the individual to assess their sense of well-being with their life. This is why Epicurus can write he could be "happy" with his life on his last day.

But wait...

Let's look quickly at what he wrote, since it is a quote that is often, and rightly, brought up:

22] And when near his end he wrote the following letter to Idomeneus :

"On this *blissful* (μακαρίαν makarian, same word to describe the life of the gods) day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could augment them ; but over against them all I set *gladness of mind* (ψυχὴν χαῖρον, psykhe khairon, joy of the mind/spirit/heart - joy = one of the kinetic pleasures) at the remembrance of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your life-long attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus."

So, he does NOT use happy/eudaimonia here. He uses makarios and khairon, blissfulness and joy. μακάριον is often translated as "blessed, fortunate, wealthy, 'well-off.'" There appears to be

no certain etymology of the root [makar] or the longer form [makarios/on]. It appears to possibly have something to do with "being wealthy," either literally or figuratively.

So he felt blessed, well-off, surrounded by friends and students and his household. He felt joy - a fleeting pleasure - in his mind at his memories. And though he doesn't write it, I would bet that he felt a sense of well-being and satisfaction as to how he had lived his life.

Post by "Cassius" of December 17, 2025 at 4:09 PM

Just working on some other material today and came across this line in book five of Lucretius. I think the underlined part is something I would add to any list of quotations to support the view that life is desirable and that it is pleasure that makes it so:

Quote

[Lucretius 5:170](#)

Did our life lie in darkness and misery until the world's beginning dawned? Although anyone who has been born must wish to remain in life so long as the caresses of pleasure hold him there, if someone has really never tasted the passion for life and has never been an individual, what harm does it do him not to have been created? (L&S-THP)

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

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4870-what-is-happiness-how-does-our-conception-of-it-derive-from-eudaemonia-and-felic/>

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.

Post by “Don” of December 18, 2025 at 10:56 PM

This is intriguing, [Cassius](#) . I was not aware of Sextus' text. This, to my reading, supports an "idealist" concept of the gods: arising from dream images, expanding the idea of the "happy man" to an enlarged state - physical as well as immeasurably happy.

Quote

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).

This is one of the primary reasons I like translating eudaimonia as "well-being" being almost a literal translation with at least a reasonable parallel to a modern understanding of the word. Here's the LSJ entry for daimon:

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, δαίμων](#)

It doesn't stretch my imagination to consider one's daimon as that part of one's mind we might call our "conscience." I could easily see that being personified, the better angels of our nature (to use a more modern phrase). One's daimon - one's conscience - if pushing one to live a moral, noble life is a eu-daimon. Hence, one lives a eudaimonic - a happy - life. If one's daimon - one's conscience - if more aligned with steering one's life in a negative direction - it's a kako-daimon.

I don't think it has to be circular. It's starting out from a human-centric position and expanding the potential of one's daimon to the extreme: blessedness and imperishability. The gods - the super-daimons - live a life of uninterrupted blessedness and uninterrupted imperishability - no backsliding ever ever. It's aspirational but unachievable for a mortal being. We can live as if we are gods but we will still not BE gods. We can have tastes and glimpses of a divine imperishable blessedness but we live in a mortal physical body that will experience pain.

I remain intrigued, but I feel Sextus doth protest too much.

Post by "Cassius" of December 18, 2025 at 11:21 PM

I've always been fascinated by this chicken-or-egg line of reasoning:

[Quote from Lucretius 5:181](#)

Further, how was there first implanted in the gods a pattern for the begetting of things, yea, and the concept of man, so that they might know and see in their mind what they wished to do, or in what way was the power of the first-beginnings ever learnt, or what they could do when they shifted their order one with the other, if nature did not herself

give a model of creation? For so many first-beginnings of things in many ways, driven on by blows from time everlasting until now, and moved by their own weight, have been wont to be borne on, and to unite in every way, and essay everything that they might create, meeting one with another, that it is no wonder if they have fallen also into such arrangements, and have passed into such movements, as those whereby this present sum of things is carried on, ever and again replenished.

I interpret the meaning of this to be that there was never a necessity for gods to have a pattern because the universe and its process have always existed.

As for intelligence and concepts, paraphrasing the deWitt quote Joshua likes to cite, a universe with no design or intention or concepts of its own naturally produced beings who do have concepts and designs and intentions.

Sextus can argue that:

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.

But there's no reason to think that there was ever a "first" example of such a being, given that the universe's processes have been operating eternally. So the issue isn't "unthinkable" as Sextus alleges. In fact it's the contrary. What is unthinkable is that the processes we observe today of biological beings developing over time to produce intelligence and concepts and designs ever had a beginning. These processes are natural and therefore the "conceptions" we are talking about have always existed at innumerable places and times in the past, and will continue to do so eternally into the future.

It's Sextus and the intelligent designers who are starting from an unthinkable premise -- divine creation from nothing.

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.

Post by “Cassius” of December 21, 2025 at 7:16 AM

Also in this thread as to the proper interpretation of words like "happiness" let's not forget another famous example of a Latin word used in similar meaning: *felix*.

Presumably Virgil understood Epicurus very well, so it's interesting that his famous line used *felix* in this context:

[Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas - Wikipedia](#)

Given modern association of felix with "feline" or cats I am not sure that helps much, but "Felicitation" appears to retain much of the same meaning, so it would be interesting to examine the Latin roots.

Post by "Don" of December 21, 2025 at 9:32 AM

It seems Felix would be a good Latin translation of Μακάριος (makarios) "blessed, fortunate"

[Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary, fēlix](#)

Post by "kochiekoch" of December 22, 2025 at 7:21 AM

I did a quick look at the word "felix", was it associated with cats in ancient times? Nope, you can thank silent movie star "Felix the Cat"

[Felix the Cat, Educational Pictures advertisement from 1926 Motion Picture News -84 \(cropped\) - Felix the Cat - Wikipedia](#)

Post by "Cassius" of December 22, 2025 at 8:02 AM

Seems like I recall some variation of felicity being used by Jefferson but I'll have to look further (these two charts are chatgpt):

English Word	Meaning in English	Connection to Latin felix
felicity	intense happiness; a state of blessedness or good fortune	Directly from Latin felicitas ("happiness, good fortune")
felicitous	well-chosen, apt, pleasing; producing happiness	From felicitas via French, meaning "fortunate" or "happy"

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4870-what-is-happiness-how-does-our-conception-of-it-derive-from-eudaemonia-and-felic/>

English Word	Meaning in English	Connection to Latin felix
felicitate	to congratulate; to make happy (archaic)	From Latin felicitare ("to make happy")
felicitation	congratulations; an expression of happiness or good wishes	From felicitationem ("a making happy")
felice	(rare, archaic) happy, fortunate	Direct borrowing from Latin felix
felicific	(philosophy) tending to produce happiness	From felix + -fic ("making happy")
felicific calculus	Bentham's method for measuring happiness (utilitarianism)	Same root

Post by “Cassius” of December 22, 2025 at 8:06 AM

Feline is not related to Latin felix ("happy, fortunate, blessed").

It comes from a completely different Latin word: *fēlēs* (genitive: *fēlis*), which means "cat" or "wildcat." Etymology Comparison

Word	Latin Root	Meaning of Root	English Descendants
feline	<i>fēlēs</i> / <i>fēlis</i>	"cat"	feline, felid, felinity, feliform, etc.
felicity etc.	<i>felix</i> (stem <i>felic-</i>)	"happy, fortunate, blessed"	felicity, felicitous, felicitate, etc.

Key Points

- The similarity in spelling (*feli-* vs *feli-*) is purely coincidental — a case of false cognate or folk etymology.
- *Fēlēs* (cat) is an ancient Latin word with no known connection to happiness or blessing. Its origins are uncertain, possibly onomatopoeic or from an Indo-European root related to "wild animal."
- *Felix* (happy) is thought to derive from an earlier root meaning "fertile" or "productive" (related to *fēcundus* "fertile" and *fēcundus* "fruitful"), which aligns with ideas of good fortune or blessing.

Post by “Cassius” of December 22, 2025 at 8:09 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4870-what-is-happiness-how-does-our-conception-of-it-derive-from-eudaemonia-and-felic/>

From Jefferson's outline of Epicurus in [1819 letter to William Short](#), referencing both happiness and felicity:

Syllabus of the doctrines of Epicurus

Physical The Universe eternal.

Its parts, great and small, interchangeable

Matter and Void alone.

Motion inherent in matter, which is weighty & declining
eternal circulation of the elements of bodies.

Gods, an order of beings next superior to man.

enjoying in their sphere their own felicities,
but not meddling with the concerns of the scale of beings below
them

Moral Happiness the aim of life

Virtue the foundation of happiness

Utility the test of virtue.

Pleasure active and in-dolent.

In-dolence is the absence of pain, the true felicity

Active, consists in agreeable motion

it is not happiness, but the means to produce it.

thus the absence of hunger is an article of felicity; eating the
means to produce it.

The summum bonum is to be not pained in body, nor troubled in mind

i.e. In-dolence of body, tranquility of mind.

to procure tranquility of mind we must avoid desire & fear, the
two

principal diseases of the mind.

Man is a free agent.

Virtue consists in: 1. Prudence 2. Temperance 3. Fortitude 4. Justice

to which are opposed: 1. Folly 2. Desire 3. Fear 4. Deceit

Post by “Cassius” of December 22, 2025 at 8:19 AM

From Lucretius, Bailey translations:

Book 1 after 80:

sed casta inceste nubendi tempore
in ipso hostia consideret mactatu
maesta parentis, exitus ut classi
felix faustusque daretur. tantum
religio potuit suadere malorum.

but in the very moment of marriage, a pure
victim she might foully fall, sorrowing beneath
a father's slaughtering stroke, that a happy
and hallowed starting might be granted to the
fleet. Such evil deeds could religion prompt.

Book 5-1194

O genus infelix humanum, talia
divis
cum tribuit facta atque iras adiunxit
acerbas!

Ah! unhappy race of men, when it has
assigned such acts to the gods and joined
therewith bitter anger!

Post by "Cassius" of December 22, 2025 at 8:28 AM

I'm always stuck in the past with my word associations:



<https://www.getyarn.io/yarn-clip/28a7f1e9-a647-42e6-8a48-a70269be58db>

Post by "Cassius" of December 22, 2025 at 7:22 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4870-what-is-happiness-how-does-our-conception-of-it-derive-from-eudaemonia-and-felic/>

For those who might be interested in a starting point to research the evolution of the concepts from eudaemonia to felicitas to "happiness," I have asked Claude to summarize the major points and produce a bibliography of references to check. Take this for what it is worth - as a starting point only. Writing up a study of this would make a great project for anyone who had the time and inclination to do so.

I'll add to this that while it is certainly a first step to determine what is meant by the word eudaemonia/felicitas/happiness, I personally think it is almost and even more urgently a question as to whether we SHOULD PURSUE eudaemonia/felicitas/happiness as our central goal, or whether we should be pursuing PIETY (religion) or RATIONALITY (logic or something like it). Neither of those are particularly easy to define either, but we have to live NOW, and we therefore we're making a choice every minute of our lives whether we admit it or not. We can't and don't postpone making a commitment until we've read 50 books and obtained our doctorates in philosophy or religion.

In other words we can't wait forever debating "what does happiness mean." We have to decide NOW whether our goal is happiness, or obeying the gods, or being "rational," or being a "good person," or whatever. So I think it's a mistake to think that we have to know all there is to know about the etymology of happiness before we decide how to organize our lives.

Display Spoiler

The Evolution of "Happiness" as the Goal of Life: From Eudaimonia and Felicitas to Modern Conceptions

Introduction

The concept of happiness as the ultimate goal of human life has undergone a profound transformation over more than two millennia. What ancient Greeks understood as *eudaimonia* and Romans as *felicitas* differs markedly from our contemporary notion of "happiness." This essay traces the etymological, philosophical, and cultural evolution of this central concept, demonstrating how a term once rooted in divine favor and good fortune has transformed into a psychological state and, in modern times, an expected entitlement.

I. Ancient Greek *Eudaimonia*: Flourishing Through Virtue

Etymological Foundations

The Greek term *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία) derives from two components: *eu* (εὖ), meaning "good" or "well," and *daimōn* (δαίμων), meaning "spirit" or "deity." The composite literally suggests "having a good spirit" or being favored by benevolent divine forces. This etymology

reveals the ancient understanding that happiness was not merely a subjective emotional state but rather an objective condition of living well—a state of being watched over by favorable spiritual forces.

The *daimōn* in ancient Greek thought represented a guiding spirit or one's personal divine guardian. Thus, *eudaimonia* etymologically implies living in accordance with one's true nature or divine purpose, a conception far removed from modern notions of subjective pleasure or contentment.

Aristotelian Philosophy: Happiness as Virtuous Activity

Aristotle's treatment of *eudaimonia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* represents the most influential ancient philosophical account. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is not a feeling or temporary state of mind but rather "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue." It is both the highest human good and the ultimate end (*telos*) of human action—the only thing desired for its own sake rather than as a means to something else.

Critically, Aristotle distinguished *eudaimonia* from *hedone* (ἡδονή, pleasure). While pleasure might accompany virtuous activity, *eudaimonia* consists fundamentally in the excellent performance of characteristically human functions—particularly the exercise of reason in accordance with moral and intellectual virtues. This requires:

1. **Virtue of character** (*ēthikē aretē* 😞 moral excellences such as courage, temperance, and justice
2. **Intellectual virtues** (*dianoetic virtues* 😞 wisdom, understanding, and practical judgment
3. **External goods**: sufficient material resources and favorable circumstances
4. **Time**: a complete life, not momentary experiences

Aristotle emphasized that *eudaimonia* is an achievement requiring sustained effort throughout a complete lifetime. As he memorably stated, "one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy."

The Objectivity of Eudaimonia

A crucial feature distinguishing *eudaimonia* from modern "happiness" is its objective character. Aristotle held that one could possess *eudaimonia* without knowing it, and conversely, one could feel subjectively happy while lacking *eudaimonia*. For example, a person might feel content while their children secretly harbor malicious intentions toward them—such a person would experience subjective pleasure but lack genuine *eudaimonia*, which requires objectively good relationships.

This objectivity extended to Aristotle's conviction that only those capable of philosophical contemplation (*theoria*)—the highest expression of human rationality—could achieve the fullest *eudaimonia*. The contemplative life represented the most godlike human activity and thus the supreme form of flourishing.

Other Greek Perspectives

While Aristotle's eudaimonism became canonical, other Greek schools offered distinct interpretations:

- **Stoics** (Zeno, Epictetus, Seneca): Virtue alone is sufficient for *eudaimonia*; external circumstances are irrelevant to true happiness. The sage could be "sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, dying and yet happy."
- **Epicureans** (Epicurus): *Eudaimonia* consists in pleasure (*hedone*), but understood as tranquility (*ataraxia*) and freedom from bodily pain (*aponia*) rather than sensory indulgence. This represented a more hedonic conception while maintaining that virtue remains essential to achieving lasting pleasure.
- **Cynics** (Diogenes): Emphasized radical self-sufficiency, arguing that virtue and freedom from conventional desires constitute happiness, rejecting external goods entirely.

II. Roman *Felicitas*: Fortune, Fertility, and Public Prosperity

Etymological Roots

The Latin *felicitas* derives from *felix*, meaning "fruitful," "fertile," "fortunate," or "happy." The root connects to concepts of productivity and divine favor, originally associated with agricultural abundance and successful outcomes. The Romans personified *Felicitas* as a goddess representing good fortune, prosperity, and fertility.

Distinctive Features of Roman *Felicitas*

While *felicitas* served as the Latin translation of Greek *eudaimonia*, it carried distinctive Roman connotations:

1. **Civic dimension:** *Felicitas* often referred to public happiness and collective prosperity (*felicitas publica*) rather than purely individual flourishing. Roman happiness was inseparable from the welfare of the *res publica*.
2. **Material prosperity:** More than Greek *eudaimonia*, *felicitas* emphasized tangible success, wealth, and worldly achievement as signs of divine favor.

3. **Fortune and chance:** While *eudaimonia* stressed rational virtue, *felicitas* maintained stronger associations with luck (*fortuna*) and circumstances beyond human control.
4. **Divine favor:** Success in military campaigns, political office, and civic life demonstrated that the gods smiled upon Rome and its leaders.

The goddess *Fortuna* complemented *Felicitas*, governing chance and fate. The Romans recognized that while virtue mattered, external fortune significantly influenced human happiness—a more pragmatic perspective than Stoic or Platonic idealism.

Christian Transformation: Beatitudo

With Christianity's rise, Latin transformed Greek *makarios* (μακάριος, "blessed") into *beatitudo*. This concept, particularly in Augustine's and Aquinas's theology, relocated perfect happiness from earthly life to the afterlife vision of God (*visio Dei*).

Thomas Aquinas distinguished:

- *Felicitas*: imperfect, earthly happiness dependent on bodily existence
- *Beatitudo*: perfect, eternal happiness consisting in the beatific vision of God's essence

This theological development profoundly altered Western conceptions of happiness, subordinating worldly flourishing to otherworldly salvation.

III. The English "Happiness": From Fortune to Feeling

Etymology of "Happiness"

The English word "happiness" reveals a strikingly different origin from its Greek and Latin predecessors. It derives from the Middle English *hap*, meaning "chance," "luck," or "fortune," borrowed from Old Norse *happ* with identical meanings. The Proto-Germanic root **hampą* and ultimately Proto-Indo-European **kob-* meant "to suit, fit, succeed"—emphasizing fortunate circumstances rather than inner virtue.

This etymology is shared across Indo-European languages:

- Old French *heur* (giving modern *bonheur*, "good fortune")
- German *Glück* (still meaning both "happiness" and "luck")
- Icelandic *heppinn* ("lucky, fortunate, happy")

The suffix *-y* simply means "characterized by," so "happy" originally meant "characterized by good hap/luck"—essentially "lucky" or "fortunate." The noun "happiness" thus meant "good fortune" or "favorable circumstances."

Semantic Shift: From Luck to Subjective State

The evolution of "happiness" in English demonstrates a remarkable semantic transformation:

1. **Late 14th century:** "Lucky, favored by fortune, being in advantageous circumstances, prosperous"
2. **Late 14th century:** "Very glad" (subjective feeling emerging)
3. **1520s:** "Greatly pleased and content" (psychological state dominant)

This shift from objective external circumstances (being lucky) to subjective internal experiences (feeling pleased) represents a fundamental reconceptualization. By the early modern period, "happiness" increasingly denoted a mental state of pleasure, contentment, and satisfaction—a meaning quite distinct from Aristotelian virtue-based flourishing or Roman prosperity and divine favor.

The Enlightenment Revolution

The 17th and 18th centuries witnessed a dramatic transformation in happiness discourse. Several developments proved crucial:

1. **Secularization:** Happiness migrated from theological frameworks to philosophical and political discourse, becoming an earthly rather than heavenly goal.
2. **Individualization:** The locus shifted from communal or civic happiness to individual psychological well-being and personal fulfillment.
3. **Rights discourse:** Perhaps most revolutionary, the American Declaration of Independence (1776) proclaimed "the pursuit of Happiness" as an inalienable right. This marked a watershed: happiness transformed from divine gift or virtuous achievement into a human entitlement.
4. **Utilitarian calculus:** Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism mathematized happiness as pleasure maximization, proposing "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" as the foundation of morality and legislation. This "felicific calculus" reduced happiness to quantifiable pleasure units—a far cry from Aristotelian contemplative virtue.
5. **Psychological turn:** Enlightenment thinkers increasingly understood happiness as subjective experience rather than objective flourishing. David Hume, John Locke, and their contemporaries located happiness in feelings, sensations, and mental states.

IV. The Conceptual Divergence

Five Key Differences Between Ancient and Modern Concepts

1. Objectivity vs. Subjectivity

- *Eudaimonia*: Objective condition of living well, assessable by external observers
- *Happiness*: Subjective feeling known only to the experiencer

2. Duration and Scope

- *Eudaimonia*: Requires a complete lifetime; cannot be judged from momentary states
- *Happiness*: Can fluctuate moment-to-moment; often measured as current mood

3. Activity vs. State

- *Eudaimonia*: Active engagement in virtuous living; a way of being
- *Happiness*: Often conceived as a passive state or feeling to be obtained

4. Virtue Requirement

- *Eudaimonia*: Necessarily involves moral and intellectual excellence
- *Happiness*: Can be achieved through any means producing pleasant feelings

5. Divine vs. Human Agency

- Ancient concepts: Retained connection to divine favor, fate, or cosmic order
- Modern happiness: Primarily human achievement through choice and circumstance

The Loss and Gain

The transformation from *eudaimonia* to "happiness" involves both losses and gains:

Losses:

- Connection to virtue and moral excellence
- Objective standards for assessing good lives
- Integration of reason, character, and community
- Recognition of life's tragic dimensions and necessary sufferings

Gains:

- Democratic accessibility (everyone can pursue happiness, not just philosophers)
- Subjective authenticity (individuals define their own happiness)
- Psychological realism (acknowledgment of feelings and mental states)
- Liberation from rigid virtue hierarchies

V. Contemporary Developments: The Return to Eudaimonia

Positive Psychology and Well-being Research

Ironically, late 20th and early 21st-century psychology has witnessed a partial return to eudaimonic concepts:

1. Hedonic vs. Eudaimonic Well-being: Researchers distinguish:

- *Hedonic well-being*: Pleasure, satisfaction, positive affect (closer to modern "happiness")
- *Eudaimonic well-being*: Meaning, purpose, self-realization, virtue (closer to ancient *eudaimonia*)

2. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan): Proposes that genuine well-being comes from fulfilling psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—echoing Aristotelian emphasis on self-actualization.

3. Meaning and Purpose: Viktor Frankl, Martin Seligman, and contemporary positive psychologists argue that meaningful engagement, not mere pleasure, produces lasting well-being.

4. Virtue Ethics Revival: Philosophers like Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Alasdair MacIntyre have revived Aristotelian virtue ethics, challenging modern utilitarian and deontological frameworks.

Critiques of Happiness Pursuit

Darrin McMahon and other scholars have noted concerning trends:

- **Happiness imperative:** The obligation to be happy can itself produce anxiety and dissatisfaction
- **Hedonic treadmill:** Adaptation to circumstances means pleasure-seeking rarely produces lasting contentment
- **Authenticity concerns:** Pharmacological or technological happiness-enhancement raises questions about genuine flourishing
- **Dystopian possibilities:** Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* warns of societies achieving universal happiness while losing humanity's higher capacities

VI. Conclusion: Multiple Meanings, Persistent Questions

The evolution from *eudaimonia* and *felicitas* to modern "happiness" reveals not merely etymological change but profound shifts in Western civilization's understanding of human nature, society, and the good life. Where ancient Greeks and Romans saw happiness as objective flourishing through virtue, divine favor, and public prosperity, modernity has

emphasized subjective psychological states, individual choice, and personal fulfillment.

The word "happiness" itself, rooted in "hap" (chance/luck), betrays this transformation. Once denoting fortunate circumstances and external conditions, it now primarily signifies internal feelings and mental states. This shift reflects broader movements: secularization, individualism, democratization, and psychological introspection.

Yet the contemporary revival of eudaimonic concepts in psychology and philosophy suggests dissatisfaction with purely hedonic or subjective accounts. We seem to recognize, as the ancients did, that genuine human flourishing requires more than pleasant feelings—it demands meaning, virtue, relationships, and engagement with purposes beyond ourselves.

Perhaps the deepest lesson from this history is that "happiness" contains irreducible complexity. It encompasses both feeling and flourishing, pleasure and purpose, subjective experience and objective achievement. The challenge for contemporary individuals and societies is integrating these dimensions: honoring subjective well-being while recognizing that lasting fulfillment comes from virtuous action, meaningful relationships, and contributions to communal good—insights the ancients understood profoundly and that modern happiness research gradually rediscovers.

The pursuit of happiness, far from being a simple or settled matter, remains what it has always been: the central question of how to live a human life well.

Academic Bibliography: The Evolution of Happiness from Eudaimonia to Modern Conceptions

Key Scholarly Books

1. McMahon, Darrin M. (2006). *Happiness: A History*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Description: The definitive historical account tracing happiness from ancient Greece through the Enlightenment to contemporary times. McMahon demonstrates how happiness evolved from divine gift to natural human entitlement, examining philosophical, theological, and political dimensions across two millennia. **Key contributions:**

- Comprehensive historical narrative of happiness concepts
- Analysis of the Enlightenment transformation

- Examination of modern happiness obsession **Available:** Major university libraries, Amazon, Google Books

2. Russell, Daniel C. (2012). *Happiness for Humans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Description: Contemporary philosophical examination of how classical Stoic and Aristotelian eudaimonism applies to modern life. Russell argues that happiness is fundamentally about having a life of meaningful activity. **Key contributions:**

- Bridges ancient and modern conceptions
- Practical applications of eudaimonic theory **Available:** Oxford University Press, academic libraries

3. Hall, Edith (2018). *Aristotle's Way: How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life*. London: Penguin.

Description: Accessible treatment of Aristotelian ethics and eudaimonia for contemporary readers, arguing that ancient philosophical insights remain relevant to modern happiness. **Key contributions:**

- Public philosophy approach to eudaimonia
- Practical applications of Aristotelian virtue ethics **Available:** Major booksellers, public libraries

4. Vittersø, Joar (Ed.) (2016). *Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being*. New York: Springer.

Description: Comprehensive academic compilation of theory and empirical research on eudaimonic well-being from psychological, philosophical, and historical perspectives. **Key contributions:**

- State-of-the-art psychological research
- Integration of philosophical and empirical approaches
- Critical examination of well-being concepts **Available:** Springer, academic libraries, institutional access

Journal Articles and Academic Papers

Ancient Philosophy and Eudaimonia

5. Gåvertsson, Frits. "Eudaimonism: A Brief Conceptual History"

- **Source:** Lund University Department of Philosophy
- **URL:** https://www.fil.lu.se/media/utbildni...ual_history.pdf
- **Description:** Detailed conceptual analysis of eudaimonia's evolution from pre-philosophical Greek thought through Hellenistic philosophy, examining semantic shifts and philosophical developments.
- **Key points:** Etymology of eudaimonia, relationship to divine favor, development through different philosophical schools

6. de Heer, Cornelius (1969). *Makar, Eudaimon, Olbios, Eutychia: A Study of the Semantic Field Denoting Happiness in Ancient Greek to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.* Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert.

- **Description:** Comprehensive linguistic analysis of Greek happiness terminology, examining how different terms related to well-being evolved in classical Greek literature.
- **Key points:** Semantic field analysis, historical linguistics, classical Greek conceptions

7. Kraut, Richard (2018). "Aristotle's Ethics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

- **URL:** <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/>
- **Description:** Authoritative philosophical analysis of Aristotle's ethical theory, including detailed treatment of eudaimonia, virtue, and practical wisdom.
- **Key points:** Scholarly standard reference on Aristotelian ethics

Roman Felicitas and Classical Transitions

8. Champeaux, Jacqueline (1982-1987). *Fortuna: Recherches sur le culte de la Fortune à Rome et dans le monde romain.* 2 vols. Rome: École Française de Rome.

- **Description:** Comprehensive study of the Roman goddess Fortuna and concepts of fortune, fate, and happiness in Roman culture.
- **Key points:** Religious and cultural dimensions of Roman happiness concepts
- **Note:** French language, specialized academic work

9. Personifications of Eudaimonia, Felicitas and Fortuna in Greek and Roman Art

- **Authors:** Various (conference volume)
- **Source:** *Symbolae Osloenses*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (2011)
- **URL:** <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.10...679.2011.631365>
- **Description:** Art historical analysis of how happiness concepts were visualized and personified in classical art, comparing Greek and Roman approaches.

- **Key points:** Visual culture, personification of abstract concepts, iconography of happiness

Medieval and Christian Transformations

10. Lee, Jong Hyun (2017). "Christianity and Happiness"

- **Source:** ERIC Educational Resources
- **URL:** <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED607132.pdf>
- **Description:** Examines how Christian theology transformed classical happiness concepts into beatitudo and eternal blessedness, analyzing theological developments from Augustine through Aquinas.
- **Key points:** Theological happiness, beatitudo vs. felicitas, Christian virtue ethics

Modern Transformations and Etymology

11. McMahon, Darrin M. (2004). "From the Happiness of Virtue to the Virtue of Happiness: 400 B.C.-A.D. 1780." *Daedalus*, 133(2), 5-17.

- **Description:** Concise article version of McMahon's historical argument, tracing the transformation from classical virtue-based happiness to Enlightenment rights-based happiness.
- **Key points:** Historical turning points, Enlightenment revolution, secularization of happiness

12. D'Onofrio, Francesco (2015). "On the Concept of 'Felicitas Publica' in Eighteenth-Century Political Economy." *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 27, 449-471.

- **Description:** Analysis of public happiness concepts in Enlightenment economic thought, showing connections between classical felicitas and modern political economy.
- **Key points:** Public happiness, political economy, eighteenth-century thought

Contemporary Psychology and Well-Being Research

13. Deci, Edward L. & Ryan, Richard M. (2001). "On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 141-166.

- **Description:** Foundational paper distinguishing hedonic (pleasure-based) from eudaimonic (meaning-based) well-being in contemporary psychology.
- **Key points:** Self-determination theory, psychological needs, well-being types
- **Impact:** Highly influential in positive psychology

14. Huta, Veronika & Waterman, Alan S. (2014). "Eudaimonia and Its Distinction from Hedonia: Developing a Classification and Terminology for Understanding Conceptual and Operational Definitions." *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 15, 1425-1456.

- **Description:** Systematic analysis of how researchers define and measure eudaimonic vs. hedonic well-being, proposing clearer terminology.
- **Key points:** Conceptual clarity, measurement issues, research methodology

15. Kashdan, Todd B., Biswas-Diener, Robert, & King, Laura A. (2008). "Reconsidering Happiness: The Costs of Distinguishing Between Hedonics and Eudaimonia." *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(4), 219-233.

- **Description:** Critical examination of the hedonic/eudaimonic distinction, arguing for integration rather than sharp separation.
- **Key points:** Conceptual integration, measurement validity

Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives

16. Annas, Julia (1993). *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- **Description:** Major philosophical work arguing for the contemporary relevance of ancient eudaimonist ethics, defending happiness as the proper framework for moral philosophy.
- **Key points:** Virtue ethics, eudaimonist moral theory, ancient philosophy relevance

17. Heintzelman, Samantha J. (2018). "Eudaimonia in the Contemporary Science of Subjective Well-Being: Psychological Well-Being, Self-Determination, and Meaning in Life." In E. Diener, S. Oishi, & L. Tay (Eds.), *Handbook of Well-Being*. Salt Lake City, UT: DEF Publishers.

- **Description:** Contemporary synthesis of eudaimonic concepts in well-being science, integrating psychological research with philosophical foundations.
- **Key points:** Contemporary research, conceptual synthesis

Comparative and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

18. Lomas, Tim (2021). "A Global History of Happiness." *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 11(3), 68-87.

- **URL:** <https://internationaljournalofwellbeing.org/index.php/ijow.../1457/1047/7409>
- **Description:** Cross-cultural and historical survey of happiness concepts from Greek eudaimonia through Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and Taoist traditions to contemporary secular approaches.
- **Key points:** Comparative philosophy, global perspectives, cultural diversity

19. Lauriola, Rosanna (2006). "From Eudaimonia to Happiness: Overview of the Concept of Happiness in the Ancient Greek Culture with a Few Glimpses on Modern Time." *Revista Espaço Acadêmico*, No. 59.

- **Description:** Accessible overview connecting ancient Greek happiness concepts to contemporary issues, examining cultural and philosophical continuities.
- **Key points:** Cultural analysis, contemporary relevance

Specialized Studies

20. Bruni, Luigino & Porta, Pier Luigi (Eds.) (2005). *Economics and Happiness: Framing the Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- **Description:** Interdisciplinary examination of happiness in economic thought, including historical analysis of felicitas publica and modern happiness economics.
- **Key points:** Economic history, public happiness, wellbeing economics

21. Bruni, Luigino & Sugden, Robert (2007). "The Road Not Taken: How Psychology Was Removed from Economics, and How It Might Be Brought Back." *The Economic Journal*, 117, 146-173.

- **Description:** Historical analysis of how happiness and well-being were marginalized in modern economics, with implications for contemporary policy.
- **Key points:** History of economics, well-being economics

Philosophy Encyclopedias and Reference Works

22. "Eudaimonia." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

- **URL:** <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/> (under Aristotle's Ethics)
- **Description:** Authoritative philosophical encyclopedia entry on eudaimonia with comprehensive bibliography.

23. "Happiness." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

- **URL:** <https://iep.utm.edu/>
- **Description:** Accessible philosophical overview of happiness across traditions.

24. "Philosophy of Happiness." *Wikipedia* (for general orientation, not academic citation)

- **URL:** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_of_happiness
- **Description:** Useful starting point with overview and references to primary sources.

Collections and Edited Volumes

25. Rabbås, Øyvind, Emilsson, Eyjólfur K., Fossheim, Hallvard, & Tuominen, Miira (Eds.) (2015). *The Quest for the Good Life: Ancient Philosophers on Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- **Description:** Collection of scholarly essays on happiness in ancient philosophy, covering Plato, Aristotle, Hellenistic schools, and late antiquity.
- **Key points:** Comprehensive coverage of ancient perspectives, specialized scholarly analysis
- **Review:** <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-qu...s-on-happiness/>

26. Glatzer, Wolfgang, Camfield, Laura, Møller, Valerie, & Rojas, Mariano (Eds.) (2015). *Global Handbook of Quality of Life: Exploration of Well-Being of Nations and Continents*. New York: Springer.

- **Description:** International perspectives on well-being and happiness across cultures and nations.
- **Key points:** Cross-cultural research, contemporary global perspectives

Historical Linguistics and Etymology

27. Online Etymology Dictionary entries:

- **"Happiness":** <https://www.etymonline.com/word/happiness>
- **"Happy":** <https://www.etymonline.com/word/happy>
- **"Hap":** <https://www.etymonline.com/word/hap>
- **"Felicity":** <https://www.etymonline.com/word/felicity>
- **Description:** Reliable etymological information on English happiness terminology with historical attestations.

28. Oxford English Dictionary (OED) entries (subscription required):

- **"Happiness":** Historical usage and semantic development
- **Description:** Most authoritative source for English word history

Online Resources and Open Access Materials

29. Positive Psychology Resources

- **URL:** <https://positivepsychology.com/eudaimonia/>
- **Description:** Accessible introduction to eudaimonia in contemporary positive psychology with research summaries and practical applications.

30. ERIC Education Resources Database

- **URL:** <https://eric.ed.gov/>
- **Description:** Searchable database of educational and psychological research papers, many open access.

Research Suggestions for Further Investigation

Primary Sources (Ancient Texts)

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (multiple translations available)
- Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*
- Plato, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Gorgias*
- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*, [Principal Doctrines](#)
- Seneca, *De Vita Beata* (On the Happy Life)
- Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (On the Ends of Good and Evil)
- Augustine, *Confessions*, *City of God*
- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (especially on beatitudo)

Historical Turning Points

- Enlightenment happiness discourse (Locke, Hume, Bentham, Mill)
- American Declaration of Independence (1776) and "pursuit of Happiness"
- Romantic critiques of Enlightenment happiness
- 20th century critiques (Huxley's *Brave New World*, Frankfurt School)

Contemporary Debates

- Happiness economics (Easterlin paradox)
- Positive psychology movement
- Virtue ethics revival
- Mindfulness and Buddhist influences on Western happiness concepts
- Neuroscience of happiness
- Public policy and well-being metrics (beyond GDP)

How to Access These Resources

1. **University Libraries:** Most academic papers available through institutional access to databases like JSTOR, Project MUSE, SpringerLink, EBSCO

2. **Google Scholar**: Free search engine for academic literature; many papers available as PDFs
3. **Academia.edu and ResearchGate**: Academic social networks where researchers share papers
4. **Open Access Journals**: Many contemporary papers freely available
5. **Interlibrary Loan**: Can request papers not available at your institution

Note on Citations

This bibliography includes:

- Foundational historical works
- Contemporary empirical research
- Philosophical analyses
- Linguistic and etymological sources
- Cross-cultural perspectives
- Both accessible introductions and specialized scholarship

For a comprehensive research project, prioritize:

1. McMahon's *Happiness: A History* (essential overview)
2. Gåvertsson's conceptual history (detailed ancient analysis)
3. Deci & Ryan on hedonic vs. eudaimonic well-being (contemporary psychology)
4. Primary sources (Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* especially)
5. Recent edited volumes for current scholarly debates

Post by “Patrikios” of January 9, 2026 at 6:33 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In other words we can't wait forever debating "**what does happiness mean.**" We have to decide NOW whether our goal is happiness, or obeying the gods, or being "rational," or being a "good person," or whatever. So I think it's a mistake to think that we have to know all there is to know about the etymology of happiness before we decide how to organize our lives.

[Cassius](#) ,

Thanks for the Claude (AI) bibliography, which I am finding most thorough and helpful. To answer your key question, "**what is happiness**", I agree that we cannot afford to wait for perfect clarity before we must act to implement Epicurean principles.

We face choices every moment, every day; so I don't find this question as merely academic. We must choose whether to organize our lives around the pursuit of happiness, or around obedience to divine will, or around abstract rationality, or around virtue as an end in itself?

If I understand correctly, Epicurus gave a clear principle: *examine your desires, distinguish the necessary from the unnecessary, and pursue what genuinely produces peace of mind and freedom from pain*. This is a guide for healthy living now.

The real question becomes: **will we trust the guidance nature has given us, or will we defer to external authorities?** As I develop trust in nature's guidance, the path forward becomes clearer. And I find the guidance from studying the Epicurean principles, provides examples and advice on how to focus honest attention on what produces genuine tranquility in our lives and what disturbs it. This seems to be a good path for pursuing a life of well-being.