



CLASSICAL WISDOM WEEKLY

# HOW TO BE HAPPY

A GUIDE THROUGH ANCIENT  
ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY



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## A GUIDE THROUGH ANCIENT ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

What is the meaning of life? How should I be living? What will make me happy? Am I philosophical because I drink cocktails? Or do I drink cocktails because I am philosophical?

I find that many people venture out into the field of philosophy in search of answers for these grand and profound questions. These are the types of questions we often muse to ourselves late at night while sitting on a bar stool, doodling on cocktail napkins.

While philosophy attempts to shed light on these very pressing concerns, many philosophy students often hit a wall when they first enter the discipline. Rather than rolling up their sleeves and diving into the meaning of life, students often spend years deciphering the nitpicky aspects of philosophy.

No, you can't learn about Aristotle's theory on true happiness until you tell us if the following syllogism is plausible, implausible, sound, valid, or simply bat-shit crazy.

Um...what?

You, however, are in luck. I won't be quizzing you on anything, and you certainly don't have to study for years at a university to get a glimpse at what philosophy has to say about the meaning of life.

Our mission here is to consider how to live a happy life. Most people believe that they are happy simply because they feel happy, and perhaps it is that simple; perhaps it is not. Philosophy questions appearances and seeks truth. Therefore, we must consider the truest form of happiness and, more importantly, we must find a way to attain it.

Consider this your guide through the perplexing realm of ancient moral philosophy. We will explore the ideas of some of the most prominent ancient intellectuals of western culture. Cutting through centuries of discourse, we will arrive at the heart of their philosophical ideas on morality, happiness, and a life well lived.

We have a lot to get to, so let's get started.

Very Sincerely,



**Van Bryan**

Associate Editor

Classical Wisdom Weekly



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CHAPTER 1:

# GETTING WHAT YOU WANT

*Ethical Egoism tells us to take what we want, whenever we want it.*

*"I fancy there will arise a man of ability who will fling off all these restraints and burst them asunder and make his escape; and trampling under foot all our written enactments and juggleries and all spells and laws, clean against nature every one of them, our would-be slave rises up against us and shows himself as our master, and then natural justice shines forth in its true light."*

-Callicles (Plato's "The Gorgias")





There are a few advantages that we have going for us when we study moral philosophy. The first is that moral philosophy (also known as ethical philosophy) is immediately applicable to your life. The second is that many of the suppositions seem to be rather easy to confirm.

For instance, Aristotle tells us that everything has a “final cause.” This is the one definitive end or goal at which an entity might strive towards. This seems agreeable and when we apply this concept to the question of our lives, we inevitably start wondering, “What’s the purpose of my life?”

Our first philosophers answer this question rather plainly: the final goal of a human life is to possess whatever we may desire. The manner in which we should attain this is through an exertion of will, with no regard for others.

Boom! Lesson over.

You now possess all the wisdom you will ever need in order to live a productive, happy life. However, just in case you are not entirely convinced, we will explore just a bit further.

This idea of getting whatever you want was supported by the Sophists of Ancient Greece. The wandering lecturers of the ancient world, the Sophists are known for their adherence to a subjective ethical code where notions such as “right” and “wrong” are considered to be arbitrary creations of a weak willed society. This moral philosophy is most apparent in Plato’s *The Gorgias*, where the sophist, Callicles, makes a case for what he refers to as “natural justice.”

While societal laws may differ from polis to polis, sometimes dramatically, natural justice remains something of an ethical default. Unlike the conventional ideas of justice that are supported by other philosophers like Socrates, natural justice favors the bold and the strong. It gives no consideration for the weak or the inferior and marginalizes those who do not possess the skills or the fortitude to succeed or even survive.



*“Unlike the conventional ideas of justice that are supported by other philosophers like Socrates, natural justice favors the bold and the strong.”*



Natural justice tells us that we ought to take whatever we want, so long as we have the abilities and the strength of will to take it. Once we have exerted our will and soared to lofty heights, we will live happily and fulfilled.

***"Mold the best and the most powerful among us ... and with charms and incantations we subdue them into slavery, telling them that one is supposed to get no more than his fair share." -Callicles (Plato's "The Gorgias")***

There is some simplicity to this thought, and in turn, there is a bit of appeal as well. Could it be that the good life consists of getting what you want no matter the opinion of others? It seems plausible, but there are a few problems that arise.






## OBJECTIONS TO ETHICAL EGOISM:


Within the course of Plato's dialogue, the philosopher, Socrates, proposes a hypothetical man whose sole ambition in life is to constantly scratch himself in public and who does so regardless of the opinions of others. If we are to follow Callicles' general idea of ethical egoism, then it can be said that this man, by virtue of constantly scratching himself, is living the best life and should be admired.

Callicles is insulted by such a proposition. When the sophist spoke of men fulfilling their desires, he was obviously referring to great emperors and conquerors, the warriors and generals of legend. Although the scratching man does fit the outline for Callicles' philosophy of getting whatever you want, Callicles seems to find the man not worthy of admiration and dismisses the entire argument.

However, to answer in such a way is to make an important concession. It would seem that achieving your desires is not the only criterion for a meaningful life. The sophist's view of ethical egoism begins to deflate when scrutinized by the father of Western Philosophy.



*"The drunkard does not have all that the king has, but should that matter if he doesn't want it?"*



This is rather important for our purposes of examining the question, "how should I live?" If we were to imagine a drunkard whose sole ambition in life was to get drunk and lie about the city gutters, could we say that this man is living well when compared to a prosperous king? The drunkard does not have all that the king has, but should that matter if he doesn't want it?

An interesting idea, but ultimately, we must concede that ethical egoism does not really support the notion of "getting whatever you want" as an answer to the question "how should I live my life?" Instead, what is really suggested by Callicles and ethical egoists is that we should get whatever we want, so long as what we want is admirable and good.

Therefore, getting whatever you want is not a satisfactory answer to our troubling questions concerning a life well lived. The value of a life can be determined by the types of things attained within that life.

So we must ask, what sort of things should a good life possess?



CHAPTER 2:

# A LIFE IN PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

*Cyrenaic Hedonism tells us life is a party, drink up!*

*"If it were wrong to be extravagant, it would not be in vogue at the festivals of the gods."*

-Aristippus (Diogenes Laertius' Lives of Eminent Philosophers)





We have seen through an examination of ethical egoism that some philosophers believed that the best life could be found by getting whatever we want, so long as whatever we want is admirable or good. That then leaves us with a tricky question: what types of things are considered admirable and good? The ancient philosopher, Aristippus, proposes one possibility for us.

Aristippus was an ancient hedonistic philosopher born in the city of Cyrene, in what is now Libya. Referencing the philosopher's birthplace, this particular school of hedonistic thought would become known as "Cyrenaic Hedonism." It teaches that the only good in life is that which is pleasurable.

Very simply, the best life is the one that is most pleasurable. The Cyrenaics espoused that pleasure was universally accepted as being "good." Conversely, pain was universally accepted as being "bad." Therefore, we are led to believe that the best life should seek out pleasure while avoiding any form of pain.



*"Very simply, the best life is the one that is most pleasurable."*



When we say pleasure, we are not talking about the virtuous pleasures described in Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Instead, we are focused on the hedonistic pleasures of the body.

Luxury, food, sex, and wine are all fair game according to the Cyrenaics. Indulging then, is not a selfish activity. Indulgence is a way of life, a way to the best life if you would like to be specific.

It is rather important to remember that the hedonists were not attempting to say that pleasure in general is good and that we should attempt to produce as much pleasure within this world. Rather, our own pleasure is of most value to us. We should pursue this pleasure for no other reason than for our own happiness. This is rather crucial for our understanding of hedonism as a way of life for the individual and not as a design for universal flourishing.

The comparison between ethical egoism and hedonism is unavoidable. Certainly the ideas of Aristippus and the sophist, Callicles, overlap in many ways. Both support a life in pursuit of fulfilling desires while disregarding the conventional ideas of justice, humility and temperance.

The difference is that while Callicles seems a bit unsure about what it is we should exactly pursue, Aristippus has no doubts - we ought to pursue pleasure, end of story. However, there are a few problems with this idea.



## OBJECTIONS TO CYRENAIC HEDONISM:

The hedonists believed that pleasure was fundamentally good and that pain was fundamentally bad. Therefore, we should live a life in pursuit of the former while avoiding the latter. The problem that arises is that pain and pleasure often complement each other.

While we might find pleasure in getting ridiculously drunk, such an activity is undeniably followed by the pains of nausea and headaches. We might believe that dining on delicious cuisines is pleasurable, but it is only through suffering the pangs of hunger that we appreciate the taste of food. It is impossible to consider pleasure and pain as being mutually exclusive. You simply cannot have one without the other.



*“The problem that arises is that pain and pleasure often complement each other.”*

With this in mind, we can see that the hedonism as a moral philosophy is unrealistic and therefore more attractive as a theory rather than a way of life. This is important to keep in mind. It is believed by the Cyrenaics that if our society were to do away with the conventional ideas of temperance and moderation, a human being would naturally gravitate towards a life of bodily pleasures. But as we have seen, that conclusion seems uncertain.





CHAPTER 3:

# DEATH DOES NOT CONCERN US

*Epicureanism says death is of no concern. So pull up a chair and relax.*

*"It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and well and justly. And it is impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living a pleasant life."*

-Epicurus

The philosophy of the hedonists seems appealing, so long as we don't examine it too closely. Still, that does not mean that we must disregard all of hedonism. Certainly, a life of pleasure is not the worst thing we could think of when asking "how should I live?" Perhaps if we could amend the philosophy so that it more accurately reflects the capabilities and limitations of a human life, then we might find a workable moral philosophy.

Epicureanism attempts to do just that. Named for the philosopher Epicurus of Samos, Epicureanism grew in popularity as an ethical philosophy after the death of Aristotle during the Hellenistic age of Greece. It is often unfairly lumped in with the teachings of Aristippus and the Cyrenaics. While Epicurus did promote a life in pursuit of pleasure, there was a rather crucial difference between the Epicureans and the Cyrenaics.

While Aristippus tells us that the best life is one in pursuit of pleasures, often to excess, Epicurus' philosophy tends to be more realistic. Rather than indulging in an excess of pleasure, Epicurus teaches us to find contentment and tranquility by avoiding pain and fear while seeking out modest pleasures. Rather than going to the bar and drinking half a dozen beers, we ought to enjoy two glasses of fine wine over dinner. Instead of consuming a dozen doughnuts in one sitting, we ought to take pleasure in a simple, suitably sized meal.

An old philosophy professor once told me that if Cyrenaic hedonism were a genre of music, it would be heavy metal. Epicureanism, on the other hand, would be classical piano or slow jazz.

That comparison is rather apt. Both philosophies propose a life in pursuit of pleasure. The difference being that strict hedonism often encourages excess, while Epicureanism consciously avoids it. It can be said that the final end of a life devoted to Epicureanism is a sense of tranquility, peacefulness, and contentment from the occasional enjoyment of simple pleasures. Also, these pleasures do not have to be strictly physical. The pleasures of love and friendship are fair game for us as well.



*"If we could accept that death is neither frightening nor painful, but simply the natural conclusion to life, then we would live a fuller, more enjoyable existence."*





An interesting aspect of Epicurus' philosophy is his view on death and the impact it ought to have on life. Epicurus subscribed to the atomist's theory of the soul. This simply means that Epicurus believed that the soul was a physical part of the body. Upon our deaths, the soul simply fades into nonexistence, into nothingness.

This would imply that the soul does not move on to another realm of existence (heaven or hell). Death marks an end of being, a cessation of any sensory or emotional stimulation. Upon our death we feel no pain or fear. In fact, we feel nothing at all, because our consciousness has ceased to exist.



***“Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.”***

Epicurus believed that the majority of human suffering was caused by our irrational fear of death. This fear often prevents us from enjoying our lives; it denies us our tranquility and calm. If we could accept that death is neither frightening nor painful, but simply the natural conclusion to life, then we would live a fuller, more enjoyable existence.

## OBJECTIONS TO EPICUREANISM:

Epicurus certainly faced criticism during his own life. His insistence that the human soul is nothing more than a collection of atoms, and therefore inconsequential, would cause others to believe that Epicurus was an atheist. A rather serious accusation during the times of Hellenistic Greece, Epicureanism as a philosophy may have suffered because of Epicurus' reputation as a blasphemer.

***“If God listened to the prayers of men, all men would quickly have perished: for they are forever praying for evil against one another.”***

Epicurus's philosophy leaves little, if any, room for divinity or faith. The universe consists of only atoms and empty space. If there is a God, then he has no sway over our life. We are the sole authors of our story.

In order to live happily, according to Epicurus, we must purge ourselves of pain and fear. We can only do this by accepting that death is of no real significance. However, the argument for the unimportance of death calls for a rejection of divinity, and by extension God.

For many people, this would appear a drastic step. The non existence, or at least the insignificance, of a God is something that many people cannot concede.

Here we see that Epicureanism begins to alienate those who would seek a happy life, but do not wish to abandon their faith. In this way, the philosophy of Epicurus can be a bit polarizing. It can be argued then that Epicureanism lacks the breadth that we might hope to find in a moral philosophy.





CHAPTER 4:

# A LIFE IN ACCORDANCE WITH NATURE

*Stoicism sees the beauty in the universe. Take a deep breath.  
Return to nature.*

*“That which exercises reason is more excellent than that which does not exercise reason; there is nothing more excellent than the universe, therefore the universe exercises reason.”*

-Zeno of Citium



Stoicism, our next moral philosophy, departs rather dramatically from our previous schools of thought. With an emphasis on suppressing our desires for materialistic pleasures and promoting a pursuit of virtue for the sake of duty, Stoicism takes a different route to arrive at a good life.


Stoicism and Epicureanism are often contrasted with each other, and that is rather fair. Both schools of philosophy arose during the Hellenistic age of Greece, when the political revolution of Alexander the Great had stripped the individual from his insulation within a city state and thrust him into an interconnected and vastly expanded society.

New schools of thought emerged to compensate for the small individual lost in a big world. Epicurus believed that the universe, the soul, and whatever gods may exist were all composed of atoms. There is no system, no grand design outside of the life of a man. Death is merely the dispersion of atoms and is rather inconsequential. Man is therefore his own guide to a satisfactory life, and should spend his time pursuing modest pleasures and avoiding pain and fear.


The Stoics, founded by Zeno of Citium, took the complete opposite view of the universe. Rather than viewing the universe as inconsequential, they attributed great importance to nature and the structure of our world. As a result, their moral philosophical views were starkly juxtaposed to those of the Cyrenaics and the Epicureans.

However, before we explain the Stoic's moral philosophy, we must first examine their cosmology, their philosophy of the universe. You simply can not grasp the former without understanding the latter.

The Stoics believed that the universe was expertly designed and operated in a way that was perfectly logical. Taking a page from the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus, the Stoics saw the universe as being governed by a divine, logical force that touched all things and admitted no exceptions.



*“The Stoics saw the universe as being governed by a divine, logical force that touched all things and admitted no exceptions.”*




To the Stoics, nature is the guiding principle. Interestingly, nature was also synonymous with God. Since nature (or God, if you prefer) is the highest form of goodness, a good life is one in accordance with nature.

To achieve this we must recognize the unimportance of non-essentials like luxury, wealth, and bodily pleasure. The potentiality for reason that exists within humans is the one thing that separates us from all other natural creations.

And so we see that “live according to nature” takes on two meanings. We ought to live by recognizing and consciously accepting the grand design of the universe. Also, we should live according to our human nature, which the Stoics believed was the cultivation of absolute reason.

Man’s goal in life is therefore an attainment of perfect reason. A peasant can be happy so long as he is a sage, but a king will be miserable unless he is also a sage.



  
*“Since nature (or God, if you prefer) is the highest form of goodness, a good life is one in accordance with nature.”*



Additionally, the peasant ought not to languish about his lot in life, for his place within the world is part of the grand design and therefore is perfectly logical. This can be said about all conventional evils that man suffers. War, death, disease, and poverty are all parts of an expertly crafted universe. We should not spend our days fretting over such woes, but accept them as all part of the plan.

These ideas are often difficult to accept for modern readers. How could it be that a peasant could be happier than a king, given the disparity of wealth?

The Stoics did acknowledge that certain individuals were given more counters than others within the game of life. However, these treasures do not speak to your true self, your inner virtuousness, and so they are of little consequence. Also, while having more poker chips might make it easier to win, the Stoics believed that the goal of life was not to triumph over your fellow man. The goal was to play well, a task that was possible whether you possessed all the riches, or none.

## OBJECTIONS TO STOICISM:

The philosophy of Stoicism seems appealing, but we tend to run into a few roadblocks when trying to live according to its teachings.

The Stoics believed that virtue alone is good, vice alone evil, and everything else should be treated with absolute indifference. Suffering, fear, and death are all things of no consequence to us. The Stoics aimed at ethical perfection, but nothing short of perfection will do.



*“A peasant can be happy so long as he is a sage. But the king will be miserable unless he is also a sage.”*



We must ask, is it even possible to completely disregard our own sufferings for the sake of appealing to a divine universal force? Because if we fall short of this, then we also fall short of the perfect life described by the early Stoics. Whether we lose by an inch or a mile, losing is still losing.

The attainment of ethical perfection according to Stoicism is so difficult in fact, that we might be hard pressed to find a philosopher who was able to live up to the lofty standards. If asked for an example of a person who exercised perfect reason, the Stoics might point uncertainly to Socrates or Diogenes of Sinope. Other than that, it would be difficult to say for certain.

Therefore, Stoicism requires us to accept a divine cosmology, disregard all of our sufferings, and cultivate ourselves toward absolute reason. If we stumble on any one of these, the entire pursuit is lost. That seems rather difficult, but perhaps there is a more forgiving philosophy that we could subscribe to instead.







CHAPTER 5:

# HAPPINESS IS AN ACTIVITY

*Aristotle tells us that not all pleasures are created equal.*

*“For contemplation is both the highest form of activity (since the intellect is the highest thing in us, and the objects that it apprehends are the highest things that can be known), and also it is the most continuous, because we are more capable of continuous contemplation than we are of any practical activity.”*

-Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics)







Enter Aristotle and his philosophical text known as *The Nicomachean Ethics*. As we will see, Aristotle asserts ideas that are reminiscent of the Stoics, putting emphasis on an attainment of virtue within our lives. However, unlike the Stoics, Aristotle does not rely on a divine cosmology to make his case. Instead, he leans heavily on formalized logic (something he is credited with discovering) and what might be considered a rudimentary form of the scientific method.

At the opening of Book X of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asks us "...what kind of thing is pleasure?" A notion that we might take for granted, it is very essential to Aristotle's moral philosophy that we adequately answer this question.

Aristotle concludes that pleasure is not a process, or a state of being. Instead he asserts that pleasure is an activity, something that we do. More precisely, pleasure is the thing that completes an activity. The philosopher makes a point to say that pleasure completes an activity so long as the subject and the object of the activity are in suitable condition.



*"Instead he asserts that pleasure is an activity, something that we do."*



If we were to examine a ship builder, for example, we would first have to conclude that the ship builder is appropriately healthy and suitably prepared to partake in the activity of ship building. Also, we would have to be sure that the object of the activity (the ship) is constructed from appropriate materials that are in good condition. If we can conclude both of these things, then we can safely assume that the ship builder will be capable of building his ship; at the completion of this activity there will be pleasure. A ship builder, insofar as he is a ship builder, will inevitably find pleasure in building ships.

So we have seen that pleasure is the natural end of an activity. Different people will certainly enjoy different activities more than others. The lover of philosophy will find the activity of philosophizing pleasurable, the lover of music will find music to be pleasurable, and so on.

Aristotle then tells us that life is an activity and as is true with all activities, pleasure should be the natural end for life. Finding the appropriate pleasure for our lives means arriving at a happy life, which Aristotle believed was synonymous with a good life.



And so we seem to have concluded that finding the appropriate pleasure within our lives as human beings will lead us to happiness, which will lead us to a good life. But this, rather obviously, begs the question, what is the appropriate pleasure?


Remember that the hedonists believed that bodily pleasures were our ticket to a happy life? Aristotle considers this, but ultimately rejects the notion. The philosopher poses the question, does it seem rational to say that all of our struggles, our fears, our hardships and our miseries are suffered only so that we may eat and drink as much as we please? Such an idea seems implausible.

And Aristotle does not agree with the Ethical Egoists, who declare that a pleasurable life is one where we conquer our fellow man and assert ourselves above society. While some might find pleasure in this, Aristotle believed that certain pleasures were better than others. We should make a point to find these pleasures that are most perfect.




*“Finding the appropriate pleasure for our lives means arriving at a happy life, which Aristotle believed was synonymous with a good life.”*

To do this, Aristotle asks us to image a hypothetical man who is perfect in every way imaginable. This ideal of human perfection would find pleasure in that which is most perfect. What is this pleasure that is most noble and honorable? Aristotle tells us that it is the active expression of virtue.



*“Aristotle, rather simply, tells us that we ought to pursue wisdom because it will make us happiest.”*



So...

The happy life and the good life are synonymous. We only find a happy life if we find our most appropriate pleasure as rational beings. Our most appropriate pleasure is the active expression of virtue. Finally we must ask, which virtue is the truest, the most honorable, and the most noble? Believe it or not, not all virtues are created equal.

Aristotle makes a point that some virtues are self-sufficient while other virtues require external things in order for that virtue to be realized. For instance, generosity is only possible if we have an excess of resources and other citizens to receive our generosity. Justice, although important, requires other citizens to receive our just acts. Virtues such as these are not self-sufficient.

Then we arrive at wisdom, which requires nothing external to be realized. We may pursue wisdom for our own pleasure and we require nobody else to have this virtue realized. Additionally, learning is the one activity that we may consistently do throughout our lives. While variables may interfere with our abilities to be generous or just, there is no reason why we should ever stop pursuing wisdom.

Aristotle also appeals to the gods to make his case for a life in pursuit of wisdom. He states that the gods are most assuredly all-knowing and so by pursuing a life of wisdom, we become closer to the divine.

Aristotle does note that while some may disagree with this, saying that we are mortal and should therefore think mortal thoughts; he dismisses these notions. Instead, the philosopher urges us not to settle for mediocrity. We ought to pursue that which is most important, most pleasurable, and most divine.

***“We must not listen to those who urge us to think human thoughts since we are human, and mortal thoughts since we are mortal; rather, we should as far as possible immortalize ourselves and do all we can to live according to the finest element within us- for if it is small in bulk, it is far greater than anything else in power and worth.”***

***-Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics)***

You may now be realizing that Aristotle and the Stoics arrived at similar conclusions. Both tell us that a life in pursuit of wisdom is the best type of life. However, the Stoics believed that we ought to pursue wisdom for the sake of duty. Aristotle, rather simply, tells us that we ought to pursue wisdom because it will make us happiest. We need no other reason than this. Additionally, we need not accept the divine cosmology of the Stoics in order to live a good life. Aristotle’s philosophy is based upon systematic logic and empirical observations that many would agree with.

Therefore, it can be concluded The Nicomachean Ethics is the most accessible and the most all-encompassing of the moral philosophies presented here. It remains a cornerstone of ancient ethical philosophy, leading those who might seek happiness, toward enlightenment and a life well lived.

