

Human Nature's Eternal Ambition for Temporary Satisfaction

We must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything, and, if that be absent, all our actions are directed toward attaining it.¹

Human beings live most of their lives in the pursuit of happiness, and this pursuit animates personal choices, market economies, work decisions, and leisurely activities. Yet the modern expression of that search has taken a narrow and often destructive shape. Contemporary culture glorifies a particular pursuit of happiness through a relentless quest for stimulation and acquisition that promises happiness through novelty and consumption. But many critiques of this way of pursuing happiness fail to address the philosophical error at its core. The appropriate remedy is not the rejection of happiness, but rather the recovery of hedonism properly understood. Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus* remains a core text for this recovery. It offers conceptual clarity and practical guidance that illuminate why the modern pursuit of happiness fails to deliver the happiness it promises and why contentment disciplined by reason is the only viable way to achieve happiness.

A 'goal' can be defined as "the object toward which effort is directed," and happiness can be understood as "a state of well-being and contentment".² People pursue countless goals, but across cultures and historical periods, a single aim binds them together: the search for happiness. When happiness is attained, people tend to feel they have all they need. Yet, happiness is transient, as evident in hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation is the nature of humans to quickly return to a baseline level of subjective well-being after positive life events. People who receive novel experiences enjoy an initial boost in happiness that declines over time and thus return to

¹ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*.

² See the entries on 'goal' and 'happiness' in the *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*.

earlier levels of satisfaction. Therefore, when happiness fades, the same desire that motivated earlier actions returns, and this creates a pattern of wanting and gaining. It seems that people cannot achieve the happiness they pursue.

Epicurus addresses precisely this predicament and offers a corrective to a modern misunderstanding. In ethical thought, hedonism identifies pleasure as the supreme good.³ Contemporary usage of the term hedonism evokes images of unrestrained indulgence and irresponsible living all for the sake of attaining happiness. But, this understanding of hedonism obscures a far more refined ancient position. Epicurus maintains that pleasure is the supreme good, but he insists that the highest state of happiness is not intensity but tranquility: a state of freedom from disturbance and fear.⁴ Epicurus's hedonism therefore requires prudence, moderation, and self-control. These features render his teaching not as a license for indulgence, but a demanding program of moral and practical reformation. For example, Epicurus states that "Whatsoever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation."⁵ (Hicks, 1925). Epicurus argues that when distress is present in wanting or anticipating an object or goal, it is not because of the absence of the desired goal or object, but rather, it is because of the feeling of desire itself. Therefore, Epicurus concludes that limiting one's desires results in less pain and distress, producing more tranquility in one's life.

Significantly, Epicurus does not simply present his view only in academic abstraction, he applies his view practically in his own way of life. Epicurus's school, known as The Garden, in Athens, Greece, functioned as a lived experiment in the conditions he described. The Garden resembled a community more than a conventional academy. Its members practiced modest

³ See Britannica Editors, "Hedonism."

⁴ See Moore, "Hedonism."

⁵ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*.

living, cultivated friendships, and devoted time to philosophical conversation. Daily life emphasized simple foods, shared labor, and a cultivation of the mind. The Garden thus embodied the claim that fewer needs produce more secure pleasure. Ultimately, then, Epicurus's school proved his theory through living example.⁶

This historical transformation of work, leisure, and the pursuit of happiness provided by Epicurus gives the backdrop against which the modern problem takes shape. In early human societies, survival required substantial labor and leisure was scarce. As technological innovation advanced, the burden of survival shifted. More efficient production lowered the time necessary for subsistence and permitted an expansion of leisure. In theory, these developments should have promoted human health, emotional stability, and spiritual fulfillment in a linear pattern. Instead, modern leisure, accompanied by the most advanced technology in history, becomes an arena for consumption and identity formation, leading to higher and faster rates of hedonic adaptation.

Individuals now tend to work not only to meet basic needs but to obtain goods and experiences that signify status and meaning to achieve happiness. The emergence of a market-based economy turned the relationship between work and happiness into a structured cycle. People trade time and effort for currency and currency for goods and experiences. This fact is illustrated by contemporary advertising, mass media, and commercial imagery--mediums that work to construct narratives that promise transformation through purchases, not merely to satisfy a need, but to remake oneself into something better. Such narratives rely upon the image of a life that is more desirable and more meaningful than the consumer's present circumstance. After the purchase or experience, however, the effect of the purchase or experience fades and the

⁶ See Wycherley, "The Stones of Athens."

consumer returns where the consumer began. This repetition produces the cycle of wanting and gaining and explains hedonic adaptation in the modern world.

Philosophically this failure is not surprising. If happiness is understood as a durable state of well-being, then temporary sensory pleasures cannot constitute the whole of that good. Epicurus explains that the problem lies not in pleasure, but in misdirected desires. Unregulated appetites generate dependence on things that cannot guarantee permanence. Luxury is not a source of security, but a new vulnerability, because increased desires produce a fragile happiness dependent upon external conditions. Epicurean insight therefore urges the rational reduction of unnecessary desires so that pleasure becomes less precarious.

This insight has practical consequences for how work and leisure are conceptualized. Work can provide meaning and dignity when it is oriented toward ends internal to the activity rather than understood as a ticket to consumption. Leisure can restore and renew when it is not defined primarily as a marketplace of experiences and goods. The challenge is how to cultivate these orientations in a social environment that constantly signals alternatives. Epicurus recommends practices that restructure life to secure life's greatest pleasures, which include attaining tranquility, cultivating friendships, prioritizing intellectual reflection, and finding freedom from fear, all of which, Epicurus argues, are widely accessible when desires are limited.

Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus* is an important text because it integrates conceptual subtlety with practical prescriptions and because it speaks across disciplines, ethics, and psychology to explain human flourishing. To treat the letter simply as a product of a bygone era obscures its relevance to contemporary problems. Epicurus offers a framework that helps diagnose the modern condition and prescribe remedies. His insistence on prudence and the

regulation of desire should not be dismissed as backward looking but read instead as a considered strategy for sustaining well-being in a world saturated by inducements to consume.

For the remedy of this cycle, Epicurus prescribes contentment, a state of mind shaped by temperate desire and a reflective appreciation for what one has. When contentment is utilized in the pursuit of happiness, happiness can be achieved in its intended form. Contentment does not mean the absence of pleasure but the freedom from the compulsion to accumulate more. When contentment is achieved, the person experiences a happiness in a grander capacity that is not contingent upon the next purchase. Work and leisure no longer function as a simple exchange between suffering and reward; they become integrated aspects of a well-ordered life oriented toward achieving happiness through contentment. To practice contentment requires reflective practices, the choosing of stable friendships, the acceptance of limitations, and the revaluation of what counts as necessary in one's life. These practices are both philosophical and practical and they connect individual transformation with modern life.

In conclusion, it is important to stress that the modern pursuit of happiness often substitutes the quantity of pleasurable experiences for their quality. The constant accumulation of goods and experiences rarely fills the inner emptiness that drives consumption. Epicurus provides an alternative view, one that honors pleasure but redefines it as peacefulness, sufficiency, and friendship. Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus* remains a core text for the modern world not simply because of its historical importance but because it continues to offer a rigorous account of why human beings are driven toward temporary satisfaction and how they might instead secure lasting fulfilment by striving for contentment to achieve happiness. Contemporary readers who wish to escape the eternal ambition for temporary satisfaction must recover

Epicurean prudence, cultivate contentment, and reorient both work and leisure toward the good of a tranquil life.

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