

From eudaimonia to happiness. Overview on the concept of happiness in the ancient Greek culture with a few glimpses on modern time¹

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“... that man is happy (eudaimon) and blessed (olbios) who, knowing all these rules, goes on with his work guiltless before the gods... and avoids transgression” (Hesiod, Works and Days 826-828)

“Good sense is by far the chief part of happiness, and we must not be impious towards the gods...” (Sophocles, Antigone 1347-1350)²

1. Introduction

... no matter what our situation is, whether we are rich or poor, educated or not, of one race, gender, religion or another, we all desire to be happy³

Among the common problems that, down through the ages, have puzzled humanity, from poets and philosophers to ordinary people, one can certainly include that of happiness.

To wish each other happiness in several circumstances of life; to hear of persons who apparently have everything they thought they wanted and yet cannot say to be completely happy; to see persons who have everything we would think able to bring happiness meet, nonetheless, with all sort of problems – such as drug and alcohol – problems that the common sense would confine to the persons struggling with life; all of these

are experiences and thoughts that each of us has had at least once. Ironically, it is possible that we, after having witness this paradox, nevertheless have never asked ourselves what happiness is; or else, if we have, we have possibly experienced a feeling of uneasiness in trying to give an answer, that is, a not vague answer bordering in commonplaces.

Interestingly enough, uneasiness and difficulty in defining happiness are apparent in the dictionaries of most of modern languages of the Western Civilization⁴: all definitions appear to be partly tautological, certainly unsatisfactory, given that recurrent motifs are “the state of well-being”, “contentment”, “satisfaction”⁵. None of those definitions, for instance, explicitly tells us of what “the state of well-being” consists. Moreover, this “state” seems not to really mirror the common view of a happy person: the one who has



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everything he thinks he wants, should be said to be in a state of well-being, yet he might be unhappy. Does this mean that happiness cannot depend on what is outside an individual, i.e. material goods and other possible sources of “well-being” from having the most expensive and comfortable car to having the job that one most likes? As a matter of fact, the other recurrent motif is that of “contentment” which makes more subjective the concept, and sheds light on what might make difficult to define and understand happiness as a whole.

Difficulty or, still better, a feeling of uneasiness is apparent in some definitions a group of undergraduate students has given to the questions “What is happiness? How to define happiness?” As a matter of fact, while some of them could not avoid stating, at the beginning, how difficult describing happiness is and how subjective a definition can be, one of them could not avoid to emphasize, at the end of his definition, that happiness is rare.

According to the answers given by the students, happiness can be several things and something different for everybody. There could also be several kinds of happiness. Except for one⁶, each of the interviewed students tends to emphasize an interior component in being happy. Having your needs and objectives satisfied, sharing your time with persons you love, accepting what you have and what you are seem to be a common denominator of their definitions. What varies is the nature of the needs and objectives; yet, most of them in the end depend on external agents (being surrounded by persons that love you and appreciate you for what you are, health, good finances, getting the person you love, encountering what is best for you, etc.). Therefore, although a feeling of self-acceptance and self-contentment, as

being the secret of happiness, underpins more or less all definitions, it seems that a self-acceptance and contentment come true only if the external agents are favorable to you and allow you to satisfy your needs. In other words, if this does not happen, is everybody condemned to unhappiness?

The impression is quite that of a vicious circle, and still a sense of uneasiness and vagueness in grasping and understanding the concept of happiness remains.

Do we have to conclude – as Socrates did with reference to the definition of “good” (*Republica* 505b-507a; *Menon* 78 d-e)⁷ – it is beyond our power to define, and thus, understand happiness? Is it really something undefinable – as the philosopher G.E. Moore would say – to a point to think it is better not to include the word in the dictionary – as a High School student suggested in a similar survey carried out in Italy?⁸

Considering that “there is nothing more ancient in the world than language [...] The history of man begins, not with rude flints, rock temples or pyramids, but with language”⁹, it is the purpose of this paper to contribute to the understanding of such a pervasive, and yet elusive concept on the basis of a lexical and conceptual analysis of words semantically related to happiness, words that belong to the language and culture from which the history of the modern Western Civilization begins, i.e. the language and the culture of ancient Greeks. Without aiming at a complete and infallible answer, the proposed analysis and the subsequent comparison between the ancient and modern results might at least be a “fertilizer” for other reflections and inquiring on the topic.

In the end, if happiness is leading a life of quality, a possible way to reach this kind of life – as Socrates teaches us¹⁰ – is through inquiry.

2. At The Beginning... Happiness In Greek Antiquity¹¹

In ancient Greek there is a constellation of words that more or less can be regarded as related to the ancient concept of happiness, words like “happy”, “blessed”, “prosperous / prosperity”¹².

The principal word, however, for happiness in ancient Greek is eudaimonia, and eudaimon is the adjective for “happy”. The original meaning of these words tells us a lot about the way in which happiness was conceived. According to its etymology eudaimonia means “having a well disposed (eu) divine power (daimon)”¹³. In ancient Greek thought happiness is a condition due to divine favor, and happy is the one who enjoys the favor of daimones, i.e. of those divine powers who might be hostile¹⁴. The visible and tangible manifestation of being “favored by the divine powers”, i.e., of “being free from divine ill-will”, is what is commonly called “prosperity”, in terms of either material wealth or success. The ancient Greek word denoting this aspect of being happy is olbos, which properly means “prosperity granted by the gods”. Thus olbios is “prosperous, blessed”¹⁵.

Although olbos / olbios describe an aspect of eudaimonia, starting from Hesiod the two words are mostly used as interchangeable. This is evident in the modern translations where the meaning commonly chosen is “happy” or “happiness”.

What is important to point out is that in both cases, i.e., the being either eudaimon or olbios, a specific activity of gods is implied such to a point that human happiness appear to be a

“plaything” of gods. This concept is mostly evident in the poetry of Pindar (5th cent. BC) and in Greek tragedy. In Pindar, the two terms are used at times as interchangeable, often as closely interrelated with each other, always, however, as clear signal of the gods’ favor, and thus as a gift granted by gods through fate/destiny¹⁶. Suggestive is the following passage from Pythian 3. 84-89:

(...) a happy lot (eudaimonia) attends you, for the lord of his people, if any man, is viewed with favour by the great Destiny. But a life free from reverses was the destiny neither of Peleus...nor of godlike Cadmus. Yet we learn that they attained the highest happiness (olbos) of all mortal men (...).

By these words the poet tries to console Hieron, lord of Syracuse, afflicted by a disease: despite the current suffering, Hieron must enjoy the happiness granted to him by gods with the awareness of the fragility of that gift, as the mythic “career” of Peleus and Cadmus show¹⁷. Gods apportion to man not exclusively goods¹⁸; more importantly, it is easy for them to build up man and then tear him down.

Human happiness seems thus to be a spiritual force beyond man’s control, i.e. a “plaything” of god. This reflects an essential trait characterizing the ancient eudaimonia: its being closely interrelated with tyche, i.e., luck and good fortune¹⁹. A happy man was the one favored by a good daimon, and thus eutyches, that is “a fortunate / lucky man”²⁰. Therefore, to Ancient Greeks, eudaimon meant also to be lucky, and eudaimonia needed good luck to a certain degree, last but not least since it was conceived as a gods’ fragile gift exposed to the vicissitudes of time and vulnerable to external hazards²¹.

This concept is central to the outlook of ancient Greeks, mainly in the Archaic and Classical Age, and such is proven both by the interesting debate on happiness we find in a passage from Herodotus' History, and the strong echoes it has in Greek tragedy.

In the first book of his History (I, 30-33)²², Herodotus comes to talk about the meeting between Solon, an Athenian famous poet and legislator (7th./6th. cent. B.C.) and Croesus, king of Lydia. The dialogue gravitates around the problem of human happiness²³. After having given a tour of the treasures showing his magnificence, Croesus asked Solon to tell him whom, of the all men he had seen, he considered the happiest. Croesus asked this thinking himself the happiest of mortals. But Solon answered him "Tellus of Athens", since – as Solon specified – when his country was flourishing Tellus had sons both beautiful and good, and he himself lived to see children born to each of them and these children all grew up. Moreover, Tellus' end was surpassingly glorious since, coming to the assistance of his countrymen in a battle against Eleusis, he died upon the field most gallantly.

Not satisfied by this answer, Croesus inquired a second time, who after Tellus seemed to Solon the happiest, expecting that he would be given at least the second place. But Solon answered "Cleobis and Biton". They were fortunate enough for their wants; more importantly they performed an extraordinary action to allow their mother to participate in the festival in honor of Hera at Argos. She needed to be taken there in a car, but the oxen did not come home from the field in time. Thus, the sons Cleobis and Biton put the yoke on their own necks, and themselves drew the car in which their mother rode. The whole assembly of worshippers witnessed this deed, and - as

Solon commented on - "then their life closed in the best possible way. Herein, too, the god showed forth most evidently, how much better a thing for man death is than life"²⁴. The mother besought the goddess to bestow on Cleobis and Biton the highest blessing to which mortals can attain"²⁵. After that, Cleobis and Biton fell asleep in the temple and never woke up, but so passed from the earth.

Breaking in angrily Croesus finally asked what his own happiness then was in Solon's opinion, given that he set Croesus' happiness at nought. And Solon replied:

O Croesus... you asked a question concerning the condition of man, of one who knows that the god is full of jealousy, and fond of troubling our lot... Man is wholly accident. For yourself, o Croesus, I see that you are wonderfully rich, and are king over many men; but with respect to that whereon you questioned me, I have no answer to give, until I hear that you have closed your life happily. For assuredly he who possesses great stores of riches is no nearer happiness than he who has what suffices for his daily needs, unless it so hap that luck attend upon him, and so he continue in the enjoyment of all his good things to the end of life. For many of the wealthiest men have been unfavoured of fortune, and many whose means were moderate have had excellent luck. Men of the former class excel those of the latter but in two respects; these last excel the former in many. The wealthy man is better able to content his desires, and to bear up against a sudden buffet of calamity. The other has less ability to withstand these evils ... but he enjoys all these following blessings: he is whole of limb, a stranger to disease, free from misfortune, happy in his children, and comely to look upon. If, in

addition to all this, he end his life well, he is of a truth the man of whom you are in search, the man who may rightly be termed happy. Call him, however, until he dies, not happy but fortunate. Scarcely, indeed, can any man unite all these advantages... No single human being is complete in every respect - something is always lacking. He who unites the greatest number of advantages, and, retaining them to the day of his death, then dies peaceably, that man alone, sire, is, in my judgment, entitled to bear the name of 'happy'. But in every matter it behoves us to mark well the end: for oftentimes the god gives men a gleam of happiness, and then plunges them into ruin.

Tellus, Cleobis and Biton were permanently well off since they are dead, and thus no longer vulnerable to reversals of fortune. Croesus is still alive and can be exposed to reversal of fortune; he thus cannot yet be called 'happy'. In other words, Solon tends to consider happiness as a condition of a person's life as a whole.

Solon's opinion on human happiness both has remarkable echoes in Greek tragedy²⁶ and mirrors the core of ancient Greek conception of happiness as something ephemeral and changeable just like human life, due to the capricious and envy gods²⁷: nobody is entitled to bear the name 'happy' before the day of his death since very often gods deprive men of the prosperity they have just given.

... I would say a mortal man, while he is watching to see the final day, can have no happiness till he pass the bound of life, nor be relieved of pain (Sophocles, Oedipus Rex, 1528-30)

No man to the end is fortunate, Happy is none... (Euripides, Iphigeneia in Aulis, 161-162)²⁸

On the basis of the mentioned passages it seems that what is at issue in defining happiness is not a contrast between material and spiritual well-being, given that the goods listed by Solon to describe the happiness of Tellus, Biton and Cleobis were, in the end, concrete ones, such as health, good descendants, physical strength. What is at issue is rather a contrast between transitory and stable well-being, i.e., temporary and definite happiness which is in turn regarded as impossible:

Ah, generations of men, – exclaims the chorus in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex (1186-1196) – how close to nothingness I estimate you in life! What man, what man wins more of happiness (eudamonia) than just the seeming so, and then to fall away? With your fate (daimon) as example, your fate, unhappy Oedipus, I call no mortal blest²⁹.

Oedipus won well-fated prosperity and has been highest-honored as ruler of Thebes, but then nobody could be said more miserable than Oedipus, having his life turned upside-down (ll. 1197-1208).

As a matter of fact, "Not even the son of Cronos... has given mortals a fate free from pain, but brings to all suffering and joy in turn... For neither spangled Night nor misfortunes nor riches last for mortals, but joy or loss at once is gone, and then comes back" (Sophocles, Trachiniae 126-135)³⁰. By these words, elsewhere Sophocles points out the alternate cases of human life, i.e human suffering of reversals at the hands of the envious gods. Similarly we find in Pindar: "Short is the space of time in which happiness of mortal men grows up, and even so, it falls to the ground when stricken down by adverse divine will" (Pythian 8, 92-94)³¹.

These are the reasons why one should wait for the end of life to give somebody the name of 'happy'. This condition is so dependent on having a "well-disposed divine power", and thus on being "fortunate" that one might conclude with Euripides "No man is happy (eudaimon). If prosperity (olbos) come his way, he might be more fortunate (eutyches) than other men, but happy - no!" (Medea 1228-1230)³².

To sum up, the mentioned passages show that in ancient Greek culture happiness is a plaything of gods, transitory, changeable and liable to reversals of fortune, as any human things, because of gods' will. Men seem not to have any responsibility in being happy or unhappy. They can be given happiness and soon deprived of it, they can reach the topmost of any goods only to then fall down.

Yet, the same ancient Greek poets testify to another factor that intervenes to define the conception of happiness in terms of contradiction with the results we have just found. The contradiction is due to the fact that men themselves, at times, prove to be responsible for their falling down from the happiness granted by gods³³. This happens when the happiness and prosperity given by gods produce a feeling of satiety or surfeit (koros), which, in turn, makes men avaricious. Consequently, the need to satisfy the excessive desire for having more and more, instead of enjoying the received gifts, produces over-riding insolence and outrageous actions (hybris) which lead to moral blindness and complete ruin³⁴. So writes Solon (fr. 6, 4-5):

(...) excess (koros) breeds outrage (hybris) when much prosperity follows those whose mind is not sound³⁵.

In other words, men prove to be not able "to digest" the plenty of happiness gods and fate can give them. By losing their

self-control, i.e., the awareness of their limitations, they attempt to gain more than they receive, though they have received a lot, and inevitably they fall down. So does this happen, for example, to Tantalus and Ixion – mythic characters able to mirror human behavior and give a lesson.

If indeed there was any mortal man who was honoured by the gods of Olympus – says Pindar – that man was Tantalus; but, alas! he was not able to digest his great prosperity, and, owing to his surfeit of good things, he got himself an overpowering curse (...) (Olympian 1. 53-59).

Tantalus, mortal man, was granted by gods the privilege to be admitted to the gods' banquet, and to eat of ambrosia and drink nectar – the gods' special food and drink – with which gods made him immortal. But Tantalus could not manage this gift of happiness and dared too much: he abused Olympian hospitality by stealing the gods' special food, the ambrosia, and giving it to mortals. His insatiety has then been punished by forcing him to experience insatiable desire that is eternally unsatisfied³⁶. Similarly incapable of bearing the happiness he received was Ixion:

Men tell us that Ixion ... teaches the lesson that men should repay the benefactor with fresh tokens of warm gratitude. He learnt that lesson very well; for though he received the boon of a happy life among the gracious children of Cronus, he could not be content with his great prosperity, but with madness of spirit, he become enamoured of Hera, the allotted partner of the wedded joys of Zeus. But his insolence drove him into overweening infatuation (...) (Pindar, Pythian 2. 21-30)³⁷.

The passages mentioned seem in a way to undermine the multifaceted conclusion that for ancient Greeks happiness is something that men cannot reach by themselves, something given by gods, something closely connected to good luck and exposed to life's reversal, in a word something beyond men's control since it depends on external factors. As a matter of fact, a certain degree of human participation and responsibility at least in being able to keep whatever happiness has been granted is contemplated in the ancient mode of thought. Keeping the goods granted by gods means to be content and to not wish more, by respecting and accepting the limits which men have been given. "It is ever right to mark the measure of all things by one's own station" (Pythian 2. 33-34) – as Pindar comments on the insolence of Ixion –, which means men must enjoy gods' gift and seek for what befits mortal mind, being aware of what estate we are.

Seek not, my soul, the life of the immortals; but enjoy the full the resources that are within your reach (Pindar, Pythian 3. 59-62)

What might ruin happiness is men's lack of self-restraint which prompts their transgression, i.e., their going beyond human measure. And this is to be irreverent and disrespectful towards gods whose punishment is inevitable.

If lack of self-restraint is what may put at risk the lot of happiness apportioned by gods along with good luck; self-control and moderation are what may enable men to keep their happiness, or at least to not actively determine the loss of happiness. If lack of self-restraint is a form of folly, self-control and moderation are a form of wisdom, or, still better, it is "having the good sense to avoid behaviour that is harmful to oneself"³⁸, once one well knows the basic, ethic principles. And ancient Greek people well knew that the

most harmful behavior is that of hybris, given that their basic, ethic principles are those summarized by the so-called Delphic wisdom. "Know yourself", and "Nothing in excess" were the maxims inscribed on the facade of Apollo's temple in Delphi, as a reminder of the necessity to always be aware of the limits of our fragile human nature in front of gods' splendor. To respect these ethical principles is, in a word, *eusebeia*, i.e., reverence toward gods.

The one who has good sense and self-control is able to enjoy the gift given by gods and to show, in doing so, pious reverence toward them, without aiming at what is not within his reach because of a foolish sense of surfeit and avarice. This seems to be the secret of happiness in the words of Pindar and tragic playwrights.

Good sense is by far the chief part of happiness, and we must not be impious towards the gods (...) (Sophocles, *Antigone* 1347-1350)

By this words the chorus comments on the demise of the king Creon who foolishly dared to contrast the gods' laws for the sake of the safety of his kingdom, incurring thus in hybris and moral blindness. Yet he was granted an enviable state by gods³⁹, but – in a way – was not able to digest it.

To be happy, thus, is to be wise, i.e. to have the good sense to be content with all goods you are granted, well aware that no person on earth can be wholly *eudaimon*, "for any one man to win the prize of happiness complete is impossible" (Pindar, *Nemean* 7. 55-56)⁴⁰.

3. Possible Conclusion

The components involved in the ancient concept of happiness are of different nature and even contradictory, in some way, with each other. Happiness has proven to be:

1. a condition characterized by having a well-disposed god, whose concrete expression is prosperity;

2. a condition affected by fortune and chance, thus changeable and transitory (the good disposition of divine power is not guaranteed – so to say – forever);

3. a condition relaying on having good sense, that is on being self-restraint and reverent toward gods. Which means to be content and to not seek more by going beyond what is within our reach.

In light of these results, happiness seems to be both something independent and dependent on the individual's will and soul. Can this implicitly contradictory nature of happiness be the reason, or one of the reasons, why one experiences difficulty in just describing it?

To have your needs and wishes satisfied, to have persons that love you, to do your best in order to feel good, to have your love returned back, to accept yourself and/or become self-confident, and so forth, all of these situations can be affected by the chance, that is, they can be vulnerable to external circumstances that are out of one's control. For example, one cannot be happy if the persons she/he loves die at the wrong time. It thus seems to be implied that you might be happy if you have the good luck to fully experience those situations. In other words, several definitions of happiness imply that it is mostly subject to fortune. In this respect, it might be not accidental that in most of Indo-European languages, the modern terms for happiness are closely related to the word "luck" or "chance"⁴¹. To mention a few examples, the modern English term "happiness" has its root in the early Middle English "happ", which means

fortune, chance, i.e., what "happens" in the world. Likewise, the French "bonheur" (happiness) and "heureux" (happy) have their root in the Old French "heur", which means luck, chance⁴². The Italian "felicità", the Spanish "felicidad", and the Portuguese "felicidade" come from the Latin "felix" – fortunate – and "felicitas" – luck, fortune⁴³.

If happiness is so dependent on luck, why should it be difficult to describe happiness as being nothing else but "to have good luck"? But, why, then, those who have good luck may be unhappy?

I've no idea why Veronika did it" said the woman tearfully. "We've always been loving parents, we sacrificed everything to give her the best possible upbringing... she's got a good job, she's nice-looking, and yet..." "and yet she tried to kill herself", said Dr. Igor "There's no reason to be surprised; that's the way it is. People just can't cope with happiness (...)" (P. Coelho, Veronika decided to die)⁴⁴

The situation of the protagonist of Coelho's novel is not far different from either that of Tantalus or other situations described in the poetic passages mentioned above. The unhappy is one who is not able to deal with the goods granted to him; therefore, the happy is one who has the good sense both to enjoy what he has and to be grateful for that, by realizing that – as Pindar said – one cannot have everything. "A man of wealth you could not rightly call a happy man; much rightly bears the name happy he who accepts the good that gods bestow and wisely uses it" (Horace, Carmen IV. 9, 45-48.).

Still, there is the unpredictability of luck one has to deal with, in which case having good sense – which is the secret that seems to ensure happiness and to make it easier to describe – may also

mean to accept that: "Events will take their course, it is no good our being angry at them; he is happiest who wisely turns them to the best account" (Euripides, Bellerophon, frg. 298). Thus, a sensible, sound-minded person is the one who is able to be flexible and adapt himself to circumstances, minimizing the effect of misfortune.

Despite the impression these considerations might give as being commonplaces, if one deeply reflects on them, he can realize that there is a little difference between the Ancients and us in thinking about happiness and in experiencing the dilemma of how to ensure happiness despite what 'happens' to each of us. Yet, although the Ancients gave an answer widely agreed on, still we feel the need to ask ourself what happiness is, and how to be happy.

Is this an innate, inescapable need of human beings? Or, are we not able, in the end, to have the good sense to be content with the achieved answers? And may the uneasiness we experience in defining happiness just depend on the fact that, in the end, we have difficulty to really accept that one cannot be objectively happy in everything and forever?

APPENDIX

SHORT SURVEY ON HAPPINESS

Claire A. Branstetter

I'm not sure how much help I can be. Happiness isn't something I can easily put into words; happiness means something different to everybody. Like beauty, it is often in the eye of the beholder. For me happiness is getting the ones I love and care about, and being able to do something I enjoy. I think there are different kinds of happiness, the happiness I feel getting to spend time with my best friend and boyfriend Jason, is a different kind of happiness from what I feel when I get an A on something I

worked hard on. I'm not sure how much sense this makes, but I hope it helps some.

Jessica Briones

(From a line)

"Happiness is not having what you want; it's wanting what you have"

Desire can be an overwhelming force in a person's life that will never die or fade. Happiness, to me, is realizing that, even if you constantly gain what you want, you may always want more. It's good to reach a point of complacency and satisfaction; sometimes, something just needs to be "good enough."

That's more than I intended to say, but basically, that's what I understand from the line.

Kate Fischer

Happiness is difficult to peg down, but here is my opinion:

Happiness is not just about having what you want, it is about knowing what you want and having the confidence to believe that you are worthy of it, and capable of achieving it, whether that be love, accomplishments, or self identity

Kiffini Dula

Happiness to me is when all the aspects of living are in, at least, the closest possible balance. By that I mean you are comfortable within yourself and the world around you. You have all of your basic needs met with a little extra. You have your health and strength, you are comfortable with your finances, there are people in your life that love and appreciate you for all that you are and all that you are not. You are happy when the ones you love have all their needs met plus all the things I mentioned above in their lives as well.

Chrystal Hamilton

Happiness is difficult to describe. It varies from person to person depending on what your beliefs are. I think that happiness is being able to love yourself completely. To bring oneself to a happy state of mind is the ability to find peace with yourself and love who you are.

William G. McBride

Happiness is the result of encountering the very best that life has to offer.

What that encounter is, and when it takes place, I feel we know the answers to both, thank God, with the help from others daily.

Michael C. Moore

Happiness is jogging with my father early on a Saturday morning, while in the midst of our run, it begins to rain. Happiness is cooking and laughing with my mother. Happiness is spending a care-free, afternoon with someone I love, devoid of fear or anxiety, safe in the knowledge of their adoration and devotion. Happiness is completing a goal or project meeting or exceeding the perceived expectation. Yet most of all, happiness is an evolution and happiness is rare!

Eric Robinson

Happiness is a physical state more pleasurable than any others. Happiness can be felt as a result of various perceived gains and successes, but is most likely nothing more than the subjective feeling caused by various mixtures and combinations of hormones and other neurotransmitters. These combinations do seem to produce varied states of happiness, ranging from satisfaction/contentment, to intense euphoria.

Though some would insist that this is much too grim and austere a picture of human happiness, one that opens the doors to and invites in nihilism and meaningless existence, happiness? even as a purely physical state? strikes me as the most important end in human life.

Contrary to those who insist that happiness is simply the absence of sadness, I am convinced that happiness itself has a sort of positive existence, as shown by the fact that some who are not sad are also not happy.

Adreinne M. Villareal

To me happiness is knowing I have done my best for myself and the people around me that matter most.

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¹ With reference to the concept of happiness in modern time, I based some reflections on the definitions that a group of undergraduate students gave me (see also Appendix). For their kind contribution I would like to thank: Claire A. Branstetter, Jessica Briones, Kiffini Dula, Kate Fisher, Chrystal Hamilton, William G. McBride; Michael C. Moore; Erik Robinson; Adrienne M. Villareal. To all of them my sincere gratitude.

² The Greek texts are those established in The Loeb Classical Library series, except for Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, for which I preferred to follow the text established by A. Dain and P. Mazon, *Sophocles*, Paris 1967 Belles Lettres, vol 2. Any translation is mostly adapted from that of The Loeb Classical Library series, unless differently indicated in note.

³ The Quest for Human Happiness in R. Mehrotra, *The Essential Dalai Lama*, Viking Penguin 2005, p. 7.

⁴ I am referring to the languages that belong to the Indo-European, namely ancient Greek, Latin (from which the Romance Languages, like Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, come), Germanic (from which Anglo-Saxon, and thus English, come).

⁵ To mention a few western languages, what we find in their common dictionaries is: "a state of well-being, contentment, joy" in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (s.v. happiness; see also below n. 43); "Stato di chi è felice" in *Dizionario Garzanti della Lingua Italiana* (s.v. felicità); "estado del animo que se complace en la posesion de un bien. Satisfaccion, placer, contento" in Larousse, *Diccionario Enciclopédico de la lengua española* (s.v. felicidad); "Bonheur supreme" Larousse, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* (s.v. félicité). See also below n. 43.

⁶ One student (Eric Robinson, see Appendix) considered happiness mostly as the psychological outcome of physiological changes in human body. This is in line with the results of modern science which shows a special interest in understanding the neurobiological factors underpinning state or feeling of happiness and pleasure.

⁷ However, Socrates then reaches a definition of Good in *Republica* 517b-532c, *Timaeus* 47b.

⁸ "Io personalmente non metterei la parola felicità nel vocabolario" (= I personally would not like to include the word happiness in the dictionary").ee, AA.VV., *Didattica delle Lingue Classiche. Proposte e Applicazioni Pratiche*, Perugia 1992, pp. 105-216. The quotation is on p. 138.

⁹ F. Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, London 1897, vol. I, p. V.

¹⁰ See Plato, *Apologia* 27 a-38 a, *Euthyphro* 11 c-15 c, *Alcibiades I* 113 e-114 b.

¹¹ The survey will be confined to analyzing the concept of happiness of the ancient Greeks as it is mirrored in the literature of the archaic and classical poetry. Needless to say that happiness was one of the main object of the philosophical speculation (see Augustinus, *Sermones* 150, 3.4) starting from Plato (see, for example, *Republica* 354a; *Gorgias* 471d; *Apologia* 41c-42a, to mention a few passages) to Augustinus and Thomas from Aquinum (for a general summary, see AA.VV., *Didattica cit.*, pp. 195-205). In ancient Greek philosophy, a special attention has been devoted to happiness by Aristoteles, namely in *Ethica Nicomachea* (for general essays on this subject, see J.L. Ackrill, *Aristotle on Eudamonia*, in A. Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, Berkeley 1980, pp. 15-33; M. Vegetti, *L'etica degli Antichi Roma-Bari* 1989,

pp. 10-12; 173-183). For a concise history of happiness in philosophy and religion, see D. M. McMahon, *From the happiness of virtue to the virtue of happiness: 400 B.C. - A.D. 1780*, in "Daedalus" 133 (2004) 2, pp. 8-17. For an overview of evidence in both philosophy and literature, see also C. M. Bowra, *The Good man and the good life*, in *The Greek Experience*, Cleveland and New York 1957, pp. 85-102.

¹² About the mentioned constellation of terms semantically associated with the word 'happiness', see G. L. Dirichlet, *De Veterum Macarismis*, in "Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten", XIV (1914) 4, pp. 1-71; C. De Heer, *Makar, Eudaimon, Olbios, Eutyches. A Study of the Semantic Field Denoting Happiness in Ancient Greek to the End of the 5th Century B.C.*, Amsterdam 1969; AA.VV., *Didattica cit.*, pp. 159-169.

¹³ "Faveur des deux": P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Grecque*, Paris 1999, p. 791. "Eudaimon est... is qui habet bonum daemonem" (= Happy is the one who has a good tutelary spirit): Dirichlet, art. cit., p. 10. Not completely in accordance to its etymology is the first meaning given in H. G. Liddel - R. Scott - H. S. Jones [LSJ, thereafter], *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1996, s.v. *eudamonia*: "prosperity, good fortune, opulence". On the variety of modern translations, see also below, nn. 15 and 16.

¹⁴ Thus, "free from divine ill-will": see De Heer, op.cit., pp. 25-26; cf. also Chantraine, op. cit., p. 246; McMahon, art. cit., p.7 and n. 2.

¹⁵ See Chantraine, op. cit., p. 791. Differently LSJ translates "happy, blest" – especially with reference to worldly goods (s.v. "olbios"), and "happiness, bliss, esp. wordly happiness" (s.v. "olbos"). As a matter of fact we shall verify a certain interchangeability in the usage of *eudamonia* and *olbos*, which results in a not consistently appropriate rendition of those terms in modern translation (see below, n. 16). Another term that can be included in the semantic field denoting happiness is *makar* (on which see, above all, Dirichlet, art. cit.; De Heer, op. cit., pp.4-7), which mostly denoted a state of divine happiness, i.e., beatitude.

¹⁶ As we can see, the two different words denoting happiness – the proper one *eudamonia*, and the alternative, so to say, *olbos* – have been translated in the same way, which might prove they were perceived as equally indicating happiness. In W. J. Slater, *Lexicon to Pindar*, Berlin 1969, *eudamonia* is translated as "good

fortune", *eudaimon* as "fortunate"; *olbos* as "prosperity", and *olbios* as "fortunate". Though in this translation the focus is a little different, i.e. on the presence on fortune (see below), the terms seem to be interchangeable. As a to Pindar, see also De Herr, op. cit., pp. 40-44.

¹⁷ Cadmus and Peleus are mythic examples of both the reverse of fortune and the impossibility to receive only good things by gods. Zeus apportions men either only evils or a mix of good and evil. Both Cadmus and Peleus have the privilege to have the gods banquet with them in their wedding ceremony; they both receive marriage-gifts from gods, but then both were left their portion of happiness and suffered tribulations. See also below, n. 18.

¹⁸ Cf. Homer, *Iliad*, 24. 527-533, about which see R. Lauriola, *Pandora, the Beautiful Evil: the Coming of Evil to Light in Ancient Greek world*, in "Revista Espaço Acadêmico" September (2005):). See also, J.C. Opstelten, *Sophocles and Greek Pessimism*, Amsterdam 1952.

¹⁹ Cf. LSJ: properly "the act of a god... - regarded as an agent or cause beyond human control"; thus "fortune, fate, chance".

²⁰ On the connection between *eudaimonia* and *tyche*, cf. *Homeric Hymn to Athena* 11. 5, on which, Dirichlet, art. cit., p. 10 and n. 4.

²¹ See Vegetti, op.cit., pp. 175-177.

²² For this passage, see T. H. Irwin, *Permanent Happiness: Aristotles and Solon*, in "Oxford Studies in ancient philosophy" 3 (1985), pp. 82-124.

²³ Herodotus' passage presents a great variety of terms semantically connected to the concept of happiness, all terms above introduced, such as – beside the appropriate *eudaimonia* and *eudaimon* – *olbos*, *olbios*, *eutyches*. The close connection bordering on interchangeability is apparent in the translation: quite always any terms is given the meaning 'happy' or "happiness".

²⁴ About this belief, see Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1225-1226: "Not to be born comes first by every reckoning; and once one has appeared, to go back to where one came from as soon as possible is the next best thing".

²⁵ The above translation is from M.I. Finley, *The Portable Greek Historians*, Penguin Books 1977, pp. 41-44.

²⁶ On the lexicon denoting happiness in Greek Tragedy, see also De Heer, op. cit., pp. 56-100.

²⁷ The so-called *phthonos theon*, i.e. “envy of the gods”, is a common belief of ancient Greek people: humans’ power and prosperity, if excessive, may provoke the jealousy of gods who intervene by causing reversal in order to balance the fates and keep men within their borders. For this concepts, see Pindar, *Pythian* 10. 20-22; Herodotus, *History* III, 39-43; VII, 10 and 46.

²⁸ See also, Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 928; Sophocles, *Women of Trachis* 1-3; Euripides, *Andromache* 96-103; *Children of Herakles* 863-864.

²⁹ On the concept of the fragility of happiness in the Greek culture of the 5th and 4th cent. B.C., see also Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

³⁰ See also Sophocles, *Antigone* 1158-1165: “... fortune makes straight and fortune brings down the fortunate or the unfortunate man at all times... Creon was once enviable... he had sved this Cadmean land from enemies, had acquired the all-powerful kingship of the land, and was guiding it, happy with a noble brood of children. And now all has been let go...”.

³¹ On this concept, see also *Pythian* 3, 103-107; 10. 20-21 (on which B. Gentili et al., *Pindaro. Le Pitiche*, Milano 1995, p. 627); *Olympian* 7, 94-95; *Isthmian* 4, 5-7 (on which G. A. Privitera, *Pindaro. Le Istmiche*, Milano 1982, p. 173).

³² Very significant in this passage is the occurrence of the main three terms (*eudaimon*, *olbos*, *eutyches*) related to the semantic field of happiness and able to denote such a difficult concept.

³³ The dialectical relation between destiny and human freedom, i.e., human responsibility in determining one’s own destiny appears already in one of the first literary expression of ancient Greeks, that is in the *Odyssey* (1. 28-43), and by that time on, so to say, it represents a big issue: are we free and thus responsible for our destiny, or is there some kind of a vital design that assigns us a specific life-path we cannot revoke? On this topic, for an interesting, general overview, see R. May, *Freedom and Destiny*, New York - London 1999.

³⁴ On these concepts, see also M. Hoffmann, *Ethische Terminologie bei Homer, den alten Elegikern und Jambographen*, Tübingen 1914; D. Herbert Abel, *Genealogies of Ethical*

Concepts from Hesiod to Bacchylides, in “*Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*” 74 (1943), pp. 92-101, espec. pp. 94-96.

³⁵ See also Pindar, *Isthmian* 3. 1-3; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 750-755 on which V. Di Benedetto, *L’ideologia del potere e la tragedia greca. Ricerche su Eschilo*. Torino 1978, pp. 40-45.

³⁶ The punishment deals with intolerable thirst and hunger: he was condemned to stand in a pool of water and no to be able to satisfy his thirst, since every time he bended down and lowered his head to reach the water, the water level receded. Likewise, every time he tried to reach the fruits growing above his head, the wind moves the branches just beyond his grasp.

³⁷ See also Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 872-894, on which R. Scodel, *Hybris in the Second Stasimon of the Oedipus Rex*, in “*Classical Philology*” 77 (1982), 214-223; R. Lauriola, *Sofocle. Edipo Re (Introduzione, Traduzione, Commento e Interpretazioni, a cura di R. L.)* Torino 2000, pp. 145-152.

³⁸ With regard to this see also A. Rademaker, *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-restraint. Polysemy & persuasive use of an ancient Greek value term*, Leiden - Boston 2005.

³⁹ See above n. 30.

⁴⁰ See also Bacchylides, 5.50 ff., on which De Heer, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

⁴¹ See M. McMahon, *art. cit.*, pp. 7-8. Also A. Wierzbicka, ‘Happiness’ in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective, in “*Daedalus*” 133 (2004) 2, pp. 35-37.

⁴² As a matter of fact in the English dictionary mentioned above (n. 5) though connoted as ‘obsolete’ the very first meaning given to happiness is “good fortune”. As to French (see above n. 5), s.v. “heureux (= happy) we read: “qui jouit du bonheur favorisé par le sort”; and s.v. “bonheur”, “circumstance favorable qui amène le succès”. The root of both French terms, as it is apparent, is “heur”, that is “chance”.

⁴³ In Ch. T Lewis and Ch. Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford 1966 (reprint), s.v. *felicitas* as synonyms we find “*fortuna, fors, sors, fatum*”.

⁴⁴ The quotation is on p. 77, Publisher: Harper Perennial 2000. The Italics is mine.