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HAPPINESS, SUFFERING, AND THE LOVE OF GOD

Study Guide

IGNATIUS PRESS   SAN FRANCISCO
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Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Outline Summary

I. Series Introduction: What Happiness Means to You

The Mystery of Unhappiness

What does it take to be happy?

Sometimes people seem to have everything they could ever want, but they are still unhappy. Maybe you or someone you know has desired something for a long time, but then—unexpectedly—still felt empty after getting it.

We all want to avoid being unhappy, but often we don’t seem to know how—or, since we live in a world with evil and suffering, if it’s even possible.

It’s strange that we need happiness so much and can still know so little about what it is. This series is dedicated to helping you understand more deeply what happiness is and examine how you are pursuing happiness in your own life.
The Importance of Happiness

Even when we may not know how to find happiness, we know we need it.

Humankind has always been preoccupied with the search for happiness. From the beginning of history, virtually every philosopher from Plato and Aristotle to modern scientists such as Albert Einstein have held up happiness as one of the most important things that we can reflect on in life.

Why? Because everything else in our life depends on it. As Aristotle explains, “Happiness is the one thing you can choose for itself; everything else is chosen for the sake of happiness.”

Plato
(428–347 B.C.)

Greek philosopher
One of the earliest, most influential thinkers of Western Civilization, he founded one of its first schools, the Academy. His best-known works are his Dialogues and the Republic.

Aristotle
(384–322 B.C.)

Greek philosopher
A student of Plato, his many writings laid the foundation for subjects as varied as biology and theater, aesthetics and physics, ethics and linguistics. His study of happiness is found in the Nichomachean Ethics.
Albert Einstein  
(1879–1955)

Groundbreaking 20th-century theorist and scientist
His investigations into the nature of the universe produced such landmarks as the theory of relativity and the theory of matter-energy equivalence (source of the famous equation $E=mc^2$).

PHILOSOPHY (FROM GREEK, “LOVE OF WISDOM”):
The study of the most fundamental realities, such as the meaning of existence and the nature of consciousness, by systematic thought.

PSYCHOLOGY (FROM GREEK, “STUDY OF THE SOUL”):
The science of the mind; investigating how the mind works and how to foster mental health.

ANTHROPOLOGY (FROM GREEK, “STUDY OF MAN”):
The study of human beings through science, history, and culture.

THEOLOGY (FROM GREEK, “STUDY OF GOD”):
The study of God and by extension the study of religious truths and supernatural realities (e.g., angels, Purgatory, the Incarnation).

“Happiness is the one thing you can choose for itself; everything else is chosen for the sake of happiness.”

— Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*
Happiness and Life Goals
Since happiness is the only thing chosen for itself, that means that our happiness will be the main goal that shapes every other decision in our life.

All of our life goals are steps to that ultimate destination. From whom we marry to what we eat for breakfast, every choice in our life is aiming at that one final result—the happy version of you.

How Happiness Influences Our Life:
- What We Strive For
- The Friendships We Make
- The Careers We Pursue
- The Person We Marry
- The Legacy We Leave
II. Series Overview: The Four Levels of Happiness

The Four Levels of Happiness:

1. Pleasure (*Laetus*)
2. Success (*Felix*)
3. Making a Difference (*Beatus*)
4. Transcendence (*Sublimitas*)

Level 1—Pleasure

The first level is pleasure, which comes from external things. Many of these pleasures come from satisfying our physical needs such as food, clothing, or shelter, and they fade quickly once the need is met.
Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Level 2—Success

The second level goes beyond the external senses to an internal sense of self. How do I measure up to others?

EGO-CENTRIC
Believing that everything in the outside world revolves around oneself. Ego-centric people do not recognize the importance, feelings, or perspectives of others.

Ego-Comparative: Inner World vs. Outer World

We are aware first of ourselves and then of the world around us.

Ego-comparative happiness is when we compare ourselves (ego = self) to others and judge that we are better.

Achievement, Status, Popularity

The main ways we can rank ourselves against other people are through these:

- **Achievements**: Harvard Graduate, State Wrestling Champ, Gold Medalist, Valedictorian, Academy Award Winner, Guinness World Record for Sweater-Knitting
- **Status**: Vice-President of a Fortune 500 Company, Head Cheerleader, Town Council, U.N. Council, Seat at the Cool Kids Table
- **Popularity**: Most Friends, Most Online “Friends”, Starring Role in the Play
The Comparison Game

Winner …

… or Loser?

Winners and Losers
Comparisons with others means that for you to be a “winner” you need to be better than other people—who thus have to be “losers”.

Many people who focus on comparisons will find themselves uncomfortably in the middle, better than some people but not as good as others.

Are they winners or losers, then?
The Need for More—Competition and Unhappiness

With so many people in the world, a need to exceed others can never be completed: you will always need to be more, and what you have will never be enough.

You can’t enjoy being the best, since it’s always threatened by fear that someone better could turn up. This is how many apparently successful people can be so unhappy and even self-destructive.

“The person who dies with the most toys, wins.”

— Popular expression of Level 2 focus
Level 3—Making a Difference

The third level is based on our desire to contribute something to the world around us, for our lives to make a difference.

Desire for Significance

We want our lives to matter. Sometimes we feel this need the opposite way: we don’t want our lives to be meaningless or insignificant.

We want to feel the world is better off because we were in it, and not that we made it worse.

The Sources of Contributive Happiness

- Doing
- “Being With”

Contributive Happiness

The desire for significance can be satisfied by doing things that contribute something to the world, and also by simply being with others in a meaningful and unselfish way.

CONTRIBUTIVE DRIVE

The natural drive each person has to make a difference in the world, to contribute to the well-being of others.
“The true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own [mind], as though it were a closed system …

The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is.”

—Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

**Not a Competition**

Bringing more goodness into the world is satisfying in itself, rather than for the success it brings.

Yet, people can sometimes turn this into a Comparison Game: “I did more good than you did, therefore my life is better than yours”, which reintroduces Level 2 and all its insecurity.
Giving Your Best vs. Being Better
So how can Level 3 be different? Instead of asking, “Am I better than others?”, the contributive drive in Level 3 makes us ask, “Did I use whatever I had to do as much good as I could?”

The happiness that comes from doing as much good with our lives as we can isn’t threatened by whether others can do more or less.

Viktor Frankl (1905–1997)
Psychiatrist and philosopher
Best known for his 1946 book, Man’s Search for Meaning, detailing his own experience in the Nazi concentration camps and the search for purpose in existence even under the darkest conditions.
Level 4—Transcendence: Our Purpose Beyond the World

Level 3 moves us to bring goodness into the world. Level 4 stirs us with the sense that we are destined for a goodness that goes beyond this world, that transcends it.

The Heart’s Desire Beyond the World.

The stirring of the heart that we are destined for something more is found in art and literature throughout history.

An early famous instance is Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, written 1,600 years ago, which described his own journey toward happiness and stated that we have certain desires for perfect things that can’t be satisfied by the imperfect things in our world.

The Five Transcendent Desires

From our earliest childhood, we have an instinctive desire for perfect truth, perfect love, perfect goodness or justice, perfect beauty, and perfect home.

When we see a beautiful face or flower fading with time, when we lose a friend or have to leave a home that has made us feel loved and secure—these imperfect experiences leave us with a desire for a perfect, unfailing kind of experience.

**TRANSCENDENT DESIRES**

Desires that are shared by everyone and, because they are so universal, rise above (or “transcend”) the differences of culture, time, country, etc., that separate people.
The Quest for the Perfect

The realization that everything in the world is imperfect, including ourselves, means that our quest for perfection must lead us somewhere outside of ourselves and even beyond the world.

This is what led Saint Augustine to pursue God, saying, “For Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

Saint Augustine
(354–430)
Catholic bishop whose influential writings on theology earned him the title “Doctor of the Church”
He narrates his own conversion from a life of sin and pleasure to a life devoted to God in his Confessions (written in 398).

The Five Transcendent Desires

• Truth
• Love
• Goodness/Justice
• Beauty
• Home
Invitation from God

Saint Augustine’s quotation illustrates that this desire for perfection comes from an awareness in our hearts that there is something greater out there, and the awareness moves us to seek it out.

He believed that this awareness itself comes from God, who is inviting us to find our transcendent purpose.

“For Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

—Saint Augustine, The Confessions

NOTES
III. Conclusion: Our Experience of Happiness

Do You Recognize the Four Levels of Happiness?
When you think of your own idea of happiness, does it match up with something from one or more of the four levels?

Are the desires of each level familiar to you?

How Have You Experienced Happiness in Your Own Life?
Our English language uses one word for all of them, but understanding the distinctions between the four levels can transform how we look at our own experiences of happiness.

In future lessons we will explore how the different levels work together: sometimes we can encounter different levels of happiness in the same experience, and in other experiences we can find different levels giving us competing impulses.

J. R. R. Tolkien
(1892–1973)
Linguist and author
His fantasies about Middle-Earth, including The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit, depict ordinary people who are sent out into a world full of extraordinary wonders and are caught up in epic moral conflicts.

C. S. Lewis
(1898–1963)
Writer and scholar
Famous both for his novels and for his nonfiction books on Christianity, he wrote fiction that often deals with people encountering timeless spiritual truths in a world beyond our own, in fantasy (The Chronicles of Narnia) as well as in science fiction (The Space Trilogy).
1. Why are some people unhappy and happy at the same time—full and empty, fulfilled and unfulfilled?

2. Why do some teenagers who have great potential have suicidal feelings?

3. Why do some extremely gifted people resent so deeply the little successes of people who do not have nearly as much—and even belittle those successes?

4. Why do we sometimes move from a sense of superiority and contempt to a sense of inferiority and fear over the course of just a few minutes?

5. Why do some people who have every imaginable form of giftedness and success drink or drug themselves into oblivion and failure?

6. What does happiness mean to you?

7. What is a life goal that you have chosen based on your idea of happiness?

8. What is a choice you often face that forces you to pick between two different levels of happiness?

9. Can you recall a specific moment in your life where you felt a transcendent desire, something more than the world could offer?