

Is the pursuit of **happiness** our primary goal?

by Lizzie – Lower VI





Is the pursuit of **happiness** our primary goal?



Whether you are a passionate philosophy student or you have been sitting staring out the window during a mindfulness assembly, I'm sure you have had the opportunity to contemplate complex questions like "what am I doing here?" or "what is the meaning of life?"

Humans have always had a fascination for answering these questions and continue to this day to argue over what our primary goal in life should be. Many would say that even after thousands of years with focus on this debate, we are no closer to finding the answer than when we first started.

Before we dive into this complex debate, we must first establish what happiness is to understand whether it is worthwhile to pursue it. The Oxford English Dictionary defines happiness as the state of pleasurable contentment of mind; deep pleasure in or contentment with one's circumstances. From this explanation, it is clear that happiness is intangible and so we



should instead focus on how happiness can be achieved in response to our circumstances.

One way of establishing lasting happiness is by setting yourself targets for success and overcoming challenges. Aristotle argued that we all have a purpose in life, so it is important to maximise our potential in fulfilling this purpose, as this will enable us to flourish and in turn achieve happiness for ourselves and for others around us. Take a knife for example: a good knife is one that cuts things well and so a good person must be one that fulfils their purpose the best.

You may be asking yourself how do we find our purpose? Each person's purpose is unique, but a good place to start would be looking at what you are good at, what you enjoy, and anything that helps others. We are all gifted with different talents, so it is important to use them to the best of our ability. In fact, some would argue that you have a moral obligation to flourish because if you don't you are depriving the world of your best self.

Nonetheless, you must use your talents wisely and for the correct reasons, as famously quoted by Spider-Man's

Uncle Ben: "with great power comes great responsibility". This quote, which can actually be traced back to the Biblical verse Luke 12:48, has the simple meaning that we all have a responsibility to seize opportunities not just for our own benefit but for the benefit of others.

On the other hand, the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus would oppose Aristotle's view and warn of the great dangers of ambition and desire.

Epicurus believed that happiness is achieved simply when pain is minimised, and we are at peace with ourselves. The purpose of life therefore is to achieve tranquillity of mind, or ataraxia.

Epicurus believed that ambition leads to suffering because our desires will eventually exceed our capabilities and we will fail to meet our ever-increasing expectations. This endless drive for more success won't fulfil us in the long-term, so it may instead cause us to doubt what our purpose is.

We should instead find happiness in what we already possess, and "not spoil what you have by desiring what you do not have."





However, arguably if everyone took this approach, humanity would not have progressed to where we are now because each leap in development has been caused by the desire to improve what already exists. Also, ataraxia can be seen as selfish, as it may achieve personal happiness, but it certainly doesn't benefit others.

Moreover, if we spend our lives trying to avoid failure, we may miss unexpected opportunities that provide us with a greater feeling of reward and a deeper level of happiness. In my experience, happiness occurs in the places that I least expect to find it. So, if I avoided its pursuit and focused only on the happiness naturally presented in my life, I would be missing out on life's fulfilment.

Despite this, I support Epicurus in his warning of the dangers of consumerism and materialism because money can't buy us happiness.

The constant need for more, whether that be materialistic or a feeling like happiness, is dangerous and can lead you into a vicious circle of dissatisfaction.

Therefore, whilst I think it is important to value what you already have, it

is also important to not be afraid of failure, as success in unexpected situations provides happiness.

Psychological research by Mauss, I. B et al supports Epicurus' argument, as it highlights the danger of pursuing happiness outside of what you already have.

Two studies support the hypothesis that pursuing happiness leads to increased unhappiness. In Study 1, female participants who valued happiness more (vs. less) reported lower happiness when under conditions of low, but not high, life stress. In Study 2, compared to a control group, female participants who were experimentally induced to value happiness reacted less positively to a happy, but not a sad, emotion induction.

This research illustrates how happiness should not be an aim but instead left to occur naturally in our lives. The paradox is that the moment you start to see happiness as a goal, is the moment you become unhappy.

It would seem that the philosopher John Stuart Mill understood happiness best when he argued that ultimately whatever we decide to pursue (or not in the case of Epicurus), we do so because





we know it will make us happy, so we have no choice but to pursue happiness.

The pursuit of happiness is constantly occurring in our subconscious, so may not necessarily produce the negative effects described in the above study, which involves a conscious focus on the value of happiness.

On top of this, some things we pursue make others happy, and this in turn makes us happy. For example, working in healthcare can be described as rewarding because the hard work that goes into helping a patient is rewarded by the patient's progress or gratitude for their treatment.

This treatment has helped both the healthcare provider and patient, so supports the utilitarian viewpoint of what happiness should be, as it has achieved the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

In conclusion, we must remember what uniquely makes us happy, as over time this can be clouded by daunting expectations that we have it in ourselves 'to make history' or 'become the best possible versions of ourselves'.

In a world powered by technology, it

can be easy to forget how social people are, and that human beings thrive on each other's support. Therefore, it is important to make other people happy because this brings happiness to us as well.

Especially in times like these, we are reminded that suffering is a call to action and that if we have the power to prevent people from suffering, we have a responsibility to do so to the best of our ability.

We should make the most of what we have been given and the opportunities available to us but know that we are not defined by our successes or failures.

The pursuit of happiness is likely to lead to unhappiness. However, paradoxically, the pursuit of helping others is likely to lead to happiness even when you may fail to achieve all you set out to do.

Written by **Lizzie** — Lower VI (Year 12)





theabbey.co.uk