

# Happiness: You Might Be Thinking All Wrong About It

“Am I happy?”

On first consideration, this is a seemingly healthy, self-reflective question that almost all of us frequently ask ourselves.

But experience has shown that the search for an affirmative answer to this question is also the cause of much anxiety, frustration, depression, and envy in modern society.

And perhaps that's because, according to Mortimer Adler, it's based on one of the most common philosophical mistakes.

The mistake is thinking that happiness is a psychological rather than an ethical state; or, to put it another way, in identifying happiness with “contentment”.

In his book [\*Ten Philosophical Mistakes\*](#), Adler writes that “contentment... cannot signify anything other than the psychological state that exists when the desires of the moment are satisfied. The more they are satisfied at a given moment, the more we regard that moment as approaching supreme contentment.”

But some problems arise from identifying happiness with this psychological state that results from the satisfaction of our desires. For one, happiness would be “a transient and shifting thing,” since some days our desires—which themselves shift—happen to get satisfied, but other days they are frustrated. (And isn't this constant shifting at the root of so much of the psychological turmoil in the West today?)

It would also mean that happiness is not really related to moral goodness. If contentment from satisfaction of desires is

the ultimate criterion, happiness could then be achieved just as easily by the by the embezzling miser as by the altruistic social worker.

Finally, it would (and does) create significant social problems. As Adler points out, “Individuals come into conflict with one another in their attempts to get what they want,” and some people’s pursuit of their desires are ultimately going to interfere with, and thwart, the ability of others to satisfy their desires. It would also mean that no government could possibly provide the conditions that would allow the “pursuit of happiness” for all its citizens.

In the classic, Aristotelian understanding—which Adler draws from—happiness (a.k.a. *eudaimonia*) is considered to be “the excellence of a whole life well lived, a morally good life.” Its achievement is not something that can really be evaluated until the end of our lives. It’s not an emotional feeling.

So basically, for many of us, if you want to be happy, stop wondering whether or not you are happy. To achieve earthly happiness, you should focus on doing the good, avoiding the bad, and hope that at the end of your life you can say that you lived virtuously.

That said, there’s one caveat. To achieve happiness, Aristotle also says—in an often ignored but significant clause—that one must have “a moderate possession of wealth.” Adler explains:

*“There are many real goods, most of them external goods, such as wealth, a healthy environment, political liberty, and so on, that are not solely within the power of the most virtuous individual to obtain for himself or herself. Obtaining these goods in the pursuit of happiness depends on fortunate circumstances that are beyond the individual’s power to control.*

*Deprived of these goods of fortune, a human life can be*

*ruined even for the most morally virtuous individual. He or she may be a morally good person and still be deprived of the happiness of a life well lived by such misfortunes as enslavement, grinding poverty, crippling illness, the loss of friends and loved ones. Being a morally good human being does not automatically result in the achievement of a morally good life."*

It's an interesting reminder that the classical understanding of "happiness" is not an entirely democratic concept, and is not the same thing as what Christians claim is open to all: "salvation".