

To Be Happy, First Be Pessimistic

We all want to be happy, but we're not terribly good at it. As a result, for centuries philosophers have wrestled with how to attain happiness. Few, though, have offered as novel an answer as Marcus Aurelius, one of Rome's greatest emperors.

Ready for it?

Be a pessimist.

This is admittedly an unappealing proposition, ranking somewhere between paying for college by selling your kidneys and eating a hundred vanilla-covered cockroaches in fifteen minutes.

But reflect for a moment about where we're at, and you might start to rethink your initial reaction.

For despite the fact that we're drowning in an ocean of entertainment with legions of "self-help" gurus acting as lifeguards, the [World Happiness Report](#) reveals that general levels of happiness have been in steady decline. According to [Newsweek](#), "Americans should be happy.... But paradoxically, happiness and well-being have fallen in recent years."

The report attributes this decline to a growth in addictions, but a close reading of Aurelius's autobiographical work "Meditations" suggests there might be a deeper problem with how we're pursuing happiness: We're not focusing on the negatives in life.

Don't believe me? "Meditations" is filled with little nuggets such as:

"Our lifetime is so brief. ... Nothing to get excited about."

"In such deep darkness, such a sewer ... I don't know what there is to value or to work for."

"When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly."

Now, such a grim view of life would seem to lead straight to either a psychiatric office or a cemetery plot.

But before you reject Aurelius out of hand, think for a moment about what pessimism is. According to [Merriam-Webster](#), pessimism is "an inclination to emphasize adverse aspects." Aurelius, then, is not advocating despair. To the contrary, he writes, "When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive."

What he is saying is that by focusing on the negative in everyday life, *while also appreciating life's inherent value*, we will have a better sense of *perspective*, which constitutes the second step to real happiness.

Reflect for a moment. How many of the things that we want daily will matter or be remembered in five years? Ten years? Fifteen years?

Personally, I cannot think of that many. And to be clear, I am not talking about needs (food, shelter, etc.). I'm talking about *wants*. The things we chase that only have transitory value. New gadgets, new fads, new friends. We are too often "those who seek pleasure" and whose "happiness ... fluctuates with moods outside their control."

Instead of being a slave to the whims of desire, Aurelius's pessimism puts our desires in perspective.

This is essential, for "if you can't stop prizing a lot of other things ... then you'll never be free – free, independent, imperturbable."

Once we “stop prizing a lot of other things,” we will “[e]ver be fulfilled, ever stop desiring – lusting and longing for people and things to enjoy.”

To Aurelius, that is what true happiness consists of. Freedom from the endless pull of the new, the novel, the pleasurable. Freedom to focus on what is actually important.

Let’s face it: this isn’t a particularly appealing conclusion. It isn’t as nearly fun as the other paths that culture presents being the true path to happiness. It requires doing the hard thing of accepting the present as is, and that the future will likely not be as pleasant as we would like to assume.

But the beauty of Aurelius’s pessimism is that it frees us from that needing to be the case. If nothing else, Aurelius and his pessimism tells us to “[r]emember that very little is needed to make a happy life.”

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