



Happiness – Pre-Modern Answers for Questions Today From Boethius to *Fortunatus*

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Abstract

Human existence is really dependent on the quest for happiness. Most people rely on contingent aspects of happiness, whereas all philosophers and poets have already taught us that true happiness rests somewhere else. This paper examines recent approaches to this idea of happiness, both in philosophy and in sociology, and related fields, and then turns to the teachings by the late antique philosopher Boethius (in Latin). From there, the article jumps to the anonymous German novel *Fortunatus* (printed in 1509) where some of Boethius's teachings find direct applications, defining happiness with a reference to wisdom. Past notions of happiness promise to illuminate us today in our search for true happiness beyond contingency.



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One of the universal needs of all people across the world consists of finding and enjoying happiness, as philosophers and others throughout time have consistently (re)confirmed. For many people, happiness consists of gaining material or physical joy, such as through food, objects (possessions), but also honor, fame, or power. Happiness also finds a meaningful expression in love, sexuality, family, friendship. Moreover, very important proves to be the relationship between human beings and the natural environment which can easily create a sense of happiness, even if only so fleetingly. Under the influence of the right music, an artistic environment, or a pleasant read, an individual discovers happiness for him/herself. But all these kinds of happiness have

always been temporary, evanescent, or deceptive, so it makes good sense that many different thinkers from antiquity to today have made greatest efforts to come to terms with this elusive notion of happiness. We could, for instance, refer here to such luminaries as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Avicenna, St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Viktor Frankl, and many others, and yet we would only find ourselves in a theoretical whirlwind of countless arguments, comments, suggestions, ideas, and theories regarding one of the most fundamental and critically important feelings in human life (Horn; Thielen). After some global reflections on the universal efforts to find

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happiness, I will turn to two major sources relevant for the discourse on happiness, one from late antiquity, the other from the early modern time, the first a philosophical dialogue treatise, the second a German novel. Both will allow us to understand the issues at stake most dramatically, and might set us on the right path toward the desired goal, which is not contingent on any particular religion, philosophy, culture, or language.

All representatives of world religions have claimed, in one way or the other, to offer spiritual avenues toward happiness, whether here on earth or in the afterlife. As much as those religions tend to rely on different Holy Scriptures, in essence the purpose mostly proves to be the same, to help the individual to transcend his/her material limitations and to reach out for a new dimension characterized by immense, infinite, supreme happiness freed from all contingency. Curiously, however, we can observe the purest, most simple, and truly authentic form of happiness among young children, whereas adults commonly live in a troubled world and struggle hard to come to terms with the fundamental challenges in their lives, not only in pragmatic terms (money, job, housing, food, family, health, etc.), but much more so in spiritual terms, especially concerning the meaning of their lives and the ultimate purpose of all being (Argyle; Graham; Myers). After all, what would be the reason for all the struggle, labor, worries, and endeavors in our existence if not some kind of hope that at the end there will be the long-desired reward, happiness, however defined.

The twentieth-century German author Heinrich Böll (1917–1985) might have expressed this troubling issue perhaps best in his short story, "Anekdote zur Senkung der Arbeitsmoral" ("Anecdote About the Lowering of Work Ethics") written in 1963. A well-dressed and overly self-obsessed German tourist wakes up a fisherman at some western Mediterranean coast with the clicking of his camera, and both engage in a conversation. The tourist finds it unacceptable that the fisherman is not working and simply sleeps while enjoying the sun. He presents him with a work plan which would quickly enrich him, if only he put his heart into it, going fishing more often, making more money, buying a better boat, then a whole fleet of fishing vessels, then a factory for the processing of the fish, and so forth. The outcome would be that he could enjoy his life carefree and

without any pressure to go to work. The fisherman, however, simply tells him that he is already doing just that without all those labor-intensive efforts, which leaves the tourist speechless, and deeply troubled because this simple response has entirely destroyed his own world concept of work ethics, clearly determined by capitalistic principles (Böll). Not the tourist with his enthusiastic ideas about wealth and productivity, but the simple fisherman proves to be a happy person, content with his own world and life. So, considering the surprising conclusion of this short story, with its truly epiphanic outcome which might be a significant wake-up call also for us today, it is not surprising that Böll's narrative has been republished numerous times and translated into many different languages; it certainly contains a universal message about the true meaning of happiness.

This allows us to reflect this issue on a more global phenomenon, that is, the timeless search for this happiness, and hence the constant effort by writers and poets throughout the world to address this topic. Of course, happiness has already been discussed from many different perspectives, including psychology, religion, anthropology, economics, medicine, neurosciences, music, philosophy, and the arts, to mention just a few relevant disciplines. Most recently, for instance, Peter N. Stearns has offered significant insights into the entire history of happiness, exploring, as the abstract on the publisher's website informs us,

the interaction between psychological and historical findings about happiness, the relationship between ideas and popular experience, and the opportunity to use historical analysis to assess strengths and weaknesses of dominant contemporary notions of happiness. Starting with the advent of agriculture, the book assesses major transitions in history for patterns in happiness, including the impact of the great religions, the unprecedented Enlightenment interest in secular happiness and cheerfulness, and industrialization and imperialism. The final, contemporary section covers fascist and communist efforts to define alternatives to Western ideas of happiness, the increasing connections with consumerism, and growing global interests in defining and promoting well-being. Touching on the experiences in the major regions of Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and North America, the text offers

an expansive introduction to a new field of study. (<https://www.routledge.com/Happiness-in-World-History/Stearns/p/book/9780367561031>)

If we search for relevant titles on happiness in the world of critical studies, we would be immediately overwhelmed by an onslaught of relevant titles, scholarly or popular, monographs or trade books, currently (*Worldcat*, Feb. 2021) amounting to close to 70,000 entries, all addressing this so relevant topic, and no one yet seems to come up with one ultimate, simple and convincing definition. Hence, it would amount to hubris to attempt to solve the issue in the framework of this short article. After all, who would not have already pondered the meaning and the various strategies of how to achieve happiness for one self, especially in philosophy, religion, and psychology (Bucher)?

Nevertheless, we can easily agree that the quest for happiness appears to be a direct corollary of all human life, so each individual, each social group, community, people, culture, religion, or nation has always attempted to accept this challenge because it constitutes the very essence of existence. Thus, we may conclude already here that all efforts to discover happiness can only aim for approximating this goal, whereas the ultimate answer to the question what this phenomenon really means will probably always escape us – and this from Plato to the Dalai Lama. Yet, this realization should not lead to despair and a sense of abandonment because the quest for happiness by itself constitutes already major progress in this almost illusionary search (White).

If we accept that happiness represents one of the essential aspects of our lives, however we might define it in general or specific terms, then we could easily agree that we would not need to reinvent the wheel and could draw from a wide range of relevant sources, mostly philosophical, religious, and literary, in which the individual author had already made a great effort to come to terms with the issue of happiness. And indeed, ancient and medieval poets and philosophers had already taken it upon themselves to search for the meaning of this phenomenon and tried hard to outline pragmatic strategies how to translate the abstract ideas about happiness into a concrete reality. The American Declaration of Independence from July 4, 1776 even

embraced the idea of this pursuit of happiness as one of its cornerstones:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. (<https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>)

Most importantly for our reflections here, one of the most influential late antique philosophers, Boethius (d. ca. 524/525), outlined in impressive terms the meaning of true happiness and the way of how to achieve it in his enormously influential treatise *De consolatioe philosophiae*, which he composed a few months before his execution brought about by trumped-up charges of state treason. I will attempt to outline just briefly the essence of his arguments and indicate with the help of at least one case from the end of the Middle Ages how much Boethius's idea in fact percolated throughout the centuries and influenced countless generations studying his work (cf. Classen 1998; Classen 2015; Classen 2016; Classen 2018a).

In face of imminent death as a result of fake charges, hence injustice, Boethius lingers in his prison cell when the allegorical figure of Philosophy appears who wants to teach him the logical way of how to find and look at happiness. Throughout history, this existential threat to a major thinker or writer has regularly brought out the finest writings, whether we think of Ḥusayn ibn Manṣur Al-Ḥallaj (857–922 C.E.), the famous Spanish theologian and philosopher Fray Luis León (1527B1591), or the Italian Marxist Antonio Francesco Gramsci (1891–1937). At first, this allegorical figure in the *Consolatio* illuminates for him that all worldly concepts of happiness are transitory because neither wealth nor power, neither physical strength nor public fame, neither family nor health can be guaranteed; in fact, all those sources

of alleged happiness are nothing but fleeting; they are lent by Fortune and can be taken back at any time. The only truth there is consists of the fact that Fortune moves constantly, in a wheel, so no one can ever hope for eternal stability. Once having realized that all those worldly concepts of happiness are nothing but deceptive, Philosophy moves on and probes where true happiness might rest. She identifies the notion of complete self-sufficiency, hence of selfness, oneness, independence, complete power, and the union or equivalency of all those aspects in a harmonious concept as the only possible source of happiness.

One might think about this entity or powerful being as God, as Goodness, or as the *summum bonum*, but Boethius argues in a philosophical, logical way, and does not aim for religious perspectives. All beings originate from a core, a seed, an idea, etc., and then are born and evolve. Life itself could thus be defined as the development of all the potentials contained in the original being, and all creatures thus aim for this degree of self-sufficiency, which no one or nothing can ever fully achieve. But it is this instinctual drive by all beings to move forward and to become completely themselves, which ultimately would mean the merging with this *summum bonum*, that is, the fulfilment of this 'genetically' given potentiality to become oneself. All flowers, trees, fungi, and so forth would go through this process, aiming for the best possibility for themselves in life. This represents an inherited instinct, to move from birth to the completion of oneself, beyond death. The only way through and above Fortune would be to aspire for complete goodness, which becomes approximately possible through the realization of Fortune's true properties and hence through the deliberate distancing from its deceiving forces because true goodness, i.e., happiness, rests outside of everything what Fortune characterizes and determines.

Curiously, but certainly logically, this also implies, which even Boethius in the dialogues with Philosophy has difficulties to understand, that there is no real evil – the crucial counter-force to happiness – because those who appear as evil in this world really fight against their own instinct toward the good and ultimately eliminate themselves. Of course, Boethius was then killed, if not murdered, but those perpetrators really destroyed themselves

in the first place, whereas the philosopher gained inner freedom and succeeded in moving beyond the confines of Fortune and approaching, even if only infinitesimally, the absolute goodness by way of aspiring for sharing in this quality of self-sufficiency, or absolute freedom from contingency.

There is no room here to elaborate Boethius's philosophy further, especially because he later also approaches the question regarding the difference between Providence (Goodness) and Destiny (Fortune). But we can be certain that his treatise, in its logical and rational development, exerted a huge influence and was read and enjoyed over the next thousand years and much more, with direct traces detectable as late as in the seventeenth century, not counting here the modern reception since the nineteenth century (Classen 2018b). In its core, *De consolazione philosophiae* illustrated most convincingly that external, material conditions of happiness are mostly delusional and can never be held onto. Yet, as Philosophy also signals, there is true happiness beyond the workings of Fortune, and every creature here on earth has an inkling of this ultimate goal and lives and thrives in order to reach out and toward that *summum bonum*, hoping to become part of it at the end.

Already at the closure of the Middle Ages, an anonymous German author penned the highly influential novel *Fortunatus*, first printed in Augsburg in 1509, which was to become extremely popular throughout the sixteenth century, when it was also translated into English and other languages (quoted from Müller). The young protagonist, who originates from Cyprus, tries his luck in the wide world serving various lords, but he quickly realizes that all of his efforts could easily lead to his destruction. At one point, he would have almost been executed, along with everyone in his lord's family because they are all accused of having stolen the jewels of the king of England. *Fortunatus* is lucky, spared in the last minute, but everyone else has to die, although they are all innocent. The young man then quickly leaves the scene, crosses the Channel and gets lost in a forest where he happens to come across a fairy who offers him one gift out of six possible ones: money, strength, health, wisdom, a long life, or beauty. *Fortunatus* picks money, and receives an inexhaustible purse. He uses this money to travel throughout the world, later to establish an estate

back in Cyprus, to marry, to have two sons, and then he travels also to the East, but there is never a clear sense of happiness; he is always afraid of thieves, and he has constantly to hide his wealth or to act a role to explain its origin. After his death, one of his sons quickly begins to abuse the purse, tries to rise socially, thus evokes much hatred, and is eventually murdered, while his brother dies from grief over the disappearance of his brother.

The poet concludes his novel with specific comments about the rise and rapid decline of this family and warns the audience that money would never grant anyone true happiness, very much in the vein of Boethius's teaching. *Fortunatus* should have picked wisdom, and then he would have been able to enjoy happiness in the true sense of the word (580). It would be difficult to determine whether the anonymous author was familiar with Boethius, but the outcome of this novel certainly indicates that the Boethian teachings left a definite impact on his mind. Obviously, the same question regarding the nature of true happiness occupied his mind, and while Boethius argued globally to leave Fortune and contingency behind and to follow the own inner drive toward goodness, the German poet isolated wisdom as the key for the fleeting ideal of happiness.

We could easily draw from countless other medieval philosophers and poets, but it is already very obvious how much the discourse of happiness determined the entire pre-modern world. This does not necessarily imply that we would have to rely entirely on the insights gained by medieval and early modern thinkers and poets, but we can conclude that many of the most fundamental concerns and ideas about happiness were already formulated at that time in a striking, insightful, and convincing manner. Philosophically speaking, Boethius had clearly figured out what false and true happiness consisted of, which strongly suggests that we can profit from his treatise in multiple fashions until today. The same applies to *Fortunatus*, a most revelatory narrative which illustrates in pragmatic terms what the consequences can be if an individual relies on money as the sole source of happiness and then faces problems and dangers all his life.

Neither Boethius nor the anonymous poet of the *Fortunatus* rejected money, power, fame, family, or

love as temporary sources of happiness, but they both strongly suggested that true happiness rests somewhere else, at least beyond the dimension of Fortune. These are powerful lessons that resonate deeply with us as well, and perhaps more than ever before because we live in the post-modern, post-capitalistic world and are in dire need for new concepts about how to live our lives meaningfully and happily. The more digitization and robotization take over parts of human existence, the more the question becomes burningly relevant, what makes us happy, and how do we live in such a way that we can gain happiness? These ancient and medieval voices prove to be powerful intellectual lights for our journey through a dark night.

Boethius's teachings have influenced many generations after his death, and they certainly deserve to be considered more closely also today because of the logical and rational developments of the arguments regarding how to pursue true happiness. One of those literary sources where we can trace his influence is the anonymous *Fortunatus*, where the poet presents in practical terms what contingency might mean and how short-sighted the protagonist proves to be, and hence we as the modern readers if we follow the same drive simply toward money, power, or fame in this world. Granted, in some larger context, we could certainly agree that neither Boethius nor the German poet formulated truly innovative insights; instead they continued ancient Greek traditions, but both their notions proved to be of timeless value for their own posterity.

The ancient Scriptures, countless Greek and Roman philosophers, and numerous poets were major predecessors in that effort to find real happiness both here in this physical existence and in the afterlife. But the dialogue treatise *Consolatio* and the novel *Fortunatus* impressively emerge as highly poignant in their strategy to lay bare the errors we are normally subject to when we pursue happiness in our simplistic and material fashion. Their teachings regarding happiness deserve our full attention also today, probably because they revealed a deeper truth than we are normally exposed to. Again, we can definitely learn from those past voices in order to aim for our (better) future.

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Conflict of Interest

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