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WWED: What Would Epicurus Do?
Epicurus, Happiness, and Psychology in Modern America

Between the United States and Europe, a tiny island the size of Kentucky sits alone in the North Atlantic ocean, its inhabitants, no more than 300,000 of them, making their living from the sea. Employment remains low and the income of the people is distributed almost equally. Winters are cold and the summers damp, the sunlight is fleeting and glacial ice covers much of the land. Yet for a country of such modest position in the world, with neither a standing military nor raging economy, it is also the most happy.¹

Iceland, perhaps best known to Americans for its suspicious lack of vowels (the capital is Reykjavik) and eccentric singer Bjork, is not a country of fabulous wealth and influence. The United States, by contrast, stands as the world's lone military and economic superpower, dominating the political destinies of six and a half billion human beings while spreading its culture to every corner of the globe. The United States ranked thirteenth happiest in the world in the same survey the Icelanders took, behind Ireland, fractured by civil violence, Venezuela, constantly in a state of political instability and corruption, and the Philippines, which boasts enormous poverty rates and acts as a safehouse for radical Islamic terrorists.

What is the United States doing wrong, if we are so powerful and rich yet comparatively so unhappy? What is the state of happiness in the United States? What would an ancient Greek philosopher named Epicurus have to say about all this? Should we follow the example set by Iceland and listen to more Bjork?

¹ According to nationmaster.com, 55 percent of Icelandic citizens gave their happiness level as "Quite happy" and 42 percent claimed they were "Very happy". 3 percent said they were "Not at all happy".

If Epicurus were alive today and took a walk down any American main street, what would he think, and what would he see? Thousands of people driving around aimlessly in \$50,000 SUVs, people talking loudly on cell phones to business partners, advertisement after advertisement selling product after product, packaging happiness and bliss into 8oz cans, television commercials blaring ads for prescription drugs that claim to fix depression, sexual inadequacy, and social anxiety, magazines featuring ads for “positive psychologists” that charge hundreds of dollars to make you happy, talk shows, one after another, marching through daytime television, showcasing human despair and hope for the entertainment of all, yoga classes day, night, and every time in between, playing on people’s lust to lose stress after being stuck in five hours of traffic behind the wheel of those aforementioned \$50,000 SUVs.²

What would Epicurus, who believed in the supreme good of life’s simple, naturally available pleasures like friends, freedom, thought, and the base necessities (food, shelter, clothes), think of this mad dash to find happiness in so many different and dubious sources? Would he react in horror, as people accumulated vast sums of material wealth (“Poverty, when measured by the natural purpose of life, is great wealth, but unlimited wealth is great poverty.” Fragments, pg 41.), trying to purchase their happiness? Would he react with pity when he saw how engrossed our society is with the notion of success being defined as the one who is envied, and failure as the one who envies (“We must envy no one: for the good do not deserve envy and the bad, the more they prosper, the

² Happiness is a massive commercial industry in the United States. Self help books were worth more than \$600 million in sales in 2000, nearly 6% of the entire book market. Prescription drugs that modify mood, like Prozac or Zoloft, make more than 20 billion dollars each year. Millions upon millions of prescriptions have been written for sexual dysfunction drugs like Viagra, and “Happiness Coaches” can charge up to \$400 dollars an hour.

more they injure themselves” Fragments, pg 43.)? Or would he react with psychology and hard data?

Psychology may be a relatively new science when compared the hallowed halls of physics and chemistry, and it has often been criticized as a “soft” science, but lately its research on happiness has been pointing to a single surprising conclusion: Epicurus was, for the most part, right, at least when it comes to our conceptions of happiness and how we go about achieving it. When it comes to what happiness actually is, however, some data challenges the wisdom of the ancient Greek.

When it comes the false happiness granted by wealth and power, the true happiness of friendship and freedom, the dangers of living to impress other people, and the impossibility of someone intuitively knowing what makes them happy, the science of psychology and Epicurus agree. When it comes to genetics and the virtue of happiness, however, psychologists would rather leave Epicurus on a shelf labeled “philosophy”, far away from the science section.

But, before we go about comparing and contrasting, we have to know what it is we are comparing and contrasting.

Part II: What is Happiness?

What is happiness? Ask most any American, and they would probably tell you that happiness a kind of feeling, a sort of indescribable warmth of soul that bubbles up through your veins and shows itself in a smile. Psychologists believe they can measure happiness, but when it comes to knowing what they’re measuring, they have avoided the

entire issue, preferring to let other people handle it for themselves by responding to simplistic surveys on subjective opinion.³ To psychologists, happiness is a mixture of three subjective personal interpretations: Positive affect (good emotions), negative affect (bad emotions), and personal judgments on satisfaction.⁴

Epicurus would likely define happiness as a sort of achievement, a place or notion of being that we accomplished through the superior use of reason to determine what would really make us happy. In short, our logic gave us ideas to act on and a happiness that could be gained (getting away from the city, finding some true friends, etc), not merely a short term emotional happiness that was given to us by the actions of someone else. Still, it is unlikely he would refute the good feelings that come from true happiness, just disagree with the way those feelings were accomplished and the duration which they could be sustained.

However, recent evidence suggests that happiness may be neither a state of emotion or an achieved concept, but something intertwined with our genetic code, similar in concept to the idea of personality traits being determined by genetics. One study with Asian-Americans and Anglo Americans concludes that the Asian genetic programming prefers deferring short term satisfaction and personal showmanship for long term good and for

³ Robert Biswas-Diener, Ed Diener, and Maya Tamir write in their article *The Psychology of Subjective Well-Being* that “For the first time, we are able to measure happiness.” The method they cite is the survey, where the test taker defines his or her happiness as it relates to their personal mood at a certain time. A Platonist/Socratic critic might accuse the psychologists of defining happiness by the attributes we associate with it, such as smiles and laughter, and not with a singular, contextually insignificant essence or “form” of happiness that goes beyond mere feeling and coincidence. But psychologists aren’t philosophers, and they would just sit there in a lab all day if they didn’t believe they could measure everything that is immeasurable.

⁴ Epicurus would undoubtedly be disturbed by the idea of using surveys to determine happiness. The very act of using a survey presupposes that people can intuitively know what makes them happy, an idea Epicurus openly balked at.

the benefit of the whole, while Anglo genetic programming moves the individual toward maximizing personal success regardless of collective need.⁵

Another aspect of happiness researchers are touching on is its apparent link to memory. Epicurus would have us believe that having a garden and some time to think would always guarantee us essential elements in our happiness, but a recent study concludes that our actual happiness during past events may be drastically different from the memory of that event recalled at a later date. That is to say, our memory of how we should have felt at the time, along with cognitive shortcuts such as remembering the most recent moment and the best moment, has a greater influence over the happiness we associate with that event than the actual mix of factors that went into creating a complex real scenario when we actually experienced it.

Psychology's search into the nature of happiness has produced additional deterministic theories. One is set-point, a theory that holds that every person has a biologically established level of happiness, and though a person's happiness will always fluctuate in times of joy or sorrow it will, the theory holds, always return to its normal, fixed point somewhere on the scale between happy and sad, what psychologists would refer to as hedonic adaptation.

The set-point theory on happiness is closely related to the broad notion of human adaptation, but specifically emotional and psychological adaptation. Numerous studies have proven that humans can adapt surprisingly well to a variety of intensely traumatic events, healing in the face of limb amputation or the loss of a loved one. Similarly, the

⁵ Biswas-Diener, Diener, and Tamir also make note of a study that examined the happiness level of identical twins. Though the twins pursued different paths through life, with different lovers and careers, their happiness levels remained almost perfectly matched, suggesting happiness might very well be determined on the genetic level.

process of hedonic adaptation may also apply to things that make us happy: Something that brings us intense pleasure in the first day of having it will bring us minimal pleasure after the first month. This is considered by some to be a by-product of the evolutionary process, where humans were forced to adapt quickly to a changing environment.

Some psychologists have disregarded the definition of happiness and attacked the long held notion that happiness is not only possible, it is virtuous. In a country where “the pursuit of happiness” is treated as a natural right, to suggest that happiness is not possible—or not good—borders on blasphemy. The work of Daniel Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard, takes a rather numbing view of happiness: That we as humans are unable to accurately predict what will make us happy; we suffer from an “impact bias” that prevents us from accurately formulating what we will feel when a certain event transpires. In other words, we can never know what will make us happy, not even with the use of Epicurus’ vaunted reason.

And is happiness even good for us? Countless studies have shown that a happy person tends to act in more socially constructive ways, that they will move forward to help themselves and their community, and will heal faster and lead healthier lives. Further research suggests that happiness is a kind of infinite feedback loop: The happier person will make better decisions that will bring them more happiness that will lead to even more good decisions.

However, some have called for us to examine the darker side of human happiness. Researchers earlier this year concluded that happier people are more likely to make

bigoted judgments⁶, overestimate their control over the world, are far more conceited, and presume that others must feel as they do, even when they don't. Furthermore, it is has been the most traditionally unhappy groups of people that have made the most social progress⁷ in the United States.

So where does all this leave old Epicurus? Clearly, the most profound judgment made by modern science on the nature of happiness is utter anathema for Epicurus: Happiness is not always a matter of free will. Though Epicurus hardly concerned himself with defining happiness, he was devoted to the idea that we could use reason and logic to break down our flawed notions of what would make us happy and rebuild them into hierarchies of true needs.⁸ He believed, until the very end, that we could learn what would make us happy, know it for certain, and pursue freely it with ease and dignity.

Modern psychology is arguing that reason has its limits, that we, try as we might, cannot escape, or supercede in command, the genetic imperative placed upon us from the moment we are conceived. No amount of reason can save us from our biology and millions of years of evolution. We make mistakes in supposing what makes us happy, we make mistakes in supposing what has made us happy, and sometimes we have made no mistakes at all, but have become trapped in genetic prisons, unable to achieve happiness because of errors in our brain chemistry.

⁶ The reason for this is unclear. Jim Holt, in his article for *The New York Times Magazine*, argues that it may be related to a feeling in happy people that "everything is fine" and that therefore analytical thought is unnecessary.

⁷ Namely African-Americans and women, who have been, historically, less happy than whites or men, but have made the most strides toward correcting inequality through positive action.

⁸ "For it is not the continuous drinkings and revellings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit (Letter to Menoeceus, pg 33.)"

Moreover, Epicurus believed in the supreme virtue of happiness and pleasure, that they were the ends of human achievement⁹, and that if pleasure was impossible, then so was justice and virtue. To believe that happiness and pleasure would lead to unjust ends such as bigotry obliterates Epicurus' worldview. Being good (living in pleasure) and doing good were considered the same thing to Epicurus, but modern research disputes that to a significant degree.

So if happiness is not always a matter of free will and the happy man may also be an unjust man, does that mean Epicurus is no longer applicable, much less correct? In truth, he has been just as right as he was wrong, because even if he missed what happiness is (so has everyone else, to be honest) or what constitutes happiness in itself, he was largely correct about the things that would bring us the emotion of happiness.

Part III: Dr. Epicurus

If there was one thing that Epicurus was right on the money about, it was money. Money, he asserted, would not bring us happiness in itself. It might help bring about initial happiness, but once the basic level of sustainability was met, money would not bring us additional happiness, especially so if one had money without the true essentials of a happy and pleasurable life.

There are few sociologists and psychologists who disagree, though some might encourage a more nuanced point of view. The average income of the American citizen more than doubled between the years of 1972 and 2000, and yet, the amount of happiness

⁹ "It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honorably and justly, nor again to live a life of prudence, honor, and justice without living pleasantly (Principal Doctrines, pg 35.)

reported by citizens remained the same. In a global assessment of values, researchers found that once the minimum amount of money to buy basic necessities was reached, additional wealth did not improve happiness at all.

Similarly, it is a well accepted fact that the more educated you are in America, the more wealthy you will become, but it is not a well accepted fact that the ever-expanding difference in wealth between the rich educated and the poor uneducated did not change the amount of happiness in either group beyond the initial estimation¹⁰.

Researchers have found that wealth may be an important factor on the national level, most likely because a wealthy nation can provide its citizens with a greater abundance of goods and services, such as security and healthcare. However, once a minimum level of economic prosperity—akin to Epicurus’ notion of basic necessities—has been met, further wealth will not increase the happiness of the population.¹¹

On a related point, researchers found a considerable difference in the happiness levels between the homeless in the United States and the homeless of Calcutta, India. Though the homeless of the United States may have access to food, shelter, and even healthcare, they are more likely to be unhappy than their Indian counterparts, who have no such “luck” in the form of services. However, the homeless of Calcutta have one important difference: Friends, who Epicurus considered vital¹². Homelessness in the United States is a profoundly isolating experience, often forcing the individual into a life devoid of

¹⁰ In more concise phrasing, the educated are happier and wealthier than the poor. However, as the wealthy become even richer, and the poor stay poor, the gap in both groups’ happiness levels remained the same as it always has.

¹¹ This depends somewhat on the cultural interpretation of “economic prosperity”. Small indigenous tribes in Africa can achieve this through successful trading of small goods, Western countries can achieve the same sense of prosperity through billions of dollars of trading.

¹² “Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of a complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship (Principal Doctrines, pg 37.)”

meaningful human contact. Calcutta's homeless are homeless as families, and can rely on another for support and friendship amidst a wretched existence, and are, therefore, more happy, even if they are hungrier and sicker.

One thing Epicurus warned us about was using "the mere opinions of others" as a guide for what would make us happy. If we were to follow everyone else's notion of what makes a person happy, we would only be made unhappy. Two interesting bits of research may prove Epicurus correct. Most people, regardless of social standing or current wealth, when asked how much more money they would need to be happy report around 20 percent. This would seem to indicate that "nothing is sufficient for him to whom what is sufficient seems little (Fragments, pg 44.)" is a true statement; even in wealth people desire more, always more, even if what they have is already enough.

On the same note, an experiment on relative wealth says much about the connection between the reckless pursuit of money and the opinions of others. If one family's income (Family A) increases while another's remains the same (Family B), Family A would likely think themselves better off. However, if the situation is reversed and Family A's income remains the same while Family B's increases, Family A would probably think themselves less better off, even though in reality their quality of living has not changed at all.

One can conclude from this experiment that perception of wealth does not depend solely on objective appraisal of personal possession, but subjective comparison based largely on the living status of those around us (relative wealth).¹³ As the wealth of those around us increases, so does our conception of what is considered acceptably wealthy.

¹³ Colloquism: It ain't that you got bling, it's that you got more bling than all the other suckas. Size does indeed matter.

This cycle gets worse as it goes on: The more we use other people to judge our acceptable level of wealth, the more we pursue greater wealth, the more we pursue greater wealth, the richer we become, and the richer we become, the narrower our normal social group becomes, so one finds himself or herself socializing with increasingly richer people, which just encourages the further pursuit of wealth as compared to everyone else.¹⁴

Hence, psychologically speaking, money never brings us happiness: As we become richer, so do the people around us, and so does our desire for more money. Our money, and whatever happiness that entails, and our desire for money, and whatever stress that entails, offset each other, leaving us neither happy or sad, simply pursuing more money. Epicurus sums up the entire experiment in one sentence: “The wealth demanded by nature is both limited and easily procured; that demanded by idle imaginings stretches on to infinity (Principal Doctrines, pg 36).¹⁵

So, when Epicurus said “live unknown”, he might have been trying to warn us about what psychologists would later prove. If we remove ourselves from society, as Epicurus suggested, and go find a small, modest house with a garden and some friends, we would cease to be bombarded by “mere opinions” from the rest of society. In order to stop our mad quest to “one-up” and compete with each other in American society, we must remove ourselves from it.

¹⁴ Richard A. Easterlin explains this process in more scientific language in his article *The Economics of Happiness*.

¹⁵ This is where the concept of hedonic adaptation comes into play once more. While the new things we buy with money bring us immediate happiness (new house, boat, etc), that happiness is lost because, evolutionarily speaking, we are made to find norms in the midst of change, to become accustomed and comfortable to the environment. A new, bigger house may seem amazing at first, but after a while, it will be normal, and we will once again lust to acquire that which is better than normal, and an even bigger house.

Pursuing this wealth, of course, would destroy our possibility for happiness in Epicurus' thinking. What time is there for thinking and friends, and what chance is there for freedom, when our lives are consumed by the slavery of other's ideal? How far would our "idle imaginings" take us down the road to despair? Epicurus might say it would take us all the way to the end.

One professor of economics, however, requests a more nuanced view of wealth. Robert H. Frank argues that it is not so much wealth that causes our state of unhappiness, but the incorrect expenditure of it. Frank continues to argue for the significance of relative wealth, but brings in two new ideas: The difference between conspicuous consumption and inconspicuous consumption.

Conspicuous consumption is the normal behavior most people associate with extreme wealth: Personal goodies like Ferraris, summer homes, private jets, things that stand out and yet serve no greater purpose beyond the sick pleasure of the individual.

Inconspicuous consumption is spending money to acquire, one might say, more Epicurean pleasures: technology for a cleaner environment, buying a son's baseball team new uniforms, donating to a friend's political causes, and other things whose benefit goes beyond the individual but is not as readily apparent to the curious eye.

The problem with wealth, according to Frank, is not that we have too much of it, it is that we are spending it on the wrong things¹⁶. We prefer ridiculous, superfluous toys to catch the eyes of our competitors, instead of less noticeable things that would, overall, increase our happiness both for ourselves and the people around us.

¹⁶ Frank gives an excellent example of the unreasonable choices our society makes in his essay *How not to buy happiness*: Society A prefers big cars, big houses, and big traffic jams. Society B prefers clean, efficient mass transit, smaller houses, less time at the office, and smaller cars. Americans choose to live in Society A.

Though this may seem confusing at first, the answer of why we do this is obvious to Epicurus: mistaken notions of happiness and faulty reasoning. We have not examined our beliefs of what will make us happy, Epicurus would likely argue, and we have failed to use reason when making decisions about our money. We have, in our own flawed thought process, determined that a big car will make us happy. If we used to reason the break apart the silent argument that justifies our purchase of the vehicle, we would know that it would not in fact make us happy, that we could be happy without it.

Conspicuous consumption then, would be unreasoned beliefs of happiness. Inconspicuous consumption would be an Epicurean, reasoned decision where we would have taken the time to examine our true happiness and make a more logical choice beyond the limits of “mere opinions”.

Our mistaken notion of what makes a happy person propels us toward these objects, often advertised as embodying certain abstract concepts¹⁷ that we really need, but are not aware of.

However, Frank also argues that the cost of living in a society is a sort of “moral sacrifice”. Though we may only be desiring to help our kids get into a better school, our additional accumulation of wealth will spur the people around us to begin their own pursuits of greater wealth. By succeeding, we make others fail. So, in order to escape this trap where the only way we may spend less on material wealth is if everyone stops their race for wealth simultaneously, otherwise, those who drop out will simply lose, at least by our culture’s definition.

¹⁷ Example: Jeep often sells the idea of freedom, Coke often associates their product with youth and sex, etc.

Part IV: WWED

What would Epicurus do? Probably the same thing he did thousands of years ago. He would retire from society, maybe pick up in a modest cabin in the San Luis Valley with a few writers and thinkers, noodling around in the hills, chatting with people in the hot springs now and then, and working on his simple garden. Society hasn't changed all that much in several thousand years: There are still those who pursue happiness with reckless, asinine abandon, not thinking what they want or why they want it. There is still gluttonous, obese wealth, and there are still those who would move to have power over others and dominate the weak. There are still good people, and still good friends, and still much nature and peace left in the world, if one is willing to find it. Epicurus would probably not try to fix society, he would try and help the individual find his personal happiness, then take a nice walk back to his cabin. Society, to Epicurus, cannot be defeated, but it can be avoided, and happiness is never as illusive as we think.

Though science may have proven the old Greek wrong about certain aspects of happiness, namely that it is solely dependent of free will, some research supports his centuries-old thought as well. Most people desire friends and companionship, most people desire freedom, but there are few in our society who desire thought and simple food. Perhaps that would be Epicurus' greatest criticism of our time, that we have not thought at all about our happiness, only reacted.

We have bought billions of pills, and yet depression rates continue to increase. We have bought mansion after mansion, and yet, just like Richard Cory, we go home to those

lovely mansions and put a bullet through our head. We have bought millions of books, millions of exercise machines, millions of beautiful new clothes, all doomed to rest in millions of dark little rooms across the country. We have tried to buy our happiness, here in America, and no amount of money, great or greater, has ever come close to purchasing it.

Bought, bought, bought, and no thought. Do these things really make us happy? Can they ever make us happy? What will make us happy? Questions few people ask themselves, and certainly not in the way Epicurus would have wanted them asked. Will psychology help us notice our own mistaken notions of happiness, will the questions the psychologists ask give us answers about our own innate drives and wills, about what truly makes us happy? Not even Epicurus knows.

And what about the future? Will America's quest for purchasable happiness¹⁸ lead us to a place where all true happiness is lost? Will we someday believe that nothing is happy except that which is hard to get? The myth of Horatio Alger and the rags-to-riches fable persists, and if something is not earned through hard work, does it count at all? Will the easy things we miss, like the friends, freedom, and the peaceful time to think, be lost because we cannot "earn" them, be lost because they are already here, hiding in the plain sight? We look in front of us and above us, not at our feet, at what we already have. Will we change? Not even Epicurus knows.

What of death? In a time of terrorism and violence, when death seems as easy as a small hidden bomb in a trash can next to the bus stop, can we ever do what Epicurus recommends we do, and realize "there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living (Letter to Menoeceus, pg 30.)"?

¹⁸ Just three easy payments of \$19.95! Call now!

In a country consumed by the fear of death, the fear of dropping out of society, the fear of being left behind as everyone climbs into wealth, can we ever believe in natural happiness? Can we ever believe that which is outside of our consume and consumer society is good, when all that we are told to believe is good is wrapped up for Christmas time cheer? Not even Epicurus knows.

What of politics, and the climate of fear? “A man who causes fear cannot be free from fear (Fragments, pg 51.)”, Epicurus writes. So where does that leave our current political leaders? Nothing more than both the peddlers and victims of fear? There is much uncertainty, and little reason in the world. Epicurus may not have been a great leader or conqueror, but thousands of years after his death, it is clear we could all do a lot worse than a little garden next to a little hut under the sun with a few friends in a little forgotten part of the world. That much Epicurus knows.