

THE HAPPY LIFE

The *Happy Life* was the first work written by Augustine immediately following his conversion in 386 A.D. Only a few months after embracing the Christian faith, Augustine had decided to retreat to a rural estate at Cassiciacum in Northern Italy that had been offered to him by a friend. He had recently given up an influential position as professor of rhetoric in Milan and was looking forward to spending some time in intellectual and spiritual contemplation. With him was his mother, Monica, his son, Adeodatus, and a few close friends. Like many of the works that Augustine produced during this period, *The Happy Life* is written as a dialogue between himself and his companions. The focus of the work—not surprisingly, given the title—is on happiness and the means by which it is attained.

BOOK I

Happiness as the End of Human Action

10. Then I asked again, “Do we all wish to be happy?”

I had hardly begun to ask the question, when they all agreed with one voice.

“Does that person,” I continued, “seem to be happy who does not have what he wants?”

“Definitely not,” they replied.

“So is everyone happy, then, who has what he wants?”

At this my mother responded, “If he wishes for good things and possesses them, then he is happy; but if he wishes for bad things, even if he possess them, he is unhappy.”

Smiling at her, I said with joy, “Mother, you have gained true mastery of the stronghold of philosophy. For certainly you were trying to express yourself like Cicero, who similarly dealt with the matter. For, in the *Hortensius*, the work he wrote in praise and defense of philosophy, he stated, “Not philosophers, certainly, but those who are prone to argue, say all are happy who live as they wish. That is not true, for to wish for what is not fitting is the worst kind of misery. It is not quite so unfortunate not to attain what you wish as to wish to acquire what you ought not. For greater evil is brought about through a wicked will than beneficial things through good fortune.”

At these words, my mother spoke out so enthusiastically that we, forgetting her sex, might have thought that some great man was seated with us. Meanwhile I became aware of the divine source that flowed through her words.

Then Licentius said, “But you ought to tell us what a person should wish for in order to be happy and what sorts of things he should desire.”

“Invite me on your birthday,” I said, “and I will gladly accept whatever you serve. In this spirit, I beg you to be my guest today and do not ask for what is not prepared.”

... I went on to ask, “Do we all now agree that no one can be happy who does not have what he wants and that not everyone who necessarily has what he wants is happy?”

They all expressed their agreement.

“we all wish to be happy”: The idea that all humans desire to be happy is a truth that was accepted by every philosophical school in antiquity. Augustine never wavered from this conviction, although his ideas about how happiness was to be attained would undergo radical transformations throughout his life.

During the course of the conversation on happiness at Cassiciacum, it is determined that happiness is the possession of a good not subject to the whims of fate. This, essentially, is the starting point of Stoic ethics. How does Augustine differ from the Stoics in his views on what must ground this invulnerable good?

Happiness as the Possession of an Invulnerable Good

11. "What about this," I asked. "Do you agree that everyone who is not happy is unhappy?"

They did not doubt that.

"Is everyone, then, who does not possess what he wants unhappy?"

They all agreed with this.

"But what ought a man do in order to become happy?" I asked. For perhaps this too is a point that should be served up at our feast, so that the hearty appetite of Licentius might not be neglected. For that which a man wants ought to be obtained when he wishes it.

They all assented to that point.

"Then it must be something," I said, "that must always be enduring, and ought not to depend upon chance nor subject to any misfortunes. For whatever is mortal and transitory we cannot possess when we wish and for as long as we wish."

All were in agreement.

But Trigetius said, "There are many lucky people who possess abundantly and plentifully those things which are delightful, but which are also frail and subject to misfortune. And these lack nothing which they desire."

I replied to him, "Is a person happy who is afraid?"

"It does not seem so," he replied.

"Can a person be without fear, if he can lose what he loves?"

"No he can't," he replied.

"But those things of chance can be lost. Therefore the person who loves and possesses them can never be happy."

He did not argue further.

At this point my mother said, "Even if a person was certain that he would not lose those things, he still would not be satisfied with them. Therefore he is unhappy because he is always wanting."

I replied to her, "Wouldn't that person seem happy to you who has all those things in excess and abundance, but who moderates his desires and enjoys them contentedly, decently, and pleasantly?"

"In that case," she said, "he is happy, then, not because of those things, but due to the moderation of his own mind."

"Extremely well put," I said. "No better answer to this question could have been given by you or anyone else. Let us have no doubt that if anyone desires to be happy, he must obtain for himself that which always endures and which can never be taken away from him through severe misfortune."

"We are in full agreement on that point already," said Trigetius.

Happiness as the Possession of God

"Does God seem to you to be eternal and ever abiding?" I asked.

"That is so obviously true," answered Licentius, "that no further questioning on this point is needed." All the others concurred with pious devotion.

"It follows, therefore, that he who possesses God is happy," I concluded.

12. As they readily and full-heartedly assented to this, I continued:

“the only point now that needs to be inquired about is what sort of person possesses God—for that person certainly will be happy. I’d like to hear your opinions on this matter.”

Licentius then volunteered, “That person who lives a good life possesses God.”

And Trygetius continued, “That person who does what God wills him to do possesses God.”

Lastiduanus also agreed with this opinion.

The boy, who was the youngest of all, said, “That person who does not have an unclean spirit possesses God.”

My mother approved all these answers, but especially this last one.

Navigius remained silent. When I asked him what he thought, he responded that this last opinion was the most pleasing to him. So that Rusticus would not seem to be neglected on a matter of such importance, I asked for his opinion too, for it appeared to me that he was silent, not so much because of deliberation, but because he was shy. He agreed with Trygetius....

Augustine. “The Happy Life.” Trans. Michael S. Russo, *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Minds*. First Edition. New York: SophiaOmni Press, 2011.

Copyright © Michael S. Russo, 2011. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.