



H. R. Meyer pinxit

Happy!!!



Content



“I am content; that is a blessing greater than riches; and he to whom that is given need ask no more.” Henry Fielding

In the modern world “happiness” has become a somewhat abused, banal word, the expression that we may often hear: “You have it now, you should be happy?”, “Are you happy getting this promotion, house, car, etc.”, “I am happy, I am in love!”. It sounds (and it is) rather superficial portraying happiness as a state induced by momentary emotions, possessions, romantic relationships, etc. The deep, philosophical meaning, which ancient and later philosophers applied to this word, has been distorted.

Our human life reminds an ocean wave with its picks and troughs, happy and unhappy moments largely based on our emotional responses or, to be precise, how we choose to process and interpret the life events. I find it erroneous to use the term contentment to describe emotional splashes, leaps of sensation usually associated with happiness by most people.

So-called happiness based on satisfaction of needs and wants always remains transient and shifting.

Contentment is an attitude that says: “I will be satisfied with what God has given me”



“It is difficult to find happiness within oneself but is impossible to find it anywhere else” Arthur Schopenhauer

We are striving to achieve happiness while realizing that contentment (acceptance of what is) is hard to attain. We always try to gain something, have more possessions, comparing with others as we want to exceed them, stand out giving huge importance to the impression we make on them and their opinions. We expect that these achievements will deliver what we call happiness hoping it will last, rejecting the inner understanding that it may not and rather will not. Thus, by not accepting what is, no matter how it looks and feels like, we build illusions, self-deceit, call it happiness (or unhappiness, as the case may be) allow our mind to create a story upon story of our life situations built exclusively on our perception and labeling of things.

“He is richest who is content with the least, for content is the wealth of nature.” Socrates

What we call Happiness depends on the external things that are in constant flux. Constant change is the main quality of life. Happiness is not Joy. It is a temporal state, which is usually gone when the conditions that have caused it disappear and it is substituted by the opposite. Mostly, it is based on the sensorial experience, hormonal reactions or mind created. Its conditional existence is realized once you apply the philosophical view to the concept of happiness.

Contentment signifies a state of stability, balance and strength, providing a profound, undisturbed feeling of freedom, fulfillment, lasting joy, and bliss achieved by taming your mind. This sensation of awareness lies deep inside our consciousness, being fundamental and profound.

Philosophy is a way to contentment



“Give your whole mind to philosophy. Sit at her side and pay her constant court and an enormous gap will widen between yourself and other men. You’ll end up far in advance of all mankind, and not far behind the gods themselves.” Seneca, Letters from a Stoic

To grasp the practical approach to philosophy promoted by the ancients we can turn to the statement of Epictetus that philosophy is primarily a matter of “**deeds, not words**”. For the ancients, in other words, philosophy is a way of life. To use philosophy according to the Hellenic philosophers, the wisdom we gather must permeate our being and express itself through excellent action in the world.

Suffering and Meaning of Life



As long as we heroically embrace our suffering, we will be aiding the process whereby we forge meaning and become fully human.

The bible story about a man falling from paradise is the illustration that the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is tasted and the man has discovered the distinction.

Understanding this distinction is a cause of our psychological sufferings, as our perception classifies the life events as such.

This discrimination between good and evil appears the main cause of human suffering.

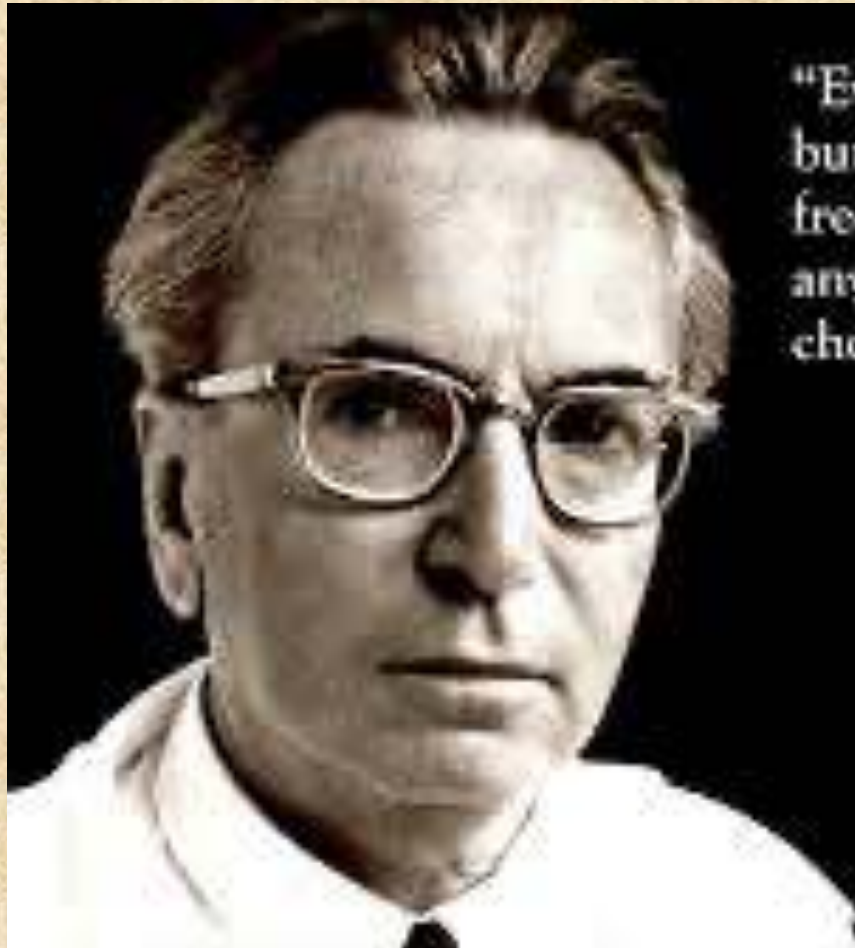


“Indeed, from the bottom of my soul I am gratefully disposed to all my misery and sickness, and to whatever is imperfect in me, because such things leave me a hundred back-doors through which I can escape from permanent habits.” Friedrich Nietzsche

According to Nietzsche, suffering is a way to liberation and contentment is a final destination.

Profound suffering proves to be an indispensable ingredient in self-transformation. Nietzsche believed those able to suffer deeply know how to use pain as an impetus to burn away all that is weak and superfluous in them. All of us have emotional tendencies, neuroses, and habits we would be better off burning away, but when things are going well we think little of making changes. When mired in a prolonged state of suffering, enacting radical changes in our way of being proves to be much easier and fulfilling.

Nietzsche felt that what we call **happiness** was an ephemeral, fleeting condition that could end at any moment...and it does. But **contentment** could only be found in having vital strength and a fighting spirit against all of the obstacles that limit liberty and self-assertiveness.



"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Viktor E. Frankl

“Man, the bravest of animals, and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not repudiate suffering as such; he desires it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far.” (On Genealogy of Moral, Friedrich Nietzsche)

Ernest Becker, an American cultural anthropologist, considered the need for meaning in life to be more important than did Nietzsche. Mankind must not only believe life to have meaning in order to flourish, as Nietzsche alluded to, but for Becker, mankind needs to be convinced that life has meaning to survive at all.

If a person loses the meaning of life his path to happiness is blocked, depression overcomes and suicide seems like the only outcome. During forced lockdowns, when the flow of life has been disrupted for many people, suicides have skyrocketed. People have been deprived even of their short moments of happiness, and subjected to meaningless suffering.

“Suffering is essential to life, and therefore does not flow in upon us from outside, but everyone carries around within himself its perennial source.” Arthur Schopenhauer




“Suffering becomes beautiful when anyone bears great calamities with cheerfulness, not through insensibility but through the greatness of mind” Aristotle

Life cannot have meaning without suffering and suffering cannot be meaningless. Can we say that happiness is the absence of suffering? Perhaps. However, contentment is the full understanding and **acceptance** of shortcomings and adversities of life, so suffering appears a natural flow of events.

James Hollis, an American Jungian psychoanalyst, offers the following advice:

“The task implicit in the encounter with despair is to sustain the struggle, to move from being victim to being hero, from the pathetic to the tragic...the task implicit in despair is not to deny the terrible feelings, nor to relinquish the modest dignity of our humanity, but to suffer through toward whatever awaits beyond the tautologies of despair.” (James Hollis)



Despair is suffering
without meaning.

Viktor E. Frankl

While all animals suffer due to deprivations or injuries, humans are alone in their capability to create suffering in the midst of external comforts. We ruminate on the past and worry about the future, and as Kierkegaard put it, we know that “terror, perdition, annihilation, dwell next door to every man” (Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*).

*“It is better to be unhappy and know the worst than to be
happy in a fools’ paradise”*

Fyodor Dostoevsky



“It is in the swamplands where soul is fashioned and forged, where we encounter life purpose, its dignity and its deepest meaning.” (James Hollis, Swamplands of the Soul)




“Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be.” (William Hazlitt)

“We may also think”, wrote James Hollis, “that if we undertake a sincere and disciplined analysis we will find the high ground and be able to build our castle there. Instead, we find to our dismay that we fall back into the old places, the familiar swamplands we have always known despite our heroic efforts. The great rhythms of nature, of time and tide, of fate and destiny, and of our own psyche, move their powerful ways quite outside our will.” (James Hollis, *Swamplands of the Soul*)

Hollis suggests that the ultimate aim of life should not be the realization of happiness, but the cultivation of meaning, and furthermore, he maintains that it is within the swamplands of suffering which we fall back into time and time again, that we can discover and forge meaning.

As Aeschylus has stated: “Wisdom comes alone with suffering”

“Loneliness is the poverty of self; solitude is richness of self.” *May Sarton*



Solitary trees,
if they grow at all,
grow strong.
Winston Churchill



*“We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation.”
(Four Quarters, TS Eliot)*

While moving into a further union with ever vaster swampland may not make us happier, it will stimulate personal growth and self-transformation, initiates a rebirth into a greater state of being – which is a foundation of **contentment, stillness of mind.**

"A gem cannot be polished without friction, nor a man perfected without trials."



"An untroubled life is "a dead sea." To have nothing to stir you and rouse you to action, no attack by which to try the strength of your spirit, merely to lie in unshaken idleness – this is not to be tranquil; it is to be stranded in a windless calm."

Seneca, Epistles

“Never let success get to your head; never let failure get to your heart.”



“We suffer more in our imagination than in reality”
Seneca

Far too many of us hold the distorted view that failure is by-and-large a bad thing and something to be avoided. This view, however, is immensely limiting. Not only does it hold us back from taking risks and trying new things, but it is also one of the main reasons so few people attain success in the pursuit of their bigger goals.

Paradoxically, when we take a more laidback approach to failure, accepting its necessity and not fearing it so much, we free ourselves to perform at a much higher level.

In reality, very often attempting something, even if we fail, is empowering and a great boon to our self-esteem – we learn that we are capable of dealing with setbacks and we become much more resilient individuals.

The ability to recognize and accept the possibility of failure and take it as a life lesson is a liberation from suffering if the failure is treated as a disaster.

Stoicism

We cannot change the predetermined events in our life but what we can change is our response to these events.



Virtue in all things:

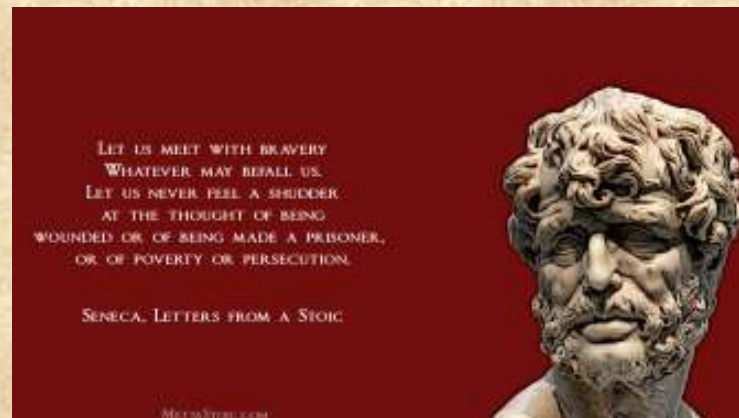
*Wisdom,
Courage,
Temperance, Justice*



“There is one road to peace and happiness (keep the thought near by morning, noon and night): renunciation of externals; handing over everything to fortune and the deity.” Epictetus

Stoicism is a philosophy based on the transcendence of destructive emotions; to transcend so successfully that one never even feels discontent, but worthy. **We acknowledge the source of our discontent and waste no time in doing something about it, it can be done and must be done.**

One of the defining characteristics of the Stoics was an unwavering commitment to focusing only on what was in their direct control—their will, their actions, their effort.



“You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.” Marcus Aurelius



The Stoics believed that it was not the attainment of any external goods, be it fame, good looks, power over others, or wealth that were key to a good life, but rather a mastery of the mind. External things can come and go due to factors outside of our control so if we stake our happiness on any of these things we give up control of our lives.

What separates Stoicism from much of the classroom philosophy is its emphasis on **practical application**. To be practical is to be prepared--to decide in advance what you will do, or what you'll need to have done, should something undesirable take place.

“Fortify yourself with contentment. It is an impregnable fortress” Epictetus



By cultivating the ‘god within’, the Stoics believed we could achieve inner freedom untouched by the ‘iron hammer’ of fate. This inner freedom would not enable one to change what has already been predetermined, but instead would allow one to respond and react to these events freely and consciously, and thereby control the effect that such events had on one’s happiness.

Key to the Stoic way of life is the idea that what is most important to our well-being, and conducive to a tranquil existence, is not what happens to us, but the **inner discourse** that accompanies the events of our life.

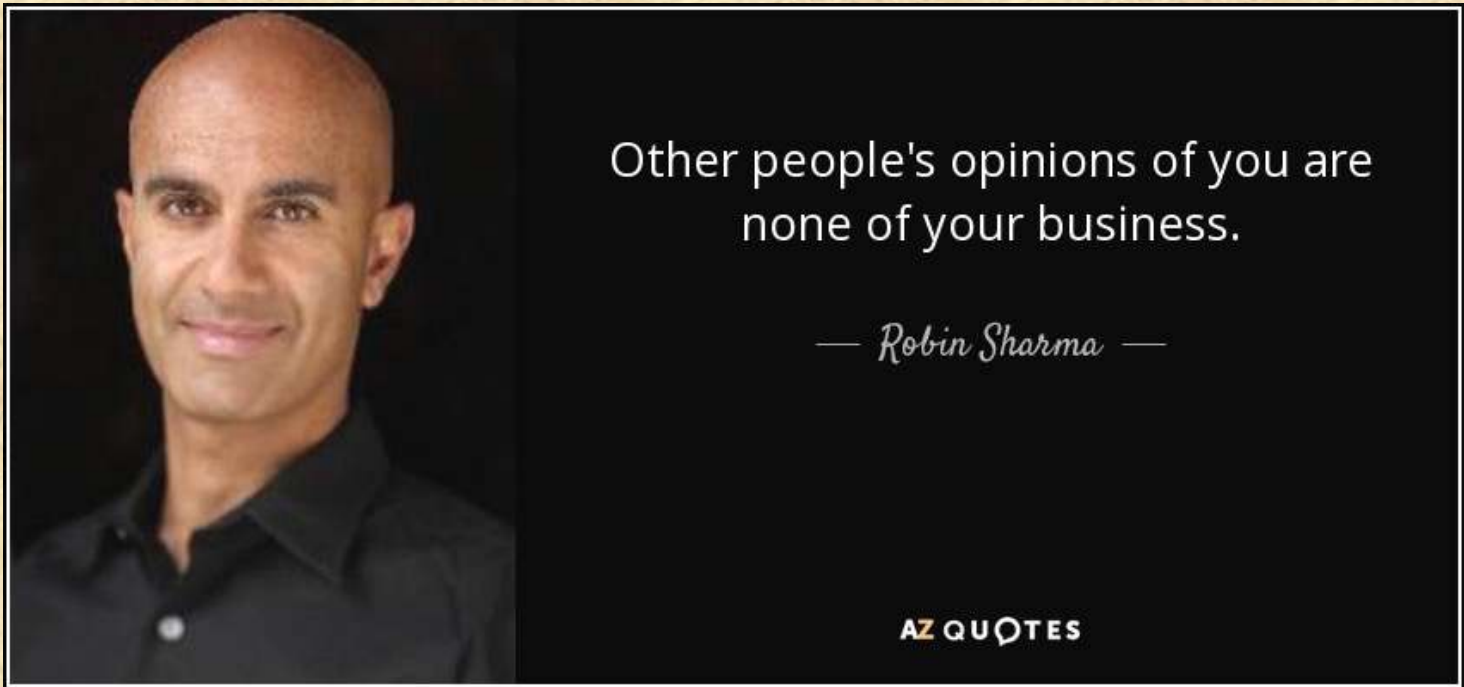


*“We must accept what happens as we would accept the fall of dice,
and then arrange our affairs in whatever way reason best
determines.” (Plato, Republic)*



“It never ceases to amaze me: we all love ourselves more than other people, but care more about their opinion than our own.”

Marcus Aurelius, Meditation



“Some things are up to us and some things are not up to us.” (Epictetus)

The contrast between the events of our life predetermined by fate, and the inner fortress of freedom we have the potential to cultivate, defines the key tenet of Stoicism: “Some things are up to us and some things are not up to us.”

The actions and opinions of other people, our health, our reputation, and the amount of wealth we amass, are examples of things not up to us. These things can be somewhat influenced through our actions, but ultimately they are things outside of our complete control. The things which are up to us, or within our complete control, are the things that emanate from our mind – for example, our opinions, judgments, beliefs, desires, and goals. Being dependent on the opinions of others is like putting yourself in chains voluntarily and being extremely scared of them being removed.

Diogenes, despite his self-chosen poverty, considered himself to be a king. He was the richest of men because he **owned something infinitely more valuable than money – a mind that has no need of it.**

“Constant misfortune brings this one blessing: Those whom it always assails, it eventually fortifies.” (*Seneca, Letters from a Stoic*)



“It is in no man’s power to have whatever he wants; but he has it in his power not to wish for what he hasn’t got, and cheerfully make the most of the things that do come his way.” (Seneca, Letters from a Stoic)

True contentment comes from a deep-seated belief that things are okay as they are, that every experience, setback and triumph alike, was uniquely and meaningfully assigned to you, and that your judgments are completely, entirely in your control.

The Stoics thought that people needed to be more conscious of the transitory nature of all things.

They believed that as one became more aware that their life could end at any time they would realize the relative triviality of so many of the things that most people worry about.

“It is not things that trouble us, but our judgments about things.”
Epictetus



“There is only one road to happiness – let this rule be at hand morning, noon, and night: stay detached from things that are not up to you.” Epictetus, Discourses

But what about the times in our life when we face not just the absence of certain external goods, but grave misfortunes and adversity? What advice did the Stoics have for these times? For this, we must pay attention to the words of Epictetus: “It is not things that trouble us, but our judgments about things.”

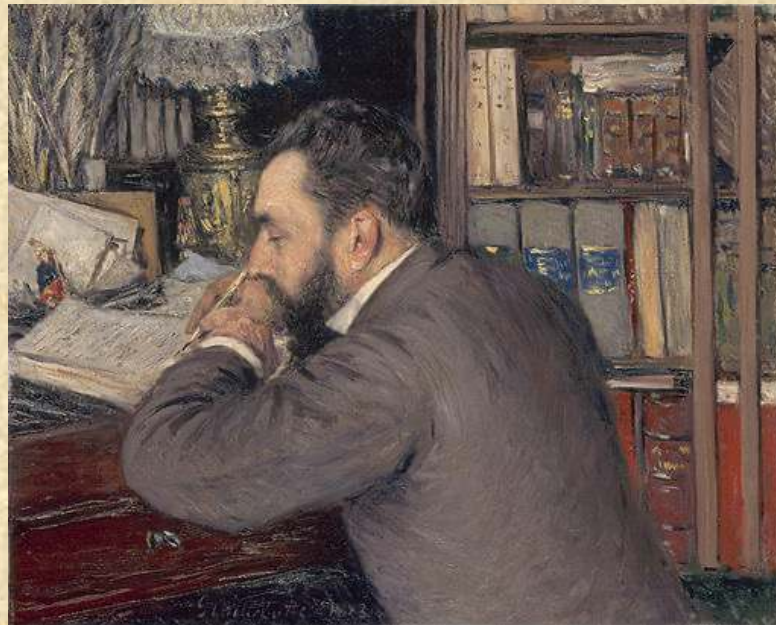
The principles which guided the Stoics’ life likely seem extreme to many and exceedingly difficult to follow.

However it doesn’t mean that we should give up our efforts to achieve liberation, as the process itself, and steps of achievement will keep extending our freedom from attachments and dependencies leading to the state of contentment.

“The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing” Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

The Stoics were extremely cognizant of the fact that the vast majority of people are incapable of dealing with the hardships of life without becoming worn down and eventually defeated.

The Stoics thought of philosophy as a tool we can use to help us sculpt and shape our character into an impenetrable fortress, one able to withstand struggles and adversity with calmness and strength.



“For choice cannot be hindered or harmed by anything that lies outside the sphere of choice, but only by choice itself... nothing except our own judgment is capable of causing us to become disturbed or confused” Epictetus, Discourses

The stoic attains this abiding tranquility by cultivating mastery of the one thing in the world considered fully within our control –our powers of judgment and choice.

The ancient philosophers did not seek out adversity, but when it struck, they viewed it as an opportunity, not a curse.

“It was only when I lay there on the rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good...And that is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say “Bless you, prison, for having been a part of my life.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago

It is crucial to note here that the Stoics did not advocate that one shun all those things which are not up to us. Rather things such as health, wealth, a good reputation, good food and drink, love and sexual pleasures, all these and more were things which the Stoic enjoyed if they came his way. Yet unlike practically everyone else, the Stoic was not attached to them and his happiness was not dependent on them. This meant not only that in their absence the Stoic still lived a life filled with joy and tranquility, but that when external goods did come his way he was able to enjoy them without being anxious about losing them.

*Tranquility and contentment are like wisdom and awareness.
They can easily substitute each other without losing the essence.*

If we make the commonly made mistake of assuming contentment to be synonymous with happiness, we'll never be able to just be.



“You become what you give your attention to” Epictetus



“Isn’t it the height of folly to learn inessential things when time’s so desperately short!” Seneca

The quality of your attention determines the quality of your life.

What we watch, what we read, who we’re around... Whatever consumes our attention consumes and shapes us.

Attention is a finite resource that begs for our diligent allocation and reservation.

In essence, we have two choices: become masters over our attention, or be mastered by the forces that fight for it.

“The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.” -Albert Einstein

How do we go about changing our thinking? By changing the inputs, or rather, the things to which we give our attention.

To be **content**, identify, pay attention to, and pursue what is meaningful to you, not what you love, as love is fickle, but **meaning** is the only thing that persists and remains.

He who is not contented with what he has, would not be contented with what he would like to have. Socrates



“There is a limit to the time assigned you, and if you don’t use it to free yourself it will be gone and will never return.” Marcus Aurelius



"Loss is nothing other than change, and change is the delight of universal nature, according to whose will all things come to pass."

Marcus Aurelius

The Stoics thought that people needed to be more conscious of the transitory nature of all things.

This technique, which is now referred to as negative visualization, entails reflecting on the transitory nature of all the external things in our life.

And at every moment we have the only question: "Am I to enjoy or endure?"

The Stoics believed that as one became more aware that their life could end at any time they would realize the relative triviality of so many of the things that most people worry about.

*“Our search for happiness is a sign that we don’t have it” André
Gide*



“The fear of finding oneself alone – that is what they suffer from – and so they don’t find themselves at all.” Andre Gide, The Immoralist

When we become old and frail, we ask ourselves: “What we have achieved? What have we been striving for?”, we begin to live by the past emotions, by remembering those fleeting happy moments which **in reality blocked our way to contentment** and joy. To some, the achievements in various fields of science or literature do indeed create a sense of satisfaction, that the life wasn’t wasted, while not allowing ourselves to admit that all this was just our story, vanity, and ultimately an illusion.

As Nietzsche writes in “Untimely Meditations”:

“A traveler who had seen many countries, peoples, and several of the earth’s continents, was asked what attribute he had found in men everywhere. He said: “They have a propensity for laziness.” To others, it seems that he should have said: “They are all fearful. They hide themselves behind customs and opinions suppressing their individuality and staging their life drama.”

Mediocrity as a barrier to contentment.

“There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance.”

Socrates

Most people in modern society remain oblivious to this higher level of reality and are rather absorbed in an obsessive compulsion to work to accumulate money and things and engage in the pursuit of pleasure and comfort they regard as happiness.

“Many who are trapped in this self-imprisoning world of sterile work and trivial pursuits are unhappy—unhappy to the point of clinical depression. Some are unable to sustain their hollow drive to work and consume, and collapse in fatigue, despair, and perplexed disillusionment...” (“Normality does not equal mental health”, Steven Bartlett)

Three traits which typify the mediocre individual are intellectual, emotional, and moral mediocrity.

“If you want to be wrong then follow the masses.” Socrates

Intellectual mediocrity is characterized by a low value placed on learning and a total absence of interest in cultivating one's intellect, critical thinking and seeking out new and challenging cognitive horizons.

The intellectually mediocre individual parrots the prevailing social and political paradigms, and uncritically accepts the dogma of the day and standards of political correctness.

Emotional mediocrity is characterized by an impoverished inner world and a lack of internal depth and richness. As a result of emotional mediocrity, one requires constant and increasingly stimulating input from the external world, which over time renders one's inner world ever more desolate.

Moral mediocrity is marked by a lack of individual autonomy and personal moral compass, and hence an inability to take a stand against socially accepted standards, principles, and values. The defining quality of the morally mediocre is an absence of courage and the lack of a “will to stand alone”.

“Contentment could only be found in having vital strength and a fighting spirit against all of the obstacles” Friedrich Nietzsche

“Any human being who does not wish to be part of the masses need only stop making things easy for himself. Let him follow his conscience, which cries out to him: “Be yourself! All that you are now doing, thinking, desiring, all that is not you.” - Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations

Unfortunately, in our most formative years, we are thrown into an institution designed to breed collectivized and obedient workers, not individuated individuals. Like Pavlov’s dogs, our behavior is conditioned by whistles and bells. We are rewarded for regurgitating information, for standing in line when commanded, and for affirming the status quo. Day in and day out, our schooling feeds our herd instinct and starves our impulse for independence, and so **when we emerge into adulthood we lack the cognitive resources required to individuate and go our own way.** We perceive life through the lens of whatever worldview our society deems correct and sane.

“To be yourself in a world that is always trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment”.

Ralf Valdo Emerson

Our happiness is heavily dependent on societal norms and demands.

“The herd doesn’t like individuality and our deviations that contradict the established model of sanity may cause us to be ostracized by this society and, therefore, causes isolation” *Ernest Becker (American cultural anthropologist), Angel in Armor*

Contentment remains the unachievable goal if you surrender your individuality!

“...we value no man by what he is, but add the trappings in which he is adorned.” Seneca, Epistles

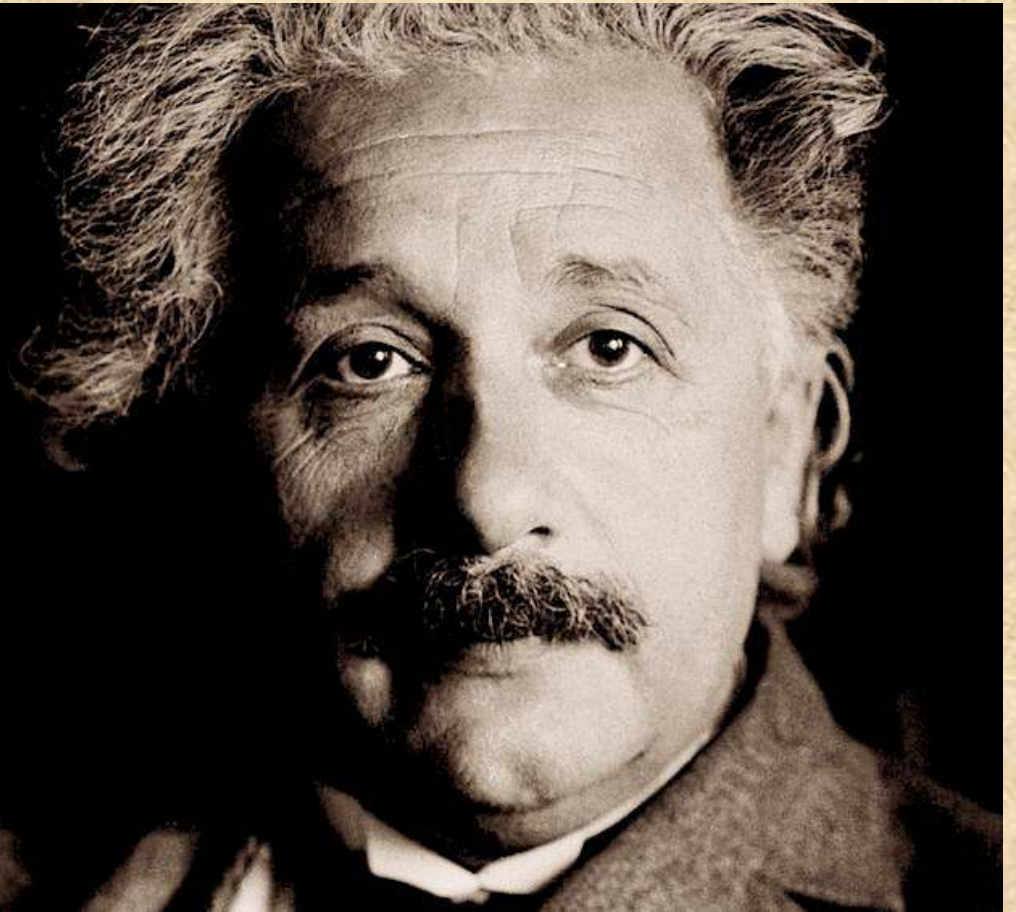
“None of those who have been raised to a lofty height by riches and honors is really great. Why then does he seem great? Because you are measuring the pedestal along with the man. A dwarf is not tall, though he stands on a mountain...This is the error under which we labor, and how we are deceived; we value no man by what he is, but add the trappings in which he is adorned.” *Seneca, Epistles*

And this is how we look at those governing over us, not assessing their worth as a capable individual, as a capable leader but measuring them together with their pedestal on which they’ve been placed by sheer human stupidity.

*“Great spirits have always encountered violent
opposition from mediocre minds”*

"Great spirits have
always encountered
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from mediocre minds."

Albert Einstein



“If you want to be wrong then follow the masses.”
Socrates



“Beneath the apparent indifference and lack of involvement of the mediocre there always lies a secret fear of having to make decisions for themselves...They dissolve among the multitude.” (Jose Ortega y Gasset)

Intellectual, emotional, and moral mediocrity coincide to produce the mediocre individual. as Jung pointed out in similarly: “While man still lives as a herd-animal, he has no psyche of his own.”

Mediocre individuals must band together, identify with, and merge into a mediocre mass.

The communal pride shared by mediocre individuals gives rise to feelings of envy, hostility, and resentment towards all those who attempt to rise above mediocrity.

The so-called normal people have a pathogenic willingness to inflict harm, which remains latent until an appropriate situation arises, therefore, mediocrities are the foundation and tool of all tyrannies required by them to operate.

10 philosophical mistakes

Happiness and Contentment

Mortimer Adler in his “10 philosophical mistakes” indicates contentment as a temporary condition, based on satisfaction of needs and wants, while happiness is something, which we are striving for, leaving nothing more to be desired.

We may accept his definition for the sake of consistency in this section. Adler has indicated that it is wrong to expect your happiness to be delivered by outside forces like, for example, the government.

Nothing is more important than achieving individual happiness.

The philosophical mistake Adler describes is “the presence of two ultimate goals according to Stuart Mill, i.e. “personal happiness and general happiness for the good of society. If there is a conflict, the latter should take precedence over the former. The general happiness should prevail.” It completely discards the nature of the human being. According to Adler, “it is impossible to have more than one ultimate goal, as they are no longer ultimate conflicting with each other.” Mill didn’t realize the fundamental differences between individual and communal ultimate goals. Simply saying, an individual is an end to be served and society is used as means to achieve the goal. Nothing is more important than achieving individual happiness. The goal of just society is to deliver good to all members contributing to their individual happiness. It is impossible for an individual to work directly for the general happiness (which is rather abstract)

Is living a morally good life sufficient to achieve happiness?

Another philosophical mistake Adler finds in the philosophy of Emmanuel Kant, Stoics and also Plato. He is objecting to their claim that living a morally good life is sufficient to achieve the state of happiness. He points at the word “suffice” as a philosophical flaw indicating that other necessary ingredients are equally important. Here, he names externals such as wealth, healthy environment, political liberty, etc. that are often outside of the power of the individual to obtain and control. Hence if these factors aren't present, an individual can spend his life in poverty, misery, deprived of loved ones, friends, and never be close to the state of happiness. As Aristotle sums up defining happiness: “..a whole life, lived in accordance with moral virtue, and accompanied by a moderate possession of wealth”....and preferably the rest of externals that constitute a good fortune.

Eliminating the attachments to things outside of our control and achieving the state of liberation is the main principle of Stoicism while it resides on the moral virtues of the individual.

However, one may argue that Stoics have certainly taken this into consideration developing their philosophy. This is why it is founded on achieving the state of contentment when individual is consistently working towards obtaining freedom from dependency on and attachment to external things while enjoying them when they are available. Eliminating these attachments to things outside of our control and achieving the state of tranquility while residing on the moral virtues of the individual, is the main principle of Stoicism.

Stoicism does not imply that we should stop aiming at obtaining wealth, developing careers and healthy relationships, or have good friends. All these are enjoyable things; however, the main goal is not to become enslaved by these externals but to work endlessly to remain free and joyful on the way to the state of liberation.



“And say while you’re training yourself day after day, not that you’re acting as a philosopher...but that you’re a slave on the way to emancipation. For that is true freedom.”

Epictetus, Discourses