



Happiness studies in ancient Greece? A 2nd century skeptic's challenge

Sissela Bok

Abstract: Can the study of philosophy lead to happiness—whether after death, as Socrates claimed, in Plato's dialogue "The Phaedo", or while one is still alive, as Epicurus, the Roman Stoics, and other ancient thinkers maintained? In his dialogue "Hermotimus or on Philosophical Schools", the second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata cast a skeptical eye on all such teachings. How can students know which of the many paths to happiness and wisdom to choose, which guide to trust? Might signing on with any one teacher be a waste of time? What if some are charlatans who not only fail to provide a path to happiness but actually mislead and profiteer from their hapless charges? I argue that Lucian's cautionary attitude is equally useful today for anyone confronted with the profusion of courses, books and websites offering help in finding or 'choosing' happiness. I would now wish to include his irreverent voice among the many that I found helpful in writing *Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science*. But I would hope to invite him, in turn, to go beyond his skeptical approach and reach also for the sympathetic understanding of different experiences and perspectives needed to deepen one's understanding of happiness.

Keywords: happiness, philosophers, skepticism, morality, empathy, resilience.



Socrates: Those who are found to have excelled in holy living are freed from these regions within the earth [Hades] and are released as if from prisons; they mount upward into their pure abode and dwell upon the earth. And of these, all who have duly purified themselves by philosophy live henceforth altogether without bodies, and pass to still more beautiful abodes.

– Plato, "The Phaedo"¹

Cerberus: When Socrates had peeped into the chasm [of Hades], and seen the darkness, and I had bitten him and dragged him by the foot, because he was still slowed down by the hemlock, he shrieked like an infant, and cried for his children, and went frantic. ... Then [when he could see that his fate was inescapable] he put on a bold front, pretending he would be glad to accept what

¹ Plato, "Phaedo" in *Plato*, vol. I, Euthypro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus, tr. Harold North Fowler (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1971), 391.



was quite inevitable, all to win the admiration of the onlookers.

– Lucian, *Dialogues of the Dead*²

Can the study of philosophy lead to happiness—whether after death, as Socrates claimed, in Plato's dialogue "The Phaedo", or while one is still alive, as Epicurus, the Roman Stoics, and other ancient thinkers maintained? True, teachers in the different schools proposed incompatible visions of happiness to students and followers; this only showed how important it was not to be led astray by erroneous doctrines. By contrast, Lucian of Samosata cast a skeptical eye on all such hopes in works such as his *Dialogues of the Dead* or *Philosophers for Sale*. An itinerant lecturer, born in Syria around AD 125, Lucian presented satires and dialogues in public performances throughout the Roman Empire. He delighted in needling philosophers for their high-flown discourse, which masked what he saw as the hypocrisy with which they could enlist the gullible in their schools.

Many in Lucian's audiences were highly educated and thoroughly familiar with Greek mythology and schools of philosophy. The scathing familiarity with which he portrayed philosophers and the adepts who slavishly imbibed their views could seem disrespectful to traditionalists even as they admired the humor and the elegant brevity of his writings. It is hard to exaggerate the contrast that Lucian's listeners must have found between his evocation of Socrates' distraught arrival in the gloomy realm of the dead and Plato's famous account of his high hopes for a blissful existence in afterlife in the company of gods and the noblest of humans.

Lucian knew the competing philosophical schools well, having spent several years in Athens in his youth. He may have traveled there in a spirit of inquiry—a self-taught man from the provinces seeking answers in the legendary city, still the intellectual center of the Western world, where Plato and Aristotle and Epicurus had once taught, and where their successors, along with Pythagoreans, Stoics, and others held forth to students of all ages. But Lucian had found precious little agreement on questions about the pursuit of happiness, the nature of virtue, and how best to lead one's life to link the two. He had looked in vain for wisdom and guidance, whether in the gatherings where Stoic philosophers taught under the covered porticos near the Academy that Plato had founded; among the Platonists discoursing in that Academy; listening to Aristotle's successors in the Lyceum; puzzling over mystical teachings by Pythagoreans and mystics; or visiting the world-famous Garden that Epicurus had created hundreds of years before, still piously maintained by Epicureans who resided there.

It would be only natural for someone coming from the provinces to Athens and witnessing the disputes among teachers of philosophy to feel bewildered at first. How, confronted with such incompatible doctrines, can one know which path to happiness and wisdom to choose, which guide to trust? Might signing on with any one teacher be a waste of time? What if some are charlatans who not only fail to provide a path to happiness but actually mislead and profiteer from their hapless charges?

These are the questions that Lucian raises in his dialogue "Hermetimus, or on Philosophical Schools"—questions as important for students of happiness in our time as in his.³ In this

² Lucian, "Dialogues of the Dead" in Lucian, tr. M. D. Macleod, vol. VII (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1961), Dialogue 4, 21.

³ Lucian, "Hermetimus or on Philosophical Schools," in C. D. N. Costa, tr., *Lucian: Selected Dialogues* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 88-9. See also "Hermetimes or Concerning the Sects," tr. A. M. Harmon, in *Lucian* (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1915), vol. V, 260-415; and a recent French translation by Jean-Paul Dumont, *Hermetime: Ou comment choisir sa philosophie* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1993). I have drawn on all

dialogue, Lycinus, a stand-in for Lucian himself, challenges an old man, exhausted from twenty years spent as the disciple of a Stoic teacher, yet still hoping to attain the heights where he has been told he will find happiness, virtue, and wisdom. When Lycinus suggests that the goal must surely be in sight after such long efforts, Hermotimus wistfully admits that, so far, he has nothing to show for his exertions. Why, then, should he have continued studying philosophy for so long? Hermotimus answers that he must persevere: “philosophy is unattainable even if you spend a long time over it unless you keep your gaze fixed intently on it; and the stakes are high—whether to perish miserably among the populace or to win happiness through philosophy.”⁴

But with the stakes so high and the journey so long and arduous, it must be crucial to know that one has signed on with the right guide. Why choose one path rather than another? After all, Stoics were far from the only teachers holding out promises of happiness to those who studied their doctrines. Lycinus presses Hermotimus to explain how he came to choose to follow his Stoic teacher in the first place, given that Platonists, Epicureans, Peripatetics, Pythagoreans, and others were also inviting followers:

When you first began to study philosophy, and there were many doors open to you, you passed by the others and came to the Stoic door which you entered on your way to virtue, believing it was the one true door which opened up the straight path, while the others led to blind alleys. What made you believe this? What signs guided you?⁵

All the reasons that Hermotimus advances—that he saw most people taking the Stoics’ path, that the Stoic teachers inspired him with hope for finding the happiness he sought, that many said they were manly and understood everything, that he admired watching them, with their dignified way of walking, their neat dress and thoughtful expressions—Lycinus promptly demolishes. Suppose, he asks, that he himself had chosen the path Hermotimus had taken, trusting him as a friend, only to find that some god had brought back to life Plato, Pythagoras, Aristotle and other thinkers. What if they asked him to explain his reasons for esteeming the Stoics more highly than them, “not giving us a chance to speak and not testing any of our claims”? Merely to answer that his friend Hermotimus had told him to choose the Stoics would be worthless, in the absence of carefully comparing the arguments and deciding what is true and what is false. But such comparisons would take a great deal of time, if carefully entered into. They would preclude merely deciding on the Stoics’ path, as Hermotimus had done.

Hermotimus agrees that such comparisons would ordinarily be indispensable; it is just that, in this case, the Stoics speak the truth. If someone tells you that two plus two makes five, this would be false “even if countless Platos and Pythagorases say so.” In the same way, one can learn the truth from the Stoics without checking other creeds. Well, counters Lycinus, but does he not have to admit that all the philosophers who disagree about philosophical issues do agree that two and two makes four; but that comparing conflicting arguments and conclusions is precisely what he has to accept as necessary before deciding on one and only one path to happiness? And yet, devoting enough time to the philosophical schools might take more than a

three translations in quoting this dialogue. All three titles combine to convey the meaning of the Greek “haireseon” which carries meanings of “sects,” “schools” and also “choices.” Choosing among the sects or schools could involve, as in this dialogue, choosing a philosophy.

⁴Lucian, “Hermotimus or on Philosophical Schools,” in C. D. N. Costa, tr., *Lucian: Selected Dialogues* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

lifetime, Lycinus facetiously adds: even if one were to restrict the number of schools to ten and devote twenty years to learning the doctrines of each, it would add up to two hundred years.

When Hermotimus is driven to reply that he simply cannot give adequate reasons for his choice, he has to consider, once again, the questions Lycinus first put to him: why *is* he still carrying on with his philosophical studies, day after exhausting day? Might he in fact be wasting his life in a fruitless quest? Barking up the wrong tree? Distraught, he finally agrees: "I am grieving for all the time I've been fool enough to waste, and, what's more, the high fees my labors have cost me."⁶ He thanks Lycinus for having pulled him out when he was being whirled about by a rough and turbid torrent, abandoning himself to being carried along by the stream. From a true believer, he has turned into a doubter of all faiths. He hates not just his teacher, not just Stoicism, but all philosophical creeds. "And if I ever again, even unintentionally, meet a philosopher as I am walking on the road, I'll turn around and avoid him like a mad dog."

The Hermotimus dialogue expresses the perplexity many experience when meeting up with individuals fervently convinced of extraordinarily different and often incompatible philosophical views; and in turn with teachers and gurus promoting disparate paths to virtue, wisdom, and happiness. The experience of wonderment for outsiders at coming face to face with multiple belief systems promising insight and happiness after often lengthy studies has rarely been more tellingly conveyed. How, given so many avenues to hoped-for happiness, do people end up pursuing this or that particular doctrine? As Lycinus explained to Hermotimus, it would be folly simply to embark on any one path with any one teacher or doctrine, before comparing the arguments made by each.

Lucian's skeptical challenges to the competing philosophical sects and his critique of hypocrisy and greed among those offering guidance to the gullible resonated in later ages. Erasmus praised him as "the adamantine persecutor of all superstition" even as Martin Luther, among Protestants, and Roman Catholic inquisitors alike excoriated him for his irreverent treatment of deities, heroes, and philosophers.

Lucian's cautionary attitude might be equally useful today for anyone confronted with the profusion of courses, books and websites offering help in finding or "choosing" happiness. Why not, he might ask those seeking paths to happiness, much as Lycinus advised Hermotimus, stop to compare the various approaches to happiness and scrutinize the evidence their sponsors offer? Why not probe, also, any vested interest some of the latter may have in enlisting as many followers as possible?

I took special pleasure, while writing *Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science*, in exploring different lines of study as if I were in the company of individuals engaged in the same pursuits. I would now wish to include Lucian among the many that I found helpful in that regard. He might well be fascinated by the rich scientific resources now becoming available for happiness studies, in fields such as psychology, economics, health care, genetics, and the brain sciences. His skeptical questioning of claims about happiness is as needed today as in his time; but I would hope to invite him, in turn, to reach also for that sympathetic understanding of different experiences and perspectives needed to deepen one's understanding of happiness.

In my book, I aimed to bring together the striking new results from research by natural and social scientists with long-standing traditions of reflection by philosophers, religious thinkers, historians, poets, and others about happiness. Lucian's irreverent attitude toward the latter

⁶ Ibid., 127.

would have served as one more challenge in the effort to draw on both the past and the present, spanning the various disciplines. Taken together, these disciplines can contribute to a fuller, deeper understanding of the scope of happiness, even as some among them can challenge and point to shallowness, tunnel vision, or errors in others. Examining divergent conceptions of happiness side by side, I suggested, would allow us both to fathom their richness and to weigh the clashing arguments about what contributes to it or detracts from it, how it might be defined and measured, and how it relates to income, say, or to temperament, sociability, marriage, or religious faith.

Against this background, I wanted to consider perennial moral issues about how we should lead our lives and how we should treat one another. What are the wisest steps to take in the pursuit of happiness? What moral considerations should set limits to such pursuits? What else should matter in human lives aside from happiness? These issues are no different from those debated by the thinkers Lucian had studied in Athens and met during his peregrinations; but some are now more sharply etched in the light of new information and the advent of modern media: How should we weigh our own happiness against that of others in a world where we are aware, as never before, of extremes of misery and opulence? How might we best take into account what we are learning about the effects of our individual and collective choices on the prospects for the wellbeing of future generations?

Bypassing such issues makes it all the easier to give short shrift to assumptions that form the subtext to even the most innocuous-seeming views of happiness. These assumptions, familiar in philosophy and political science, concern power—power exerted or defended against, whether in families, communities, or political and religious institutions. Often unspoken, these assumptions are about who has the right to pursue his or her own happiness, who does and does not deserve happiness, and whether the happiness of some may require the exclusion or exploitation of others. They resonate in debates over authority and obedience, control and resistance, duties and rights, allegiance and independence. Today, conflicts over them are playing out on a far larger stage than ever before, reaching billions of individuals across the globe, their fortunes affected by global economic shifts beyond their control, their hopes fanned by mass media promotion of methods for achieving happiness in daily life or for finding the path to eternal bliss.

To refocus attention on the moral dimensions of the pursuit of happiness, I asked, throughout my book, what I call “Yes but” questions in the face of claims that a particular action or personality trait or belief or way of life will bring greater happiness. Some of these questions are of an empirical nature, requesting evidence to support the claims or voicing caution in the face of their frequently cheery, upbeat appeal. Others are of a moral nature, asking whether it would be right to seek the kind of happiness held out as desirable or to enjoy it, once it was achieved. Will pursuing such happiness involve us in deceit? Will it require that we break a promise? Is it cruel, unjust, exploitative? Does it call for us to blind ourselves to needs we would otherwise feel duty-bound to address? Stepping back to ask such questions creates space for reflection, for seeking to perceive more fully and to deliberate more attentively in the face of the many conflicting claims about what happiness is and how it should be pursued—precisely the approach that Lucian proposed to Hermites.

I likened efforts to achieve such understanding to the journeys undertaken in the myths and folk tales by young persons setting out to seek their fortune. They have no assurance of success, no assurance that happiness is owed to them. They have to traverse unknown regions, encounter seductive lures, take high-stakes risks, sometimes come back empty-handed. They must find the right balance between empathy and resilience—between fellow-feeling and self-

protection—as they learn to perceive the humanity and the urgent needs of many a strange-looking creature, while remaining wary of all who claim to know the one and only path to happiness.

Just as the seekers in myths and folk tales need more than a little luck in order not to emerge empty-handed, so does anyone exploring the role of happiness. Even as those seekers benefit from combining sympathetic understanding with a dose of healthy skepticism, so do those who venture into the jungle of claims and counterclaims about happiness, especially when they meet up with conflicting appeals by religious, political, and other authorities to set aside all misgivings and place faith in their dictates. Finding the right balance between empathy and resilience matters as much for the *study* of happiness as for those engaged in its *pursuit*.

Resilience, unless it is accompanied by empathy, helps shut out full awareness of the needs of others. A measure of individual resilience is necessary for sheer survival; but people also need empathy to thrive in the company of others, beginning with families. Both resilience and empathy are present in rudimentary form early in human life at the neurological level. Both can be nurtured, strengthened, or on the contrary neglected, stunted, even completely eroded through misfortune and abuse. And the erosion of one can debilitate the other: those who become more fearful, say after witnessing or enduring violence, can adapt by become less caring, sometimes taking vicarious or active pleasure in maiming and killing—exhibiting a form of what I have called, elsewhere, “learned pitilessness.”⁷

The more I have had a chance to study the clashing views about happiness and the passionate advocacy the subject can inspire, the more intrigued I have become with the voices of the thinkers who have embarked on a similar study. In listening to them, I have been struck by the difference between persons so sure of their convictions that they block off all dialogue, at times attempt to silence all critics, and those who, like Lucian, relish dialogues with friends and adversaries, present and past—and who, in so doing, invite the rest of us to strive to reach beyond our own limited perspectives.

Author

Sissela Bok
Harvard University
sbok@hsph.harvard.edu

Publishing Timeline

Received 25 April 2012
Accepted 30 April 2012
Published 29 August 2012

References

- Plato (1971). “Phaedo” in Plato (1971) *Plato, vol.1.; Euthypro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus* (H.N. Fowler, Trans.). Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press.
- Lucian (1961). “Dialogues of the Dead”, in Lucian (1961) *Lucian: vol. VII* (M.D. Macleod, Trans.). Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press.
- Lucian (2005). “Hermotimus or on Philosophical Schools,” in Lucian (2005) *Lucian: Selected Dialogues* (C. D. N. Costa, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

⁷ See my *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment* (Perseus Books, 1998); and “Violence, Free Speech, and the Media,” in *Perspectives on Crime and Justice: 1998-1999 Lecture Series* (National Institute of Justice, 1999), 51-72.

-
- Lucian (1915). "Hermotimes or Concerning the Sects," in Lucian (1915) *Lucian: vol. V* (A. M. Harmon, Trans.). Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press.
- Lucian (1993). *Hermotime: ou comment choisir sa philosophie* (J-P. Dumont, Trans.). Presses Universitaires de France.
- Bok, S. (1998). *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment*. Perseus Books.
- Bok, S. (1999). "Violence, Free Speech, and the Media," in National Institute of Justice (ed.) (1999) *Perspectives on Crime and Justice: 1998-1999 Lecture Series*. National Institute of Justice.
- Bok, S. (2010). *Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science*. Yale University Press.