

UNITED WISDOM

Meaning, happiness and satisfaction: what exactly are we seeking?

Meaning and Direction

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

P02 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Meaning, happiness and satisfaction: what exactly are we seeking?

Epigraph

> *Pleasure is our first and kindred good.*

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus. Robert Drew Hicks translation. Text.

What this article is about

A person can enjoy an evening and still wonder why they should return to the old arrangement of life. They can also be tired by important work without regarding it as meaningless. Calling both experiences a lack of happiness makes it easy to answer the wrong question: offer entertainment to one person and a calling to another. This article distinguishes a pleasant state, an overall assessment of life and the grounds on which participation seems significant. It examines where they meet, why they diverge and the mistakes of trying to answer everything with one feeling. Philosophical and religious sources retain their different grounds, while a psychological source clarifies one measured construct. The distinctions are neither a test of the reader nor a demand for perfect balance. They help name a particular question without treating dissatisfaction as conclusive proof that a life was chosen wrongly.

I. One word can conceal different questions

A conversation about happiness becomes clearer when the person specifies the question. Do I feel good now? Am I satisfied with the way my life is going? Does my participation have an intelligible point? These questions can arise on the same evening and receive different answers. Imagine somebody coming home tired and irritable after a difficult day, knowing they helped complete important work. The state is unpleasant, but the activity need not feel empty. Another person enjoyed a wonderful weekend and cannot see why they should return to the old routine. Neither combination makes one person deep and the other shallow. It shows that the pleasantness of a moment differs from the reasons for participating.

Satisfaction also has several ordinary meanings. Sometimes a need is met: I have eaten and am no longer hungry. Sometimes work matches the maker's intention. Sometimes the term describes an assessment of life as a whole. Here, life satisfaction means that last kind of evaluation: how a person regards their life in light of what matters to them. This is a working distinction, not the only correct meaning of the word. It prevents us from answering a question about direction with dinner, or a simple need for rest with a philosophy of life. A more precise

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

question places less pressure on a single action to change everything at once. It first clarifies the scale of what seems missing.

Clarifying language does not invalidate an experience. Someone may say they feel bad before they can classify the feeling precisely. Distinctions are for the next conversation, not an examination. When a loved one answers distress with a list of achievements, they may discuss an overall evaluation while the speaker describes loneliness today. When they recommend entertainment, they may offer pleasure to somebody seeking reasons to continue a project. Both responses can be kind and still miss the question. A useful beginning is to ask what the person wants more or less of when they say happiness is missing. The answer may be specific, mixed, or not yet clear.

II. A pleasant state has value of its own

Pleasure does not need a grand purpose to be recognised as part of life. A warm shower, favourite food, an amusing conversation or music may be good as experiences. Some people regard such enjoyment suspiciously: if an activity neither develops them nor serves an important cause, it seems a waste of time. Yet lacking a large task does not make it worthless. In our hypothetical scene, a person listens to a familiar song after work. The minute does not answer a question about their entire life and need not do so. It has a narrower content: they enjoy this sound now. Naming a small pleasure without making it prove happiness allows it to retain its actual size.

Epicurus connects a happy life with pleasure, but in the Letter to Menoeceus distinguishes it from continual feasting and considers the consequences of choosing. Epicurus. His aim includes freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance, not a modern instruction to pursue the strongest sensation. For our distinction, pleasure can be good without every available pleasure being chosen. A late celebration is enjoyable, yet someone may prefer sleep before necessary work. This does not prove a harsh life superior. It compares a whole situation in which the enjoyment of an hour and the cost of the next morning belong to the same decision.

The opposite error is to dismiss pleasure because it changes. A celebration ends, a taste disappears, a pleasant walk becomes part of the past. Finitude does not make the event a deception. A meeting could be good without being required to last forever. When a pleasant state must conclusively prove that an entire life is right, it receives a task it cannot perform. Unnecessary disappointment follows: I felt good, but things became ordinary again. More precise questions concern the experience itself. Did I want to take part? What was enjoyable? What did it cost? The answers allow repetition or refusal without passing judgement on joy as a whole. Not every pleasure needs to become a permanent regime.

III. Satisfaction is a view of the larger picture

Overall life satisfaction differs from today's mood. Diener and colleagues' 1985 SWLS paper describes a measure of global life evaluation, distinct from positive affect or loneliness. We rely here on its available abstract, not on a claimed reading of all its validation studies. Diener et al.. The instrument is neither reproduced nor used to assess the reader. The distinction matters: a difficult day need not make an entire life a failure. Conversely, pleasant emotions can coexist with dissatisfaction about the continuing organisation of one's days. An answer about the whole requires different grounds from an answer about this minute's feelings.

Imagine someone satisfied with the decision to study although a particular week is hard. They miss gatherings, struggle with unfamiliar material and make mistakes. Their overall assessment rests on a chosen possibility rather than an average number of pleasant minutes. But it must not prohibit noticing excessive demands. I regard this as important does not mean that every condition should remain unchanged. They can keep the direction and adjust the schedule, request an explanation or take on less. Satisfaction with the whole does not turn each part into an unconditional good. It supplies a context in which individual parts can still be examined and improved.

An overall assessment may also be revised without declaring the past mistaken. A person once valued mobility and now wants a stable home. A demanding schedule used to suit them; time with loved ones matters more now. A changed criterion does not erase an earlier value. It helps to distinguish changes in circumstances from changes in preferences. I am no longer satisfied then begins a specific inquiry rather than accusing every previous decision. The work may remain interesting while the commute takes too much time. A new identity or final meaning is not necessarily needed. There is first an ordinary task: examine the available conditions of living.

IV. Meaning concerns reasons for participation

Here meaning refers to the grounds on which a person's participation in life seems significant to them. It may concern an activity, a relationship, a value or a worldview. This working description permits different forms of meaning without making one compulsory. A parent helps a child learn because the relationship matters; another person preserves a rare craft; someone else understands life as a religious calling. Their grounds need not coincide for discussion to be substantial. The question concerns more than the pleasure of today's activity. It also concerns why participation continues to matter, what actions follow, and what the person is prepared to revise if those grounds stop convincing them.

At the opening of Augustine's Confessions, the restless heart is related to the creature's orientation towards God. Rest names a religious relationship, not merely a successful

emotional state. Confessions, I.1. In Book I of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle considers happiness through excellent activity and a complete life. Aristotle, I.7. These grounds are different. They show why happiness cannot always be translated as a good mood. A contemporary reader need not accept either doctrine. Understanding first requires identifying the central question and preserving the answer within its author's framework.

A reason for participating should not become a demand to feel its strength continuously. In a hypothetical story, someone tends a garden planted with a loved one. Some days the work is enjoyable; on others they do what is needed without enthusiasm. A quiet or tiring day does not automatically dissolve the connection. Yet treating all exhaustion as evidence of depth would be equally mistaken. The relationship can matter while another arrangement for care is needed. Meaning helps name a reason for involvement; it does not provide an unlimited licence to consume one's strength. When important work becomes unmanageable, asking what help is available concerns the work's reality rather than proving its ground weak.

V. Joy need not be a final answer

A person can enjoy themselves and still ask about meaning. Enjoyment is not thereby false. Imagine someone who loves travelling: cities, food and encounters interest them. Between trips, however, they cannot see why they keep a disliked job beyond funding the next journey. The question concerns the organisation of life and does not cancel the experiences. An unhelpful response demands a choice between extremes: declare all enjoyment empty or prohibit doubts because the trip was fun. A more precise conversation permits both facts. The journey was good; continuing the old arrangement solely to pay for another may no longer appeal. This does not yet supply a complete plan for change.

The next step is to identify what seems missing outside the pleasant event. Perhaps the person wants more time for work they consider worthwhile, stronger relationships, or simply relief from an inconvenient schedule whose fatigue acquired too general an interpretation. None can be chosen for them from a single statement about emptiness. Distinctions protect against haste. They allow a specific difficulty to be examined before all enjoyment is dismissed as superficial. A scheduling problem may call for revising the schedule. If the problem concerns the direction of work, rest may ease the state while leaving the question of direction separate.

Depth should not become a competition against pleasure. Someone choosing a simple enjoyable gathering need not prove that it also develops their personality. A difficult book can matter without one interest deciding the worth of another person's life. Otherwise meaning becomes a social rank: my pleasure is superior because it has an elevated explanation. We propose a different use of the questions. Enjoyment describes one aspect of experience; reasons for participating describe another. They can meet, diverge or change in relative

importance. Distinguishing them helps understand a situation, rather than arranging people on a ladder of inner development.

In our hypothetical conversation, a friend therefore does not accuse the traveller of fleeing their true self. They ask which part of the old arrangement the person no longer wants, and what they would like to examine instead. The answer may be small: keep travelling while reserving an evening for different work, discuss the schedule, or make time for a loved one. These possibilities promise no discovered destiny. They give different wishes separate places. The person need not condemn their enjoyment to gain permission to change an unpleasant part of life, nor declare a small change the final answer to every question they have accumulated.

VI. Meaningful work still needs decent conditions

An activity can matter while providing little enjoyment for a period. This combination does not prove that any conditions must be endured. Imagine someone organising an important local project. The outcome matters, but agreements are unclear, meetings overrun and work is unevenly distributed. This is meaningful can support participation or replace a discussion about demands. To distinguish those uses, restore specificity. What matters in the project? What is difficult? Which difficulty follows from the task, and which comes from how the work is arranged? A problem becomes discussable when it stops being treated as a compulsory price for moral worth.

Clarification preserves responsibility. A participant need not disappear without discussion when others depend on them. They can state the work they can manage, propose handing over a task and discuss timing. Responsibility is nevertheless different from prohibiting any change in participation. Important work is done by people with limited time, and clarity about those limits belongs to the work itself. In our scene the person does not reject the project's meaning by saying they cannot chair every meeting. They revise their role. A change may preserve useful work or reveal that the earlier plan is currently unworkable. Both are more informative than demanding stronger belief in a worthy goal.

Unpleasantness does not become the sole reason for refusal either. Some actions are difficult because they involve learning, patience or a demanding conversation. A person may choose them with an understanding of the cost and room for revision. The mistake is substituting the formula difficult means deep for that choice. Difficulty may accompany worthwhile participation, or it may come from an unnecessary obstacle. The feeling alone cannot tell which. The task, relationships and available ways of working need examination. Meaning is not proved by the amount of suffering, and pleasure does not automatically make an action right. These limits on hasty inference leave room for a more considered decision.

It can help to ask what would remain meaningful if unnecessary strain were removed. In the local project it may be bringing people together, preserving a place or providing accessible help. If the whole reason disappears without a sense of personal heroism, that feeling deserves examination. This is a reflective question, not a diagnosis of motives. The person may find that the outcome, recognition and belonging all matter. Mixed grounds are ordinary; an honest description requires no perfectly selfless motive. It reveals which needs the activity serves and whether too much has been assigned to it. What to preserve, negotiate or accommodate elsewhere then becomes clearer.

VII. Dissatisfaction raises a question, not a verdict

Dissatisfaction can carry information, but its meaning still needs interpretation. I need more may concern money, conversation, free time, recognition or direction. It can also follow comparison, when one's life is suddenly assessed against another person's picture. These cases do not become identical because the same word was used. Declaring dissatisfaction proof of a wrong path assigns too much to the next decision: it must repair an undefined life as a whole. A more precise step identifies one area. Where do I want something different, what is known, and what remains unclear? This does not promise relief, but makes the question more available for discussion.

Suppose someone feels they have achieved nothing. On clarification, they are comparing their work with an acquaintance's public result. The criterion can now be examined: do they want that outcome, value a similar process and accept its cost? Perhaps they do, and comparison reveals a genuine wish. Perhaps not, and another person's success has become an ill-fitting measure. There is no need to ban comparison or diagnose envy in advance. The question is what they want to bring from that example into their own life. Their assessment can become their own even when prompted by somebody else. Another person's photograph may raise a question; deciding needs a fuller picture.

Dissatisfaction need not disappear immediately after a clear decision. Someone can choose a direction and still regret other possibilities. They can recognise a good life while wanting to change part of it. Gratitude and desire do not necessarily contradict one another: gratitude acknowledges what was received, while desire concerns a possible change. A person may like their home and need a shorter commute. They do not first have to stop valuing the home in order to discuss moving or a different schedule. When these words stop cancelling one another, actual goods and actual difficulties can both be named. That is more careful than choosing between complete enthusiasm and wholesale dismissal.

Not every question needs to become continuous self-measurement. A person can notice dissatisfaction, name a possible cause and return to life while gathering missing information. An evening need not end with a final assessment of existence. If a persistent difficulty

substantially interferes with ordinary life, philosophical distinctions alone may be insufficient, and concrete help appropriate to the situation may be useful. One assessment of happiness supplies no diagnosis. The article's boundary is simple: it clarifies questions and reasons without determining the reader's condition from a text or replacing examination of actual circumstances. Receiving help is compatible with not having a final answer today.

VIII. Traditions offer different grounds

Comparing answers about happiness is useful when each author's question is preserved. If one discusses pleasure, another excellent activity and another God, replacing every term with inner harmony removes the grounds of the answers. The substitution makes a brief conclusion easy while leaving a generic instruction to become calmer that the source may never have offered. More accurate reading first asks what counts as good, how the person is understood and what a good outcome depends on. Only then can a limited point of contact be identified. Different texts may criticise an arbitrary desire without agreeing about which desire to choose or what human life is for.

Psychological measurement does not take the place of a religious answer. It can specify an experience or evaluation under study without deciding numerically whether a doctrine of purpose is true. A philosophical argument does not replace an account of someone's actual conditions either. Valuing excellent activity still leaves the question of why a particular workplace permits no rest. The sources stand beside one another to compare questions. We do not use a satisfaction measure to confirm Aristotle, or Augustine's prayer as an experimental explanation of emotion. The differences reveal the limits of each language. Their proximity becomes useful when it is not presented as established identity.

Personal reflection may take a useful distinction without accepting the entire answer. A reader can appreciate considered choices about pleasure without adopting Epicurus's whole philosophy, or understand Augustine's prayer without sharing his faith. Partial use calls for honesty: it should be identified as the reader's use, not attributed to the author as an updated secular doctrine. Asking what a day is devoted to can be proposed as editorial reflection without calling it an ancient practice when the source establishes no such thing. Comparison preserves author and reader as different participants. Interest, agreement, disagreement and limited application are possible without merging their views.

Disagreement must remain possible. Some answers have incompatible grounds even when a reader likes individual expressions from each. Pleasure as a final aim and a relationship to the Creator cannot become identical merely because both concern living well. A more considered inquiry asks which answer is convincing, why, and what remains unacceptable. It need not end with choosing a school. Clarifying one concept or recognising an unresolved disagreement can be enough. A comparison does not fail because it lacks a single conclusion, provided the

differences are accurate. Sometimes the useful result is to stop seeking one answer to questions that have different structures.

IX. A life need not give the same answer every day

Distinguishing meaning, happiness and satisfaction creates no new obligation to maintain an ideal balance. Turned into a daily examination, the three questions add another system of conformity: today must feel pleasant, my life must satisfy me, and every action must seem significant. This demand goes far beyond clarifying words. Actual days carry different content: maintaining a household, learning, meeting someone, working or resting. They are not experienced identically. The distinctions are offered when they help a particular decision, not as continuous measurements of completeness. An adult life can include a day that does not confirm its entire design.

Return to the two people at the beginning. The tired participant can recognise an important result and a need for rest. The person returning from enjoyable days can preserve the joy and separately examine the direction of ordinary life. Neither must first prove themselves generally happy or unhappy. A narrower language is available: today was hard, but the work matters; the gathering was enjoyable, but the question about work remains. These sentences leave room for continuation. They offer precision missing from everything is fine or everything is meaningless. A next step can address the actual remaining question without being required to justify or cancel an entire life.

Sometimes an answer will change conditions, sometimes discuss values, and sometimes simply permit rest and postponing reflection. None can be made a universal route in advance. A person may lack money for necessities, making an abstract conversation about meaning incomplete. They may have comfort without chosen participation, or important work needing a different arrangement. Distinguishing questions does not remove difficulty. It reduces the risk of answering it with someone else's ready-made conclusion. The focus remains on what question arose, what supports it, and which response can be examined in the actual situation without a promise of final happiness.

A person can want enjoyment, value their life and seek reasons for participating at the same time. An unclear answer in one area need not make the others unreal. This freedom does not remove choice; it makes choice more specific. Today someone notices a good meeting, tomorrow revises a schedule, and later returns to what they want to devote time to. These movements can belong to one life without a formula that permanently explains their relationship. Perhaps the search is not always for one feeling that settles everything. Sometimes it is for a more honest conversation about several things, each with its own value, time frame and grounds.

What this means in practice

Choose a recent situation in which the thought I lack happiness arose. This is an editorial exercise, not a diagnostic scale or a tested programme for changing a state. Describe the event without evaluating your whole life: what happened, who was involved and what time frame is relevant. Then try completing three different sentences: this feels pleasant or unpleasant because; this part of my life does or does not satisfy me because; this participation seems significant or unclear because. Three clear answers are not required. An unknown answer can be recorded as unknown.

Consider whether one action was expected to answer everything. Rest may be needed now, while a question about work deserves a separate conversation later. Do not dismiss rest as empty because it failed to settle direction. Nor does important work prove that its conditions can no longer be discussed. Select one concrete remaining question about demands, budget, relationships, value or a possible next involvement.

Name a small way to clarify it: read the terms, discuss a schedule, speak to someone affected, or allow time for an answer. This proposal guarantees no satisfaction. If specific professional help is needed, a short written reflection cannot replace it. A useful outcome may simply be understanding the question and no longer requiring today’s mood to issue a final judgement on an entire life.

Key quotation

> *Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.*

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, I.7. W. D. Ross translation. Text.

Connections between traditions

Sharing a question does not establish a shared doctrine.

Distinction	Adjacent grounds	Boundary
Enjoyment and choice	Epicurus; the example of rest	A philosophical aim is not pursuit of the strongest sensation.
Moment and whole	SWLS; a difficult week	A global evaluation construct does not diagnose the reader.
Mood and living well	Aristotle; modern happiness	Different meanings cannot be silently substituted.

Distinction	Adjacent grounds	Boundary
Rest and relationship	Augustine; significance	The Christian ground remains religious.
Experience and change	Four vocabularies; the exercise	None tested the proposed reflection’s efficacy.

Primary sources

1. Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus. Robert Drew Hicks; pleasure and choice, epigraph.

2. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, I.7. W. D. Ross; activity and a complete life, key quotation.

3. Augustine, Confessions, I.1. J. G. Pilkington, electronic revision by Kevin Knight; a Christian ground for rest.

4. Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985, The Satisfaction With Life Scale, DOI 10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13. Abstract used for global evaluation; instrument not reproduced.

Russian quotations are original translations from the named English editions. Scenes and the exercise are editorial proposals; actual reading scopes are recorded in research notes.

Tags

meaning, happiness, satisfaction, pleasure, life evaluation, mood, value, participation, choice, direction, joy, fatigue, living conditions, comparison, gratitude, desire, rest, activity, religious ground, philosophy, psychology, Epicurus, Aristotle, Augustine, Diener, SWLS, virtue, autonomy, question, good life

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.