Our Idea of Happiness Has Gotten Shallow. Here's How to Deepen It.

We used to have a very different understanding of what it means to live well.

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"Getting what you want in life — that's happiness, bro," Saxon Ratliff tells his younger brother in the latest season of "The White Lotus" on HBO. Helpfully, he lists his essentials: sex, money, freedom, respect (in that order). A jacked dude-bro, constantly slamming foul-tasting protein shakes, Saxon is determined to steer his brother away from their sister Piper's budding interest in Buddhism. It's a creed for people afraid of life, he scoffs.

Piper, meanwhile, is demurely rebelling against a life that's all privilege, no purpose. "Lately, it's felt like everything is pointless," she tells the head monk at a Buddhist monastery near the lavish Thai resort where the Ratliffs are staying. "And the things my family cares about, I just don't care about." When she tries to explain this existential ache to her mother — a woman seemingly made out of exfoliating serum and oblivious narcissism — Piper puts it as simply as she can: "I need to figure out what makes me happy, OK?"

So each sibling is chasing happiness, but in opposite directions: Saxon through acquisition; Piper through renunciation. And neither fully understands the cost of those choices. In fact, the season unfolds like a sly symposium on the many meanings of happiness in an age of TED Talks, best-selling manifestoes and podcasts that chirp endlessly about self-optimization and the elusive "best life." Happiness, it turns out, is more Rorschach than road map. Is it found in the ultraluxe wellness center or the austere monastery? Does it come from getting what you want or wanting less?

These aren't merely personal questions but philosophical ones, and they've been asked — and answered differently — throughout history. Once, happiness was understood as a communal project tied to justice and shared flourishing. But over time, it evolved from an expansive ideal into something individual and small. Now the challenge seems clear: to reclaim a deeper, more demanding vision of what it means to live well in a fractured world — and restore happiness to its proper scale.

Aristotle, in the fourth century B.C., used the term "eudaemonia" to describe the highest aim of a human life. It was a matter not of fleeting pleasures but of living well — cultivating certain virtues and acting on them. At his Lyceum, in a shaded grove just beyond Athens' eastern walls, Aristotle taught that eudaemonia wasn't entirely within

one's control. It depended on "external goods" like health, wealth, friends and a measure of luck. And it could be pursued only in a self-ruling community, or polis, whose flourishing was essential to one's own. This was more than the pragmatic recognition that it's hard to thrive in a failing society; Aristotle saw a well-ordered polis as a necessary part of the good life itself.

The classical thinkers who enlisted the term "eudaemonia" profoundly shaped European discussions of happiness through the ages, even though they disagreed on its exact nature. Where Aristotle saw external goods as part of eudaemonia, Roman Stoics like Seneca, more than three centuries later, argued that the good life was simply a matter of exercising moral and intellectual virtues — wisdom, courage, temperance and justice, which meant giving others their due. Cicero, who lived between Aristotle and Seneca, placed particular emphasis on public service.

In practice, these conceptions of well-being were less expansive than they appeared. The vision of self-cultivation they shared required the kind of leisure and education denied to women, laborers and slaves. Seneca, who thought simplicity was a key to the *vita beata* — the happy life — amassed riches as an adviser to Nero. An indifference to fortune was, paradoxically, the prerogative of the fortunate.

You'll find a connection between being happy and being lucky across the Indo-European languages. When "happiness" entered English around the 15th century, it referred to good fortune or divine favor — something received rather than achieved. Our very vocabulary suggested that happiness wasn't simply up to us. The basic classical ideal, meanwhile, living well through the cultivation of virtue within a just society, got filtered through Christian theology and Renaissance humanism and came to provide the idea of happiness with ethical contours. Happiness, in other words, signified a state of alignment — with virtue, with nature, with God.

By the time of the Enlightenment, "happiness" acquired a more inward and secular dimension, and, crucially, it became an aspiration for everyone, in keeping with the broader project of Enlightenment universality. In the late 17th century, John Locke pronounced the "pursuit of happiness" as a natural right, grounded in reason and self-determination. In the 1720s, Francis Hutcheson, an early voice of the Scottish Enlightenment, framed his own happiness principle — "that action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers" — around an inborn benevolence that linked our well-being to the flourishing of others.

French thinkers built on this idea, invoking the notion of *le bonheur public* — public happiness — with a rising egalitarian spirit. In 1750, the economist Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot told the Sorbonne, "Nature has given all humanity the right to be happy." In this view, happiness was not merely a private feeling but a public good: a condition in which individual fulfillment and collective well-being were inseparable. Ensuring such happiness came to be seen not just as a noble aim but as a central duty of government.

So when Thomas Jefferson and the other framers endorsed the pursuit of happiness, they were channeling a broad philosophical tradition. Happiness still bore the classical imprint — tied to justice and civic life — but it had been democratized (albeit with the grave exclusions of their age). Promoting happiness wasn't a personal indulgence; it was a political mandate. A just state enabled people to live well, and shaping that state was itself part of the good life. Here, then, was an expansive conception of happiness applied expansively. Happiness was *big*.

But not for long. Over the next century, its meaning began to contract. Once anchored in civic virtue and outward-facing ideals, happiness was increasingly treated as a personal feeling — a matter of mood, not meaning.

Part of this transformation can be traced to the shift from Hutcheson's moralized happiness principle to Jeremy Bentham's more radically subjective one, which gained traction in the early 19th century. Bentham's version of the "greatest happiness for the greatest number" recast happiness as an arithmetic of feelings, something that could, in theory, be measured and maximized. At the heart of his system was "utility," defined as the tendency of an action to produce pleasure or prevent pain. Utility, in Bentham's view, was the ultimate moral standard — good acts, good policies and good laws were those that generated the most net happiness. And happiness was more about feeling groovy than proving worthy.

This "hedonic" conception of happiness had its upside. Casting off old prejudices, Bentham favored emancipating women, decriminalizing homosexuality, protecting animals from cruelty. His sturdy Scottish exponent, James Mill, helped spread the Benthamite basics, while raising his son, John Stuart Mill, in no creed but that of utilitarianism. By 7, the younger Mill was reading Plato's dialogues in Greek; before long, he was writing a sequel to the "Iliad." And by 20, precocious as ever, he had a midlife crisis.

If all his life's projects — the great social reforms he had been trained to pursue — were achieved, John Stuart Mill asked himself, would he be happy? "An irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!'" he wrote later. The anguishing despair that overtook him after that revealed something hollow in the happiness he had been taught to prize. It wasn't that he ever rejected Bentham's framework outright; he still valued its pluralism, the way an experiential approach to happiness forced you to recognize that different people would have a different idea of the good life. But he came to see that true flourishing required depth, dignity, autonomy and the widely shared material security that a just state should try to secure. It was a vision of happiness that retained something of the classical ideal — richer, more demanding, less easily quantified.

Yet even as Mill sought to complicate the concept, industrial capitalism was pushing in another direction. A happiness stripped of depth — a debased version of Bentham — was spreading with weedy vigor. The rise of mass production and market economies bound happiness to economic growth. As Thomas Carlyle warned in 1843, the greatest-happiness principle was "fast becoming a rather unhappy one." What had once been a philosophy of human flourishing was increasingly a ledger of economic output.

The "marginalist" revolution in economics, starting in the 1870s, completed the transformation. Utility was converted from a moral principle into a wealth function. No longer tied to broader notions of well-being, it became a measure of personal preference. Economics, which once grounded value in labor, production and exchange, now saw value as purely subjective — the satisfaction gained from an additional unit of a good. As William Stanley Jevons put it, utility was simply "the addition made to a person's happiness." Another early theorist of marginalism even imagined a "hedonimeter": a device to quantify enjoyment, like a stock ticker of the soul.

By the early 20th century, utility maximization — happiness writ small — emerged as a linchpin of economic analysis. Public happiness, in turn, became a matter of optimizing the sum of individual welfare. The mathematics could be complex, but the premise was simple: *Getting what you want in life — that's happiness, bro.*

The notion of happiness as choice-making swiftly migrated from economic models into the marrow of the broader culture. What was once a lifelong project shrank into a sequence of transactions. As the midcentury economy boomed, it didn't just build wealth; it reconstructed desire. The good life, formerly the province of philosophers, was now a mainstay of the marketers: happiness packaged as the perfect lawn, the gleaming automobile, the immaculate kitchen with its humming refrigerator. We became, almost without noticing, what we bought.

And if you still felt empty? That's where the therapy culture of the 1970s and 1980s came in — not as a remedy for consumerism but as an extension of it. The older vocabulary of life-defining commitments and meaning-making projects continued to wither while a new lexicon took hold: self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-love.

By the 1990s, happiness had acquired a personal brand. Oprah Winfrey presided over a daytime academy of self-care, empowerment and curated aspiration. Then came the next wave: the life-hacking, self-quantifying, habit-stacking era of optimization gurus like Tim Ferriss, whose first book, published in 2007, was "The 4-Hour Workweek" — "a toolkit," in his words, "for maximizing per-hour output." (He followed it up with "The 4-Hour Body" in 2010 and "The 4-Hour Chef" in 2012.)

This vision of flourishing was more streamlined, life broken down into modular upgrades. Meditation "reboots" were measured in minutes. An enthusiast of Seneca, Ferriss offered a snackable Stoicism, which he described as "a simple and immensely practical set of rules for better results with less effort." It was a "personal operating system," a way to redirect negative emotions toward positive ends. "Excitement is the more practical synonym for happiness, and it is precisely what you should strive to chase," he wrote. "It is the cure-all."

Amid the excitement, the happiness concept kept getting miniaturized. With the rise of the algorithms, decision-making became a series of bite-size transactions. *If you liked this, you'll like that.* Every swipe, click and purchase was an act of preference revelation, the digital cookie crumbs of personal identity.

In today's social media ecosystem, happiness even threatens to become a ring-lighted aesthetic: matcha lattes, artisanal candles, sage-smudging, captioned reminders to *just breathe*. Once again, happiness is work — but now the work of packaging moods and moments for validation, with a tiny dopamine hit for each "like."

And yet the more demanding conception of happiness never disappeared. "So long as you're happy," parents tell their kids. In reality, they want to see their children engaged in something worthwhile, contributing to something beyond their own fleeting satisfactions. A movie doesn't have a happy ending just because the hero's smiling. We wouldn't call it a happy ending if Neo chose to return to the Matrix's cosseting illusions, or if Truman decided to remain in his stagecrafted life. We understand that there's a tension between happiness as a self-enclosed project and happiness as something entangled with the world. Look at Saxon and Piper, who both see happiness as a form of leveling up — a quest built around self-mastery — to the point that they barely notice, for most of the season, that their father is unraveling. We just need to move beyond that small, sealed-off model of happiness — so that happiness can root itself in connection, responsibility and care.

If you'll indulge the philosophers' habit of conjuring characters to illustrate their abstractions, imagine a young person — let's call her Julia — who left community college after a semester and has bounced between gigs ever since: dog-walking, cafe shifts, warehouse nights. Her life is messy, but she has learned how to show up for people. When her neighbor's mother gets sick, Julia brings groceries. When her cousin gets out of rehab, she's the one who texts every day. She doesn't have a wellness routine or a five-year plan. But people trust her. She holds lives together in small, invisible ways.

Or imagine a middle-aged man named Daniel, a product manager with a smart fridge and an Optimal Morning Routine. For years, he has chased happiness through upgrades — to his apps, his appliances, himself. But lately, the returns feel thin. When his niece's soccer team needs a coach, he volunteers, awkwardly at first, then with growing investment. Daniel has started showing up at town meetings, fighting to save the field from developers. Now his calendar includes something he cares deeply about that doesn't come with a progress bar.

Or imagine a public worker named Casey, driving the same city bus route for 20 years. After years on the route, Casey has come to know who needs help with their bags, who wants small talk and who prefers silence. Recognizing the regulars and their routines matters to Casey; it's a way of creating small moments of connection in an otherwise disconnected city, of being a steady presence in others' lives.

These aren't tales of moral heroism. Nobody here is emulating Dorothy Day's journey from bohemian rebellion to radical solidarity with the poor. Daniel still wears a Whoop band. Julia hasn't found her "calling." But they're living into a broader idea of happiness — less about what they have, more about what they give, who they're with, what they're part of.

Is it possible that happiness stayed big, and it's only our way of talking about it that got small? Surely the old understanding, in which the pursuit of happiness is inseparable from shared commitments, hasn't gone anywhere. On some level, we still know the difference between feeling good and flourishing, between the hedonic and the eudaemonic, between the algorithm's next suggestion and the difficult and uncertain path toward a meaningful existence. Yes, we often speak as if feelings are all that count, but maybe that's because the language of the "good life" has been hollowed out.

In an age shadowed by the climate crisis, fraying social bonds and political rupture, what's needed isn't a neoclassical revival or a wistful retreat to the Lyceum. Aristotle was right to see human flourishing as bound up with justice, but wrong — badly wrong — about what justice requires. We understand the perils of domination and exclusion in ways the ancients did not. We also know that a good life isn't a unitary ideal but something profoundly plural, shaped by circumstance, history and the unrepeatable texture of each human life. Happiness isn't an optimization problem. It's the shared work of making a world spacious enough to sustain the many ways free individuals choose to live, and sturdy enough to hold us all together.