



HAPPINESS, SUFFERING, AND **THE LOVE OF GOD**

The Workbook

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IGNATIUS

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THE LOVE OF GOD**

The Workbook

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Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

3. Why would an all-powerful, all-loving God allow suffering in the world?

More pressing for most people than the question of a transcendent destiny is the question of how to reconcile that potential destiny with suffering and evil.

If God were all-powerful, couldn't He prevent it? If He were all-loving, *wouldn't* He prevent it?

These questions presuppose a deeper, often unaddressed question: Is suffering completely incompatible with love?

4. In light of all this, how should we suffer? How can we suffer well?

How can we make the most out of our suffering? If suffering can be used to bring ourselves to the greatest meaning in life and promote the greatest use of our freedom, how can we get the help we need to use it properly? What are easy ways to remember to bring God's grace into our lives in times of suffering, so we can follow God's providence in those times?

What Is Happiness?

The Importance of Happiness

Even when we may not know how to find happiness, we know we need it. Mankind has always been preoccupied with the search for happiness. From the beginning of history, virtually every philosopher from Plato and Aristotle to modern scientists like Albert Einstein have held up happiness as one of the most important things that we can reflect on in life.

Why? Because everything else in our life depends on it. As Aristotle explains, "Happiness is the one thing you can choose for itself; everything else is chosen for the sake of happiness."

Finding the answers means

- a happier, more meaningful life;
- leaving the optimal possible legacy;
- finding the truth about yourself;
- finding the truth about your dignity;
- finding the truth about your eternal destiny and the destiny of us all.

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Happiness and Life Goals

Since happiness is the only thing chosen for itself, that means that our view of happiness will be the main goal that shapes every other decision in our life. All of our life goals are steps to that ultimate destination. From who we marry to what we eat for breakfast, every choice in our life is aiming at that one final result—the happy version of you.

Your definition of happiness determines

- the kind of relationships you pursue;
- the kind of friendships you pursue;
- the career you choose;
- how you do your job;
- how you carry out your relationships;
- how you judge a successful or unsuccessful life;
- your sense of direction and purpose every day;
- your sense of self worth.

“Happiness is the **one** thing you can choose for itself; **everything else** is chosen for the sake of happiness.”

—Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*



Plato
(428–347 B.C.)

Greek philosopher

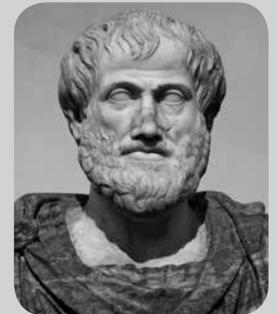
One of the earliest, most influential thinkers of Western Civilization, he founded one of its first schools, the Academy. His best-known works are his *Dialogues* and the *Republic*.



Aristotle
(384–322 B.C.)

Greek philosopher

A student of Plato, his many writings laid the foundation for subjects as varied as biology and theater, aesthetics and physics, ethics and linguistics. His study of happiness is found in the *Nichomachean Ethics*.



Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

The Four Levels of Happiness

When you review man’s quest for happiness through the ages, as researched from such diverse perspectives as psychologists, philosophers, anthropologists, and theologians, there are four broad ways of defining happiness that consistently emerge. These four ways can be grouped into levels, because as you move up the levels, the happiness becomes greater in measurable ways: it becomes more pervasive, more enduring, and more deep.

Level 1—Pleasure

The first level is pleasure, which comes from external things. This is physical, material happiness; many of these pleasures come from satisfying our physical needs such as food, clothing, or shelter, and fade quickly once the need is met. Pleasure provides an immediate euphoria, intense but short-lived.

Level 2—Ego-Comparative Happiness

The second level goes beyond the external senses to an internal sense of self. How do I measure up to others? We are aware first of ourselves and then of the world around us. Ego-comparative happiness is when we compare ourselves (“ego” = self) to others and judge that we are better.

Level 2 Happiness Is a Good Thing

Ego-comparative happiness is worthwhile and not a bad thing in itself. The desires of Level 2 motivate us to pursue many good things. It is very good to achieve a lot with our lives—to further our education, to have status, to have security in ourselves, to have self-esteem, to have the power to get things done. These successes are in fact powerful tools to achieve good in the world and make something of our lives.

Your Definition of Happiness = Your Purpose in Life

The Four Levels of Happiness



1. Pleasure (*Laetus*)



2. Success (*Felix*)



3. Making a Difference (*Beatus*)



4. Transcendence (*Sublimitas*)

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Dominant Level 2 Happiness Has Severe Consequences

These good things are meant to lead us to deeper fulfillment; the danger comes when Level 2 becomes dominant and achievement and status become the only things we value, the only things that make us happy. Level 2 should be a transition phase; stopping there can become destructive.

This is a pressing issue, because many people in our culture stay at Level 2 as their dominant level. Their happiness becomes dependent on their sense of status—how good they are compared to everyone else, and how they measure up.

Trapped in the Comparison Game

We call this fixation on success and achievement “The Comparison Game” and will examine it in more detail further on.

The basic problem is this: a life based on competition is necessarily going to leave most people unhappy, for the simple reason that in any competition only one person can be the best. (And even then, no one can stay on top forever.)

As we will see, people who get caught up in the Comparison Game can find themselves trapped, and moving on to Levels 3 and 4 ultimately becomes necessary if they are to avoid unhappiness.

**Seventy percent
of our culture is
likely to be Level 1
or Level 2 dominant.**

Sources of Level 2 Happiness

- Achievement
- Status
- Popularity
- Respect and Esteem
- Power and Control
- Intelligence
- **Winning**



EUPHORIA (FROM GREEK, “BRINGING GOOD”)

An intense feeling of joy or well-being, either mentally, physically, or emotionally.



KINESTHETIC (FROM GREEK, “FEELING IN MOTION”)

A form of sensory experience that involves bodily movement.

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Level 3—Contributive Happiness

Making a Difference

Contributive happiness is focused outward on the good we can do in the world and particularly to the people around us. We have a desire to contribute something to the world around us, for our lives to make a difference.

This contributive focus sidesteps the dilemma of the Comparison Game. Instead of asking, “Am I better than others?”, the contributive drive in Level 3 makes us ask, “Did I use whatever I had to do as much good as I could?”

The happiness that comes from doing as much good with our lives as we can isn’t threatened by whether others can do more or less. Bringing more goodness into the world is satisfying in itself, rather than for the success it brings.



PHILOSOPHY (FROM GREEK, “LOVE OF WISDOM”)

The study of the most fundamental realities, like the meaning of existence and the nature of consciousness, by systematic thought.



PSYCHOLOGY (FROM GREEK, “STUDY OF THE SOUL”)

The science of the mind; investigating how the mind works and how to foster mental health.



ANTHROPOLOGY (FROM GREEK, “STUDY OF MAN”)

The study of human beings through science, history, and culture.



THEOLOGY (FROM GREEK, “STUDY OF GOD”)

The study of God and by extension the study of religious truths and supernatural realities (e.g., angels, Purgatory, the Incarnation).



A Positive or Negative Legacy— Am I Better than a Rock?

We have immediate needs for physical comfort and social status and a drive to satisfy those needs, but we also have a drive to make the most out of our lives, to leave a positive legacy to the world. We want our lives to *matter*.

**Scripted into every one of us is an intense drive and desire
to leave some kind of positive legacy in the world.**

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

We can see this conversely in our fear of leaving a negative legacy.

Imagine you lived a long life, and looking back at the age of 80 asked, “What was the difference between the value of my life and that of a rock?”

If the honest answer was, “Maybe the rock did more for the world than I did,” you would feel a sense of loss and even despair.

“The true meaning of life is to be discovered **in the world** rather than **within man**....

The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a *cause to serve* or another *person to love*—the more human he is.”

— Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

Remaining at Level 2: According to Frankl, those in the camp who focused on waiting for rescue, anticipating the restoration of their status, freedom, and comfort, would lose strength over time as imprisonment dragged on and they didn’t receive these needs. They would fixate on a set date—“we’ll be rescued by Christmas”—and past that date, they would succumb to depression or, increasingly, even death.

Choosing Level 3: Others instead focused on the future good they could bring out of their present dark experience. Resolutions to treat their families better, to start institutes, or simply to find the culprits and bring justice to the world gave them strength; these prisoners tended to not only survive the experience, but to go on to have the most remarkable and meaningful lives.

The choice to look outward: Level 2 vs. Level 3

Leaving a legacy, of course, requires more effort than seeking comfort or affirmation—the satisfaction is deeper but less immediate.

This is why moving from Level 2 to Level 3 requires an active choice, otherwise we can stay in an ego-comparative mindset by default. This can lead to feelings of failure, unfulfillment, and eventually despair.

The contrast between choosing Level 3 and remaining at Level 2 is illustrated in Viktor Frankl’s famous work, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl shares his experience living in one of the harshest testing grounds for any approach to happiness: the Nazi concentration camps of World War II.



LOGOTHERAPY

A form of therapy developed by Viktor Frankl that prioritizes man’s need for meaning in life as its central therapeutic concern.

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness



Viktor Frankl
(1905–1997)

Psychiatrist and philosopher

Best known for his 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, detailing his own experience in the Nazi concentration camps and the search for purpose in existence even under the darkest conditions.

How to Achieve Level 3 Happiness

Doing something for people: You can define yourself by finding areas where you have the power to act to help others. (See “Write Your Own Self-Definition” below, p. 20.)

Being with people: Being present for someone, listening to them, showing empathy, or just sharing a happy moment can all be meaningful contributions as well, even if they don't seem like “doing” something.



EMPATHY

The ability to appreciate and understand another's feelings and to respond appropriately with care.



CONTRIBUTIVE DRIVE

The natural drive each person has to make a difference in the world, to contribute to the well-being of others.

The Five Transcendent Desires

- Truth
- Beauty
- Love
- Home
- Goodness/Justice

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Level 4—Transcendent Happiness

Contributive happiness turns our attention outwards, beyond the self-focus of Levels 1 and 2, but it is still limited to the present time and place of our life on Earth. The final, highest level is called transcendent happiness because it transcends all those limitations and deals with the most profound realities, with our ultimate purpose and with our destiny for eternity. (Recall that the four levels become broader in scope as you move up the levels.)

The Five Transcendent Desires

Transcendent happiness might seem at first like a distant hazy concept, compared to more concrete present desires like keeping more of your paycheck or being fit and good-looking. But, in fact, transcendent happiness aims at the fulfillment of very familiar desires that are already inside you, desires that have been with you from your earliest childhood.

These five transcendent desires can be recognized in our response to good things in life, a sense that “this is good” but isn’t fully what we’re looking for, because we know instinctively that these things are echoes of something more perfect.

When we see a beautiful face or flower fading with time, when we lose a friend or have to leave a home that has made us feel loved and secure—these imperfect experiences leave us with a desire for a perfect, unending kind of experience. We know that there is something more. As we’ll see in the next episode, we actually have this knowledge because we ourselves are transcendent beings.

The Four Levels are a Progression

We speak of the four levels of happiness, not four kinds of happiness, because they are a progression. We are naturally supposed to build from one level to the next. This is why the Comparison Game and a life of pleasure cause trouble—not because Level 1 or Level 2 happiness is bad in itself, but because by making winning and pleasure our dominant means of obtaining happiness we impede our natural growth to the higher levels of happiness. We can see the progression of the four levels in several ways.

Broader Effects

The pleasures of Level 1 tend to be limited in effect to ourselves. The effects of Level 2 and Level 3 are more pervasive, reaching others in society. Level 3 is specifically focused on reaching out to the community. The effects of Level 4, as we will see, extend the farthest—in fact, beyond this world.

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

More Enduring

In addition to being broader, the effects extend further in time as you move up the levels. Level 1 pleasures don't last once they are experienced. (Eat a fine meal, and a few hours later you're hungry again.) The effects of Level 2, like getting an education, or Level 3, like helping others in need, can last through your whole life. The transcendent effects of Level 4 extend into eternity.

“Deeper”

The higher levels of happiness engage a person on a “deeper” level—your highest intellectual and creative powers. Your intelligence, your ability to love, and your awareness of the spiritual and of the infinite all come into play more as you move from pleasure to competition to contribution to transcendence.

Approaching the Transcendentals

Finally, our focus expands toward the transcendent as we move up the levels. Pleasures can give us a momentary encounter with goodness or beauty. The striving for achievement in Level 2 helps us develop what is good for us, but the focus is limited to ourselves. Level 3 expands these encounters so that we are seeking truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home for other people, but not necessarily with a focus on what is universal, ultimate and eternal—that focus happens in Level 4.



TRANSCENDENT DESIRES

Desires that transcend imperfection in truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home—so they seek *perfect* truth, love, goodness, beauty, and home. They also seek a transphysical and eternal existence beyond this world.

Choosing a Dominant Level

As Aristotle said, your definition of happiness defines your life, and having distinguished the four levels of happiness, we can see more specifically what that looks like, depending on which of these levels you choose to focus on as your dominant level. Life will look very different for someone who is focused on pleasure, on success and status, on helping others, on eternity.

So, why don't we all just “jump to Level 4”? The rewards become more intense and profound and enduring as we move up the levels, but they also require a bigger investment in effort and time. They require more sacrifice.

The lower levels become the default levels if we don't intentionally pursue a higher one. The rewards are easier and faster, even if they don't reach us as deeply. Levels 3 and 4 take longer to yield rewards and at first may not seem like a way to happiness at all.

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

This is where the question of intentionality becomes significant. Because even though the lower levels can provide fast results, too much focus on them can block the progression to higher levels, and this means less profound happiness and ultimately unhappiness.

The Comparison Game



The gap tends to fall between Levels 1 and 2, which are focused inwardly on the self, and Levels 3 and 4, which shift their focus outwards. People who stay focused on Level 2 without moving further become trapped in the Comparison Game.

When your final goal in life becomes status, success, achievement, you mentally sort out the world into win/lose/draw: Status is measured against others, and you are either better than them (winning), worse than them (losing), or about equal (draw).

When winning at these comparisons is an end in itself, life becomes a constant assessment, looking back and forth at yourself and everyone else around you. There are only three possible outcomes, with surprising similarities.

Losing

Sense of Inferiority

If you define happiness as being the best in some area—wealth, fame, stamp collecting—then losing in this contest will bring feelings of inferiority. You will feel worth less than other people—that you’ve been dealt a bad hand by God.

Jealousy

Losing the Comparison Game also closes you off from appreciating the good in others. Every talent, accomplishment, or skill in other people becomes an attack on you; their success is part of what defines you as a loser. You become jealous and take pleasure in finding their flaws.

Depression

When you are cut off from others, when you constantly feel judged, or when good things that happen to others only increase your bitterness—the likely outcome is depression. Without the success that defines your happiness, your life can feel meaningless, and you have no motivation to try and make an effort at anything.

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Draw

Constant Vigilance

The consequences of being a loser are so drastic that for people on the bubble—those who see themselves as keeping up evenly with others—the most important thing in life is to guard against slipping. Constant vigilance is needed, because the stakes are high and any mistake can expose you.

Often, keeping up with others requires putting up a front, maintaining the appearance of being put together when you don't feel competent at all.

Fear of being exposed for who you really are overshadows all your relationships and interactions.

Political Lifestyle

To keep from slipping into a “worse than others” status, you must be protective of your territory, going on the offensive to undercut anyone who threatens to infringe on your glory and your limelight.

Your entire life becomes a political arena, so you can maintain your status and not get cast as a failure.

Driving Others Crazy

The fear, the vigilance, the political maneuvering, the constant false persona—none of this leaves room for authentic or spontaneous behavior. Your life becomes narrowly and inwardly focused on defending your position no matter what, which is going to make you an unpleasant person to be around.

The Comparison Game: being a loser means

- feeling inferior;
- low self-esteem;
- jealousy;
- depression;
- lack of drive / “giving up”.

NOTES

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Winning

The Pressure Doesn't Stop

Once you make it to the top, you face the pressure of maintaining that status. Constant vigilance is required to not be outdone. Lose your place at the top and you lose your happiness—a very stressful scenario to deal with day after day.

Additionally, there is the pressure to increase your success—to recapture that feeling of accomplishment or superiority through higher and higher levels of achievement, status, and intelligence.

Narcissism and Addiction

“It’s lonely at the top”—a life devoted to being better than everyone else can frequently lead to narcissism. Nobody can stand to be around you, and (after all the effort you put into being superior to them) you can’t really stand to be around them either. Narcissism is very lonely and can also lead to destructive treatment of self and others.

If this weren’t enough, the isolation becomes its own problem because narcissists need the adulation of others to feed their feelings of superiority; this adulation becomes harder to get the more the narcissist drives others away, causing a cycle of frustration and anger.

A Cultural Neurosis

No one wins the Comparison Game. And society, viewed as a whole, definitely doesn’t win. If everyone’s greatest good is being better than others, what independent value do those achievements carry? What’s the net gain to the culture? What kind of legacy will those people produce as a society (besides, of course, the depression, the neurotic vigilance, and the contemptuousness)?

How do we break out of the unwinnable cycle of the Comparison Game?

The Comparison Game: Being a Winner Means

- pressure to stay on top;
- insecurity that others might surpass you;
- pressure to keep accomplishing more;
- narcissism;
- isolation;
- judging others;
- contempt;
- alienating others.

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

A Life of Contribution

Once you decide Level 2 can't be your dominant level, where do you go? You can't simply stop pursuing status or popularity; you have to replace it with a new goal. Some people get out of the Comparison Game by falling back on the pleasures of Level 1. They focus their life on alcohol, drugs, adventure, expensive living, and similar experiences to escape the pain they feel from the Comparison Game. Of course, this focus becomes even more limiting and only intensifies the pain of a life that is lacking meaning. The only way out is upward.

Contribution, Not Competition—Moving Upward to Level 3

A life based on competition is necessarily going to leave most people unhappy. (Only one person can be the best.) The key to moving out of the Comparison Game is to shift your focus consciously from competition to contribution—what can I give to the people around me to make the world better?

First Technique—“Write Your Own Self-Definition”

Where can you make a difference in the world? Separate out the different areas and ask yourself what specifically you can do for the people in each area—write it down; make a list.

What talents do you have, what time could you commit, what needs does someone have that you could do something about? Start with the people closest to you, then work your way out into the broader community. Maybe a family member needs you to spend more time with him. Perhaps you could join a school board, or work for the Little League; volunteer at a community center or homeless soup kitchen; help out (or become) a political candidate trying to improve something you care about.

Areas You Can Make a Difference

- Your family and friends
- Your workplace / school
- Your community / society / culture
- The whole world / the Kingdom of God

“Always look for the good news in the other.”

— Gabriel Marcel

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Positive Effects

Focusing on contributing means that the emotions of the Comparison Game start to subside. If you are doing the good that you can, you don't need to compare yourself to others. You may have less talent than someone else, but if you are using more of it for good, you are objectively better off, and you know it.



Gabriel Marcel
(1879–1955)

Philosopher and playwright

He wrote several books that pioneered the philosophy of Personalism or “Christian Existentialism”.

Second Technique—“Look for the Good News in Others”

Level 2 dominance puts the focus on yourself, and this narcissism hinders your ability to have empathy for others. This makes it hard to have compassion and to want to make sacrifices for others.

How do you get out of this self-centered position? According to philosopher Gabriel Marcel, the answer lies in changing the way we look at others. His advice is to “always look for the good news in the other.”

Looking for the Bad News

You can't look for the bad news and the good news in someone at the same time. If you look for the bad news, you're only going to see the person as a problem, and it becomes impossible to feel empathy or compassion. You can't love the person, because you can't see him as lovable.

People can often make the mistake of trying to “force” themselves to love someone while their minds are full of nothing but negative judgments about that person; this approach is unsustainable and ultimately dishonest. You wind up marginalizing the person and dismissing him, closing yourself off from seeing or experiencing the good in him.

Looking for the Good News

Luckily, the opposite also works. Look for the good news in someone, and you understand the context for the bad news (which everyone inevitably has some of). This shift in perspective makes empathy much easier.

Plus, you invariably find the little good things you would have missed: their delightful idiosyncrasies, aspirations to do good, gratuitous acts of kindness, and so on.

Lesson One—The Four Levels of Happiness

Positive Effects

When this new perspective leads to empathy, you get out of yourself. If you look for the good news repeatedly, it becomes a habit and starts to take you out of the narcissism, the depression, the self-absorption of the Comparison Game.

Plus, looking for the good news can have a positive chain reaction. People can typically sense if someone is approaching them with negative or positive expectations, and when they perceive that they are being approached with empathy, they can be less defensive and will respond with trust and empathy, which makes it easier for you to look for the good news in the future, and the cycle of love continues. You will have more energy to do good and build up your life of contribution. You will build stronger relationships and find collegiality with all kinds of people who believe like you do, and this will become a completely different form of life.



SMALL GROUP REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does happiness mean to you?
2. What is a life goal that you have chosen based on your idea of happiness?
3. What is a choice you often face that forces you to pick between two different levels of happiness? What is your default decision when faced with such a choice?
4. Can you recall a specific moment in your life when you felt a transcendent desire, something more than the world could offer?
5. What level of happiness do you think is most valued in our current culture and why?
6. Why don't people simply reach for the heights of Level 4 all the time? What are the incentives for focusing on lower levels of happiness?
7. Is there anything wrong with winning?
8. What concrete techniques can you develop to expand your focus into Levels 3 and 4?

