



What Greek and Roman philosophers can teach us about being happy

BY LARA EHRLICH

ANCIENT ADVICE FOR A GOOD LIFE

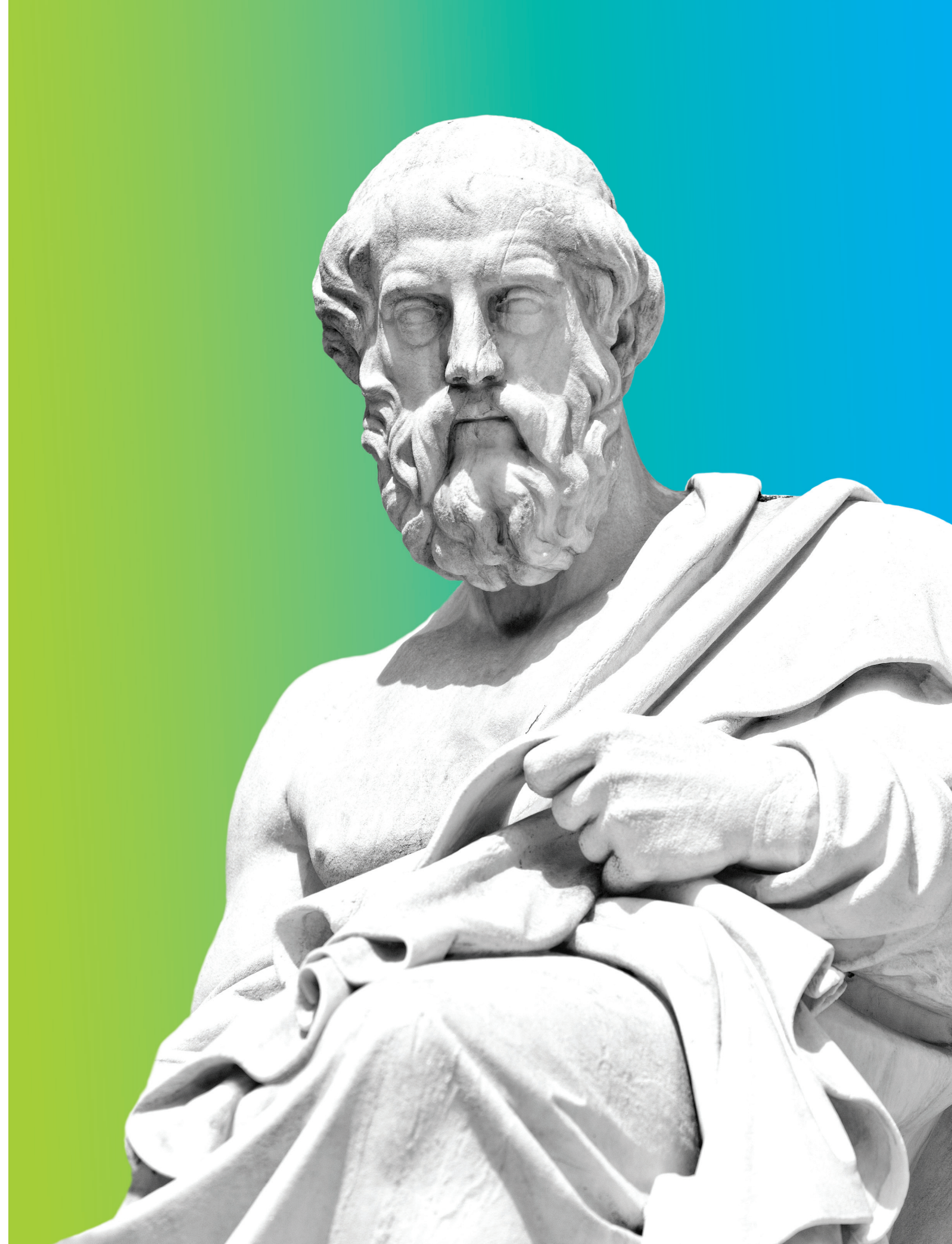
Should I go out tonight, or study? Do I want to be pre-med, or am I just doing what my parents expect me to? What's the point of college, anyway? These are some of the questions that students have posed to Zsuzsanna Varhelyi during her office hours. As she embraced her role as their sage, the associate professor of classical studies began thinking about her answers in the context of what the ancient philosophers she taught in class might advise, and created a course around it.

“What is a good life?” Ancient wisdom and modern insights” examines how Greek and Roman philosophers like Plato and Aristotle derived their ideas of happiness and how their ideas compare to modern perceptions of contentment. At the end of each class, Varhelyi poses a question inspired by the reading assignments for the students to address in journals. After a class on Plato, they ponder whether they could be happy if those around them were not; an essay by modern sociologist Sam Binkley leads them to consider whether the US government wants them to have a good life.

Inspired by Varhelyi's insightful questions and her idea to engage—and grapple—with the wisdom of the ancients, *arts&sciences* explores the meaning of a good life.

Forget advice columns like Dear Abby, we're channeling the goddess of wisdom, Athena, to show how the giants of philosophy would have answered our most pressing questions, from finding a soul mate to landing a better job. And because not all of their advice has aged well, Varhelyi weighs in with expert commentary—and some wisdom of her own.

THE GREEK PHOTOHOLIC/ISTOCK



DEAR ATHENA:

My boyfriend and I have great chemistry, but it's a different story beyond the bedroom. We don't have anything to talk about at restaurants, so we end up on our phones. We really have nothing in common—but I've never been so attracted to anyone. How can I turn lust into love?



Athena: Plato (427–347 BCE, Greece) would have us believe that humans were originally spherical, with

four arms, four legs, and a single head with two faces. They ran by turning cartwheels. When these foolish creatures got too cocky and took on the gods, Zeus split them in two. Now, we roam the Earth in search of our other halves, longing to be whole again. “So ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man,” wrote Plato in *Symposium* (translation by Benjamin Jowett). That’s why it isn’t enough to have a partner who only offers



physical pleasure, and why it does matter that you and your boyfriend have nothing in common. This man is not your other half, so don’t waste your time on him. Go find the *one* person on this planet who will complete you.



Zsuzsanna Varhelyi: Few today would follow Plato in thinking that you have only one soul mate whom you

must locate to enjoy a happy relationship. Despite this constraining philosophy, Plato was actually quite progressive. He wrote that there were three types of spherical humans: those composed of one man and one woman, two men, and two women. For Plato, the highest degree of love was the relationship between an older man and a younger one, based on philosophical teaching. “They are married by a far nearer tie and have a closer friendship than those who beget mortal children, for the children who are their common offspring are fairer and more immortal,” he wrote (translation by Jowett). In the Renaissance, the church and society in general took issue with Plato’s explicit references to love between men; the Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino, a Catholic priest, reinterpreted the relationship as chaste, forming our modern idea of Platonic love. These days, many would agree with Plato that physical attraction is only one—and by itself, an insufficient—part of what makes a relationship work, so if you’re not able to develop companionate love with your partner, you are unlikely to succeed in having a long-term relationship with him.

LEONSOX/ISTOCK; LIU RODGERS/COURTESY; VARHELYI/PINGBAY/ISTOCK



Dear Athena: This year, I’m turning 35—the age my father was when he died. I know it’s irrational, but I take after him in so many ways that I’m afraid I’m going to die at 35, too. Death has become such an obsession that my wife leaves the room when I bring it up. How can I make peace with death?



Athena: Epicurus (341–270 BCE, Greece) says it may help to remember that we are

composed of atoms whirling through space. We don’t have much choice in the fact that we’re alive, or when we’ll die, but we can choose how we live. “It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and well and justly,” he says in *Principal Doctrines* (translation by Robert Drew Hicks), “and it is impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living pleasantly.” So, seek pleasure over pain, and use whatever time you have to enjoy the small things. Eat good food. Be with friends. Don’t fear death, because when it comes, your body and soul will no longer exist, so there will be no part of you left to feel pain. In times of despair, remember the epitaph Epicurus inspired: “*Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*. I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care.” Epicurus died of kidney stones, but remained cheerful until the end.



Varhelyi: Although many have read Epicurus’ words “pleasure is the highest good” as a directive to pursue

hedonistic pleasures, that is not what he meant. In fact, he was advocating for a simple life, free from pain and fear. He denounced the idea that we might be punished in the afterlife, because dreading death leads to anxiety, which elicits

irrational fears (it is not rational to think you will die at the same age as your father, for instance). I recommend you read Stephen Greenblatt’s 2011 book, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, in which he traces the 15th-century discovery and influence of Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*, a lost manuscript of “startling, seductive beauty,” in which the Roman philosopher describes the afterlife as a dispersal of atoms. His ideas—based on Epicurus’ teachings—helped fuel the Renaissance by suggesting that life and death has “no master plan, no divine architect, no intelligent design,” Greenblatt says, and inspired artists and thinkers from Botticelli to Darwin, Shakespeare to Thomas Jefferson. “Nothing for us there is to dread in death,” Lucretius wrote (translation by William Ellery Leonard). So relax. Enjoy the company of your wife and honor your love for your late father by making the most of the time you have left—likely measured in years, not days.



Dear Athena: I’m a freshman in the Questrom School of Business. I work hard, but my grades are mediocre. I’m afraid my parents will be disappointed in me and that I won’t get a good job. How can I ensure my success?



Athena: Epictetus (AD 50–135, Greece) would have you think of yourself as an

archer; you can shoot for the center of the target, but the wind might blow your arrow astray. That would not be your fault. The arrow isn’t good or bad by nature, the wind isn’t good or bad—the only thing that can be good or bad is how you feel about missing the target. The gust of wind was part of a divine plan you

can't control, so there's no point in dwelling on it. Instead, see the failure as an opportunity to become stronger and face adversity calmly. "No man is free who is not master of himself," according to Epictetus in *The Golden Sayings*. Realize what's in your power, and what's not. You can't control the grades your teachers give you, or whether a manager gives you a job—that's all predetermined by the divine pattern. Do the best you can, strive to live in harmony with nature, and stop feeling sorry for yourself.



Varhelyi: Epictetus rose from slavery to become a celebrated philosopher in his own time. As someone who

suffered tremendously (his owner supposedly broke his leg out of anger, leaving him permanently disabled), Epictetus ascribed to the Stoic idea that we have power over how we judge our circumstances. For Epictetus, happiness does not come from reaching the external mileposts you've identified, but from re-evaluating your longing for them.

"Who is free from restraint?" Epictetus asks in *The Discourses*. "He who desires nothing that belongs to others. And what are the things which belong to others? Those which are not in our power either to have or not to have, or to have of a certain kind or in a certain manner." Stoicism—a school of philosophy that says living in harmony with nature helps us weather the vagaries of fortune—is the basis of our modern cognitive behavioral therapy, which encourages us to change harmful thought patterns and develop coping strategies. A good psychotherapist can help you figure out what's triggering your feelings of inadequacy and redirect your negative thoughts. While you're at it, add a minor in English (or classics) and enjoy life a little.

SOUL SEARCHING 101

At the end of each class, Professor Zsuzsanna Varhelyi poses a question based on the lesson's reading for the students to address in their journals. These include:

➔ Do you think questioning common ideas is a good way to figure out whether they are good? (Based on Plato's *Republic*)

➔ Can you think of any ethical dilemmas you or someone you know ever faced? What decision did you/they make? What were the difficulties of deciding? (Based on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*)

➔ Can you think of times in your life when you were very caught up in a positive experience? (Based on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*)

➔ Describe a life in which you had all the pleasurable experiences available to you. Would you ever run out of ideas? (Based on Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus* and Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*)

➔ Can you speculate why ancient Greeks may have regularly told stories of vengeance that ended terribly for all involved? (Based on Aesop's "The Fox and the Crane")



Dear Athena: My son, who is in middle school, has a classmate who bullies him for his appearance. I suggested talking to the teacher, but my son doesn't want to be a tattletale, and he won't let me call his friend's mother. What else can we do?



Athena: Take a lesson from the story of the fox and the crane by Aesop (620–564 BCE, Greece). The fox invited

the crane to dinner and served a delicious broth on a plate. While the fox lapped up his dinner, the crane couldn't scoop up the broth with his beak, and went hungry. A few days later, the crane invited the fox to dinner and served his broth in a long-necked jug. While the crane stuck his beak into the jug and polished off the broth, the fox couldn't eat his supper. He realized the crane had gotten revenge for his cruel prank and apologized. Tit for tat. Tell your son to pick a physical characteristic his classmate might be sensitive about and devise his own comedy routine.



Varhelyi: Aesop's fables offer a counterpoint to us humans, who consider ourselves the

most rational beings, by having animals teach us a lesson about the shortcomings of human behavior. While you might know Aesop from stories you read in childhood, like *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* and *The Tortoise and the Hare*, in antiquity, these stories were seen not as children's tales, but as political discourse. Public speakers employed fables in their speeches to prove their points. And as widely accepted narratives about how life works, fables reflected and reinforced the social hierarchy of Aesop's day, promoting continuity rather than change. Today, fables have fallen somewhat out of popularity in favor of stories that teach our children about both realities and ideals. In David McKee's children's book *Elmer*, patchwork elephant Elmer makes the other elephants happy with his jokes and games, but he's sad because he looks different from them. He paints himself gray to blend in with the herd, only to find that they are gloomy without him. Elmer realizes that they love him for his differences, and he comes to celebrate himself for who he is. Take a page from Elmer instead of Aesop, and strive for a more peaceful reconciliation than the crane's. Host a supper for both families and talk it out—and make sure everyone can enjoy the meal.



Dear Athena: My ex says I'm a bad person and she's better off without me. I'll be the first to admit I have flaws—I probably drink more than I should, I play online poker at work, I don't floss—but I've never thought of myself as a bad person. I love this girl, Athena, and I want to win her back. How can I go from bad seed to good egg?



Athena: Aristotle (384–322 BCE, Greece) would say your ex is right. You're gluttonous. You take risks. You don't listen to reason. And you enjoy acting badly,

which puts you as far as humanly possible from being a good—or, virtuous—man, who both wants to do what's right and does it. Like Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics* (translation by W. D. Ross), "to each

man the activity in accordance with his own disposition is most desirable, and, therefore, to the good man that which is in accordance with virtue." It's going to take a lot of work to crawl your way to goodness, and it's probably impossible. The highest good is not the pursuit of honor, pleasure, or wealth—it's derived from the one thing that separates humans from other animals: reason. A good life is one spent becoming the best possible human, which Aristotle says we can do by practicing virtues like temperance, composure, and self-control—all of which you could stand to cultivate. "For men are good in but one way, but bad in many," Aristotle says (translation by Ross). If you can attain these virtues, then you'll achieve the highest good: *eudaimonia*, which we might translate as "flourishing." Sounds easy enough, but to achieve the virtues, you must practice them until they are habitual—and you must also have been born into a good life. If your parents are bad seeds, too, then I'm afraid you're out of luck.



Varhelyi: In ancient Athens as well as modern America, people say they want to be happy, but they mean

various things: finding love, reaching our full potential, avoiding illness. When Aristotle defined happiness as living up to our highest possible capacity, he was referring specifically to the ideal free citizen male of Athens. He thought such men did their best when they were driven by reason and participated in political life. "When a whole family or some individual, happens to be so preeminent in virtue as to surpass all others," he suggested in *Politics* (translation by Jowett), "then it is just that they should be the royal family and supreme over all." One difficulty in applying Aristotle's philosophy to our lives is that, by his standards, it would be nearly impossible to live well if we are lacking in friends, wealth, or power, or if we have encountered suffering. That said, you can still try to better yourself. Start by reading Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who coined the term *flow* to describe immersion in a creative activity so complete that we don't notice time passing. "The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times," he wrote in his 1990 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. "The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile." While you might not flourish by Aristotle's standards, you can still strive to achieve some virtues and a state of flow by trying some new creative activities. You might find that you'll enjoy pursuing your best self—just remember to floss. [a&s](#)

Unless otherwise noted, the translations used in this article were accessed at the Internet Classics Archive (<http://classics.mit.edu>).

Do you have a letter for Athena? We're not quite ready to turn the *arts&sciences* letters page into an advice column, but we'd love to hear your take on this ancient advice, as well as about the philosophies or approaches to living you learned at CAS that have shaped your life since. Write to the editor at thurston@bu.edu.

WRITE TO US!