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Happiness Is Not Self-help | Jennifer Frey

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The Veritas Forum

Americans spend over \$11 billion on self-help every year, but philosopher Jennifer Frey says that if you want to be happy, you should read philosophy instead. For Dr. Frey, if we want to uncover a more holistic vision of the good life, we need to go back to the classics—to Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. When we do that, she says, we discover that happiness is less about feeling good all the time and more about cultivating a vision of life that gets you outside of yourself.

Transcript

So people say, you know, how did you get interested in happiness? And part of me wants to be like, I was never interested in happiness. If by happiness, we mean probably what you mean. Like, am I happy today? And then the answer to that is find your emoji.

And that's certainly not the goal of human life. Philosopher Jennifer Frey says that if you want to be happy, you should read philosophy. Now for those of us who didn't fall in love with Kant's critique of pure reasoning in college, that may sound like terrible advice.

But Frey isn't just standing on a soapbox. Americans spend over \$11 billion every year on self-help, which means we're already looking to philosophy for help. It's just bad philosophy.

For Frey, if you want to uncover a more holistic vision of the good life, we need to go back to the classics, to Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. When we do that, she says, we discover that happiness is less about feeling good all the time and more about cultivating a vision of life that gets you outside of yourself. So I guess we could just start with talking a little bit about your interest in philosophy, how did you get interested in studying philosophy, and then maybe a little bit about how you got interested in studying happiness in the good life.

Sure, I think most people in high school, I went to public high school in Cincinnati, Ohio, and philosophy wasn't taught. Even though I was in the advanced placement track, we

learned literature and history, but no philosophy. But I did become interested in philosophy in high school.

I think mostly I was just bored by everything else. I wanted something new, and I had this sense somehow that there were philosophers, that this was a thing. This was the mid-90s, and this was about the time that Borders, Books and Music was becoming a thing.

It's depressing now, I think it doesn't exist anymore. Yeah, and then I went to college, I went to Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, and there was a tremendous amount of pressure on me to do something that would have, I don't know, kind of financial security, economic security, and also a certain kind of status. There was a lot of pressure to do something sort of pre-law, which I had absolutely zero interest in.

But I just sort of doggedly persisted, and I declared a philosophy major pretty much right away. At first, I was kind of thinking, "Oh, well, maybe I'll do more literature or history." But I was fairly scandalized by my literature courses, where there was, I should say, like a hostage. I should say, like a hostility to anything like truth claims, and I felt very alienated from that.

And so I migrated over to philosophy, and it wasn't a perfect fit for me, but it was definitely a much better fit than literature, but I also just found philosophy incredibly exciting and engaging. And I just kind of got hooked, and I'm still doing it. Would you say that part of what drew you into philosophy was that, I guess, drive towards truth claims in general to actually seek out truth itself? You know, I'm not really sure.

Like, what was going on in my head at the time was pretty simple. I mean, I just had a lot of really basic questions about human beings, and frankly about myself. And it seemed to me that there weren't a lot of great resources for answering those questions, and I was hoping that philosophy was going to help me.

And what I came to discover was that I really gravitated towards ancient and medieval philosophy. And the question about the existence of God was something that became extremely important for me because I was at the time a fairly committed atheist. I was raised in a religiously indifferent household, religiously indifferent borderline hostility, but definitely like I did not have a religious upbringing.

And I kind of had, and this was before the new atheist, but I kind of had a new atheist perspective about religion in general. And one of the things that I encountered in studying philosophy was incredibly smart religious people, including some of my professors, and that had a very profound impact on me because it put a lot of pressure on this idea that I had that people were religious because they were ignorant, or because they were emotionally needy, or they just didn't know science or something. I had these impossibly crude ideas.

And so the question, you know, it couldn't be the case that there is a God became a very important question for me. And it led me to reading a lot of ancient and medieval philosophy. I think in particular by reading Thomas Aquinas, I changed my mind and decided that not only was it possible that God existed very, very obviously possible, but that I myself came to be convinced that it was true.

And so that was a huge turning point in my life because, you know, I'm 18 and like a very radical change and worldview. And I didn't know what to do with it because you're in like this weird position where you're like, okay, I believe in God. And if I believe in God, then obviously you have to worship him.

But then I'm just going to choose a religion. Like that's a very strange position to find. Absolutely.

One is a very heavy choice. Is that happening with it all in your freshman year of college? Yes. Oh my goodness.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

I did not have a typical college experience by any means. And, you know, especially that first year, I basically lived in the library. Yeah.

So this is like the almost the polar opposite of this, I guess, stereotype. So I came into college studying philosophy as well, but I came from the other side. I came from Christian upbringing.

And a lot of people were very concerned that I would go to study philosophy and then lose my faith. Like I would encounter existentialism and Nietzsche. And then all of a sudden realize none of it was true.

Well, it happens to a lot of people. Right. And you almost had this, the inverse of that experience.

You know, you come into philosophy thinking it may encourage you to continue on this, your own path or whatever worldview and all of a sudden you're now believing in something that philosophy was maybe supposed to dispel. Yeah. Well, I mean, I definitely did not come to philosophy and chanted in any religious sense, but I think pretty quickly when you start reading canonical figures in Western philosophy, you know, that the question of God becomes very explicit.

And that surprised me. I did not, I did not expect to find that. Well, let's maybe talk a little bit about Aquinas.

You mentioned him and he seems to be a really significant influence for you. What was it when he first encountered Aquinas that was so compelling about either belief in God or

just the way he was thinking? Yeah, I mean, gosh, it's hard to get back in that headspace, but I guess, you know, I think, I think the main thing for me was it seemed true. And, and I think that can be difficult for people to understand, but, you know, my background was a kind of relativism.

You know, I was, I was definitely raised to be a kind of relativist about things. You know, don't judge people. Everybody has their own truth, that kind of thing.

And that started to seem empty to me, even in high school. You know, I sort of saw through that as, you know, basically a kind of nihilism that wasn't going to help anyone. And I had no conceptual room for thinking that there was a Christian intellectual tradition that had a very convincing and compelling rational explanation of morality.

But that's what you find in Aquinas. People say, you know, how did you get interested in happiness? And part of me wants to be like, I was never interested in happiness. If by happiness, we mean probably what you mean.

Right, which is sort of like, like, am I happy today? And then the answer to that is like, find your emoji, right? Am I the smiley face? Am I the cry face? Am I the, like, what, how do I subjectively feel right in this moment? And obviously that is a very unstable, somewhat uninteresting phenomenon. And that's certainly not the goal of human life. You know, the basic Aristotelian idea about what we might just call practical philosophy is that living well is a matter of right practical reasoning.

Yeah. So that's kind of like the formula and living well is a translation of the Greek eudaimonia or oipraxia. And eudaimonia is one of those words that really has no great English correlate, maybe blessedness, but that has all kinds of connotations that really aren't in Aristotle.

So we just translated it as happiness. Well, let's, I mean, you have a form coming up. You're coming to speak with Veritas at Yale with Lori Santos, who's a professor at Yale who's been teaching one of their most popular courses ever, I think, on happiness and how to be happy.

Right. And she's working, I guess, maybe more within that psychological, maybe, framework that we were, you know, am I happy today? Happiness, maybe being an attitude? Of course, I don't want to straw man that. I think there's something more robust to it that she's working through.

But it's more in line with happiness is something you can configure in your day to day life. Right. But it sounds like you're not understanding happiness or the good life in the same way.

Are there, is there any compatibility between those two views? Yeah, that's a great and really hard question. So part of what I've been up to, well, actually, most of what I've

been up to for the past three years, I think, is a great question. I think that's a great question for the past three years is working on a huge interdisciplinary project with social scientists, including many different kinds of psychologists.

And so we're interested in articulating what that ideal is. And I think when we talk about happiness as a goal, as something that we should be promoting for people, we want them to be happy. It's very dangerous not to have a normative objective component of that.

Because if happiness is just feeling good, well, if things had worked out slightly differently, Hitler could have been very happy. And I don't think that's something that we want to be celebrating. So I guess what I'm interested in is maybe what's called a kind of deep happiness, where sure happiness is in some sense about how you feel.

Like it would be really weird if the happy person worked just totally miserable and psychologically tortured and everything was deeply unpleasant and horrible. But they're living a good life. So you can't get it.

Yeah, it would strain credulity to think that this person is happy in any sense. Nevertheless, a happy life doesn't have to be like feeling ecstatic all the time, which would at any rate be exhausting. And it also is compatible with periods of suffering and in a very general way of self-sacrifice and self-denial.

And in order to get that, we have to bring in some kind of objective picture of the good human life, which is ordered to something besides your own personal pleasure or subjective. Good feelings. I think it's a fact about human beings, a deep fact about human beings that we're not happy in the deep sense, satisfied, outside of loving, meaningful relationships with others.

It goes right back to Aristotle. The Nicomachean Ethics is 10 books. Two entire books of the Nicomachean Ethics are about friendship.

More than anything else in his Ethics, Aristotle talks about friendship. He says, "You cannot be happy without friends. It's impossible.

You love your friends, right? And friends will be good of the other." So really at the heart of the happy life is willing the good of others. And that means willing the good of others in ways that demand self-sacrifice. Aristotle takes it as obvious that the friend will be glad to make those sacrifices.

That it won't be like this torturous thing, this really hard thing for them to do. And what explains that is love of the friend. You know, your feelings about other people.

And to become that kind of person that can enter into these sorts of friendships is not to have as your top priority your own pleasure. Because obviously, if that were the thing

you were focused on, you're just not going to be a good friend. It's not going to happen.

Right. Well, when it seems like even in our contemporary context, there is an admiration for self-sacrifice. Like if we see on the news someone sacrificing himself to go save someone inside of a burning building or something along those lines, we admire that.

But we almost categorize it as just a free choice in this moment that this guy or girl acted heroically in this one scenario. But it's not something they don't talk about it as if they have cultivated the behavior of someone who would do that. Yeah, I agree.

We like the hero where the hero is the person who makes the ultimate sacrifice. I think we definitely still admire that. And that's a good thing.

I would be very worried for a culture that thought, "Wow, what an idiot." We do still admire the hero. But I think what we're more confused about are definitely less agreed upon is the importance or the value of everyday self-sacrifice. I think a lot of people resist that.

They're very hostile to the very idea of it. So this comes up a lot when people talk about parenting or having children. A lot of people are childless and would like to remain childless.

Even married people, birth rates are astonishingly low. They're well below replacement for every single European society. They're well below replacement.

They're approaching that in the US as well. And I think related to this is a real hesitance or even hostility about the kinds of daily self-sacrifice. To be honest, I have six children.

It's relentless daily self-denial and self-sacrifice. It's pretty unclear that your kids are really going to do much for you. It's definitely more selfless.

I think a lot of people are really not attracted to that. But let's be honest, parenting is very hard. It's very, very hard.

It's a daily grind and it wears you down. You're up at three in the morning, knee deep and poop. It's what it is.

And I think a lot of people, they don't want that. They'd rather just travel the world. But the flip side of that is, and here's where psychology does play a really interesting and valuable role, is that a lot of work in psychology suggests that people who engage in long term self-sacrificial projects like parenting.

There are other examples, but parenting is one of the paradigmatic examples, have significantly higher scores in psychologists tend to call it self-transcendence. They have these self-transcendence measures. But people who score high on these measures have a deep sense of meaning and purpose in their life.

And they tend to be happier in the long run. So if you ask a parent who's got a two-year-old and a five-month-old, are you happy? They're like, "Oh, no! This is awful!" No, this is a nightmare. But check back in with them later on.

And they tend to be doing better than their peers later on in life. Yeah, it sounds like maybe it's part of the difficulty or maybe a significant part of the difficulty is isolating happiness as a variable that we should be overly emphasizing in our lives. It's not something that is... We just need to solve for the happiness factor in a sense.

But you're casting a vision that happiness may emerge from, but it's this unification of virtue, the sense of purpose and meaning. And that happiness is somewhere in the mix, but it's not this thing that you've completely separated as the sole pursuit of my life. Yeah, so I do think in some sense that happiness is the goal of human life.

That's something that I take from Aristotle. But now what does that mean in practice? It means that your reasons for acting ultimately get their intelligibility from whatever your vision of happiness is. And your vision of how to live is basically your conception of happiness.

Like, what's going to fulfill me? And that's really the subjective side of the happiness equation, is the sense of being fulfilled. That's subjectively real in people. That sense of deep joy and satisfaction.

That is a subjectively real psychological first personal thing. But then the question is, well, what really gets me that? And for Aristotle, one, you have to be doing certain kinds of activities. The kinds of activities that are characteristic of a good human life.

And that's going to be the answer to that question is going to be grounded in an account of the kind of thing you are. Okay, you're a human being. You're a human person.

And you have these certain capacities. And we can think of your capacities as your ability to engage in certain activities. And these need to be perfected and integrated in such a way that you can achieve that sense of being really satisfied with your life.

So you have to basically become a complete, well integrated human being. Like all of these capacities for knowledge and feeling. They all have to be regulated to attain certain goods that Aristotle thinks are central to a good human life.

Well, where does Aquinas come in here? He has this Aristotelian background and influence, but he also is importing a belief in God, a belief in the transcendental. How does that Aristotle believed in God as well? And God is very central to his metaphysics. It's central to his entire system.

So, but he doesn't believe in the Christian God. And one of the huge differences between Aristotle and Aquinas is that Aristotle agrees with a lot of other Greeks that you can't be

friends with God. That doesn't make sense.

Because God doesn't need you. And also you can't really reach God. So for him, the concept of friendship with God, which for Aquinas is the ultimate end of human life.

It's friendship with God. That is happiness. So that's a yes.

That's a very huge gap between them. And it's not a gap that can be closed. I mean, I think you have to make a choice there about what you think is possible and probable.

Well, maybe I don't know if you feel comfortable sharing your inclinations on that. Because I mean, I guess we could go back to this. I'll be at much more robust, relativistic lens and say, well, I'm going to choose my pure Aristotelian pursuit of happiness.

I'm going to cultivate virtue and all these things with a belief of meaning. Or, and I'm going to be happy. Or on the other hand, I'm going to pursue friendship with God as this prime goal or a tele- Yeah.

Well, I think... Are they, could they both be happy? I mean, I can tell you that in my case, you know, what I came into contact with, which was very fundamental for me, was looking at the lives of Christian saints. And I would say that the most fundamental for me was St. Augustine. So the confessions, when I read the confessions, I knew that my life would never be the same.

Like, it was absolutely transformative for me. I was a completely different person when I closed that book than I was when I opened it. Which is funny, because I just read it out of this sense that like, oh, well, I would be an uninteresting person if I hadn't read this book.

So I read it. I mean, you know, it's whatever it is to me. No, like, I just wanted better banter at a cocktail party.

But I, but it was totally... Yeah. That's why I'm reading Infinite Jest right now. Which is not a bad motive.

I don't want to malign that motive, but in addition to being just such a beautifully written and moving and nearly perfect book, it just... It opened up this possibility of life that I didn't really see before. And that possibility of life was a very intellectually serious, ambitious person seeing the importance of making friendship with God, the foundation of everything that he does, and how this transformed, how it completely transformed some. I came to think that there was a different way of living that was not only more appealing or attractive to me, I mean, it was, but I think it was more appealing and attractive because I thought it better captured the truth.

That is to say I came to think that something was missing from that worldview. And I think this idea about friendship with God is not something that you get to just by rational

argument. I think you have to see it.

You know, I think you have to see it, play out in people's lives. And that's what I got out of reading the confessions and then subsequent readings of the lives of the same. You start to realize that a Christian vision of the world is pretty different in a lot of ways, and it really is going to change your orientation in general, and that, of course, is going to impact the choices that you make.

What would you say, kind of concluding here, what would you say to someone who's, you know, listen to this podcast, they just put down all their self help manuals, cultivate a sense of happiness in their own life, but they've, they realize that that's a fairly flimsy approach towards cultivating this larger sense of meaning and purpose and the good life. Where should they start on this journey of maybe a more robust vision of happiness as we've talked about throughout this podcast? Yeah, I mean, this is a half-serious, half-in-gest, but I actually think to Walker Percy, he was this southern writer, Louisiana, New Orleans, really. He had this kind of takedown, this ultimate parody of the self-help genre.

It's called "Last in the Cosmos," the last self-help book, and it's hilarious and witty and philosophically deep and profound, but it's kind of a takedown of the entire self-help enterprise. And it's all about sort of locating what he calls the predicament of the self, sort of like, why is it that you're always undermining yourself and you can't figure yourself out? It's kind of like, why are you a mess? And of course, he doesn't think that he can write the self-help volume. He thinks there's nothing he Walker Percy is going to say that's going to get you out of this predicament, but he does, you know, he is a philosopher and he is a Catholic, but he does want you to better understand your predicament, right, so that you'll see that you're not super official or wrong-headed ways of negotiating your way out of it or learning to live with it or whatever.

So there's a lot of fun in that book, but there's also a lot of good and interesting philosophy in it, and it's an easy read. I think in general, you know, what should people do to be happier? I mean, I don't think there's any. Or was that the question? Is the question, what should people do? I guess it's more maybe even something that undergirds that, where could they even find the resources to cast a vision of the good life? Oh, well, yeah, well, philosophy, obviously.

Yeah, good answer. Obviously everyone should embrace philosophy and their life and of course take many philosophy classes in college. Yeah, I don't know why it's been so tough to convince all my friends to do this.

I lived with all engineers in college and they didn't buy it at all. Yeah, it's too bad. I mean, I think, you know, especially in the American context, I think that philosophy is not on people's radars.

If it is on people's radar, it's kind of like, it's kind of a thing that it actually isn't. So we

think of it like gurus or something. Maybe somebody who's cordoned themselves off from society and is just thinking about stuff.

I think we have a caricature of philosophy and what philosophy is that is really sad and depressing and bad for us. So getting into philosophy and doing the kind of careful reflection and self-reflection that philosophy demands is going to be good for you. It's going to be good for you.

It's going to be unsettling for you, which is very good. It's very good to be unsettled, to be shaken from this idea that you've got it all figured out and you're on the right path because probably you're not and you don't. And it's good to become self-aware about this.

And I think think more about this Aristotelian ideal, take it seriously, the idea that, you know, what really is going to be central to whether or not you're happy and you feel satisfied with your life and you have found a kind of meaning and purpose in your life is going to be measured by the significant extent by the relationships that you've cultivated, which is to say, who are the people you love and why do you love them? That's beautiful. It's a beautiful vision. Well, I want to... It's also hard.

For all of you who are listening and thinking happiness is easy. It's not. Being a human being is very hard.

Yes, absolutely. I feel like that all the time. Well, thank you so much, Jennifer.

It's been an absolute delight to chat with you. Yeah, it's been fun. Obviously, my personal interest in philosophy aside, I think it's just a fascinating topic and I think one that is very much on the minds of people growing up figuring out what does it mean to even be happy.

If you want to hear more and read more from Jennifer, be sure to check out her podcast Sacred and Perfain Love, which can be found through her blog, VirtuBlog.com. And if you want to dig in to the meaty philosophy of the work she's doing, be sure to check out her interdisciplinary project with the John Templeton Foundation called Virtù Happiness and the Meaning of Life, as well as her forthcoming book, *Self Transcendence and Virtù*.

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