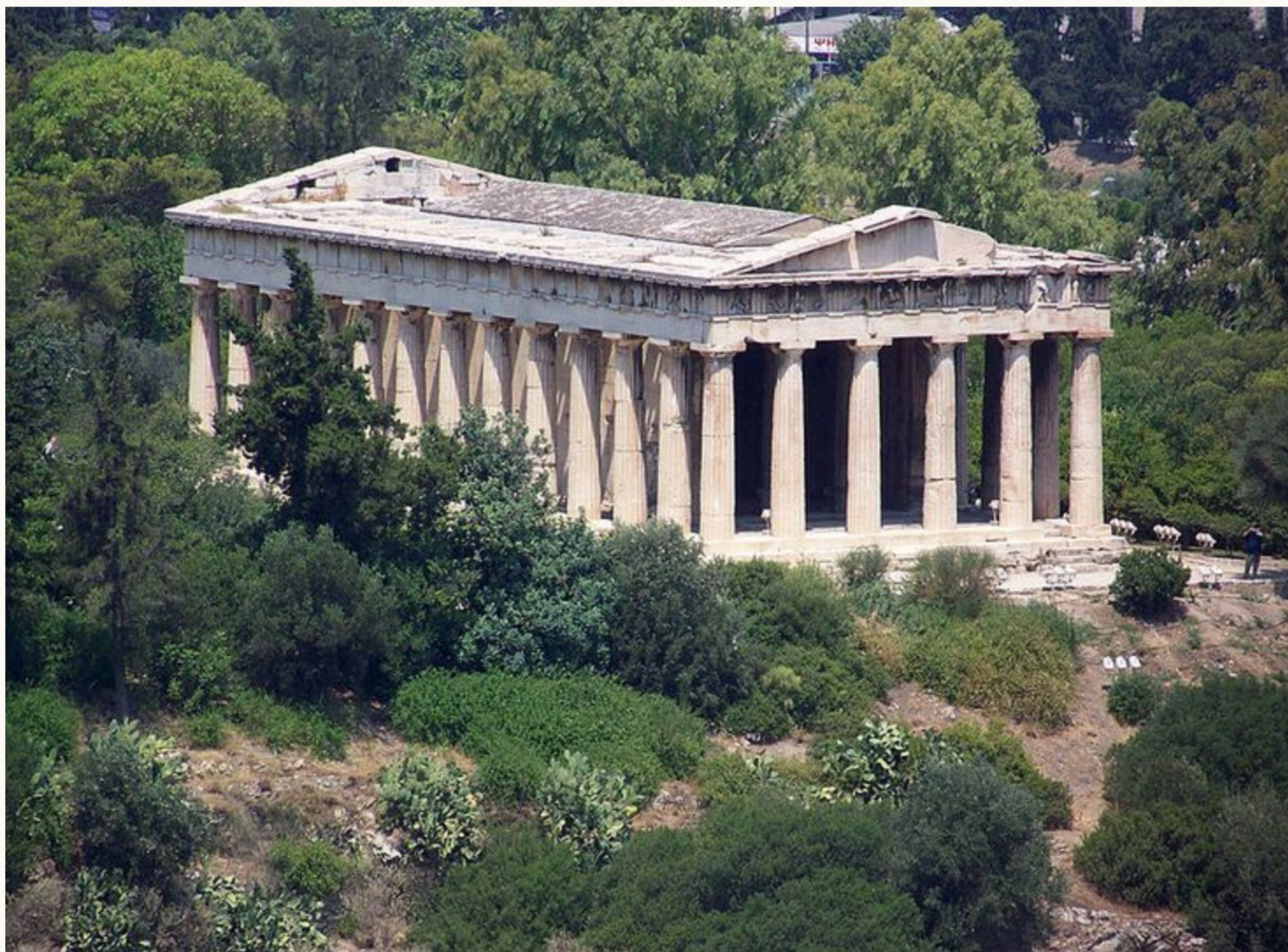


A Better Word than Happiness: Eudaimonia

Eudaimonia is an Ancient Greek word, particularly emphasised by the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, that deserves wider currency because it corrects the shortfalls in one of the most central, governing but insufficient terms in our contemporary idiom: *happiness*.

When we nowadays try to articulate the purpose of our lives, it is to the word happiness we commonly have recourse. We tell ourselves and others that the ultimate rationale for our jobs, our relationships and the conduct of our day to day lives is the pursuit of happiness. It sounds like an innocent enough idea, but excessive reliance on the term means that we are frequently unfairly tempted to exit or at least heavily question a great many testing but worthwhile situations.



The Ancient Greeks resolutely did not believe that the purpose of life was to be happy; they proposed that it was to achieve *Eudaimonia*, a word which has been best translated as ‘fulfilment’.

What distinguishes happiness from fulfilment is pain. It is eminently possible to be fulfilled and – at the same time – under pressure, suffering physically or mentally, overburdened and, quite frequently, in a tetchy mood. This is a psychological nuance that the word happiness makes it hard to capture; for it is tricky to speak of being happy yet unhappy or happy yet suffering. However, such a combination is readily accommodated within the dignified and noble-sounding letters of *Eudaimonia*.

The word encourages us to trust that many of life’s most worthwhile projects will at points be quite at odds with contentment and yet worth pursuing nevertheless. Properly exploring our professional talents, managing a household, keeping a relationship going, creating a new business venture or engaging in politics... none of these goals are likely to leave us cheerful and grinning on a quotidian basis. They will, in fact, involve us in all manner of challenges that will deeply exhaust and enervate us, provoke and wound us. And yet we will perhaps, at the end of our lives, still feel that the tasks were worth undertaking. Through them, we’ll have accessed something grander and more interesting than happiness: we’ll have made a difference.



With the word *Eudaimonia* in mind, we can stop imagining that we are aiming for a pain-free existence – and then berating ourselves unfairly for being in a bad mood. We’ll know that we are trying to do something far more important than smile: we’re striving to do justice to our full human potential and to work in some small but key way towards the improvement of our species.