

16 Liking Vs Wanting, Supernormal Stimuli

Forager Societies and Human Flourishing

1. What Is a Forager Society?

- Foragers (hunter-gatherers) live by hunting wild animals, fishing, and gathering wild plants rather than farming or industrial work.
 - For most of human history, almost everyone lived as foragers; modern life is evolutionarily very recent.
 - Studying foragers helps us ask: are we better or worse off (in terms of happiness/flourishing) than people living in the environment humans evolved for?
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2. Key Features of Forager Societies

(Know at least 5 in detail; below are more than 5, each with flourishing + comparison points.)

Feature 1: Small, Mobile Bands & Low Population Density

Description - Groups typically around 20–50 people, often related by kinship. - They move around (nomadic or semi-nomadic) following seasonal food sources. - Very low population density; lots of space per person.

Effects on Flourishing - Pros - Strong sense of belonging: you know everyone well. - Less crowding and noise; more contact with nature. - Fewer strangers → fewer anonymous conflicts and crime. - Cons - Very limited social circle; if relationships go badly, you cannot easily “find a new group”. - If the group is dysfunctional or abusive, there are few alternatives.

Comparison to Today - Today: most people live in huge, dense, anonymous societies (cities, online networks). - Modern life offers far more variety of social contacts but also isolation, loneliness, and stress from crowds.

Feature 2: Strong Egalitarianism and Anti-Hierarchy Norms

Description - Very little formal hierarchy or political leadership. - Strong norms against bragging, hoarding, or bossing others around. - Successful hunters, for example, are often “teased” to keep them humble; prestige is kept low to avoid dominance.

Effects on Flourishing - Pros - High sense of equality and dignity: people feel they are not dominated or controlled. - Less envy and status anxiety; fewer rigid class distinctions. - Cons - Limited opportunities for ambitious people to gain influence or create large-scale projects. - Group pressure can suppress individuality or excellence (e.g., “don’t stand out”).

Comparison to Today - Modern societies are much more hierarchical (wealth, status, corporate structures, governments). - We gain coordination for very large projects but also experience status competition, inequality, and feeling “small” within systems.

Feature 3: Extensive Sharing & Little Private Property

Description - Food and other resources are widely shared within the band (“demand sharing”). - Little long-term accumulation of material goods; property is often limited to personal items (tools, clothing). - Strong norms that everyone should have enough; hoarding is disapproved of.

Effects on Flourishing - Pros - Strong safety net: if you have a bad hunting day, others still feed you. - Reduces anxiety about survival; increases trust and solidarity. - Encourages a sense of “we” rather than “me”. - Cons - Few material comforts or long-term security; no savings or investments. - Less incentive to work extra-hard for personal gain; those who contribute more may feel resentment toward “free riders”.

Comparison to Today - Today: high importance on private property, savings, and individual wealth. - We gain material security and choice, but often at the cost of weaker community bonds and greater inequality.

Feature 4: “Immediate-Return” Economy (Present-Oriented Life)

Description - Little long-term storage of food; what is gathered/hunted is often eaten soon. - Minimal planning for months or years ahead compared to farmers or modern workers. - Life is structured around day-to-day or week-to-week needs.

Effects on Flourishing - Pros - Less long-term stress about careers, mortgages, and retirement. - Experience of living in the present; daily activities have immediate results (you hunt → you eat). - Cons - High vulnerability to short-term shocks: bad weather, illness, or injury can quickly create crisis. - Less capacity to build long-term projects, institutions, or accumulated knowledge.

Comparison to Today - Modern life is intensely future-focused: schooling, career tracks, investments, “5-year plans”. - This can support long-term flourishing (healthcare, education) but also generates chronic anxiety and work-pressure.

Feature 5: Lots of Social Interaction and Cooperative Child-Rearing

Description - Daily life is highly social: working, eating, and relaxing are group activities. - Children are often cared for by many adults (“alloparents”), older siblings, and the broader band. - Knowledge and stories are transmitted orally in close-knit settings.

Effects on Flourishing - Pros - Strong sense of belonging, identity, and support. - Children experience many caring relationships, not just two overburdened parents. - Reduced loneliness; more face-to-face interaction. - Cons - High social surveillance: everyone knows your business; little privacy. - Conformity pressures; hard to escape group norms or reputation.

Comparison to Today - Modern societies often feature nuclear families, single parents, and individual living. - We gain privacy and personal freedom but also increased loneliness and parental stress.

Feature 6: Work Patterns – Physically Demanding but Often Less Total “Work Time”

Description - Foragers do physically hard tasks (hunting, gathering, walking long distances). - Many anthropological studies suggest less total “work-like” hours per week than typical modern full-time jobs, though this varies by environment. - Work and leisure blur together (e.g., gathering while socializing).

Effects on Flourishing - Pros - More free time for socializing, storytelling, rituals, and rest. - Physical activity is built into life → better fitness, less sedentary behavior. - Cons - Work can be dangerous and exhausting; exposure to weather, injuries, predators. - No option to avoid work through technology; survival depends directly on physical effort.

Comparison to Today - Many modern jobs are sedentary, long hours, and stressful but physically safer. - We have more comforts and entertainment, but also chronic stress and health problems from inactivity.

Feature 7: Close Relationship with the Natural Environment

Description - Constant direct contact with landscapes, animals, and weather. - Detailed ecological knowledge: plants, animal behavior, climate patterns. - Spiritual or cultural meanings often attached to natural features.

Effects on Flourishing - Pros - Strong sense of connection to nature; opportunities for awe, beauty, and meaning. - Environmental knowledge may give a sense of competence and agency. - Cons - High exposure to natural dangers: predators, storms, disease, accidents. - No insulation from harsh conditions; weather and environment constantly threaten survival.

Comparison to Today - Modern people are more insulated from nature (buildings, technology, HVAC). - We gain safety and comfort but often feel detached from the natural world, which may harm psychological well-being.

Feature 8: Health, Risk, and Insecurity

Description - Many foragers are physically fit, with low rates of some modern chronic diseases (e.g., obesity, type 2 diabetes). - However, high infant and child mortality, frequent injuries, infections, and no modern medicine. - Life expectancy is generally lower, especially before modern contact.

Effects on Flourishing - Pros - Those who survive childhood may enjoy robust physical health for many adult years. - Cons - Frequent bereavement (loss of children, kin) and constant risk of death. - Lack of treatment for infections, injuries, and complications of childbirth.

Comparison to Today - Modern medicine, sanitation, and nutrition greatly reduce mortality and suffering. - We live longer, but new problems arise: chronic diseases of lifestyle, anxiety, depression, and “diseases of civilization”.

3. Foragers, Supernormal Stimuli, and Modern Happiness

Link to concepts from lecture on liking vs wanting and supernormal stimuli:

- Supernormal stimuli: artificially intensified versions of natural rewards (e.g., junk food, social media, pornography, gambling apps) that trigger strong wanting even when they don't increase – or even reduce – genuine liking or long-term well-being.
- Foragers lived in environments without most of these:
 - Food: simple, unprocessed; you cannot easily “binge” hyper-palatable sugar/fat/salt.
 - Entertainment: face-to-face play, stories, music – less risk of compulsive digital or gambling addiction.
 - Social status: based on real contributions and relationships, not global comparison via media.

Implications for flourishing:

- Foragers' motivations may have been better aligned with what actually makes them happy and healthy:
 - When you're drawn to hunt, rest, or socialize, those activities typically support survival and well-being.
- In modern societies, many of our strongest urges target supernormal stimuli:
 - We want them strongly (drugs, junk food, endless scrolling), but they often don't increase overall happiness, and can even make it worse.
 - This creates a divergence between what we are motivated to do and what really benefits us, leading to addiction, distraction, and regret.

So, in comparing foragers to us: - We have far more comfort, safety, options, and potential for long-term flourishing. - But we also face unique psychological threats (supernormal stimuli, chronic stress, misaligned wanting) that foragers largely did not.

4. Overall Evaluation: Are Forager Societies Conducive to Human Flourishing?

Advantages for flourishing: - Strong social bonds, cooperation, and shared identities. - Relative equality and low formal hierarchy. - Lots of time in nature, integrated physical activity. - Possibly more alignment between natural motivations and genuine well-being (fewer supernormal stimuli).

Disadvantages for flourishing: - High risk of death, disease, and injury; little medical care. - Vulnerability to environmental shocks (famine, drought). - Limited personal choice in careers, lifestyles, and belief systems. - Intense social pressure and lack of privacy or exit options.

Compared to today: - We trade security, variety, and comfort for more stress, inequality, isolation, and vulnerability to supernormal stimuli. - Philosophically, the key exam task is to: - Argue which features of forager life likely promoted happiness, - Which undermined it, - And how modern societies might recover some benefits (e.g., strong community, time in nature, controlled exposure to supernormal stimuli) while retaining modern advantages (healthcare, safety, choice).