Emilie du Châtelet’s *Discourse on Happiness*¹
Outline – Marcy P. Lascano

Du Châtelet writes that people think it is difficult to be happy, but the truth is that it just takes years to figure it out. Her discourse is supposed to give us those secrets before we get old.

In order to be happy, one must be:
- free from prejudices
- virtuous
- healthy
- have tastes and passions
- susceptible to illusions

**Tastes and Passions**
“We have nothing to do in the world but to obtain for ourselves some agreeable sensations and feelings.”
One is only happy because of satisfied tastes and passions. (349)

We need tastes because we are not always happy enough to have passions (349) “The unhappy are interesting, the happy are unknown” (350)

Passions, even if they cause more unhappiness than happiness, are desirable because they are a necessary condition for the enjoyment of great pleasure. (350)

We must make our passions serve our happiness. It is easier to do so if we know our station and our circumstances. It is best to be content with one’s station (she is only writing for “people of quality”).

**Health** is the first good (351)
- Overeating and dieting
- Wine

**Freedom from Prejudice** (352)
- Religion/superstition
  “Prejudice is an opinion that one has accepted without examination, because it would be indefensible otherwise. Error can never be good, and surely it is a great evil in the things in which the conduct of life depends.” (352)
- Do not confuse prejudice with proprieties (353)

**Virtue**
“One must be virtuous, because one cannot be immoral and happy at the same time. By virtue, I understand all that contributes to the happiness of society, and consequently to ours, since we are members of that society” (353)
- The reproaches of conscience will keep one from being happy if one is not virtuous.
- Public shame and disdain are much worse than torture because it is certain and there is no hope of reprieve. (353)
  “It is not enough for us not to be unhappy, life would not be worth the effort of living if the absence of suffering were our only goal; nothingness would be better, for assuredly, that is the state of least suffering.”
- The feeling one has after performing a virtuous act is most “delicious” (354)

¹ All page numbers refer to *Emilie du Châtelet: Selected Philosophical and Scientific Writings*, Edited by Judith P. Zinsser, translated by Isabelle Bour and Judith P. Zinsser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
Illusions
They are not errors, more like optical illusions. (354)
Cannot give them to ourselves, but must preserve the illusions we have (355)

Additional skills for happiness:
• Be resolute about what one wants and what one wants to do (355). Repentance is useless and disagreeable. Better to make amends for errors and move on. (355-6)

• Keep unpleasant ideas away — best not to think about death, disagreement with Montaigne, argument that preparation for death might be useless if we are not of sound mind (356)

• Discussion of the passions of ambition and glory: She holds that ambition is not generally conducive to happiness because it makes our happiness rely on others: “Let us not be afraid to reduce our dependence on others too much, our happiness will always depend on others quite enough.” Glory is available to men in many areas, but women are forbidden from most professions, so they can only achieve glory through study.

Our current happiness is supplemented or diminished by our beliefs about the past and future. (358)

Self-esteem is often the driving force behind our actions.

“One of the great secrets of happiness is to moderate one’s desires and to love the things already in one’s possession.” (358)

“So, one must allow oneself to desire only the things that can be obtained without too much care and effort, and this is a place where we can do much for our own happiness” (358)

• Second discussion of one’s station/situation and the need to not desire to change it. Avoid restlessness. (359)

• Gambling: love of money, driven by the passions of hope and fear (359)
  There is more pleasure in a mediocre fortune than in great abundance.

Love and happiness (360-5) Autobiographical account of her love affair with Voltaire
• Love is rare, but with love you need nothing else to be happy (360)
• Pleasure of giving yourself up to another (361)
• Love makes you incapable of doing other arts (361)
• Description of how love leaves a relationship over time (362)
• When love is one-sided (362-3)
• Clinging to someone who no longer love you will not increase their love (363)
• Advice to the ladies: Never appear in the wrong with your love, never display eagerness when his love is cooling, and always appear to be a degree cooler than he is. (363)

“Lastly, it is for reason to make our happiness. In childhood, our senses alone attend to this task; in youth, the heart and the mind become involved, with the proviso that the heart makes all the decisions; but in middle age reason must take part in the decision, it is for reason to make us feel that we must be happy, whatever it costs. Every age has its own pleasures; those of old age are the most difficult to obtain: gambling, studying, if one is still capable of it, the enjoyment of fine foods, respect, those are the mainsprings of old age. No doubt these are only consolations. Thank goodness, it is up to us to choose the time of our death, if it is too slow coming, but as long as we prefer to endure life, we must open ourselves to pleasure by all the doors leading to our soul; we have no other business.” (364-5)