

# AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

*A philosophical look at happiness*

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## THOMAS JEFFERSON

In the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson stated:

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”*

The parameter of the ensuing discourse is focused on the last five words: *“and the pursuit of Happiness.”*

Assuming that this statement is true, the question becomes: What exactly is this “happiness” that we have a fundamental right to pursue? The contemporary understanding of happiness seems to often focus on “pleasant,” “positive” emotions, and having one’s needs met; however in 1776 the common meaning may very well have meant “prosperity,” “thriving,” and “wellbeing.” To unpack this question we start by considering the author.

There is some debate among scholars as to Thomas Jefferson’s inspiration for including this phrase in the text, but what is known to be true is that Jefferson was a self-proclaimed Epicurean.

## EPICURUS

Epicureanism is a school of philosophy founded in 307 BC that is based on the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. This ancient philosopher believed that pleasure was the greatest good. His emphasis on pleasure makes his philosophy a strand of hedonism, however his understanding of pleasure does not focus on lower quality of pleasures such as bodily, but rather focuses on the higher quality pleasures attained through the acquisition of knowledge, by living modestly, and limiting one’s desires. By seeking to derive the greatest amount of higher quality pleasure Epicurus believed this to be the path to tranquility and freedom from fear, which once attained lead to happiness.

It’s important to note that according to Epicurus, the acquisition of knowledge was sought only to rid oneself of the fear of Gods and of the fear of death. As such, Epicurus’ philosophy did not advocate a belief in God. Since Jefferson was a self-proclaimed Epicurean, it is a safe conclusion that he likewise did not advocate for the belief in God.

What supports this conclusion is that while it is known that he was an avid reader of the Christian Bible, he created his own version, which he called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, but today is often simply referred to as the *Jefferson Bible*. This version removed any mention of Jesus' miracles, and rather depicting him as a teacher of morals.

What this might suggest, then, is that Jefferson's use of the phrase "*and the pursuit of happiness*" had nothing to do with Epicurus. Notice the reference to a creator:

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights..."*

With his personal deemphasize on God, perhaps Jefferson was referencing a meaning of happiness to be used objectively for the citizens of the emerging new nation.

## **JOHN LOCKE**

A possible answer can perhaps be found with John Locke, a seventeenth century English philosopher who actually coined the phrase "pursuit of happiness" 87 years before the Declaration of Independence was written. The phrase was used in his book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and so perhaps an understanding of Locke's view on happiness will bring us closer to understanding our pursuit.

*"The necessity of pursuing happiness [is] the foundation of liberty. As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness; so the care of ourselves, that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our liberty. The stronger ties we have to an unalterable pursuit of happiness in general, which is our greatest good, and which, as such, our desires always follow, the more are we free from any necessary determination of our will to any particular action."*

What's important to note in Locke's view of happiness is this distinction between real and imagined happiness. This suggests an objective view of happiness beyond an individual's subjective desires. For example, one may have a strong desire to indulge in rich chocolate cake. The individual may believe that indulging in this urge will bring pleasure, but it is only imagined pleasure and not really in one's best interest, because it will not lead to a "true and solid" happiness required for satisfaction with life.

John Locke's "*unalterable pursuit of happiness*" advocates for a freedom to make decisions that would result in the best life possible for a human being, but this does not insinuate a freedom to choose anything less. What this might be advocating, then, is a

government that could outlaw such things as rich chocolate, because choosing such base pleasures would not lead to genuine happiness.

## **JEREMY BENTHAM**

The eighteenth-century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham would likely disagree with such a proposition, and if you find fault with this possible interpretation of Locke's happiness, perhaps you do to.

Bentham was a quantitative hedonist, believing that happiness is a singular, measurable, felt sensation of pleasure (HLGL 62). Because of his emphasis on measuring quantity of pleasure, he disregarded quality of pleasure. To be happy by Bentham's theory is to experience a greater quantity of pleasures over pains or neutral states.

To support this claim he argued that every felt sensation either offers a measure of pleasure or a measure of pain. Modern philosophers call these measures "hedons" and "dolors," with a hedon being a measure of pleasure and a dolor being a measure of pain (HLGL 65). Think of a hedon as a positive measure (+) and a dolor as a negative measure (-). In this way, the sum of one's hedons and dolors is the measure of one's happiness.

Bentham suggested six criteria for quantifying pleasure:

- (1) Intensity
- (2) Duration
- (3) Certainty/Uncertainty
- (4) Propinquity/Remoteness (how soon will it occur)
- (5) Fecundity (how likely it is to be pleasing)
- (6) Purity (will it continue to bring pleasure)

Consider the pleasure derived from a game of chess to a the pleasure derived from a game of Russian Roulette. When we consider intensity I think it is safe to assume Russian roulette to be the more intense activity versus chess; therefore Russian roulette would be deemed more pleasurable. Now let's consider duration. Chess can sometimes last hours versus the comparatively short lived game of Russian roulette. Therefore chess is deemed more pleasurable. The certainty and uncertainty of these games being pleasurable is another matter, for one would think that winning would bring about more pleasure, but sometimes the thrill of the game itself is the source of pleasure. Certainly the fact that Russian roulette can very likely end in death, however, seems likely to push chess to be the most pleasurable, for I can think of no examples of chess games that have ever ended in death. The nearness of the pleasure for both games will differ depending on the circumstance, so in this category we can consider it a tie. And lastly, the fecundity and purity of these games is seen to be in favor of chess, for it is not

likely that a continued play of Russian roulette will lead to further pleasure, but rather pain. By using Bentham's criteria we have found that chess is more likely to lead to happiness as opposed to Russian roulette.

But this poses a problem. Holding pleasure to be a singular sensation we are left to decide what constitutes the base hedonic value. Won't this value vary depending on the individual?

## **JOHN STUART MILL**

The nineteenth century British philosopher John Stuart Mill solves this problem with his emphasis on a spectrum of felt sensations that vary in quality.

According to Mill, pleasures of low quality (such as eating a cookie or taking a nap) do not have as much an affect on us as higher quality pleasures (such as reading poetry or studying philosophy). The philosopher defined these higher quality pleasures as whatever involves the human capacity for reason and appreciation of aesthetic beauty. This explains his famous saying: "*It is far better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.*" Meaning, if given the choice, people will always choose the higher qualities of human rationality even if otherwise unsatisfied, rather than the life of a pig, whose only capable of low quality pleasures even if completely satisfied. Humans are rational creatures, authors of their own existence, and this rationality should be celebrated for it leads to high quality human happiness.

In this way Mill is like Epicurus, in that he advocates for high quality pleasures, however Mill's pleasures don't quite reach Epicurus' standards.

This theory has its own problem, however. Consider prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps. They may have had the gift of human reason, yet despite the presence of such a high quality pleasure they lacked even the base pleasures of adequate food and shelter. It cannot be asserted that these individuals were happy, but according to Mill's theory it can be argued that should be regarded as happy.

## **DANIEL KAHNEMAN**

The psychologist Daniel Kahneman promotes a happiness theory known as modified quantitative hedonism. His theory states that what contributes to happiness varies from moment to moment, regardless of our past experiences and regardless of reality. To support his claim, the psychologist notes a discrepancy in the role of life circumstances to our happiness, believing that our individual life circumstances have a smaller role in our happiness than our inherited temperament and personality (TOH 36). He concludes that (1) no matter what happens to us we will all get along one way or another until we die, and (2) some people have a natural tendency towards positivity or negativity.

Kahneman believes that people with a natural tendency for positivity have a “happiness resilience” that brings them back to a “sense of normalcy” even after distressing circumstances. Kahneman refers to this as the “treadmill effect:” the notion that though individuals may experience emotionally intense reactions to life circumstances that have a major impact on their lives, “these reactions appear to subside more or less completely and often quickly” (TOH 36). Consider the example of what happens when we swim in a cool pool of water. At first the temperature comes as a cold shock to the body, yet over a relatively short period of time the body gradually adapts to the water.

With this in mind, Kahneman suggests there exists a “satisfaction treadmill,” which promotes happiness as a scale of achievement “that lies somewhere between realistic expectation and reasonable hope” noting that “people are always satisfied when they attain their aspiration level” (TOH 37).

## **FRED FELDMAN**

If we are attracted to this idea of a happiness treadmill, and like the idea that carefully directing our focus to achieve happiness, then perhaps we’ll like this thing called attitudinal hedonism, as espoused by the contemporary American professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Fred Feldman.

He believes that happiness is “*a positive psychological stance toward some object, which may or may not be accompanied by any felt quality*” (HLGL 62). For Feldman, happiness is understood as taking pleasure in the “states of affairs” (TOH 65). In this way, something may not necessarily “feel” good, but we may still be pleased by the “state of affairs.”

Two examples that support Feldman’s theory are as follows:

(1) Dolores experiences debilitating pain on a regular basis but takes a pain management drug alleviating her pain to a certain degree. Though still in severe pain, Dolores’ pain has subsided significantly and, according to Feldman, this makes her happy due to the “state of affairs.”

(2) Wendell purchases a dream-enhancing machine that promises to give you the greatest dream you can ever imagine when you sleep. Expecting to experience a fantastic dream level, Wendell was disappointed to find that it produced only a mildly pleasing dream, though still a better than normal dream. Even while feeling pleasure, Feldman asserts that it cannot be argued that Wendell is happy, because the experience did not meet his expectation (TOH 62). He was not happy with the “state of affairs.”

These examples aside, one problem with Feldman’s theory is that it doesn’t rely on truth. He argues that “*we can experience pleasure, both in the attitudinal and feeling sense, even when our experiences are illusionary*” (HLGL 98) because occurrent (or actually occurring) attitudinal pleasures do not rely on truth (TOH 70).

As an example, we can believe something to be true and be comforted by it, but this thing we believe can actually be entirely false. The *experience* of a good lie can positively affect attitudinal pleasure. We may take comfort in believing that we have a loving and faithful partner, even if the truth of the matter is that the partner constantly cheats on us. The theory being, “what we don’t know won’t hurt us.”

## **DANIEL HAYBRON**

If we have trouble supporting a theory of happiness that doesn’t rely on truth then perhaps we can look to the St. Louis University Philosopher, Daniel Haybron, who believes that the true source of an individual’s happiness is their “emotional state” (TOH 100). If one is happy it’s because they have a predominance of “joyfulness, high-spiritedness, peace of mind,” and the like. Happiness therefore is understood as a “dispositional phenomenon” that reflects an individual’s history and potential for future tendencies. But how do we develop this peace of mind?

## **ROBERT NOZICK**

Robert Nozick is a Harvard professor of philosophy who believes that there exist things outside of pleasure that contribute to our happiness. To prove this he created a thought experiment famously known as “The Experience Machine.”

Imagine a machine that you can be hooked up to that will give you any experiential sensation you can think of. The machine would be so well-made that there would be no way for you to know whether you are already hooked up to the machine or not, because once in the machine you would forget that you had premeditated all of the experiences programmed into the machine. This machine will give you all the wonderful experiences that you’ve always wanted, with only the good feelings and no pesky negative feelings. The only difference is that these feelings would only be sensational; the things you’d be experiencing wouldn’t actually be happening. The point of this thought experiment is that you must decide if you would agree to enter this machine for the rest of your natural life.

Nozick believes that this thought experiment proves that happiness cannot be reduced to feelings alone, because he believes that few would agree to use such a machine. Your own answer to this thought experiment indicates an evaluation of what you deem most appropriate for obtaining the best possible life for yourself (TOH 250). If you would enter the machine then you are a hedonist; if you would not enter the machine then you are something else. Over the next couple of days we’ll be discussing some of those “something else’s.”

## **ARISTOTLE**

If we accept Nozick's thought experiment as proof that hedonism is an inadequate theory of happiness then we can perhaps find a better solution with the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle who has a theory of happiness that states "*living well and doing well are the same as being happy*" (TOH 323). Happiness of this kind is termed eudemonia, which refers to living "an excellent human life," fulfilling one's fullest potential in all areas of virtue. In short, happiness means to flourish. Aristotle believed that to be happy was to achieve the highest attainment of virtues, such as honor, courage, temperance, understanding, truthfulness, modesty, and so forth.

The key for understanding Aristotle's theory, however, is seeing it as a constant striving for virtuous greatness; a process rather than a destination. It is a continuous activity, just as "*one swallow does not make a spring, nor...does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy*" (page 877). To grow in virtue and therefore increase our chance for happiness, we focus on developing good habits to fully express what we are capable of. For this reason it is said: "*We become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions*" (page 883). We become happy by facing difficult situations and responding in virtuously, even if we lack the precise mastery. Our muscles grow by adding resistance, not by avoiding resistance.

## **RICHARD KRAUT**

The Northwestern University professor of philosophy Richard Kraut takes a subjective approach to happiness which states: the happy person is the one who meets their self-imposed standards, finds their life to be desirable, and that nothing more could be done to improve their life (TOH 372).

In this view, happiness is created by an individual imposing personal standards of living and creating goals in order to live the life that they believe would lead to the cultivation of the best version of themselves (363). Merely being in a positive psychological state does not make a eudemon life, rather seeking to *actually* live a eudemon life instigates the psychological state that indicates a positive self-assessment. This flexible subjective approach to happiness allows for happiness to still be possible even when unfortunate life circumstances intervene.

## **JONAS CAIN**

Jonas Cain is a contemporary American freelance philosopher who suggests happiness can be fostered in what he calls the "Goose Theory." Simply put, what do you see when you see a goose? Cain asserts that the correct answer is "geese." When we see a goose it is rare that we only see one, rather we see several geese. He believes that this offers a

prescription for working together, helping our gaggle of family, friends, neighbors, and community in order to promote happiness.

## **DANIEL GILBERT & TIMOTHY WILSON**

In 1998 two psychologists, Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson, conducted a study that demonstrated the power of what they call our “psychological immune system,” and how it works to shield us from pain and unhappiness. This is how it played out:

Subjects were given the assignment to evaluate the personality of someone based solely a written account of an embarrassing story from their life. Some subjects were told they’d never meet this other person, while others were told that they would work together as partners (TOH 92). They were then asked to rate how happy or unhappy they would feel if they found out that the other person had evaluated them poorly.

It was predicted that the subjects would be less happy to receive a poor evaluation if they ended up working together. The idea being that criticism coming from someone we know just seems more jarring and uncomfortable.

After the study, however, the subjects reported being far happier when they received a negative evaluation from their partner than from a stranger.

The study concluded that this thing called the psychological immune system motivates us to like those that we must interact with, finding ways to help us forgive our partners more readily than strangers (TOH 92). If we accept this conclusion as true, then perhaps happiness is fostered by working together.