

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

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The American Declaration of Independence holds it to be a self-evident truth that all men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The document also claims that governments are instituted among men to secure these rights. Much can be said about the right to life and the right to liberty, but the present concern will be with the right to the pursuit of happiness. Several questions arise almost immediately.

Even if one grants that happiness is not a natural condition but must be sought, there is the question of where to look for it. A popular song of some years ago said something like this: "Happiness, happiness; everyone's searching for happiness; round and round they all race, but everyone's looking in a different place." There is certainly no consensus on where happiness may be found.

Another disturbing question is whether or not happiness can be found at all, no matter where one may seek for it. The hedonistic paradox makes the seemingly contradictory claim that happiness cannot be found by those looking for it. The alleged truth of the paradox is that happiness is found indirectly, if found at all. According to the hedonistic paradox, perhaps the Declaration of Independence should have referred to a right to be happy if happiness ever accidentally occurred. It is not clear if the hedonistic paradox advocates not pursuing happiness

at all or perhaps pursuing it obliquely, as one would use stealth in order to capture a quarry.

A further question about the pursuit of happiness asks if happiness is even a worthy or appropriate goal. Perhaps the objective we should seek is more the fulfillment of a responsibility than the implementation of a right. Is not the proper goal the doing of our duty rather than trying somehow to be happy? Immanuel Kant spoke of doing one's duty in spite of a contrary inclination. Indeed, Kant thought that moral credit should go only to those who seek to do their duty when they would really prefer to do something else. Yet Kant still regarded happiness as an important consideration. In The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics, Kant wrote, "To safeguard one's happiness is a duty, at least indirectly; for discontent with one's condition amidst the press of worries and unsatisfied wants may easily become a great temptation to the transgression of duties." According to Kant, then, we have some obligation to be happy so that we will not fail to do our other duties.

It might be worthwhile to consider some of the things various thinkers have said about happiness. Although he should not be held responsible for how someone else organizes and interprets the information, Professor John Hospers of the University of Southern California has provided helpful resources concerning happiness and many other issues in his book Human Conduct. This paper varies from the work of Professor Hospers but does reflect much material provided by his labors.

Among the ancient Greek thinkers who had definite views on happiness was Plato. His idea was that following virtue would bring happiness. This position thought that there would be a correlation between virtue and happiness, on the one hand, and a correlation between vice and unhappiness on the other hand. The eighteenth-century English novelist Henry Fielding expressed his view on the matter in his novel Tom Jones: "There are a set of religious, or rather moral writers, who teach that virtue is the certain road to happiness, and vice to misery, in this world. A very wholesome and comfortable doctrine, and to which we have but one objection, namely, that it is not true." The difficulty is that many who follow virtue seem to be unhappy while many who follow vice seem to be happy, apparently a complete reversal of what Plato was thinking. Plato, however, whatever others may have said, may not have been thinking of happiness as a condition of delirious joy but rather as a sense of inner satisfaction from having done what was considered to be right. If happiness is understood as basic contentment and virtue is perceived as fulfillment of what is thought to be required, then Plato's view was fundamentally sound that happiness would result from virtue.

Other ancient Greeks had a different version of happiness. The view attributed to Aristippus and the Cyrenaics is that happiness comes from immediate physical pleasure. Perhaps most people would identify themselves, either explicitly or implicitly, with this position. Although the Cyrenaic idea has a natural appeal, critics have found difficulties. An extreme interpretation

of the Cyrenaic philosophy is expressed in the well-known saying "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." In spite of the fatalistic logic assumed in this saying, death may not come tomorrow. The perspective may change if there is a future to consider. For example, the main character in Sloan Wilson's The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit was an American who served with the U.S. Army in Europe. Thinking that he would probably not live to see his wife in the United States again, the man had a brief romantic encounter with an Italian woman. The man was later captured by the Germans but did not die. He escaped and finally returned home to begin again. As he was struggling to reach family and career goals, word came to him that the Italian woman had borne a child by him and was now asking for support. From such considerations, there is the view that it is not enough to think of happiness only in relation to the present but that a possible future should be considered.

Another criticism of the Cyrenaic emphasis on immediate physical pleasure is that the pleasure may be associated with something bad. The British philosopher C. D. Broad has emphasized that pleasure does not occur in a vacuum but is always related to a source. The source may be acceptable or objectionable. Broad has claimed that the total experience involving pleasure should be considered. If the pleasure is related to an acceptable source, then the total experience is good. If the pleasure is related to an objectionable source, then the total experience is bad. Broad's position implies disfavor for any happiness derived from pleasure that is associated with an objectionable

source. The position of hedonism acknowledges that some sources of pleasure may be considered objectionable but maintains that pleasure itself is intrinsically good regardless of the source. Thus a strict hedonist would have no great problems with a happiness based on pleasure derived from less than wholly acceptable sources.

Epicurus, another ancient Greek thinker, was a hedonist in the sense of seeking happiness through pleasure; but Epicurus disagreed with the Cyrenaics on the kind and time of pleasure. Epicurus advocated mental pleasure over a lifetime. He condemned sensual indulgence as bringing about misery in the long run. Epicurus favored controlling physical appetites. He warned that rich food, rich drink, and sex would likely cause pain eventually. Epicurus followed asceticism, which is the denial of physical pleasures. Plain food, such as bread and water, would satisfy physical needs and would bring an appreciable level of pleasure.

It is another irony of history that the word "epicure" is used today to refer to someone who is especially fond of good, even exotic, food and drink, just the opposite of what Epicurus recommended. The idea of Epicurus was expressed many centuries later by Jeremy Bentham in the latter's hedonistic calculus, a set of guidelines for choosing pleasures. Bentham wrote of the purity of pleasure, by which he meant the degree to which pleasure was unmixed with pain. Epicurus himself gave this definition: "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul."

The way to achieve absence of pain in the body is to choose the plainer physical pleasures over the more exotic physical pleasures. The way to achieve absence of trouble in the soul is a little more complicated. Epicurus referred to ataraxia, by which he meant peace of mind or inner calm. One could be helped toward this goal by emphasizing the "higher" mental pleasures that are chiefly intellectual and aesthetic. Also, Epicurus thought that people should not worry about death, which people feared to some extent because of legends concerning punishment by the gods. For Epicurus, death is the ending of all sensation and thus should not be feared.

There have been various criticisms of Epicureanism. For one thing, Epicurus may have exaggerated the problems of the physical pleasures. While the pleasures are frequently not pure, the general estimate seems to be that the pleasure does outweigh the pain taken as a whole. Another criticism is that Epicurus may have exaggerated the value of the mental pleasures. These pleasures require certain natural abilities plus cultivation and are not guaranteed. Most people do not find the mental pleasures to be very appealing. Another reservation concerning the thought of Epicurus is that he seems to have been more concerned with avoiding pain and distress than with achieving positive enjoyment.

The Stoics were a group of ancient Greeks and Romans who had their own ideas about happiness. Zeno, a contemporary of Epicurus, is regarded as the first Stoic. The name is derived from the Greek word stoa, meaning "porch," an apparent reference

to the meeting place of Zeno and his followers. The behavior of the Stoics was very similar to the behavior of the Epicureans, but the thinking of the two groups was somewhat different.

One way that the Stoics recommended for the achieving of happiness (or the elimination of unhappiness) was the lessening or even elimination of desires. The Stoics agreed with the Epicureans on the desirability of a simple life, which would be achieved largely by minimizing desires. Also, there was the idea that unhappiness results from unfulfilled desire, that is, the situation of desperately wishing for something that cannot be obtained. For example, in Aesop's fable of the fox who could not get the grapes that he wanted and thought that the grapes were probably sour anyway, the fox may have been somewhat petulant but apparently avoided unhappiness. It was better for the fox's well-being to claim, even falsely, that the grapes were sour than to pine unhappily for what he could not have.

Another recommendation of the Stoics for achieving happiness (or avoiding unhappiness) was apatheia, that is, a use of reason and willpower to control the emotions. The idea is that of not getting emotionally involved and thus either not getting hurt or else taking things as well as possible. External events are not always or perhaps even often under our control, but we can theoretically control our response to whatever happens. This view holds that external events in themselves are neither good nor bad, but they are good or bad for us depending on our response, and we can control our response. These basic ideas are followed today in what is called RBT, rational behavior therapy.



An example of apatheia is provided by Epictetus, an ancient Stoic who at one time was a slave. The story told about Epictetus may be apocryphal but illustrates the point. The master of Epictetus supposedly ordered the leg of Epictetus to be broken so that the valuable slave would then be lame and have a hard time escaping. As others twisted his leg, Epictetus reportedly told them that they would break his leg if they kept twisting. When the leg did indeed break, Epictetus calmly stated that he had told them so. Epictetus controlled his emotional response through reason and willpower. Marcus Aurelius, the ancient Roman emperor, also used apatheia. He greatly disliked leading his troops in battle but utilized a deliberate and calculated indifference to enable him to fulfill his duty. He was involved but uncaring in the sense of minimizing unhappiness.

Reservations concerning the Stoics include the view that they, like the Epicureans, seem to have been more negative than positive, emphasizing avoiding unhappiness more than achieving happiness. Also, what the Stoics recommended may be largely contrary to human nature in that it is very difficult to have the willpower required for taking things calmly. In addition, the Stoic emphasis on emotional withdrawal so as not to be hurt is understandable but regrettable, for emotion is obviously a very important part of human nature, a part that should be properly fulfilled rather than denied.

The great philosopher Aristotle had many magnificent ideas, some of them concerned with happiness. Aristotle referred to eudaimonia, which is usually translated as "happiness" but might also be understood as personal well-being. One of Aristotle's

ideas was that happiness or personal well-being for humans is somehow associated with whatever is distinctive with humans. Life is not distinctive with humans, nor is sense experience or locomotion. According to Aristotle, what is distinctive with human beings is reason. Thus Aristotle believed that the highest use of reason would bring the highest happiness. John Stuart Mill may have had Aristotle's views in mind when Mill said, "Socrates dissatisfied is better than a pig satisfied." Many might be grateful for happiness however it may be achieved or occur; but Aristotle, Mill, and some others think that the intellect must be involved for happiness truly suitable to a human being. For some, the intellect may not attain its goal of understanding but still provides significance and perhaps exhilaration through being employed. In The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, Albert Camus wrote, "To a man devoid of blinders, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it."

Another of Aristotle's ideas for happiness was moderation or the doctrine of the golden mean. Aristotle regarded extremes, either too little or too much of anything, as bad with the good life being somewhere in between. Certainly moderation itself would be a mean between complete denial and largely unrestrained indulgence. Aristotle acknowledged that the mean may not be at exactly the midpoint between extremes and that the mean may not be exactly the same for all individuals. He also believed that some things do not have a mean but are bad in themselves, such things as murder, theft, and adultery. But, in general, unhappiness

would be avoided and happiness would be attained through having neither too much nor too little but just the right amount.

Aristotle thought that various factors might affect the possibility of happiness, such things as health, money, freedom, and friends. Whatever else may be involved, the presence or absence of any one or any combination of these factors could be significant.

Professor John Hospers of our own time has thought of happiness as being long-lasting or frequent mental pleasure. He mentions such things as art, knowledge, worship, and human affection as contributing to happiness. It would thus be not so much physical pleasures but rather an enduring mental satisfaction that would constitute happiness, and there are various ways that the mental satisfaction could be achieved.

There are many additional ideas concerning happiness besides those already mentioned, but perhaps a few reflections will help us draw to a close. One wonders if there is any single concept of happiness that is sufficient for all people. Perhaps happiness is such an individual matter that it is difficult enough to prescribe for ourselves and much more difficult to prescribe for others. There is also the question of whether happiness is mostly a matter of situation and temperament with individual temperament being the more important and being due to heredity more than to environment or choice. There are those for whom a single, shining sliver of luminescence barely penetrating an immensity of gloom will bring surcease from sorrow. For others, the unclouded, azure rotundity of the vaulted heavens is not

sufficient to remove apprehension that a small speck could appear in the sky and bring a melancholy out of all proportion to its actual size. Some seem to have almost a natural disposition toward happiness almost without regard to circumstances, while others find it difficult to rejoice under even the most fortuitous conditions. Some maintain that happiness is within our control, while others claim the opposite.

Although the Declaration of Independence asserts the pursuit of happiness as an unalienable right of all men, questions not only quickly arise but remain.