

What Thomas Jefferson Meant by 'The Pursuit of Happiness'

The idea of the “pursuit of happiness” is in our societal DNA. Yet, this “unalienable right,” immortalized in the Declaration of Independence, has often puzzled people. What exactly did Jefferson mean?

Most people think of happiness as feeling good, but that is not what Jefferson meant. Pleasure and happiness are not the same. Our happiness does not depend upon everything going right in our life or getting what we want.

In her law review article, “[The Origins of the Pursuit of Happiness](#),” Carli Conklin observed the widespread societal misunderstanding about the nature of happiness. Jefferson didn't mean, “The unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness” provides an “unmitigated right to pursue that which would make one feel good.”

Conklin described Jefferson as a “meticulous and deliberate writer and proponent of the rights and duties of man” who would not include a vague phrase in a “quite particular declaration of man's natural and political rights.”

Jefferson was influenced by William Blackstone's [Commentaries on the Laws of England](#). Conklin wrote of Blackstone's argument, “The pursuit of happiness is the primary method by which men can know and then apply the law of nature as it pertains to humans.” Blackstone himself wrote that individuals can “discover . . . what the law of nature directs in every circumstance of life; by considering, what method will tend the most effectually to our own substantial happiness.”

Conklin clarified the implications of Blackstone's argument: “Happiness in this sense is synonymous with the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*; it evokes a sense of well being or a state of

flourishing that is the result of living a fit or virtuous life.”

Jefferson embraced this meaning of happiness. In a [letter to his eldest daughter Martha](#) (Patsy), Jefferson advised living a virtuous life is the key to happiness. “Ennui,” Jefferson wrote, is “the most dangerous poison of life.” According to Jefferson, the antidote is “developing daily those principles of virtue and goodness which will make you valuable to others and happy in yourselves.” Jefferson left no room for doubt about the [means to happiness](#): “Health, learning, and virtue will ensure your happiness; they will give you a quiet conscience, private esteem, and public honor.”

Pointing us back to Blackstone, Conklin puts it this way:

Rather than being ‘fleeting or temporal,’ such happiness is ‘real’ and ‘substantial.’ It is real in that it is ‘not fictitious; not imaginary; [but] true; genuine.’ It is substantial in that it pertains to the substance or essence of what it means to be fully human. Thus, for Blackstone, to pursue happiness was to pursue a fit or rightly ordered life; one that was in harmony with the law of nature as it pertains to man.

The wisdom of Blackstone and Jefferson is consistent with the latest academic research on happiness. Once we are beyond the necessities of life—and no, these necessities do not include electric cars—hedonic or other changes in life’s circumstances do little to impact happiness. One researcher, [Sonja Lyubomirsky, explained](#), “Happiness more than anything, is a state-of-mind, a way of perceiving and approaching ourselves and the world in which we reside.”

Leonard Read believed the pursuit of happiness was a spiritual process. In his book [Elements of Libertarian Leadership](#), Read wrote, “We are truly happy only when we are in a perpetual state of hatching, our own consciousness opening to Infinite

Consciousness.” By “hatching,” Read referred to the ideas of Greek philosopher Heraclitus who believed, in Read’s words, “We are creatures in transit. We can’t drift along as we are, just being our jolly little selves; we must grow, and if we don’t, we decay.”

The famed author of [Man’s Search for Meaning](#), Viktor Frankl, stressed that happiness must be obtained indirectly by pursuing a meaningful life. In his book [Yes to Life: In Spite of Everything](#), Frankl explained that life is not about getting what we want: “Pleasure in itself cannot give our existence meaning; thus the lack of pleasure cannot take away meaning from life.”

Frankl maintained, “Happiness should not, must not, and can never be a goal, but only an outcome; the outcome of the fulfillment of ... duty.”

Consistent with Blackstone and Jefferson, Frankl advised us to “‘perform a Copernican revolution’, a conceptual turn through 180 degrees, after which the question can no longer be ‘*What can I expect from life?*’ but can now only be ‘*What does life expect of me?*’ What task in life is waiting for me?”

In *Anna Karenina*, [Leo Tolstoy’s Vronsky](#) experienced the ennui that Jefferson warns against. Having obtained Anna Karenina’s love, Vronsky “soon felt that the fulfillment of his desires gave him only one grain of the mountain of happiness he had expected...He was soon aware that there was springing up in his heart a desire for desires—*ennui*. Without conscious intention he began to clutch at every passing caprice, taking it for a desire and an object.”

Tolstoy illuminated the lesson that a life revolving around self-gratification doesn’t work: Vronsky’s “fulfillment showed him the eternal error men make in imagining that their happiness depends on the realization of their desires.”

Why does it matter that the “pursuit of happiness” is so often

misunderstood?

There is no right to happiness; certainly, others are not obligated to make you happy. You are free to pursue happiness if you don't trample on the rights of others to pursue their happiness.

The late minister and author [Hugh Prather warned](#), "Unhappiness is unfocused, agitated, and, above all, scared. Having no integrity, no calm inner direction, it takes its cue from whatever problem is perceived to be before it now."

When we pursue happiness, we have a responsibility to remove our self-created barriers to happiness. Pointing the finger at others while "remaining unaware of our darker thought patterns" is a barrier to happiness. Instead, Prather encouraged us to become more aware of our "petty, malevolent, and embarrassing thoughts."

Prather advises us to examine how we use time. Do we have a valuable purpose? If not we "rumble around... and bounce haphazardly and hopelessly off every change time brings." In doing so, proof of our "insignificance and ineffectuality" mounts. Discontentment grows.

Feeling unhappy, someone may reason that someone or something else must be at fault. *They, not I, are without virtue.* Not understanding the true nature of happiness fosters irresponsibility and threatens liberty.

A society with a population less willing to pursue happiness, in the sense that Jefferson, Blackstone, and Frankl advised, is a society in which populist authoritarians multiply to exploit the vacuum. Authoritarians and collectivists will point to a myriad of "problems" obstructing happiness and assure us they have solutions.

Happiness is an inside job, and those who understand the nature of happiness cultivate timeless virtues that lead to a

life of meaning and purpose. Today, more than ever, the pursuit of happiness is essential to preserving liberty.

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