

## **Wisdom and the Pursuit of Happiness**

*January 10, 2008*

This time of year it's customary to wish each other a "Happy New Year" and to make resolutions for the upcoming year. While I don't want to over analyze these customs, they provide an opportunity to reflect on the connection between happiness and how we resolve to live our lives.

Perhaps surprisingly, happiness is a foundational concept for major moral theories. The reason for this is the common sense observation that we're all out there pursuing it. Happiness seems to be a goal that comes with being human. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson lists, along with life and liberty, the pursuit of happiness as an unalienable right that we are endowed with by our Creator. However, there's a problem. While we all desire happiness, we're not all sure what it is, which makes it illusive.

Confusion over happiness is a perennial problem. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century Augustine noted that ancient philosophers offered two hundred and eighty-eight different opinions on ultimate happiness. (That's probably equal to the number of philosophers he had read.) More recently, the sociologist Robert Bellah demonstrated how confused Americans are about the pursuit of happiness in his book, *Habits of the Heart*. According to Bellah's studies, what we are aiming at is often arbitrary and unjustified.

One way to get clearer on the pursuit of happiness is to rule out common misconceptions. Implicit in contemporary American life are the beliefs that happiness is grounded in success and pleasure. In an earlier commentary, I ruled out success. Today, I would like to briefly look at pleasure.

Hedonism is the name given to philosophies that equate happiness with maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. While few Americans would call themselves hedonists, in many ways our society is constructed as if we believed this philosophy were true. One insightful critique of this tendency in our culture is Aldous Huxley's novel, *Brave New World*. Huxley's strategy is to take the trend in our society of using science and technology to supply happiness to their logical conclusions. Huxley's fictional society uses genetic engineering, psychology, psychotropic drugs, entertainment technologies and consumerism to provide people with maximum pleasure and minimum discomfort.

For the citizens of this utopia, a mood elevating drug is always at hand, the pleasures of sex are never denied, shopping options are plentiful and satisfying, and war and crime are things of the past. The result is a society that is so *banal* most people find it repulsive and inhuman.

I've read this book with hundreds of college students over the years. It's a popular book with students and it gets them to reflect on happiness and the ways we pursue it. At the beginning of class most students vehemently argue that happiness is purely subjective and there is no such thing as false happiness. If a person says they're happy, well... then they're happy. However, after reading and discussing Huxley's novel most students conclude that the people in this technological utopia might report being happy, but in fact what they are experiencing is false happiness. Further, despite the temptations of a life of pleasure, with the exception of a couple of guys usually sitting in the back of class, students say they would never want to live in such a world. Although, a few say it would make a great Spring Break destination.

What makes this imagined "perfect" world, of supposedly happy people, inhuman and repulsive? Huxley is clear that the price of universal happiness is freedom and individuality. But why do we need freedom and individuality to be *truly* happy?

Part of what makes us human is our capacity to use our minds for the pursuit of various goods or ends. Philosophers call this capacity practical reason and its perfection is wisdom, which is ability to determine for ourselves those ends worth pursuing and identify good means for realizing them. The philosopher, Martha Nussbaum says about this capacity, "All human beings participate (or try to) in the planning and managing of their own lives, asking and answering questions about what is good and how one should live." In order to flourish and be happy humans need to exercise this capacity.

The pleasure seeking citizens of *Brave New World* never engage this essential human characteristic. They don't pursue happiness it is supplied by technologies and psychology, and, it seems that in order to be happy we must pursue it using practical reason. Supplied happiness, is subhuman. If we overly rely on technology to remove our discomforts and supply a steady stream of pleasurable experiences, we will fall short of the goal of being *truly* happy.

It seems that if we want to be happy in this New Year one of the things we should resolve to exercise is our practical reason. We need to acquire wisdom to help us identify and pursue the illusive goal of happiness.